

A Sermon Preached by
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The Ten Commandments

Many Christians see the Ten Commandments as a list of rules sent down by a fire wielding god who's simply waiting for us to mess up before he squashes us or worse than that, sends us all to hell because we don't follow the rules properly.

Most people I come across don't really have any interest in following that kind of god. And frankly, neither do I.

So what do we do with this 20th Chapter of Exodus?
It's on banners in Sunday School rooms
Inside flaps of Bibles
Stone markers in front of court houses
Wallet inserts

I would argue, for us to really understand the Ten Commandments, we need to read them in context.

- Who spoke them?
- Why?
- Who heard them?
- What was happening at the time they were first heard?

As with any good story, we can't simply lift one tiny section out, take it out of context, and think we've got the meaning all figured out.

It'd be like watching Dorothy come out of her house into Munchkin Land and seeing her walk down the Yellow Brick Road and then ending the movie there.

What's going on?

How did Dorothy get there?

What happened before this part of the story?

So let's step back a bit and see what's going on.

The Hebrew story begins with a beautiful poem describing how God has created this whole world. Animals, plants, rocks, stars, etc. & people too Male & Female he created them.

Genesis 2 fleshes out the poem by showing us that there is a place, a state of being, where all things are exactly as God wants them to be. It's called Eden.

God has created people to be with Him and things are, in this place called Eden, perfect.

The Hebrew word for this is Shalom.

Most people translate it as "peace" but it's much more than that.

One rabbi defines Shalom as **EVERYTHING THAT CONSTITUTES HEALTHY HARMONIOUS LIFE.**

Shalom is "the negation of lack on every level"

Nothing is out of place.

Things are as God intends them to be

- Between God and people
- Between people and themselves
- Between people and people

Between people and the Earth

But the story moves on and the tellers of these stories begin to show us that things are starting to go very wrong.

Right away we see people choose to control their own surroundings, to choose a way of life separate from how God intends things to be.

And shortly after that, we see one person kill another. Cain kills his brother Abel.

But note what the writer of this story says . . . the focus isn't so much on the act of killing, but where Cain MOVES as a result.

Genesis 4:16 So Cain went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

East . . . away from the place, the state of being, where things are as God intends them to be.

And he's not just moving away from Eden, (shalom) . . . look at verse 17

Genesis 4:17 Cain's wife became pregnant and gave birth to Enoch. Cain was then building a city, and he named it after his son Enoch.

He's setting up shop. He's moving in. He's raising a family. He is choosing to do these things outside of the Kingdom of God.

His way of life, and his family's way of life, is not Shalom.

So we see this Genesis story keeps asserting that things are moving in the wrong direction.

In fact, it gets so bad that just a few chapters later in the story, we see that indeed the whole world has moved away from this Kingdom (Shalom) way of life.

Genesis 11:1 Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. 2 As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

So we see this direction, this movement eastward, away from Eden, away from the state of being where things are as God intends them to be, God's Kingdom . . .

And out of this movement, we see the rise of a global military superpower.

Egypt.

This civilization as moved so far from God's dreams and hopes and aspirations for humanity, that Egypt has built their kingdom on the backs of slaves.

They've even gone so far as to declare that their king . . . is . . . God!!

Pharaoh was god. And he was a god that achieved peace and prosperity and economic growth through the use of slaves

workers who were not paid a fair wage

people treated as property

sold, and trafficked

dehumanized

We've gone from

Two people who ate some fruit . . . to

Murder . . . to

A whole civilization at odds with the way God intends things to be

People are being oppressed . . . and that was never supposed to be a part of God's Kingdom, Shalom, Eden.

And what do these people, these slaves, do?

What do YOU do when you are at the very bottom? When you just can't go on? When there ISN'T a light at the end of the tunnel for you? What sound do you make?

Exodus 2:23 During that long period, the Israelites groaned in their slavery and they cried out. & their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God.

They cried out!

AND GOD RESPONDS!!! Why? Because God Always Hears The Cry Of The Oppressed!!!

Why? How do we know that He hears?

BECAUSE OPPRESSION IS NOT, WAS NOT, AND NEVER WILL BE, OR HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH THE KINGDOM, THE SHALOM, OF GOD!!

If something as simple as killing another person leads Cain east of Eden, then how far east is a civilization built upon murder, forced labor, and dehumanization?

God always hears the cry of the oppressed.

Exodus 3:7 The LORD said, "I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.

8 So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

9 And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them.

Over and over in the story of God's people, when they cry out . . . God hears their cry.

In the Old Testament alone, the phrase "cried out" appears 49 times!!

And again, this makes sense. When the cry is in response to things that are not in line with the way that God wants them to be, when things are anti-Kingdom, anti the Shalom of God . . . of course God will respond.

So Moses leads the people out of oppression, away from a kingdom and an empire that disturbs the Shalom of God.

And so now we come to Mount Sinai.

God now moves from rescue mode, to speaking mode.

Sinai is where we finally hear God speak not just to one person as He did with Abraham, Jacob, and Moses. Now, God speaks, for the first time since Eden, He speaks to a group of people.

But before he speaks to the people in the wilderness, he let's Moses know what he's about to do . . .

Exodus 19:1 On the first day of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt they came to the Desert of Sinai. 2 After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

3 Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 4 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, 6 you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

Covenant = berit = cut a deal

Same word used in a Jewish wedding between the man and woman.

In fact (WE DON'T HAVE TIME THIS MORNING) there is wedding language ALL THROUGH the covenant that God establishes with His people. The hearers and readers of this story would have all sorts of bells and whistles going off.

The 10 Commandments are, in fact, a wedding ceremony between God and all of humanity.

But we can't ignore this other word . . . PRIESTS!! God is calling his people to be . . . priests?

What does a priest do? They mediate the divine.

A priest comes between people and the god they serve.

A priest shows others what their god is like.

What a priest does and says in the rituals they perform shows you what their god cares about.

God is inviting his people to show the world what He's like. To showcase what their God cares about.

When we realize that this is how God is setting things up, we have to ask ourselves a very important question . . .

WHY CAN'T GOD DO ALL THIS BY HIMSELF? Why doesn't God just "show up" and fix everything and free everyone from oppression? What's the deal?

I believe it is because God needs a body. God needs people, you and me, to show others what God is like and what He cares about.

And as we can clearly see moving from the beginning of the story to this point: God is all about rescuing people who have moved east of Eden.

He is all about liberating people from oppressive kingdoms that are anti-God's Kingdom.

God is all about redeeming a civilization, indeed the whole world, from living in such a way that disturbs the Shalom (THE NEGATION OF LACK) of God.

God needs a Body.

Perhaps God is telling his people, "you've experienced what it is to be enslaved and dehumanized in Egypt. Now, I will show you the best possible way to be anti-Egypt."

God is about to show these people what it means to be human again.

So let's just look at the first 4 commandments.

FIRST: You shall have no other gods before me.

These are former slaves and so they must remember who God is and what He's rescued them from. They must never forget and keep this central to their understanding of God.

Because if they forget about who God is and what He cares about, they might forget what it means to be slaves and that might lead down all kinds of destructive paths . . .

(as it does later in the story but that's like generations down the road)

SECOND: You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.

Most of the surrounding cultures had gods that had shape and form and were imaged in carvings and stone statues, etc. If you wanted to understand one of these gods, you looked at the image of that god.

But this commandment leads them away from this thinking. There's a God that has no shape or size and is not bound within an image.

This commandment reminds us that God is calling us all to be priests. If people want to know and understand what this God is like, they need to look at our LIVES!!! Remember, God needs a Body!! He doesn't need wood or stone because he has US!!!

THIRD: You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God.

The Hebrew word for "misuse" is also translated as the word "carry". Same word.

So, if God is inviting people to represent the dreams and hopes and aspirations of God in the world by the way we live our lives then we need to be aware of how we use and carry the name of God.

How do we carry God with us?

The Israelites were being invited to live in a way that was anti-Egypt, to make sure that God no longer heard the cry of the oppressed because people would no longer oppress one another.

To misuse, or improperly carry, the name of God is to neglect those who are being oppressed.

FOURTH: Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work.

A day without work was unheard of in Egypt. They had to make bricks every day. No rest. If you didn't make enough, you got beaten or even killed.

So the Sabbath is about honoring God, of course. But it's honoring God by reminding themselves that they aren't in Egypt anymore. Our worth as people comes from God, not from what we produce or how much we work.

The final 6 commandments are simply an extension of this new way to be a human being, to live in such a way that RESTORES the Shalom of God.

And over and over again in the accounts of the Law moving forward are reminders and stern warnings from God that they must never step into the role of Egypt. They must love their neighbors, care for the widows and orphans, feed the hungry, clothe the naked . . .

This is in the OLD TESTAMENT but for many it might remind you of the words of Jesus as well. Jesus knew the story. Jesus heard and hears the cries of the oppressed.

So the invitation for us today?

Do people, as they look at your life, get an understanding of what your God is like?

Do they see a God who hears the cry of the oppressed?

Do they get an understanding of a God who has dreams of restoring Shalom? (the negation of lack)

Does your life mirror a God who invites people into a Way of Life, rather than simply following rules?

Are you a priest?

Who are the oppressed amongst us in the world?

In our country?

Our city?

In this room?

Who are the oppressors?

Are we going to show the world what our God is like? A God who hears the cry of the oppressed? Or a god who just wants us to fall in line . . . or else?