

Why Obey Commandments?

Lent 3 - 2018

Exodus 20:1-20 - ESV

20 And God spoke all these words, saying,

²“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

³“You shall have no other gods before me.

⁴“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

⁸“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labour, and do all your work,¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

¹²“Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³“You shall not murder.

¹⁴“You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵“You shall not steal.

¹⁶“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

¹⁷“You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbour's.”

¹⁸ Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off¹⁹ and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.”²⁰ Moses said to the people, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.”

Introduction:



During the season of Lent we are shadowing Jesus on his way to the cross. As for his first disciples this is a sobering journey. So the readings in Lent are strong on being clear about the cost of discipleship.

The first reading today from Exodus comes in that frame. This is what we know as the ‘10 Commandments’. After rescuing the Hebrews from the land of Egypt, described as the ‘House of slavery’, Yahweh sets out his instructions to the People of Israel under Moses. These instructions came as a set of requirements that were required of the people within the frame of being God’s People.

There is a great deal of very interesting archeology around this and I have spoken about that before. What I am going to do today is drive straight to a personal message where this becomes critical for us all here today, every single one of us!

Diagnostic question

Ten Commandments

1. You shall have no other gods before Me.
2. You shall make no idols.
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
4. Keep the Sabbath day holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.
10. You shall not covet.

So with a simplified version of the 10 commandments before us let me ask the question why do you hold to these commandments today?

If I focus on Command # 8: “You shall not steal.”

Q: Assuming you are not a thief, may I ask you why you might hold to that?

Are you clear in yourself why you do not steal?
Register your thoughts here.

Development:

There are two categories of answer to that question: Why I do not steal?

The right answer is an answer of faithful obedience to the command of God delivered by Moses and affirmed by Jesus.

A: I do not steal because God my creator and saviour told me not to and I choose to honour and obey him in that.

That is the answer of faith in the living God who speaks and reveals himself to those who listen.

That is the personal response of the heart Yahweh sought from his people in the Old Testament and Jesus builds on in the New Testament. That is what personal faith in a living God involves. Those living in the Kingdom of God appreciate this.

That is what Yahweh was calling his people to in the 10 Commandments, the people he had rescued and now owned.

This obedience of faith grows out of recognizing who is speaking and honouring his words.

It is the ground of biblical faith in God as creator and redeemer.

The personal call and command comes from above and is received as revelation to be responded to in relationship.

There is another category of reasons why people may hold to these commandments and specifically commandment #8 "You shall not steal."

These other reasons for not stealing are developed from the ground up and held personally or socially. There may be empirical reasons for holding to this. When that happens it becomes a rule or an agreed law.

Many societies have agreed that stealing is not good and should not be tolerated so there are rules against that. Respect for ownership is a deep value in many cultures so people can arrive at this moral ethic themselves with or without religion. Many people hold this principle for themselves because they choose to hold high ethics such as the Golden Rule. The Torah was not the first to prohibit theft but it does so as a command from the God of Israel – Yahweh, to his people.

In this country and in the EU more and more protection is being provided in law to protect people from theft so the principle is well accepted but it is not referenced to God.

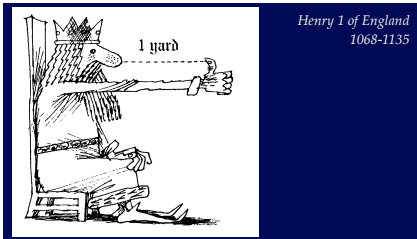
Q: So what is the issue?

A: In the Law of Moses and the Commands of Jesus the Lord God speaks to his people calling them to faith of obedience. It involves personal relationship with God and accountability to God.

In the other reasons for not stealing the ground for the rule is societal.

So as you sit here this morning and consider why you do not steal along with the other 9 commandments, why is it? Do you avoid stealing because you so honour God or because it's a good ethic to observe and society requires it? Are you responding to God's personal command and instruction or observing a rule or law distilled from Judeo Christian ethic? Is it personal instruction or impersonal regulation?

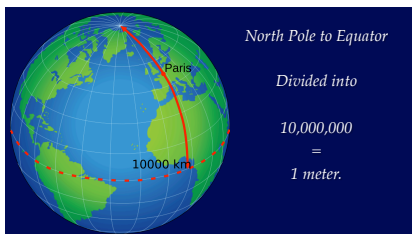
Over the last 500 years Western people have made a shift in thinking that may be at work confusing things here.



If we go back to England in the 12th century they were developing ways to measure length and distance. King Henry 1st of England (1068-1135) set the yard at the distance from his nose to his thumb on his extended hand.

For those unfamiliar with the yard it is about 0.94 of a meter or 3 times the length of an average man's shoe known as a 'foot'. Albeit with some minor standardization the yard is still a measure used in some parts of the world today. What I notice here is that this measure is derived from the physique of the King. It's very personal and a bit arbitrary, but it is the King's Yard.

Eight hundred years later the French had a revolution and wanted to get away from the thumbs and noses of Kings. In fact they did away with the head of their king altogether!



French mathematicians devised a new standard measure by dividing the distance from the equator to the North Pole by ten million. That led them to devise the meter as the new standard for all measurements of distance. No more kings, noses or thumbs, they now had a non-political and purely mathematical rule of measure.

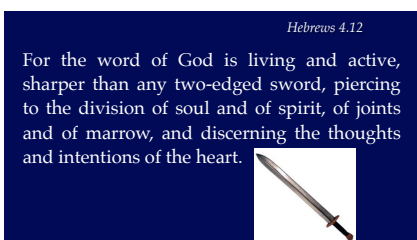
Christians were influenced by these developments too. Laws and ethics moved from being personal instructions as revealed and received from God to being rationally derived from some natural order and so worthy of having wider support and acceptance. This is nothing new but every year the consequences still unfold and confusion grows.

The last verse of the Book of Judges describing Israel around 1000 BC rings very familiar:

²⁵ In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

Application

So back to us here this morning from diverse churches all over the world.



These 10 commandments from Moses and the Commands of Jesus come as a sword; (Hebrews 4.12)

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Unless we receive, honour and obey these commands and the commands of Jesus as being from the living God we are in effect no more than cultural Christians holding to what we ourselves consider right and wise, classically *eigenwijs!*

Unless we are obeying the personal living God in faith, we are simply choosing to accept Christian ethics for some reason other than worship of God.

The common working belief is that ethics can be built on some standard objective, politically-sustainable basis but what actually happens when departing from God's face and hands is people set themselves up as the measure which is what secular humanism is about.

Unless you hold to the ethics of God's commands through Moses or Jesus out of faithful obedience to God and his claim on your life, you are at best a cultural Christian. That falls short of the measure of what makes for faith. In your thinking you will be like all other clean living pagans or non-believers.

St Paul saw this coming and warned Timothy about it.

He saw people in Church who creamed off Christian values but denied God. (2 Timothy 3.1ff)

Godlessness in the Last Days

2 Timothy 3.1-5
But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, **having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.**

3 But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. ²For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, ⁴treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵**having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.**

Conclusion:

What I am saying is that unless you are responding personally in obedience to the living God through our Lord Jesus Christ you are not living in any personal faith and not a Christian even though you may hang around churches doing churchy things.

If you are doing your best to live the Christian or Judeo-Christian values of life without God then you will still not know God's power because your faith is in own thinking as you have not surrendered to God as King.

Evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where they found bread.

Attributed to Daniel Thambyarajah 1908 - 1970
Tamil Evangelist, President of the Ceylon Methodist Conference

One area where this will really show is in one's ability to witness or share faith with others.

A definition of evangelism that I find helpful here is:
Evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where they found bread.¹

If we have found bread, grace, life, light and truth in a person who we relate to we can point and lead someone else to that person.

If we have found our bread merely in attending church, in Christian ethics or in cultural Christianity, then we cannot introduce a seeker to anyone but only commend our religion. "Come and join our club and do what we do" is not a valid gospel message but just proselytizing.

Personal obedience in faith makes all the difference. If we serve a personal God we can introduce people to him. If we serve ideas, values or traditions then we cannot.

You may be a personality type for whom personal contact with the Spirit of God is very abstract. This may seem highly intuitive and that is not how everyone is wired.

That is possible in a world where our Western education systems perform a spiritual lobotomy on children between the ages of 5 and 25 to the point where the remaining spiritual hunger is satisfied by imported traditions from the East.

¹ Attributed to Daniel Thambyarajah 1908 - 1970 Tamil Evangelist, President of the Ceylon Methodist Conference

But still even without intuitive spirituality there is the Word of God, message spoken from God as person to other persons, found in the Bible.

That is where the 10 Commandments sit and how they need to be received. They are God's Word to all who receive him as their author. That is where faith and action meet.

Once God's words are received in faith the personal faith journey begins and like all relationships, it will take shape and become a relatable experience.

It starts by hearing and receiving God's words personally from him to us, and it develops in faithful obedience.

Appeal.

So what if you now realize that your Christian faith is not based on a personal response to the living God – however we may encounter him?

Looking at the 10 Commandments, conversion involves moving from considering them because you, your family, your church and most of society think they are worth noting to simply; this is God's Word to me worthy of receiving my obedience in faith. This is where I can be concretely obedient.

That is what makes for faith in God and being Christian for the right reasons and in the right faith dynamic.

Every head bowed please.

If that is you I am going to invite you to stand and own that decision to obey and serve the Living God so we can pray together.

Why stand? That marks it as real and serious. You will remember having stood for this.

Stand if you want to move from being a Christian because you think it's a good idea to because its God's call and you want to obey.