



THE GRACE OF GOD'S LAW

Exodus 19-24

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This message is a continuation of a sermon series entitled the Gospel According to Exodus. Throughout this series, we've seen the purposeful, missional nature of God's grace, as he delivers his people *from* death and destruction, *to* himself, *for* the sake of the world. Thus, when we were introduced to Moses at the beginning of Exodus, we saw how he was first delivered *from* death at the hands of Pharaoh, then drawn *to* God at Mt Sinai, and then commissioned by God *for* the sake of his kinsmen, and through them, all nations. Because of Moses' experience with the Lord, he was prepared to lead his kinsmen to the Lord. And so he did. Under Moses' leadership, God delivered the Israelites *from* slavery and death. Then Moses led them to meet God in the place where he first met God—at Mt. Sinai.¹

Now we come to Exodus 19-24. These six chapters constitute a commissioning ceremony for a new nation, the people of Israel, as they're drawn *to* God *for* the sake of the world. Just as God previously commissioned Moses at the burning bush on Mt Sinai, God commissions all Israel at the very same place with the entire mountain on fire.²

It was a spectacular moment in redemptive history, and a dramatic climax for the nation of Israel as they gathered before the Lord. Consider the setting:

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. (Exodus 19:16-19 ESV)

¹ Believers quite naturally lead by following. Because of his prior experience with God, Moses was able to lead people out of slavery and into a relationship with God. Every Christian walks this same path. Consequently, every Christian is ready to lead others on this path as well. Christians are equipped with the essential know-how to lead people to God simply by retracing their own steps to faith.

² The fire of Mt. Sinai foreshadows the commissioning of the church at Pentecost, when the gift of the Spirit is signified by tongues of fire. (Acts 2:3)

Thunders and lightnings. Fire and smoke. A loud trumpet blast. That's how Israel's commissioning ceremony at Mt. Sinai begins. After such a thrilling introduction in Exodus 19, one might expect a cinematic announcement of Israel's marching orders in Exodus 20. However, God doesn't announce Israel's mission for several chapters. What comes first is law—four chapters of it. There are the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. Then there are three chapters of laws about this and that, ranging from the kind of altars God likes, to cattle regulations. From a literary perspective, the legal material feels incongruous, like running the film credits at the climax of a movie rather than at the end. Why would God interrupt the drama of the commissioning ceremony with all this fine print? What are these laws for, and what are Christians to do with them? We'll answer these questions and more as we take a closer look at the commissioning ceremony in Exodus 19-24.

WHAT'S THE MISSION OF GOD'S LAW?

What is the purpose of the laws in Exodus 20-23, and in the rest of the Bible for that matter? While there are many different opinions on this question, Christians look to Jesus for an answer. Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ said:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets. Matthew 22:37-40.

Jesus summarizes the law in terms of love of God and love of neighbor. In this he is drawing from the Old Testament, quoting from specific passages in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, in order to summarize the mission God gave humanity in creation. In Genesis 1, God made us in his image and he gave us work to do:

- There's the **vertical** work of being God's image bearers, whereby we renew our identity and allegiance to God through worship.
- There's the **horizontal** work of being God's image bearers, whereby the whole earth is filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. This includes **multiplying** God's image around the world, so that people who know and love him and serve him can be found everywhere. And it also includes the work of **stewardship**, so that all of God's world might be ruled in righteousness and justice, under the love of God.

Thus, when Jesus summarizes the law in terms of love of God and of neighbor, it's a brilliant way of summarizing what the Old Testament says we were made *for*, i.e. the vertical and horizontal components of the mission of mankind.

There's a substantial amount of law in the Bible. It's by no means the only thing in the Bible. Don't believe those who describe the Bible as "God's rule book." It's not, but there are rules in the book, both in the Old and New Testaments. And according to Jesus, the purpose of these rules is to enable us to fulfill our vertical and horizontal mission as God's image bearers.

Let's take a look at how this missional character of God's law plays out in Exodus. What does it mean for Israel in their commissioning ceremony at Mt. Sinai? The law is presented as the basis for their marching orders. Starting in Exodus 23:20, immediately after the conclusion of the law, God reveals Israel's mission:

Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared....

*And I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates, for I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you.
[Exodus 23:20, 31 ESV]*

These verses describe Israel's mission, and they presume that the mission will be executed in accordance with God's law. The Israelites are to fill Canaan with images of God—not idols, but believers. Just as in the beginning Adam and Eve were commanded to multiply and fill Eden with God's images, the Israelites are commissioned to multiply God's images throughout Canaan. Furthermore, the Israelites are to be God's stewards there, so that the land will be ruled with righteousness and justice under the love of God. In other words, Israel's mission is to become the "kingdom of priests" and the "holy nation" that God called them to be at the beginning of the commissioning ceremony in Ex 19:6.

BLESSINGS & CURSES

When God reveals Israel's mission in Exodus 23, he unfolds it together with a list of blessings and curses. These are important motivators for accomplishing their mission. For example:

Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him. But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. [Exodus 23:20-22 ESV]

Do you see the blessings and curses described here? The blessing is God's promise to lead and protect Israel as they go into the middle of an incredibly dangerous situation. They will need both God's guidance and his defense in the hostile territory of Canaan. The curse is a warning against rebellion. The Israelites aren't in command; God is. The angel isn't on "Israel's team"; rather, Israel is called to serve on God's team. This is made clear when Israel eventually meets the angel on the western shore of the Jordan, at the inauguration of their mission to the promised land. Joshua looks up and sees the angel standing before him with his sword drawn. Joshua asks, "Are you for us, or for our adversaries?" In reply, the angel says, "No; but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come." (Joshua 5:13-14). Joshua immediately falls down before the angel, recognizing his authority.

A similar set of blessings and curses are repeated in Exodus 23:28-33, in which God describes Israel's future borders extending from the Mediterranean all the way to the Euphrates. It says that God will bless Israel by driving out their adversaries before them. It also warns Israel that

God will curse them with judgment if they take up the Canaanite gods and engage in their wicked practices.

We mustn't be put off by these curses. They're just what we should expect in a ceremony formalizing an important, world-changing mission. Those who want to accomplish this mission must stay loyal to the commander. Those who take their eyes off him will suffer the consequences.

We encounter similar blessings and curses all the time in our daily lives. Take your job as an example. Stay true to the mission of the company, stay loyal to the boss, and you'll be blessed with salary and benefits. But if you decide to do your own thing, there will be consequences. Or what about a contract you sign, like a mortgage? Pay your mortgage on time every month and you'll be blessed to live in your home now and eventually to own it. But if you decide not to pay, there will be consequences. Our lives are filled with blessings and curses like these, built in to our relationships in order to motivate us toward various objectives.

HOW SHOULD WE READ GOD'S LAW?

It's a real challenge trying to make sense of all the laws in Exodus 20-23. Let's consider some strategies for reading and understanding this material.

First, it's very helpful to see that Exodus 19-24 is a **covenant treaty** between God and his people. Early twentieth century archaeologists uncovered several examples of ancient suzerainty treaties made between imperial powers and a vassal states in the Middle East. These treaties share the same essential format in the same way that business letters share a standard format. Suzerainty treaties:

- begin with a **historical preamble**, i.e. a narrative describing the generous posture of the empire toward the city state.
- list the **requirements** of the vassal state, i.e. what the beneficiary must do in order to preserve the covenant relationship.
- list **blessings and curses**, i.e. blessings that would come from keeping the covenant, and curses that would come from breaking it.
- conclude with a **sacrificial meal** shared by both parties to ratify the covenant.

These ancient treaties give us insight into how to read Exodus 19-24, in which Almighty God enters into covenant relationship with a lesser power, the nation of Israel.

- God's law is preceded by a **historical preamble**; Exodus 19:4 and 20:2 are key verses in summarizing God's deliverance of Israel from slavery.
- God's law (Exodus 20-23) lists the **requirements** for Israel.
- There are **blessings and curses** (Ex 23:20-33) in order to motivate them toward completion of the mission objective.
- Israel's leaders share a **sacrificial meal** (Ex 24) with God atop Mt Sinai.

By reading Exodus 19-25 as an ancient covenant treaty, we're able to see why all the laws come smack in the middle of the narrative (i.e. the credits in the middle of the movie). While it may be surprising for modern readers to find several chapters of laws interrupting the story, it would have been entirely normal to ancient readers familiar with covenant treaties. Just as we expect a certain order of details in a business letter, they would have expected the order and format that we find in Exodus 19-25.³

In fact, ancient covenant treaties weren't that different from a formal commissioning today. Think for a moment about what it takes to become a commissioned officer in the Marines. A candidate must attend Officer Candidate School in Quantico to learn the "law" of the Marines, e.g. leadership, warfare, physical fitness, etc. The candidate must also be informed regarding the rights and responsibilities of service—the blessings of obedience, and the curses of disobedience that accompany being a Marine. These blessings and curses would include topics like salary and benefits, length of commitment, consequences for insubordination, etc. A candidate who demonstrates competency in all these areas can then graduate with great fanfare. The order of Exodus 19-24 appears to be remarkably similar.

Now let's take a closer look at the laws. We're given an important clue regarding how to read the laws during the final commissioning ceremony:

Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do." (Exodus 24:3 ESV)

All the words of the Lord and all the rules describe the two sections of laws in Ex 20-23. (See the diagram on the next page.) The first section is what we commonly call the "Ten Commandments" (Ex 20). However, the Old Testament never uses this terminology. Rather, the Old Testament calls the Ten Commandments the Ten "Words."⁴

If you think about the order of the Ten Commandments, you can see that they begin with the vertical and end with the horizontal, i.e. the first four are primarily about loving God, and the last six are primarily about loving neighbor. (I say "primarily" because there's a lot of overlap, and keeping them all is the best way to love both God and neighbor.) Worship is the big idea behind keeping the first four commandments. These four commandments help us stay on mission by following God rather than idols, by loving God rather than rebelling against him. And multiplication and stewardship are the big ideas behind the last six commandments. Commandments 5, 6 and 7 help us remain purposeful about multiplication by honoring our parents, not murdering, and not committing adultery, particularly when we think of these commandments in the broad, life-affirming ways that Jesus teaches them in the Sermon on the Mount. Likewise, the last 3 commandments help us remain purposeful about stewardship by

³ The discovery of ancient suzerainty treaties also explains why Moses was given two tablets. When ancient suzerainty treaties were established, two identical copies were made, so that each party could review the terms and obligations regularly. This suggests that the Ten Commandments weren't written five each onto two different tablets, but rather ten commandments each on two identical tablets.

⁴ When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, the "ten words" became the "deka logoi." This was later Anglicized as "declogue," which is a common moniker for the Ten Commandments.

fostering godly economic principles with the 8th commandment, fostering a godly justice system with the 9th, and by stewarding nothing more than what God puts under our care in the 10th commandment.

READING GOD'S LAW IN EXODUS 19-24

THE TEN "WORDS"

THE CHARTER FOR GOD'S PEOPLE

Exodus 20:1-17

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength
Mark 12:30.

1 DON'T HAVE OTHER GODS



2 DON'T HAVE IDOLS



3 DON'T MISUSE GOD'S NAME



4 REMEMBER THE SABBATH



Worship

I AM the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.
-Exodus 20:2.

Love your neighbor as yourself
Mark 12:31.

5 HONOUR YOUR PARENTS



6 DON'T MURDER



7 DON'T COMMIT ADULTERY



8 DON'T STEAL



9 DON'T LIE



10 DON'T COVET



Multiplication

God created mankind in his image and commanded them to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.
-Genesis 1:27-28.

Stewardship

God created mankind in his image and commanded them to be his stewards over all the earth.
-Genesis 1:27-30.

& THE "RULES"

IMPLICATIONS FOR COVENANT ISRAEL

Exodus 20:22-23:19

Re: Worship.
Sacrificial Altars
(20:22-26)

Re: Neighbors.
Servants
(21:1-11)

Re: Multiplication.
Harming God's Image
(21:12-32)

Re: Stewardship.
Care for Property.
(21:33-22:15)

Re: Multiplication.
Warping God's Image
(22:16-20)

Re: Neighbors.
The Marginalized
(21:1-11)

Re: Worship.
Feasts
(23:10-19)

Following the Ten Commandments, Ex 21-23 contain ~50 “rules” which work out the fundamental principles of the Ten Commandments for Israel at that particular moment in history. In other words, if the Ten Commandments function as a kind of timeless constitution for God’s people, then the rules in Ex 21-23 *apply* the Ten Commandments to Israel in context.

The “rules” in Ex 21-23 are organized into four different categories over seven blocks of material.⁵ These seven blocks more or less move through the Ten Commandments from 1 to 10 and back to 1 again. The first and seventh blocks are about *worship*. The second and sixth blocks prescribe love for *neighbors* in whom the image of God is somehow at risk, whether because they are slaves or widows or orphans or foreigners. (After 400 years of slavery in Egypt, Israel mustn’t perpetuate Pharaoh’s practice of treating human beings as possessions.) The third and fifth blocks are about *multiplication*, prohibiting practices like murder and adultery that would harm or warp God’s image in people. The middle block is a longer section on *stewardship*, applying commandments 8-10.

Take a few moments to review the diagram, and then go back and read Exodus 20-23. Hopefully you’ll be able to discern the system behind what at first glance appears to be a random assortment of various laws.

There’s one other feature of the laws in Exodus 20-23 that I want to mention, something that sets them apart from anything else that’s been discovered from the ancient world. No other law codes discovered in antiquity are so *personal*, with the nation’s deity speaking in the first person to his own people, from “I” to “you.” Sometimes people criticize God for rescuing the Israelites from slavery and then, to use their words, “burdening them with the law” at Mt. Sinai. To them, it feels like a bait and switch, moving from grace to works. But from God’s perspective, there’s no bait and switch. God’s law is a means of grace. It’s one of the primary ways that he reveals himself to his people. The people come to Mt Sinai to meet the Lord, and he graciously reveals himself to his people through his law. Consequently, we can read these laws as a way of discovering more of the character of God. That’s undoubtedly how Jesus read them.⁶

HOW DO WE KEEP GOD’S LAW?

Finally, now that we can read God’s law, what are twenty-first century Christians to do with it? And once again, while there are many different opinions on this question, Christians need only turn to Jesus to hear what he has to say. Early in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that he hasn’t come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). Then he points to himself, saying, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20). The scribes and the Pharisees were among the *most* decent, the *most* respectable people in that day. How can we have a righteousness that exceeds the most decent and respectable people in our world? Only by having the righteousness of Christ. It’s a

⁵ As shown in the diagram, the seven blocks follow what is known as a chiasmic framework: A-B-C-D-C-B-A, or Worship-Neighbors-Multiplication-Stewardship-Multiplication-Neighbors-Worship.

⁶ Want to know how Jesus felt about the law portions of the Old Testament? Read Psalm 119.

righteousness summarized by love of God and neighbor. It's a righteousness consistent with the Ten Commandments. However, it's not a righteousness that we can obtain by keeping the law. Rather, we gain this righteousness by entrusting our lives to Jesus. Our only hope of obtaining this greater righteousness is by pledging allegiance to him. Christians, therefore, are people who are made clean not by virtue of keeping the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.

Are Christians then free to disregard the law of God? Absolutely not. Remember that the law is God's gift to us, revealing more of his character to us. If we're going to remain true to our mission as God's image bearers, then we must love and meditate on God's law as a way of knowing the one whose image we bear. The law of God provides us with essential instructions for Christian ethics and mission.

Consequently, if the Decalogue is akin to the constitution of the people of God, then it stands to reason that the way we live today ought to be consistent with teaching of the Ten Commandments. And while the more detailed legislation in Ex 21-23 in most cases will not apply directly to our situation, the underlying principles will. So, for example, we can learn a lot about how God would like us to engage in stewardship today through studying how God taught the Israelites to steward property back then. But in all our study, let's be careful not to become distracted from the greater mission of loving God and loving neighbor.

In closing, let's take one last look at the grand commissioning ceremony in Ex 24.

(3) Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do." [i.e. the Ten words in 20] And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant [i.e. the rules in 21-23] and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words." (Exodus 24:3-8 ESV)

This passage is the only place in all the Old Testament in which blood is applied to the entire congregation. The importance of this moment cannot be overstated, as it signifies atonement, the cleansing of sin, the transformation of sinful people into a holy nation. As with their deliverance from Egypt, holiness is not something that the Israelites can do for themselves. God's initiative in transforming them into a holy nation foreshadows the sacrificial death of Jesus, when all the types and shadows of the Old Testament will finally be realized.

In the last supper, Jesus took the passover cup and offered it to his disciples saying, "Drink this, all of you. For this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). Because of the precious blood of Christ, we are washed clean and enabled to enter into God's holy presence.

(9) Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank. (Exodus 24:9-11 ESV)

They ate and drank with the Lord! How could they do it? Because of atonement, the cleansing of sin, provided them by the Lord.

What they experienced once atop Mt Sinai, we experience every Sunday in Christian worship. Not by our own efforts in keeping the law, but by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the law, and gives us his righteousness through faith. He delivered us *from* death and destruction. He draws us *to* himself to feast at his table. And he sends us out as his redeemed image bearers *for* the sake of the world.