

Exodus 20:1-17 // Rules of Relationship

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Preacher: Jonathan Middleton

[0 : 0 0] an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. 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, neither you nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servants, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. Honor your father and your mother so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal.

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male or female servants, his ox or donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks so much for reading, Robbie, and great to see you all this evening. And let me encourage you to keep your Bibles open at Exodus chapter 20. Well, let's pray and ask for God's help as we come to this passage. Father, as we come to the Ten Commandments this evening, familiar to many of us here, we pray that you would help us to hear them afresh this evening, remembering that these are words spoken by you to your people. And we pray that the Holy Spirit would apply them to us, writing them on our hearts and on our minds. For we pray in Jesus' holy name. Amen. Well, the Ten Commandments, what the Hebrew Bible sometimes refers to as the Ten Words. Easy to remember. You can count them on your fingers.

The question is, the question is, do I have to keep them? Do I have to keep them? I thought it might be helpful for us to think about that this evening. Do I have to keep the Ten Commandments? And there's probably a mixture of responses in a room this size to the Ten Commandments. A few weeks ago, I think Donald Trump came out and he said, I love the Ten Commandments. I'm not going to comment on that, but some people love them and some people not so much. But if I were to tell you that this was going to be, this evening was going to be the first of ten weeks in the Ten Commandments, would you be thinking, brilliant, bring them on? Or would you be groaning and thinking to yourself, oh no, you've got to be kidding. It'd be interesting to do an experiment to turn to your neighbor. I'm not going to do that just now. But some people love rules and regulations. Maybe that's you. Maybe you are a stickler for rules. Maybe you're the kind of person who just loves to pour over the small print and that kind of thing, can't get enough of it. And that's great. We need people like that in a church like this. But maybe you recoil at the idea of rules. Maybe you recoil against that. Maybe the very idea of rules sounds restrictive and limiting like that. Like somebody's out to spoil your fun, ruin your freedom. Well, Nina Simone, the jazz singer, Nina Simone, she gives eloquent expression to that innate desire for freedom that is part of the kind of cultural narrative of our age. Her song, I wish I knew how it would feel to be free. I wish I knew how it would feel to be free. I wish I could break all the chains holding me. We tend to think that rules impede our freedom. We equate rules with our freedoms being removed from us. And the people of Israel, they've just been brought out of slavery. Why shackle them with rules? Why rain on their parade like that? We got a piano over the summer for our children to learn.

[5 : 21] They've not had any lessons yet. We thought it would be good to let them just get used to it and tinker around with it to begin with. So for now, they're free to play just as they wish, unfettered by any rules or method or technique or any understanding of harmonic relationships between the musical notes.

Now, walking in to one of their performances is like walking in on some kind of avant-garde industrial noise music experiment. So perhaps there is something after all to it, the rules. But the Ten Commandments, what have these rules got to do with us today? Can we really take these ancient codes of conduct as our modern model moral framework? We're going to think about what they are and how they apply to us under the following headings. You'll find them in the notice sheet.

Firstly, freed from slavery. Secondly, we're freed for relationship with God and with each other. And then finally, we'll make some closing remarks on our freedom in Christ. But firstly, we're freed from slavery.

So if you look at the brass plaque behind me on your left-hand side, you'll see the Ten Commandments. And that's how they're usually presented, taken out of their Exodus context, presented in the abstract, as it were. And note that up on the wall, it starts with verse 3, the first command.

[7 : 05] I am the Lord thy God. Thou shall have none other gods but me. But you miss verse 2, and you miss the whole point of the thing. And God spoke all these words. Verse 2, I am the Lord. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

This is the key pivotal verse. Verse 2 explains what the Ten Commandments are, what the Ten Words are, and what they're not. And if you remember back to last week, and Jamie's sermon, this event is truly spectacular. The Ten Commandments are given, not in a classroom, but at the mountain of God, surrounded by thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain. So if you glance back across the page to chapter 19, verse 18, Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because Yahweh descended on it in fire.

At the foot of the mountain, the people are trembling in fear. But we should notice something here, something we need to get right when we come to the Ten Commandments, and it's this. They were given by the Lord, the God who has revealed himself in his infinite holiness, his fearsome holiness. But they are also given in a context of grace, a context of God's grace.

How so? Well, before even the first command is given, God reminds them that he is the God who heard their cries when they were in Egyptian captivity. He is the God who rescued them from the house of slavery.

And it's grace first, then obedience, not the other way around. And we get the order mixed up. We make a miscalculation here, and we're headed for a spiritual disaster, headed for a spiritual train wreck.

[9 : 25] And on January the 26th, 2004, at Tokyo Disneyland's Space Mountain, and I appreciate we've already had a roller coaster illustration this morning, but at Tokyo Disneyland's Space Mountain, an axle broke on a roller coaster, train ride, mid-ride, causing it to derail.

And the problem was that they'd ordered the wrong size of axle. They'd mistakenly been ordered using the imperial system instead of a metric system. They'd made a fundamental miscalculation, a fundamental error in their assumptions.

And the assumptions that most people make, most people make when they come to the Ten Commandments, is if I live like this, if I live like the Ten Commandments are set at, then I'll be acceptable to God.

If I want God to love me, then I'll obey His commands. But the order of it is key. And get that wrong, and you're headed for a spiritual derailment.

And the chronology gives us the theology. So verse 2, what God already did, that's grace.

[10 : 40] Verse 3, the first commandment, that's obedience. First grace, then obedience. Never the other way around. Every other religion, it's the other way around.

But this order means, our salvation is not based on our performance. Our salvation is not based on our works. It's not, keep these rules for 40 years, and see how you're getting on, Israel.

Then I'll bring you out of slavery, if you're doing all right. It's not God brings them to the Red Sea, and then they have to pass a test as individuals, and see if they've kept the Ten Commandments.

If they pass the moral exam, then they get through to the other side. It's not that. It's first grace, first God brings them out from slavery, and then He shows them how to live.

And it's the exact same in the New Testament. So Paul's letters follow the Exodus 20 pattern. How God saved us, that's the first part.

[11 : 39] And then the second part, how then we should live in response to God's grace. Exact same order. So the letter to the Romans, the first 11 chapters, here's the Gospel, then chapters 12 to 16, chapter 12, verse 1, the Romans hinge verse, therefore, in view of God's mercy, here's how you live a life that's holy and pleasing to God.

Ephesians is the same, first three chapters, Gospel truths, four to six, how then you're going to live. Exact same Exodus 20 pattern.

And this, I think, helps us to understand the nature of these commandments, God's rules. They're not a checkbox exercise. They're not rungs of a ladder for us to climb, but rules of freedom, rules of relationship.

We're rescued from slavery, rescued for relationship with God and with each other. And so that leads us on to our second point.

We're freed for relationship. And God brought them out of Egypt to be in relationship with him. God's descended on the mountain, and at the end of Exodus, he's going to be moving in with the people of Israel.

[13 : 01] His glory fills the tabernacle, the tents of the meeting. So this is a really big deal. God's people in God's presence. And they've had nothing like that since Eden.

And so it's a big deal. And so as Israel sits poised to enter the land of Canaan, the new God, and they need to know how to live in proximity to a God who is holy, a God of infinite holiness.

So this is a definitive moment for these people. And it's a bit like a wedding vow. The nation comes to the altar like a bride. The pastor is saying to Israel, do you take this as your lawful husband?

And so when God says in verse 3, you shall have no other gods before me, nothing could be more rational, nothing could be more reasonable, because there's no other gods, ancient or modern, that are powerful to save, that can give us that freedom.

And any God substitute that we cling on to, whatever it may be, power, money, sex, relationship, whatever it may be, any God substitute, can only harm and damage us.

[14 : 14] And so the first commandment teaches us that putting God first is not only the right way to live, but it's the best way to live. It's how we're to live if we're going to flourish.

And it's important for us to see that. Now you may have noticed the commands are mainly negatives, not the fourth and the fifth, but the rest of them are in the negative.

You shall not do this, you shall not do that. So why is that? Why in the negative? And again, it sounds, to our ears, it sounds restrictive. Actually, they're given in the negative basically because we're free, we've been set free.

Now that's counterintuitive. I appreciate that, but think about it. If you go to Kelvin Grove Park, there's a notice on the railings there, no alcohol allowed.

And you have freedom in the park to do whatever you please, but no alcohol in Kelvin Grove Park. If you go to a swimming pool, there's a list of rules.

[15 : 21] And I guess they've changed them now, but if you grew up in the 1980s going to a leisure center, there was always this sign up on the swimming pool wall, a truly iconic piece of graphic design.

The pool rules. No smoking, no running, no half drowning, your best mate in the water. No petting, sometimes modified to no heavy petting.

But would patrons kindly refrain from? That's a polite way of putting it. Do any of this and you're out, that sort of thing. Why are they stated in the negative?

Because you're basically free to enjoy yourself. You're free to enjoy yourself except those few things. With a positive command, it's you can't do anything except only this one thing.

But with a negative command, you get to do everything apart from this. If you remember back in Eden, God gave Adam and Eve one negative command.

[16 : 29] And they had all the freedom in the world to do everything else. The Ten Commandments are given in the negative because God set us free and tells us what to avoid so we can flourish in our lives.

So second commandment, verse four, you shall not make for yourself an image for the purpose of worshipping it. So it's nothing against art or artists in general be creative by all means.

But we're not to be creative when it comes to working out what God is like. We're to worship in the way God shows us and as he reveals himself to be.

Otherwise, we're worshipping a figment of our imagination. That's another thing about these commandments. They reflect God's character. Actually, all of them do.

But the second commandment especially does so explicitly. God is a jealous God. Jealous. How so? It goes back to the idea of it being like a marriage covenant.

[17:40] Same as a husband being jealous for a wife. Now, that's not a negative thing. I want my wife Alice's love exclusively. I wouldn't be happy if it was shared among others.

A husband's love for his wife can be described as jealous. God is jealous for your exclusive devotion to him.

Third command, verse seven. What's in a name? You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God. We live in an age where God's name has become a swear word.

OMG, Jesus Christ profaned and so prevalent is it in our lives and our experience of our colleagues and of the media that we listen to and expose ourselves to that we can become very easily desensitized to that if we're not careful.

But actually there's more to it than that because if you're a Christian you've been baptized into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and so you have God's name on you and so our lives should be lived out in light of that because people notice things.

[18:55] People notice things more than we realize. I thought you said you were a Christian. I thought Christians weren't supposed to do that.

So we need to be careful that in our conduct we don't bring Christ's name into disrepute. Fourth command, verse 8. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

How does this translate for today? The first thing to note is it's not just about the Sabbath it's about every day. Six days you shall labor and do all your work but the seventh day you shall not do any work.

Six days work one day rest. It's a pattern for the whole of life grounded in God's creation order. What does it mean for Christians?

And we'd have to acknowledge that different Christians have different ideas about what the Sabbath means have different views on it. And on the one hand Christ fulfilled the Sabbath and so in Christ we find our true rest.

[20:09] And by the way the things that Christ did on the Sabbath contributed significantly to him getting killed. On the other hand Jesus was raised from the dead on the first day of the week and since the very earliest days of the church normal Christian practice has been for the Lord's people to meet with each other on the Lord's day to worship the Lord Jesus.

And the Ten Commandments are given therefore to a redeemed people to show them how to be in relationship with God. That's these first commands as a vertical dimension to them but they're also given to show us how a freed people are meant to live in relationship with each other to live in harmony with each other.

So this is the horizontal dimension. And again this isn't God being some kind of cosmic spoil sport to ruin our fun sort of thing he's giving us these rules for our own good.

And there's a clue about that in the fifth command to honour your father and mother so that you may live long in the land that the Lord is giving you.

So here our well-being our prosperity seems to be linked to our obedience to God's rules. Well this time of year the leaves are falling and there's a lot of dead wood about the place and yesterday afternoon at our household was spent building a massive bonfire with the kids in the garden it's still smouldering away now I went out to check before coming here and the children love that kind of thing gathering wood and bracken having hot chocolate and toasted marshmallows but one or two rules had to be established you shall not pick out that burning stick from the fire you shall not chase your sister with said burning stick and that's not health and safety gone mad it's not that I want to dampen their fun I want them to have fun and I want them to have it without them going up in flames commands 6 7 8 and 9 you shall not kill you shall not commit adultery you shall not steal you shall not give false testimony against your neighbor now that's not a bare minimum list the 10th commandment shows us it goes deeper than that you shall not covet your neighbor's wife house or property

[22 : 49] God's not just concerned with our outward obedience he cares deeply about our heart motivations he cares deeply about what's going on inside your hearts inside your thought life your motivations as well as your actions and that's how Jesus interprets them in the sermon on the mount do not commit adultery Jesus says you're guilty of that if you ever looked at someone lustfully in heart Jesus says God is concerned not just with the crime of murder but with the anger that leads to the crime of murder so the 10 commandments might focus on deeds but they're rooted in the realm of our heart's desires now just imagine just imagine a world where everybody kept these 10 commandments just imagine what that would be like imagine the bliss of a world where all these 10 commandments were kept all the time girls would be able to walk home safely at night without having to look over your shoulders for fear of being attacked guys for that matter would be able to walk home safely too let's work for the police less need for prisons no safeguarding policies no health and safety regulations lawyers would practically be out of work imagine a world like that wouldn't you like to live in a world like that

I think a world like that would look a lot like Eden before the fall see these are not random rules not a checklist to win God's approval but the reversal of the effects of sin you go back to Eden and you see Adam and Eve coveting the fruit that they weren't supposed to have in the first murder violence adultery ten commandments a reversal of the effects of sin but only only if everyone keeps them so that brings us to our final point our freedom in Christ and in this this closing section I want us to see how they apply to us today and we asked at the beginning do I have to keep them do I have to keep the ten commandments as Christians when we come to the ten commandments they should lead us to the cross they should lead us to Jesus and they should bring us to our knees before the cross as they reveal to us our own shortcomings and as we meditate on God's law we are surely convicted of our own covetousness of our own deceitfulness the way our impulse is so very often to grab that which does not rightly belong to us the ten commandments show us our need for Jesus following Jesus is not for people who manage to keep the ten commandments over time following Jesus is for people who fail to keep the ten commandments

Jesus came as our savior he perfectly fulfilled the law he's punished as though he's broken the law so we are forgiven as though we kept it it's all grace are Christians under the ten commandments no the bible says we are no longer under the law we're under grace grace is what it's all about and so then we live our lives in gratitude to Jesus returning to grace again and again whenever we mess up Christians have a different relationship to the law we don't have the law written on tablets of stone but when we are born again in Christ we have the law written on our hearts and minds in that sense it's not so much that we have to keep them but that we get to keep them it's our joy to live for Jesus

Quincy Jones was a prolific jazz musician composer and producer across all sorts of genres of popular music working with some of the biggest names in the industry he died a few weeks ago early in his career he studied music in Paris under Nadia Boulanger who taught him and this is how he puts it you had no freedom until you restricted yourself he says I hated this idea because it might be true I hated this idea without boundaries you don't have no freedom the jazz musician has rules to obey major minor alternations the jazz scale but within those rules freedom those rules are what give the freedom absolute freedom to create music to create beauty to create joy freedom to improvise without a note sounding wrong you want to know how it would feel to be free the ten commandments do you have to keep them why wouldn't you want to live life to the max let's pray father we we want to thank you for Jesus we want to thank you for his life lived out in perfect obedience lived out in perfect fulfillment of your law lived out in perfect honor of his father in heaven and as sinners we want to thank you for the grace that you've shown us in setting us free from slavery to sin and in showing us how to live as freed people as your treasured possessions as a holy nation help us therefore by the holy spirit who dwells within us to meditate on and to delight in your law and to live lives for the glory of our savior

Jesus Christ Christ and so we pray in the name above all others in Jesus name amen we're going to respond now in song and Greg and the band are going to lead us in our final songs please stand and sing this life I live this life I live is not my own for my redeemer paid the price he took