

An Introduction to the Ten Commandments

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Lessons: Exodus 20:1-17; Mark 12:28-34; *Arcana Coelestia* 8862

Sermon: When you hear the Ten Commandments read as we read them today, do you find that some of them sound a little harsh—maybe even threatening? You notice that eight of the ten are in a negative form: thou shalt not or you shall not? Do you ever wonder whether the Ten Commandments are no longer applicable? Jesus in the New Testament taught a new doctrine—a doctrine of love. Or perhaps we shouldn't focus on the commandments, we should think more of faith or love.

Of course if you look closely at the New Testament you find that in many different places Jesus emphasized the importance of the Ten Commandments. One of the most remarkable was when a young ruler came running to Him with a question: What good thing should I do to inherit eternal life? And immediately Jesus said: keep the commandments. And since there are so many commandments and laws in the Old Testament, the young man said which ones? And Jesus then listed about six of the Ten Commandments. This was still the basis of a spiritual life. The Ten Commandments were not abrogated or changed by the Lord coming into the world. In fact in the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord refers to a number of different commandments, emphasizes them and then shows the deeper meaning. The commandments still stand.

To understand the wording of the commandments, and to have a sense of the significance of that event in Sinai, it is helpful to know something of the custom of the day. Imagine that you belong to a small tribe near a larger kingdom, perhaps the kingdom of Persia. The people in your tribe agree that they would like to come under the leadership of the king. They would like to be absorbed into his kingdom. So after discussions among the tribe, a delegate would be sent to the king, negotiations would go back and forth, eventually the agreement would be reached, that they would become part of the kingdom but a formal ceremony had to take place. The king would make a journey to visit the tribe; there would be elaborate preparations with much pomp and circumstance, blowing of trumpets and other things to signal the arrival of the great king. When the king arrived, the first thing he would do would be identify himself. Such as "I am Darius the king of the Medes and the Persians." Then the king would do would remind the tribe of how they have benefited from his leadership. So he might say something like this: "I delivered you from the attacks of the Assyrians."

Having established who he was and how he had benefited them in the past, he would then set out the regulations that they must follow to become loyal citizens of his empire. And of course the first regulation is you must not create a king of your own. You must not betray me or be disloyal to me by setting up some other god or bowing down to some image. There would be other stipulations all written down on a clay tablet. When the clay was baked and hard they would break it into two pieces: one would be for the tribe and the other for the king so that the document could not be read until both pieces were together.

The king was making an agreement with the people, the agreement to bring prosperity to their land and to protect them. The people in their turn were making an agreement with the king as if to say: "we understand that in becoming part of your empire we have to conform to your laws. And if we break those laws we violate the covenant. The covenant becomes null and void—we then lose the protection of the king or we lose the privilege of being part of his kingdom.

It is remarkable how many of those aspects of ancient customs are embodied in the giving of the Ten Commandments.

First of all the Lord appeared to Moses and told him to lead the people out of Egypt. So Moses went back into Egypt and after great tribulations the Egyptians finally let them go off into the desert. They were a people without a religion, without laws, without any kind of governmental structure; all they had was the fact that they were descendants of Israel—they were the children of Israel. They had to be merged into a single nation, and this they did at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Moses told the people to prepare themselves for three days: not to eat or to touch any unclean thing. They were not allowed to touch the mountain. Mt.

Sinai was covered in smoke and there was thunder and lightning. This was a great event because God Himself was going to come down and to talk to the people and make a covenant with them. The opening words of the Ten Commandments are: I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. God identifies Himself and then He reminds them of what He has already done for them. Then come the commandments, the first of which is: you shall have no other gods before My face.

This is an agreement between God and the people. It is a covenant. They were a covenant people. It becomes so important in their future that they were accepting a code of laws and conduct. So long as they followed those laws, then they were the Lord's people, and they would be blessed by Him and protected by Him. But when they broke those laws, they were in a sense putting themselves outside of that kingdom, losing its benefits, its blessings and its protection.

It is interesting that when Moses came down from Sinai with the tablets in his hand, the people had already broken the first commandment. After all, they had lived in Egypt. They were impressed by the Egyptian gods and now in a time of doubt and uncertainty they had reverted back to that Egyptian worship—fashioned a calf out of gold, bowed down to it and said: “These are the gods that delivered us.” Moses was furious, broke the tablets, had the idol burned in the fire and many people died that day. When we read that story, it seems harsh. And yet the whole safety of the nation depended on their being a covenant people and if there were those who were not willing to accept the first condition of the covenant, which was the worship of the Lord, how could they be the people of the Lord?

If you follow the story of the Old Testament, you will find a number of examples in which the key issue was: were they willing to hold true to their part of the covenant? When they did so, they prospered. When they departed from the covenant, they suffered and eventually were taken into captivity.

Solomon was king at the time of the greatest prosperity of the children of Israel. But there was one weakness in Solomon's reign: he married women from all other nations and beliefs and introduced their worship into the temple of the Lord. So Solomon for all his glory effectively destroyed the worship of the Lord—he broke that covenant.

After Solomon's death, when his son Rehoboam was put on the throne, there was a rebellion from the tribes of the north, and he was powerless to stop it. On the north was a man by the name of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat. When you read through the book of Kings, you keep coming across the name Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin. As one king after the other took the northern throne it was said he did this or that but nevertheless he departed not from the sins of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat who made Israel to sin. You find yourself wondering: what was the sin of Jeroboam the son of Nebat?

Jeroboam was a practical man. He thought: “How can I have a separate country if all my people go to Jerusalem once a year to worship?” So he set up a false god at the border between his land and the kingdom of Judah and another idol in the northern part of the land and said: “These are your gods.” As a result the whole nation turned away from the worship of the Lord. That was the sin that the northern country never recovered from. Within a few generations, they had been invaded by the Assyrians, taken captive and the tribes were scattered, lost and never found again simply because they failed to obey the first commandment. They broke the covenant; they were not the Lord's people any more.

Even the southern kingdom of Judah had times in which they lost sight of this essential ingredient of their life. AS a result they too were taken captive. But the difference with the southern kingdom was that in Babylon they repented, revived their worship, were brought back into their land, and renewed the covenant with the Lord, the very first part of which is: You shall have no other gods before My face. How can you be part of My kingdom if you worship some other god or bow down to an idol?

One of the fascinating things about this covenant is that it is a covenant made by all the people. Let's take for example: if someone were to murder. Obviously it is a crime against the person murdered. It is also a crime against the civil laws. But on the deepest level that one person committing murder is breaking the covenant with God. He is sinning against God and hurting all the people. There is a story in the book of

Joshua about the battle of Jericho. At the end of the battle of Jericho trouble came into the land because one person had stolen from the city. Joshua found out about this and he realized that they could not go on until they found this one person who had broken the covenant. That man, Achan, was eventually killed and all his family. It seems very harsh but you realize that each person kept the commandments not just for himself but for the whole nation. This is an agreement of all the people that the Lord was going to be their god, they would be His people and they would keep the ten laws—the ten words. When they broke those laws, the whole nation was in jeopardy. The whole nation was hurt by it.

Now of course that was back in a time when the state and the church were one and the same. We have separated them. Religion is one thing and government is another. But isn't it still true that where one individual breaks a commandment other people are hurt by it? Think of the deterioration of morals in a country such as ours and how even a few individuals can wreak havoc with the national conscience and really bring injury to the whole country. You cannot just sin alone without hurting other people. And we have lost that concept over the years thinking that somehow our civil life is separate from our spiritual life.

The thing that was different with the giving of the Ten Commandments from any other covenant made with the king and the new subject people was that this was to be a spiritual kingdom. With natural kingdoms, the king comes and goes—has a short reign and is then followed by someone else. When you make a covenant with the Lord and become a part of His kingdom, you are connected with a king who never dies—an eternal kingdom. To be part of that eternal kingdom, there are civil, moral and spiritual laws. The wonderful thing is that the Ten Commandments contain all three. A civil law against murder, adultery, theft or false witness. It's a moral law not to covet. It's a moral law to honor your parents and it's a spiritual law to worship the Lord and not worship other gods, to keep His name holy and to respect His day.

The Ten Commandments are really inviting us to become part of a spiritual kingdom that transcends time and space. Each one of us has been called to be God's people. Each one of us has to look at our life and ask: "Have I made a covenant in my heart to be the Lord's and let the Lord's laws rule my life?" It is not always easy to know.

There was a man who was living his life in a very worldly way, not involved in any kind of spiritual program. At one point someone asked him about his spiritual life: "Did he believe in God?"—well he didn't think so. "Was he spiritual?" No, he didn't think so. And finally his friend said: "What is it that you love more than anything else?" He wondered what he meant by that. So the friend put it this way: "What is there in your life that you would die for, that you would give up other things for?" The man thought long and hard and wondered if it was money. Money is a terrible god, at first giving great rewards but then putting people into a deep prison. Maybe it was self, maybe it was his ego. People can be so wrapped up in themselves their selfishness is a barrier to their marriage, to their relationship with their children, to their relationship with life. Whatever it is in your life that means the most to you, that in a sense is your god. This man really had to look at himself and first of all say: "What is my god, what do I live for and secondly do I like the kingdom that my particular god that creates for me? Do I enjoy living in that kind of kingdom?" In the end he had to admit that he really did not know.

We are all called upon to look at our spiritual life and what kind of spiritual kingdom we would like to belong to. Are we willing to accept this very first commandment: to worship God above all else and to have it be the supreme thing in our life? How would we know if that were true? It is partly a question of whether we keep the other commandments because if you want to know whether you serve the king, all you have to do is ask yourself do you obey the other stipulations of the covenant? Do you honor the laws of His kingdom?

We are invited to live in the natural world and at the same time be part of a spiritual kingdom. A kingdom, which transcends time and space. A kingdom which endures forever. And in this sense it is useful to stop and look at the Ten Commandments and see how they apply to our life. Especially if we look at the first commandment and wonder what is it that is so important in our life that we would sacrifice everything for it? If it's some external god like money or prestige or pleasure or self, we might find after a while we get very restless in that kingdom, very unhappy; we feel like prisoners in that kingdom. If we worship the one god, we find a greater freedom, a prosperity and the promise of eternal life.

When the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the children of Israel the people were in great distress. Their lives were falling apart. Their kingdom was in danger. He suggested to them that their deepest problem lay in the fact that they no longer put much importance in the Ten Commandments. He then suggests the solution: "Obey my voice, and I will be your God and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way I commanded you, so that it may be well with you." (Jeremiah 7:23)

Amen.