

(Devotional #22) **Christian Liberty and the Law:
Sanctification, Grace, and the Ten Commandments**
(Exodus 20:1-17)

For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; His commandments are not burdensome – 1 John 5:3

For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light – Matthew 11:30

It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore, keep standing firm and do not be subject again to the yoke of slavery – Galatians 5:1

The Christian life is fulfilling the spirit of the law (Godly Character) by means of a unique power (Holy Spirit) because of an overwhelming desire (Motive). It requires a standard or code of behavior, an inward power, which makes it possible to achieve it, and a motive which drives us on to do so¹.

Students of the Scriptures must consider how the Ten Commandments **'FIT'** with the New Testament's teaching regarding Christian Liberty. Do the Ten Commandments apply to the Church today, or were they only given to Israel? How should Christians view the Ten Commandments? The relationship of the Ten Commandments to Christian Liberty will be our topic for the next few weeks as we examine the Decalogue² in light of the New Testament.

The Ten Commandments are part of the Mosaic Law, and the Mosaic Law, as a system of governance, applied only to Israel, with specific parts designed to govern Israel's life in the Land of Canaan³. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which the Decalogue is not limited by geography, history or culture. The Ten Commandments have a special application to Israel because they are part of the covenant God made with that nation – but on another level, they apply to Jews and Gentiles alike in every dispensation ... in this sense: ***'The Ten Commandments are timeless principles by which the moral character of God is revealed to the world.'*** This is a point where some dispensationalists miss an important function of the Decalogue; they do so by not recognizing the commandments have a purpose that rises above the intent of the Jewish covenants.

The Ten Commandments were kept in the Ark of the Covenant, which in turn was kept in the Holy of Holies in the Temple⁴. Since only the Ten Commandments (**and not the entire Mosaic Law**) resided in the Most Holy Place of the Temple – the place where God's Presence was manifested – they must represent, in a way the rest of the Law does not, the very Nature of God Himself – **THEY ARE THE IMMUTABLE AND ETERNAL MORAL LAW OF GOD, and as such** – they transcend the Jewish Covenant. They express 'God's Moral Identity' and are part of His self-revelation to mankind, not just to Israel. This is why *unrepentant antinomianism*⁵ on the part of a nation always will lead to national destruction!

¹ *Legalism is Lethal in the Spiritual Life*, Fred Chay, Pg. 12

² The Ten Commandments sometimes are referred to as the Decalogue. 'Decalogue' is a compound Greek term made up of two Greek words: δέκα (deka – meaning, 'ten') and λόγοι (logoi – meaning, 'words'). In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Ten Commandments are called, οἱ δέκα λόγοι (hoi deka logoi – 'THE TEN WORDS').

³ See Deuteronomy 5:31- Moses was told by God to 'teach the Law to Israel' and to 'instruct the people that they were to observe all of God's Laws and Statutes in the Land God had given them.'

⁴ See Deuteronomy 10:1-5

⁵ Antinomianism means 'against law.' Nations that operate in the absence of the Moral Laws of God are destined to fall under divine judgment, as outlined in the Five Cycles of Discipline given in Leviticus 26.

I have heard it said, *'the Ten Commandments apply only to Israel under the Dispensation of Law,'* and also, *'the Sermon on the Mount applies only to the Millennial Age.'* Both statements are disproportionate. The Decalogue is part of a Jewish covenant, and the Sermon on the Mount – *(particularly Jesus' application of the Ten Commandments)* – never will be achieved perfectly as long as we have our Old Sin Natures⁶, but the Decalogue cannot be restricted to Israel alone for the commandments *(especially as Jesus explained them in Matthew 5)* manifest to the world the character and nature of God.

The Ten Commandments are the basis for 'HUMAN MORALITY' – not just 'JEWISH MORALITY.'

They give us a picture of what a moral relationship with God looks like, and how relationships between human beings, irrespective of the culture or dispensation, should be conducted. Is it only the Jew who is to recognize God as the Creator and worship Him? Is it only the Jew who is to respect private property and his neighbor's home and wife? Does only the Jew owe honor to his mother and father? Is human life sacred only to the Jew?

The answer to all these questions is, ***'of course not; these principles apply to all men.'*** The commandments – though not a functional set of laws for governing a society – are *the basis* for laws that can be written to serve any society in any era. They are timeless and they have a place in the private lives of each of us and in the public sector of any law-abiding nation.

Now obvious questions arise from this, the foremost being: Are we then under the Mosaic Law? Absolutely not! Paul is clear that we are ***NOT*** under the Mosaic Law⁷. Romans 10:4 says: ***"For Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes."*** This means the Law finds its completion in Christ because He fulfilled the Law completely.

How then are we to view the Ten Commandments today as Christians? If you limit the commandments to the framework of the Mosaic Covenant, and confine their application to that single context, then they are Jewish and have no application beyond the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel; but if you view them in a broader sense – *specifically as the revelation to mankind of God's moral character* – then they form a pattern for how God's character should be imitated by God's people, who are created in His image. Viewed this way, the commandments transcend the covenant and become principles that have value both for the individual and for all law-abiding nations.

SALVATION / SANCTIFICATION AND THE TEN COMMANDMENTS:

The errors that trap some people grow out of a confusion about the role of the Ten Commandments in personal salvation specifically, and in the Christian life (*sanctification*), generally: **THE TEN COMMANDMENTS PLAY NO ROLE IN PERSONAL SALVATION OR IN THE SANCTIFICATION OF THE CHRISTIAN.**

But how can this be? There are two principles that are in play at the same time:

- The Ten Commandments reveal to the world the character of God – *as such, they reveal to us the Moral Law; and ...*

⁶ In Galatians 5:16-17, Paul describes the Old Sin Nature as 'THE FLESH,' which, in contrast to 'THE HOLY SPIRIT,' wars against God's Holy Character. These two, the FLESH and the SPIRIT are polar opposites, and no one is immune. The Old Sin Nature is passed down through the male line to every descendant of Adam – see Genesis 5:3.

⁷ We always must ask the question, 'what is the timeless principle that stands behind the commandment'? (We will cover the 4th commandment in detail in a later lesson.)

- The Ten Commandments depict for mankind how we are to live with respect to God and with respect to one another – *as such they are a template for individual behavior, and they are the basis for laws that govern a civilized society.*

Yet, the Ten Commandments cannot save us, nor does keeping them obligate God to hold us in higher regard than He would otherwise. Fred Chay writes in his book, *“Legalism has no place in justification or sanctification”*⁸. By ‘legalism,’ Chay means ‘any system of law-keeping, including the Ten Commandments.’

So, does this mean we should ignore the Ten Commandments and live anyway we please? Paul addresses this in his Letter to the Romans; he writes, *“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase”*? Then he answers his own rhetorical question by saying, *“May it never be”*!⁹

The term ‘Law’ in Scripture is used in more than one way: sometimes it refers to the five books written by Moses, sometimes it means, the entire body of legislation known as ‘the Mosaic Law,’ and it can refer specifically to the Ten Commandments. When Scripture says, ‘Christ fulfilled the Law,’ it usually means, Jesus fulfilled the Ceremonial Law, putting an end to the sacrificial system, and that he lived in perfect obedience to the Ten Commandments (*the Moral Law*).

But here is the problem – try as we may, we cannot keep the Ten Commandments in a manner that is acceptable to God. The Apostle Paul, before he was saved, was a professional law-keeper – (*he was a Pharisee*). He says of himself, *“as to the righteousness which is of the Law, (I was) found blameless”*¹⁰. In this regard, he is just like *the Rich Young Ruler*¹¹. When this young man questioned Jesus about gaining eternal life, Jesus directed him to the Ten Commandments. In reply, the young man said of himself: *“Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth.”* Jesus then said to him, *“that isn’t enough.”* He said this to help the young man understand that eternal life is not the reward for law-keeping. Paul recognized his own inability to keep the commandments when in Romans 7, he said, *“I would not have known about coveting unless the Law had said, YOU SHALL NOT COVET ... but sin through the commandment produced in me coveting of every kind”*¹².

You see, Jesus already had laid the groundwork for a proper understanding of the commandments in His Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5, Jesus said, *“You have heard it said, YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTRY, but I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her already has committed adultery with her in his heart”*¹³. **UH OH!** It’s not just about ‘doing and not doing,’ as the young rich man had thought. That is what got Paul! Coveting is an attitude not an act.

Okay – I could continue for another ten pages, but I think you get the point. If we can’t keep the Ten Commandments in the way Jesus laid them out for us, then they can’t be a plan of salvation or a plan of sanctification. But Paul told us, we can’t ignore them either. So ... what do we do?

⁸ *Legalism is Lethal in the Spiritual Life*, Fred Chay, Pg. 20

⁹ See Romans 6:1-2

¹⁰ See Philippians 3:1-7 (note esp. verse 6)

¹¹ See Mark 10:17-22 (note esp. verse 20)

¹² See Romans 7:7-8

¹³ See Matthew 5:27-28

I wish I could give you a magic formula, but I can't – because I don't have a perfect answer. From reading Tim Keller's books, I came to realize the likelihood I ever have had a 100% pure motive in my life ... is **ZERO**. As believers, we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit ... but we also have an Old Sin Nature – and these two natures are at war with each other. God demands obedience and the commandments lay out for us how obedience looks from God's perspective. But since Jesus defined them as applying both to *'thoughts and motives'* and not just to tangible acts, we must depend on the Holy Spirit over the course of our lives, to change how we think and to purify what drives us (*our motives*). Are we under the Law? Thank goodness **NO!** But are the Ten Commandments applicable to us as Christians? **ABSOLUTELY!** If this seems to you like a bit of a dilemma, then we are looking at the question from the same perspective. No act of *'law-keeping'* contributes anything to the salvation or sanctification of any man. The Law, rather than being **'A PLAN OF SALVATION'** is in fact, **'A PLAN OF CONDEMNATION.'** Paul is clear about this in Galatians; he writes, *"For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse, for it is written, **CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW TO PERFORM THEM.** Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident, for the justified man shall live by faith" – Galatians 3:10-11.* Paul goes on to say: *"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us – for it is written, **CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE**" – Galatians 3:13.*

Paul makes it clear that the Law of Moses (*or for that matter, any act of 'law-keeping'*) cannot produce for us anything but a curse. And the only reason God can act in compassion toward us at all is because He first acted judicially against Christ at the cross¹⁴.

Once we have a solid understanding that *'we are saved by grace-alone'* and not by *'acts of law-keeping,'* we are in a position to understand the Ten Commandments in their proper context, for the commandments are written in a style that is both *authoritative* and *timeless*. Add to this the fact that the commandments are grounded in God's grace. Israel was delivered from Egypt for God's good pleasure, as reflected in His covenants – (*Exodus 20:2*). Israel was to live in obedience to His commandments – not to attain deliverance or salvation – for salvation was theirs already. They were to obey God out of **GRATITUDE** for what He had done for them.

Not much has changed in the Church Age. It is only by the grace of God, and for His own good pleasure, we have been delivered out of the domain of slavery to sin and placed into the freedom of Christ. Therefore we obey, not to get something from God, but to thank Him for what He already has done. The commandments guide us in this path of obedience – but it is an obedience that flows out of gratitude. And yes, they form the basis for Israelite Case Law ... but one would be hard-pressed to find any functional legal system that is not based on the principles made manifest in the revelation of the Decalogue.

THE NUMERATION OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS:

Now one might expect the commandments to be numbered (*one, two, three ... ten*) in the book of Exodus. But alas! That would be asking too much! However, rather than using our allotted time comparing the Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Protestant methods of dividing the commandments, I am going to list them as I think they should be divided ... and this will be the division we will use throughout this study. The Ten Commandments are given to us in Exodus Chapter 20.

¹⁴ See 2 Corinthians 5:21 – *It is worth noting: in Scripture 'Justice always precedes compassion.' There is no compassion in Scripture apart from Justice. This is why there is no solution to the human condition apart from the cross. Though we are 'prepared beforehand for good works' (Ephesians 2:10), good works are a result of our salvation not the cause of it.*

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS:

- I. I am the Self-existent God and you shall have no other gods before Me. – *vss. 1-3*
- II. You shall not commit idolatry by making any likeness of any god or creature in heaven above, or on the earth beneath, or in the water; you shall not worship them, or serve them, for I alone am God. – *vss. 4-6*
- III. Do not profane the NAME of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished, who takes HIS NAME in vain. – *vs. 7*
- IV. Remember to keep the Sabbath Day holy; do your work in six days but dedicate the seventh day to the LORD your God. No one in your family shall work on the seventh day. – *vss. 8-11*
- V. Honor your mother and your father so that you may enjoy a long life in the Promised Land. – *vs. 12*
- VI. Do not murder an innocent person. – *vs. 13*
- VII. Do not commit adultery. – *vs. 14*
- VIII. Do not steal. – *vs. 15*
- IX. Do not bear false witness against your neighbor. – *vs. 16*
- X. Do not covet your neighbor's house, his wife, or his male servant, or his livestock, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. – *vs. 17*

Ray Pritchard points out we could think of the Ten Commandments as Beatitudes:

Blessed are they who put God first.
Blessed are they who need no substitutes.
Blessed are they who honor God's name.
Blessed are they who honor God's day.
Blessed are they who honor their parents.
Blessed are they who value life.
Blessed are they who keep their marriage vows.
Blessed are they who respect the property of others.
Blessed are they who love the truth.
Blessed are they who learn the art of contentment.

In 1987 Ted Koppel, former news anchor of Nightline, gave the commencement address at Duke University, in which he made the following statement: “*Our society finds truth too strong a medicine to digest undiluted. In its purest form, truth is not a polite tap on the shoulder; it is a howling reproach. What Moses brought down from Mount Sinai were not ‘the Ten Suggestions’ – they are commandments – (‘ARE’ NOT ‘WERE’). The sheer beauty of the commandments is, they codify in a handful of words, acceptable human behavior, not just for then or now, but for all time.*”

Such are the Ten Commandments God revealed to Moses. Over the next few weeks we will examine each of them in the context of Christian Liberty.