

Exodus 19:1-6, 16-22 (Common English Bible)

On exactly the third-month anniversary of the Israelites' leaving the land of Egypt, they came into the Sinai desert.² They traveled from Rephidim, came into the Sinai desert, and set up camp there. Israel camped there in front of the mountain³ while Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him from the mountain, "This is what you should say to Jacob's household and declare to the Israelites:⁴ You saw what I did to the Egyptians, and how I lifted you up on eagles' wings and brought you to me.⁵ So now, if you faithfully obey me and stay true to my covenant, you will be my most precious possession out of all the peoples, since the whole earth belongs to me.⁶ You will be a kingdom of priests for me and a holy nation. These are the words you should say to the Israelites."

¹⁶ When morning dawned on the third day, there was thunder, lightning, and a thick cloud on the mountain, and a very loud blast of a horn. All the people in the camp shook with fear.¹⁷ Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their place at the foot of the mountain.¹⁸ Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the LORD had come down on it with lightning. The smoke went up like the smoke of a hot furnace, while the whole mountain shook violently.¹⁹ The blasts of the horn grew louder and louder. Moses would speak, and God would answer him with thunder.²⁰ The LORD came down on Mount Sinai to the top of the mountain. The LORD called Moses to come up to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.²¹ The LORD said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people not to break through to try to see the LORD, or many of them will fall dead.²² Even the priests who come near to the LORD must keep themselves holy, or the LORD will break loose against them."

Matthew 5:17-20; 22:34-40 (CEB)

¹⁷ "Don't even begin to think that I have come to do away with the Law and the Prophets. I haven't come to do away with them but to fulfill them.¹⁸ I say to you very seriously that as long as heaven and earth exist, neither the smallest letter nor even the smallest stroke of a pen will be erased from the Law until everything there becomes a reality.¹⁹ Therefore, whoever ignores one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called the lowest in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever keeps these commands and teaches people to keep them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.²⁰ I say to you that unless your righteousness is greater than the righteousness of the legal experts and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had left the Sadducees speechless, they met together.³⁵ One of them, a legal expert, tested him.³⁶ "Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

³⁷ He replied, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind.³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment.³⁹ And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself.⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands."

If we stood in the presence of God, how well would we listen and obey?

We begin a new series this week. We'll be considering, specifically, the Ten Commandments, and more generally the Law of Moses – God's instruction to his people after they fled Egypt. To begin, we need to fill in some of the back-story – the escape from Egypt and the arrival at Mt. Sinai three months later.

The story of the Exodus

When the book of Exodus opens, Abraham's descendants (through Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons) have been enslaved in Egypt for several hundred years. Sometime around 1500–1300 BC, Moses is born, grows up in the Pharaoh's house, murders an Egyptian who was beating a fellow Hebrew, and disappears into the desert. There, he marries and tends to his flocks.

One day, he sees a bush that is burning but is not consumed by the fire. When he investigates, Moses is confronted by God, who tells Moses that God is going to save the Hebrews. It is in this meeting that God reveals his name to Moses: YHWH, which means, “I am” or “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:1-6).

Jesus, the Law, and the Two Tablets

When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai, he brought two tablets containing what we call the Ten Commandments. These commandments can be found in Exodus 20. The first four commandments speak to our relationship with God: do not worship any other God, don't make idols, don't abuse God's name, keep the Sabbath holy. The last six speak to our relationship with others: honor your parents, don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't testify falsely against your neighbor, and don't covet other people's possessions. The Ten Commandments lie at the heart of the Old Testament law.

Many people mistakenly believe that Jesus came to abolish the Old Testament. On the contrary, Jesus came to fulfill the law. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples what God's Law is really all about. When tested by the young lawyer, Jesus said that all the Law can be summed in the commandments to love God (the first tablet!) and to love neighbor (the second tablet!). All of the do's and don'ts one finds in the Old Testament are simply concrete expressions of those two commandments – for an ancient people.

Moses resists and offers up some reasons why he isn't the right guy, but God persists. Eventually, Moses, with the help of his brother, Aaron, returns to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh and demand freedom for the Hebrews. As you'd expect, the Pharaoh resists, so God sends plague after plague upon Egypt. In the end, Pharaoh relents only when God sends death to strike all the first-born of Egypt. However, the death passes over the homes of the Hebrews who have marked their doorways with the blood of a lamb.¹

After this final plague, Pharaoh lets the Hebrews go, but then changes his mind and chases after them. God parts the Red Sea (or “sea of reeds”) to let the Hebrews pass, but the Egyptian army is drowned when they follow the Hebrews into the parted waters.

God then leads the Hebrews into the desert. After a few months (not forty years!), they arrive at Mt. Sinai where God gives Moses the Ten Commandments and the instructions for building God's tabernacle, the place where God will dwell with his people. God also instructs the people on a system of priests and sacrifices that will mark them out as God's people.

God comes to his people

Though the plagues in the Exodus story capture people's imagination, the heart of the story is the encounter between God and his people at Mount Sinai. As the presence of God descends upon the mountain the scene

becomes foreboding, even terrifying. The people are warned that they cannot approach the mountain. Touch it and they die. The mountain has been made a holy place and the people would be consumed by the holiness of God, much as the wings of Icarus melted when he flew too close to the sun.

But God calls Moses up the mountain to appear before God, who reminds the people of what God has done for them and proposes a covenant with the Israelites: “If you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my special treasure” (see Exodus 19:1-6). When Moses returns from the mountain, the leaders of the people meet and agree to accept the covenant, “to do everything Yahweh asks of us.” After everything God had done for them, the Israelites' willingness to accept God's covenant shouldn't surprise us. Sadly, neither will their failure to keep it.

¹Jews commemorate this “passing over” every spring. In the last week before his crucifixion, Jesus arrived in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. The last supper of Jesus and his disciples was a Passover dinner. Thus, the followers of Jesus came to see him as the Passover lamb, who was essentially inaugurating a new Exodus. Thus, Jesus was seen as the one whose sacrificial death makes our own salvation possible.

After the people accept the covenant with God, the most amazing thing happens. God tells Moses that he will come to the people in a cloud of smoke so they can hear the audible voice of God! God is going to spell out clearly the terms of the covenant Israel has accepted so that all can hear. Thus, Moses assembles the people at the base of the mountain where God, in smoke and fire and announced by the blowing of a ram's horn, addresses his people.

In his address, YHWH lays out a series of ten terse commandments. In these commandments, God begins to shape a people who will be holy, who will reflect God's own character. The Ten Commandments begin God's instruction on how to live in right relationship with God and with one another. This entire passage (Exodus 20-31) is foundational to the biblical narrative, and there are at least three keys to understanding why this is so.

A few things about the Law to keep in mind

1. The Hebrew word *torah* is often translated "Law" but could just as easily be read as "Instruction" or "Teaching." The Law of Moses is not an assortment of arbitrary rules; rather, they provide the shape of a life lived in God's way and a community formed by the Spirit of God.
2. Jesus summed up all of the Law, God's Instruction, in two teachings: Love God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and love others (Leviticus 19:18). The first tablet speaks to our relationship with God. We are to have no other gods or take God's name in vain and so on. The second tablet speaks to how we are to live with others. We are not to steal or give false testimony. We are to honor our parents and our marriages. We are to forsake murder and so on. All of it seeking to answer the question, "What would love do?"

If you took all of God's teachings set forth in the Law of Moses, mixed them up in a pot, and boiled them down to their essence, love of God and others would be what is left. Think again of the two tablets – the first one focused on what it means to love God, the second on what it means to love others. If you will let this sink deep into your mind and heart, your understanding of Scripture will be revolutionized.

3. The Law was not given to the world, but to the Israelites, the family of Abraham. They were the ones who worshipped YHWH and he gave these teachings to his people. God would dwell with them in a way that he did not dwell with others. Thus, in a way, the Law can be seen as a manual on what it means to live with God. None of us would be surprised to be handed a list of house rules if God moved in upstairs. All of this is to say it is foolish to try to separate the two tablets, to strive to live by the ethic of the second tablet while ignoring first.

Finding our way forward

We all desire to live the good life, whatever we mean by that. We hope the same for our children and family. In the light of Christ, we know that the good life we seek is built on loving God and neighbor. Such a life is a holy life. Of course, loving God and neighbor is much easier said than done. Indeed, the story of Israel is largely the story of the people's inability to live as God hoped. This is also our story. Even if we know what we ought to do, too often, we do the things we know we shouldn't and fail to do what we know we should (see Romans 7:14-25). Still, to live as God expects us to live and to build the good life that we seek, we must grow, each day, in our ability to truly love God and our neighbor. As Paul put it in his letter to the Romans, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). And in the coming weeks, we will seek to understand God's teachings in ways we have not before. It is sure to be a surprising journey!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The biblical perspective is that making better choices begins with God. Do you really agree? Aren't there lots of moral and ethical people who don't acknowledge God or any divine being whatsoever? Where do their "oughts" come from? Why would anyone care about "oughts" that are derived only from human preferences? What difference does God really make? If making better choices begins with God, why do so many of God's people make such terrible choices? What evidence is there of God at work in our own choices?
2. Imagine that God came to you and proposed that he live in your house. How would this make you feel? Would it make a difference if God had done some good things for you? Suppose that God posted the Ten Commandments as new rules of the house. Do they make sense to you? Is there anything missing? Why these ten and not others? What would you like to see on the list that isn't there? As you look over the list, which ones make you the most anxious? The Jews found joy in the rules of their house (see Psalm 119). Why do you think this is so? Many of us find little joy in any rules. Even the word "obedience" can make us nervous. How can we find joy in being obedient to God's will for our lives?

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Sermon Notes
