

“LIVING GOD’S WAY – 1”
Exodus 20:1-17; Judges 21:25

Every now and then, as you watch the TV news or read the newspapers, it hits you that this world can be a pretty nasty place, really. Despite what *The Daily Mail* might lead you to believe, though, I don’t think it’s necessarily any worse than at any other period in history. Just think, for example, of the excesses of the late Roman Empire, the horrific savagery of the Middle Ages, the gross perversions of the eighteenth century, the imperial hypocrisy of the Victorian era: and that’s just Europe. It’s still very easy, though, to become depressed and disillusioned. The government is always on about “crime and the causes of crime” or “issues of law and order”. Our newspapers are full of stories about kids with ASBOs, gory murders and the constant rise in petty crime. We do seem to be living in a time that is selfish and lawless to the core.

Humankind, particularly in the western world, seems to have lost all sight of God. We have created our own idols – celebrities, shopping centres, ideas and ideologies. If the name of God is heard at all it is as a swear word. The day of rest and worship which God provided for us has been eroded away in the quest for greater profit. Family life is falling apart at the seams. Human life is held in very low esteem as murder, violence and war fill our TV screens – both as news and as entertainment. Sexual promiscuity and deviancy are seen as the norm. There is theft on all sides – whether petty shoplifting, burglary or the institutionalised fraud of financial institutions. Look up at the advertising hoardings and you find yourself bombarded by the deceitful trickery of the admen whose labour drives our society, which is founded on greed and covetousness. (Gosh! I do sound like a *Daily Mail* columnist.)

It seems as if it’s every person for himself or herself – the laws passed by successive governments are either conniving with the evil inherent in our society (gambling, alcoholism, abortion, Sunday trading) or disregarded on such a scale that the police and judiciary seem powerless to combat them. Talk of human rights keeps criminals out of prison and lawyers in clover! There are no absolutes, it seems, nothing objective to fall back on.

At the end of the book of *Judges* (21:25) in the Bible there is a sentence that describes the situation in Israel at the end of the period of the Judges and before the monarchy – “*In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.*” It was do-as-you-please, every man for himself. No-one seemed to care what was going on and there was no commonly agreed set of standards by which society could be governed. (Well, there was, but they’d been ignored.) If you’ve ever read through *Judges* you will have noticed the stories of some of the great men and women of the Old Testament – Gideon, Barak, Deborah, Samson and so on. But you’ll also see that the society which they were trying to govern was becoming increasingly perverted and selfish, turning away from the worship and obedience to God that had characterised their behaviour when they first arrived in their new land from Egypt. To take just two stories from the later chapters of the book, in 17:1-5 we read of Micah setting up his own little cult of worship to idols (with the same little comment in v6). And in chapter 19 there is a horrific tale of violence and sexual perversion that would tax the cinematic skills even of Mel Gibson. There was no authority, no commonly held system of values. The novelist Arthur Koestler, in his usual pessimistic style, once wrote, “*I am not sure whether ethical absolutes exist. But I am sure we have **act as if** they existed or civilisation perishes.*” Human beings really do need some external authority, some objective standard by which to govern our lives.

What Arthur Koestler wouldn’t admit, and what most people today – even many Christians – won’t admit, is that objective laws do exist, there are clear absolutes. There is a set of guidelines to live by – *The Maker’s Instructions* which have been given to humanity by the God who created us. And that set of guidelines is to be found in the Bible, in *Exodus 20:1-17*. We call them The Ten Commandments. Unfortunately, most people choose to reject them, ignore them, or treat them as The Ten Suggestions.

[The popular radio show *I'm Sorry I Haven't A Clue* invites its panellists to suggest how they might have been publicised in the newspapers if they'd been given today:

- 10 Things You Didn't Know You Shouldn't Do (*The Sun*)
- Graven Image Manufacturers Protest At New Guidelines (*The Times*)
- "Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery" Drops To No. 8 (*Smash Hits*)
- Moses Names Ten For Sunday (*Sporting Life*)]

From the time of Israel's deportation, those in authority, with the willing support of their peoples (don't complain about our lawmakers, you voted for them!), have tried to circumvent the laws of God by creating their own legal framework, and the longer time goes on, the more complicated become our attempts at replacing them. As the poet T S Eliot once wrote, God said "*I have given you my law, and you have set up commissions.*" Just to illustrate that, The Ten Commandments take up about 200 words or so (depending on the English version you use): one of the minor directives to come out of the European Commission in Brussels (to do with the shape of carrots or the size of safety helmets or some such) came out at 26,000 words. (Now I really do sound like a *Daily Mail* fan!)

So, over the next few weeks or so on Sunday mornings and in the house groups, we're going to have a fresh look at these Ten Commandments to see whether they actually have any relevance for us today. We will look at them in the light of the New Testament and how we can apply them to our own lives. In *Matthew 5:13,16* we read that we are to be "*salt and light*" in our world, so we must consider how we can bring the influence of these commandments to bear on our society. In that way, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, maybe we can be a little more optimistic than we seemed to be to begin with. There's all kinds of issues to discuss about this, so if you're wanting to have a good old debate about them, get along to one of the house groups. This morning, though, we're just going to say a few things by way of introduction.

1. WHAT ARE THEY?

Not long after I'd arrived here in Lichfield, some of the young people from the church here who were pupils at King Edward's School invited me to take part in a debate at the Christian Union there. In the general discussion after the debate, one of the students made the assertion that religion is just an exercise in brainwashing (and MTV's not, I suppose). Everyone is indoctrinated by the Church, she said. When I asked her what she meant by that, she replied that we all have things like The Ten Commandments rammed down our throats. To try and discover the extent of this indoctrination, I asked her to list The Ten Commandments. She couldn't think of any. Could anyone there list The Ten Commandments? Just five of them? No – no-one could. So much for indoctrination!

Most people have heard the phrase "The Ten Commandments" – even if only as a film title – but very few could list even half of them, and fewer still could tell you what they're all about, I suspect. And I don't suppose many Christians are any better. Most people would say that their a set of laws for Jews or for Christians, or something like that – a bit like the rules of a club or society. Some people would say that they're simply a list of "Thou-shalt-nots" designed to take the enjoyment out of life. I hope we shall see that they actually help us to enjoy life more.

The first thing to say, though, is that they're less a set of laws than a covenant, a treaty. Historians and archaeologists tell us that The Ten Commandments follow the pattern of many ancient international treaties between conquering kings and the people they have subdued. Just look at *Exodus 20* for a moment. First it identifies the King (v2): then it says what he has done (v2b): then there is a long list of things that the people must do (vv3-17) – ten conditions, if you like. Four are to do with the attitude of the people to God and six are to do with their relationships with each other. With the possible exception of stealing, they are all to do with the ways we treat other people – not, as with most other ancient treaties, how to treat property and things.

But there are other vital differences between this and other treaties that were made at about the same time. And they concern the first two verses of this chapter.

2. IT'S NOT WHAT TO DO BUT WHY

The emphasis in this covenant is not on the harsh conditions that a subdued people must fulfil to satisfy a conquering king, but on the response that a liberated people will want to make to a loving God. They are not laws based on the whims of men – ideas that tyrant kings might have about how to get people to live in relative peace, nor even suggestions that a benevolent democratic government may have for universal peace and happiness – that's really what's got us into our present mess.

No, they are words spoken by God. He has spoken as our Creator and they are his absolutes. He made us and he knows how we should function. We believe that these are God's words. As one commentator puts it (Kline in *NBC*), "*The fact that The Ten Commandments were uttered by the voice of God himself without any intermediary is a witness to their authority and enduring validity.*" It's always best to follow the Maker's Instructions, as you will know if you've taken receipt of a hi-fi system or a DVD recorder or a piece of IKEA furniture. You can waste an awful lot of time doing things your own way – and you often get into quite a mess as well.

That God has spoken them is one reason for obeying them, one difference between this covenant and other ancient treaties. The second difference is that we are not dealing with a conquering tyrant, but a loving and liberating God – he has brought his people **out** of oppression in Egypt, rather than subjecting them to oppression as so many other rulers did. God appeals to this as a reason why his instructions are to be followed: he has demonstrated his love, so the people have no reason to fear him and every reason to respond in loving obedience.

3. SO WHAT'S THE RELEVANCE TODAY?

"OK," you may say, "that's fine if you're Jew living in the seventeenth century BC, but it doesn't necessarily follow that I should keep to The Ten Commandments today, does it?" Well, I think it does – and for the following reasons.

a) It's the same God

The God who created the Israelites, the Jewish people, and who knew best how they should function is the same God who created us. These commandments are for the smooth running of society, any society. The desires and emotions that are felt by men and women, the motivations behind relationships, the ways in which we interact are basically the same today as they were then. Of course, we like to think that we're more sophisticated, that we know a lot more, we're great deal wiser and better informed, but deep down it's the same things that keep us going, the same drives and preferences. God knows what's best for us so he gave us these commandments for all time.

b) God is still the Liberator

The strands of love and the images of liberation which run through the Bible have their spiritual counterpart today. Just as the Jewish people had been saved by God from the oppression and destruction of Egypt, so the whole of humanity (as St Paul tells us in *Romans*) has been liberated by Jesus Christ from the oppressive and destructive results of sin, death and hell. We cannot say, as many people have tried to do over the centuries, that Jesus ushered in a new era in which there was no need to keep to the laws of the Old Testament, just an ethic of universal love. Jesus himself said, "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them*" (*Matthew 5:17*). And when, in *Mark 12:31* he says that the second commandment is "*Love your neighbour as yourself*" it is not replacement but a summary of The Ten Commandments that he is giving.

For us today, obedience to The Ten Commandments is vital for us as God's created beings, but it is doubly important for us as Christians as a response to the liberating and eternal love of God. We love him because he first loved us and, as Jesus told his first disciples, "*If you love me, you will obey what I command*" (John 14:15).

c) Jesus helps us to obey

Jesus not only fulfils the Law, he interprets it. He shows us what it really means. We'll see that, I hope, as we look at each separate commandment over the next weeks. The Pharisees and Teachers of the Law tried to interpret it, but ended up adding to the burden of it all with all their extra instructions. In the end they had moved further away from the law and the spirit behind it. They were a bit like FIFA officials trying to meddle with the few simple rules of football, but adding to the rule book and causing confusion.

Jesus didn't add to the burden, but made it easier to see what the reason was behind it. He showed that attitudes and thoughts matter as much as actions and words. He exposed the hypocrisy that lies behind so much of what we think of as obedience. He demonstrated the implications of it all. He pointed out God's standards, but also provided a way of escape if we fail.

What's more, he provides us, by his death on our behalf, with an incentive to keep to The Ten Commandments, and he has given us the gift of his Holy Spirit to give us the strength and power to keep to it. Clive Calver, when he was General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance, was asked by Ludovic Kennedy in a Radio 4 interview what he thought about non-Christians who seemed to be very good and law-abiding citizens. He replied that he had every respect for them, but felt sorry that they didn't have the incentive of Jesus to motivate them, nor the extra help that comes from knowing him.

So don't get too despondent as you look at the world around, as you read the newspapers and as you listen to the news bulletins. There are real guidelines for living. There are objective standards that we can aspire to. They have been given to us by a loving and liberating God, and with his strength we can keep them and proclaim by our lives and by our words in the world where he has placed us that they do actually work.

(House group notes follow on next full page)

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Housegroup Notes

The Ten Commandments, given to the people of Israel by God at the time of the Exodus, are a set of responses to his liberating actions. As he is Creator, he is best placed to know how his creation should operate and these “commandments” are like the instructions we get whenever we acquire a new piece of technology.

They are set out in the form of a treaty, which identifies the King, describes what he has done and prescribes the appropriate response from the other party to the treaty. Unlike other contemporary treaties, it is not based on the harsh conditions that a subdued people have to fulfil for a conquering tyrant, but on the response that a liberated people will want to make to a loving God.

Although they were given to a wandering people in the Sinai peninsula nearly four millennia ago, they are still relevant today, because the same God is still in control of the world and men and women still have the same selfish and divisive propensities. God, through Jesus, is still a liberating God. Jesus, through his Holy Spirit, provides the strength to keep to the commandments.

Questions for discussion

1. Before you read the passage from *Exodus 20*, all write down from memory The Ten Commandments. (Don’t worry too much about the order.)
2. For each commandment, give an example of how breaking it has become commonplace today.
3. Are there any commandments which we think of as “less important” than the others?
4. Do you think The Ten Commandments are still relevant today? Why/why not?
5. How does Jesus help us to keep the commandments?
6. How can we, as followers of Jesus Christ, communicate to the world around that these commandments are all important?
7. If you had to add an eleventh commandment, what would it be? Why?