

Exodus 20:1-17

God's Good Gift of Law

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

When someone mentions the ten commandments, what immediately comes to mind? I suspect that for a lot of people, it reminds you of someone you know that plays very fast and loose with one of them. Maybe they like to permanently borrow things without permission. Or maybe they will repeat and spread any rumour they hear without any regard for the truth. But there's an obvious problem with this response. What about you? Shouldn't you be looking for the log in your own eye first before thinking about the speck in your brothers? That is what Jesus said, after all.

But I want to suggest that there's an even better first reaction. Before thinking about who's done what, and who needs a good solid reminder of God's law, especially starting with ourselves, perhaps we should approach the commandments with an attitude of thanksgiving. The commandments are part of God establishing his relationship with his people. The opening sentence that's not in our list of commandments tells us just as much about God and us as the commandments themselves do. God says to the people of Israel, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."

Before the commandments are given, the basis for the relationship is established. The ten commandments aren't just dropped out of thin air into a group of people who must then follow them. They are part of God setting up a special relationship. And if we look at the laws God gives in a broader sense, they are, both individually and in their entirety, a gracious gift from God for the sake of the life, health, and well-being of his people. They're not an arbitrary collection of restrictions, but part of our creator's plan to provide for and protect his creation. They are God's gifts and God's wisdom, the creator's design for our lives. And they are very good. Remember, what did Moses do with the stone tablets of the Commandments when he saw that Israel had made for themselves the golden calf? He broke them! That is, he withheld God's wonderful gift from his ungrateful and unfaithful people.

It is quite telling that in the Exodus narrative God's redemption occurs before the giving of the law. The people have already fled Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, and are now free from their oppressors. God has already given them so much. God has firstly acted on behalf of his people. And then, the commands represent a response to God's action already done. And they reflect the nature and character of the one giving them.

As we look at the commandments, they show a relationship that is life-giving and based on trust. The command to not murder is the most obvious statement about the value of human life within these verses. But all the commandments, at some level, have something to do with this theme. The instruction regarding the Sabbath, for instance, also concerns life. The reasoning given for keeping this day holy, at least in its Exodus context, is the pattern of creation found in Genesis one. God's own pattern of working six days and resting on the seventh serves as the model of life for the people. We might also consider the command to honour your father and mother here as well. This is about your actions and attitude towards those responsible for the origin of your life.

But I want to come back to this idea of thanksgiving. When we look through the list of the commandments, they all relate to a particular gift that God has blessed us with. And so, each commandment is also a reminder to give thanks to God for that gift. And if you're not quite sure how that works for all of them, I'm going to step through them one by one and explain the associated gift of God. And the question we need to ask for each one is, "What has God given us that this commandment protects?"

So, the first commandment: "I am the Lord your God. Do not have any gods before me." What God gives us is himself. He is not some distant and uninvolved deity but is present with his creation. So, we give thanks that our creator is present with us and provides for his creation.

The second: "Do not misuse the name of the Lord your God." What God gives us is his name, which means we have access to him. We can come to God in prayer, and praise, and thanksgiving. So, we give thanks that we can approach our holy and almighty God, and that he does listen to the prayers of his people.

The third: "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy." What God gives us is his loving presence and invites us into his rest. So, we give thanks that we can gather for worship, that he feeds us spiritually, and refreshes and renews us for life in this world.

The fourth: "Honour your father and your mother." What God gives us is parents and other structures of authority and order in society. So, we give thanks that we have order and the rule of law and that we have a family environment to nurture us as we grow.

The fifth: "Do not murder." What God gives us is our very lives. So, we give thanks for the simple fact that we are alive, and for our health, our wellbeing, our skills and abilities, that we can use to serve others.

The sixth: "Do not be unfaithful in marriage." What God gives us is marriage and family, and the close intimate relationships that come with that. So, we give thanks for marriage, for families, for loving and stable homes that in some small way demonstrate the heavenly Father's love for us.

The seventh: "Do not steal." What God gives us is our stuff. Every good thing we need in this world is a gift from God, and for that we give thanks.

The eighth: "Do not bear false witness." What God gives us is reputation and truth. So, we give thanks that our good name, our reputation, our honour, our integrity is protected and upheld.

And I'll take the ninth and tenth together as they both deal with coveting. "Do not covet anyone else's house and do not covet anyone else's husband or wife, servants, animals or possessions." What God gives us is contentment and gratitude, being satisfied with all the other good gifts that come from God. So, we give thanks, because we know that God supplies our needs. In his providential care for us, we have no need to compare ourselves to others and be jealous of them.

And finally, we give thanks that God, out of his great love and mercy sent his son Jesus to die for us, so that all those times we reject his gifts, or despise, or cause harm to God's gifts to someone else, we still have forgiveness. Even when we mess up every single good thing that God gives us, he still comes to us with mercy and grace. Even when we show total disregard for all these commandments, God still wants us to know his love and to receive his forgiveness.

So may the ten commandments be for you a reminder of not just your need for Christ's forgiveness, but of all God's good gifts to you. May they remind you to give thanks for your life, your wellbeing, your relationships, and your stuff. And to give thanks that above all, God is gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love. To God be all glory, now and forever. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.