

## The covenant, relevancy, and purpose of the commandments 10/4/18

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Here, in Exodus 19, we see the children of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai, having just arrived at Mt. Sinai.

The pattern of the narrative lectionary that Pastor John is following and the central idea of these verses in Exodus 19 is the forming of a Covenant.

- God made a covenant with Noah after the flood (2 weeks ago)
- God made a covenant with Abraham and Sarah (last Sunday)
- Now, here, we see God making a Covenant with all the people of Israel

This Covenant however, is slightly different in some respects from the other two. The first two covenants are heavily weighted to the idea of God “doing for”; God not destroying the earth and God making Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants numerous and a blessing. But here we see a shift in how the party that is not God, the Israelites, contributes to the keeping of this covenant. It is now the work of God’s people to be a “priestly kingdom” and a “holy nation”. And how this work is accomplished and this Covenant maintained is through the understanding and the keeping of these commandments God will give Moses.

Admittedly, I haven’t thought very regularly, as a lifelong Christian about the 10 commandments—although I’ve known of them for as long as I can remember—I’m just being completely honest. And I think the reason for myself, and perhaps others, is that I have a rather lazy and, perhaps false, understanding of what they are, what they exist to do, and what they mean for my life as a follower of Christ.

In one hand the “shalls” and the “shall nots” of the 10 commandments absolutely do read and, in one sense, *are* this list of Do’s and Don’t’s. But when one holds, only, this simplified understanding of the covenant of these commandments, a way of being and a way of freedom that seeks to treat and regard one another in community with mutual love and respect is reduced to, merely, an “I-am-religious” checklist to be crossed off.

For example, if an individual had a burning, murderous hate within them for another person in their community, and their thought process was “God I hate that person, I would take their life, but, ah, because of that commandment I can’t, but I definitely would!” And in turn, no murder occurs, would you say that those two individuals are living in ‘peace’?

Now that is not to say that that prohibitive function of the commandments isn’t important, it absolutely is in calling out and prohibiting specific acts of harming others in a multitude of ways. But holding that view alone, as an understanding of the commandments, leaves a lot to be desired in the realm of the renewing of minds, hearts, and communities and the radical love that God embodies and represents.

Jesus, in His ministry, did not shy away from the conundrum that is a legalistic and blind followership of the Law—but in several texts addresses it directly. Jesus, as the very wisdom of God, knew that not only could this happen from this understanding of the commandments, but that it was happening in the Jewish community and especially under the leadership of the Pharisees and religious leaders.

In Jesus' sermon on the mount recorded in Matthew, we see Jesus saying, "You have hear it said, 'you shall not murder' and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgement', but I say to you that if you are angry with, if you insult or exclaim 'you fool!' to another, it is even for those acts you are held liable.

Jesus continues, "You have heard it said, 'you shall not commit adultery', but I say to you that anyone who looks at another's [spouse] with [covetousness and] lust has already committed adultery within his or her own heart."

And Jesus goes on with several more similar points, but, it is within these examples that the crux and the essence of God's concern for the Commandments is fully displayed: it is for the sake and purpose of changing communities and how the keeping of the commandments changes one's own heart and one's own very being. And, in turn, changes how one regards and engages another's very being within that community.

There is another story, certainly not the only other, but another instance in the Gospels where Jesus interact directly with one of the commandments—in the book of Mark when Jesus heals a man's hand on the Sabbath. The commandment of course being to rest on the Sabbath, right? That neither you, nor your children, nor your servants, nor your livestock, etc should do any labor or work on the Sabbath. Mark Chapter 3 reads,

"Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them [the Pharisees and others] were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath.

Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone." Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.

He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored."

You know-- Since I was a kid, I have always been interested in trying to start hypothetical and theological discussions with those around me. In fact to this day, I don't think my mom can get through a meal at beef-a-roo back home without me trying to get her to have an existential crisis on her lunch break. I have never been one for small talk...

I remember asking my mom as a kid, perhaps trying to trick her in a moral conundrum, if there was *ever* a time in which one can call into question telling the truth, the whole truth, ...etc. And this idea, which is definitely of her because I couldn't have come up with this language at that age, but I remember her saying something along the lines of "ones attempt to lie or bend the truth being in order to spare someone's feelings from being needlessly hurt", that that was a situation in which blind adherence need be put into context and into a larger picture of what's happening.

Now my mom will be the first to say she is "no theologian" and doesn't want to be for that matter, and yet, I believe that in the passage from Mark 3 from which I just read, that there is tangible, exegetical evidence for that very idea.

Now I will say here that the Pharisees have a very sound argument against Jesus in this situation.

- They have scriptural proof texts from the commandment itself stating that you can't do this

- they have generations of religious tradition on their side

- and they have the credibility of others and benefit of a power structure that comes with being recognized leaders within the religious community

Not only that, but in an almost identical story in Luke, the Pharisees make the argument, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day."

I mean, this is pretty good, Now I'll show my hand a little here and say I kind of agree with Jesus on this one, but I can objectively say this is a pretty good argument here, right?

And YET, even with their structured, sound argument and perhaps because of their obsession with this argument, Jesus says, essentially, "you are missing the point.

That to keep these commandments, in a followership and a faith that says, "I don't care who gets hurt or oppressed in the process as long as I can check off the 'I-followed-the-rules box' in my religious to-do list, is to categorically misunderstand this covenant's very nature and purpose...

And so I believe that this is the message and the question for each of us to consider today:

What does it look like to understand these commandments through the example of Christ, by whom we as Christians become inheritors of this Covenant? And how does that understanding shape how we respect, understand, care for, value the worth of, and ultimately love others?