

UNIT TWO: GOD'S REDEMPTIVE WORK WITH ISRAEL

SESSION EIGHTH: THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Summary of the Eighth Session of the Course

Worksheet: "You Shall Not Steal"

On a worksheet, the participants wrote down as many reasons as they could why a person might refrain from stealing from another person. The reasons did not need to be good or appealing; they just needed to be reasons someone might not steal. Then, I asked the participants to rank their reasons from 1 (the highest or best reasons) to 5 (the lowest or worst).

When we listed on the board the reasons not to steal, the group saw that the lower reasons were selfish: "I won't steal because I'm afraid I'll get caught and punished." As we moved upward, we saw reasons that had to do with self-image: "I won't steal because I am a good person, and good people don't steal." Moving up still higher, we began to see reasons that had to do with not hurting God, other people, or myself. Then, we related the reasons to Jesus' two commandments: Love the LORD your God wholeheartedly, and love your neighbor as yourself.

During the conversation about the various levels of reasons not to steal, someone suggested that the higher reasons had to do with the idea of covenant. I won't steal because I would be violating my relationship with God and with other people in the covenant community.

We finished this exercise by discussing the levels at which the command not to steal is being written on the heart (which, in the Hebraic way of speaking means the mind and, especially, the *will*). In other words, *when does it become my own will not to steal?* When am I no longer a thief at heart? We saw that a greedy person is a thief at heart, even if he or she never steals anything literally. A person filled with hate is a murderer at heart.

The Ten Commandments form a major part of God's torah. The Hebrew word torah has been mistranslated as "law," but it does not mean law; it means teaching. Torah is not teaching in the academic sense of teaching arithmetic but the kind of teaching by which parents raise their children to be adult human beings in society. God is teaching the ex-slaves to be Israel, Yahweh's own covenant people. What does it mean to be Israel? The commandments give guidelines. We saw that the Ten Commandments do not cover every possible situation, nor are they meant to. They do, however, cover much of life, if we do not limit them to their most literal meanings. For example, the commandment against stealing is also against cheating and even against being greedy.

The Ten Commandments are not law, because law is concerned with outward behavior. The police officer does not care how you felt about stopping at the stop sign, as long as you did stop. You can resent it all you want – just stop. To underscore this idea, we looked at the tenth commandment, “You shall not covet.” No one can see another person covet. This commandment is against envy. I am to be satisfied with what Yahweh give me and not want what someone else has. Coveting is a sin against myself. I am to love my neighbor as myself. So, not only am I not to sin against my neighbor by stealing something from him or her, but I am not to sin against myself by allowing myself to become envious. Our society has no law against coveting, because it is an inward sin, not an outward crime. To enforce a law against coveting, the police would have to be able to read minds. So, we saw that the Ten Commandments are much more than just **laws**.

The Ten Commandments in Context

The context for the Ten Commandments is the covenant Yahweh God is making with Israel. Before giving a single command, Yahweh identifies himself to Israel as “your God,” the one who brought you out of slavery. Yahweh establishes his own identity in terms of his relationship with Israel. From now on, Yahweh will be the God of Israel. Yahweh will be called by Israel’s name, and Israel will be called by Yahweh’s name: the Israelites will be Yahweh’s people. After a couple is married, he is from that day on called her husband and she his wife; they take on an identity in terms of each other. Yahweh has joined himself to Israel, and they will journey through life and history together. Neither any longer has life apart from the other; they remain distinct (just as husband and wife remain distinct people) but their love for each other and commitment to each other defines them both. That the Creator of the universe should willingly and purposefully define himself in terms of a people is remarkable, but such is the way of the God who loves.

“Who brought you out” The covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel begins with an act of deliverance and is based upon it. Grace comes before torah, before any commandment. So, the people’s obedience to the commandments is to be in response to Yahweh’s grace and mercy, and it is to be part of their liberation. They have not gone from one slavery to another but are to remain free. They have known the resentful and burdensome obedience of slaves; now, they must learn *the obedience of free people*.

We discussed the importance of seeing the Ten Commandments within the context of God’s covenant with Israel. To cut the commandments themselves out of context, away from the grace and the covenant, is to reduce them to a set of rules for general morality and religiosity. That’s wrong. True, they contain some good ideas and worthwhile prohibitions. If everyone refrained from stealing, murdering, and committing adultery, society would be better for it, but the Ten Commandments are not general rules for human societies. I suggested a parallel. Suppose we were to publish the marriage vows as general rules for life, but with no reference to a wedding or an actual marriage. There would still be some good ideas in them – faithfulness to

people one loves, etc. – but they would not make the sense they are supposed to make. The same is true of the Ten Commandments. Apart from the covenant, they don't make the sense they are supposed to make. And, without grace as their basis, they actually make bad sense – that is, they tend to lead to the self-righteousness and pride of commandment-keepers, rather than to the thankful faith God wants from us.

God did not give Israel the Ten Commandments so that, by keeping them, Israel could earn God's favor. No! Israel already had God's love. The question is how to respond to that love and become truly Israel in practice, and the commandments guide Israel along the pathway of that goal.

Exodus calls the commandments “words” – “God spoke all these words.” God's word is creative: “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” God's word calls into being that which did not exist before. The Ten Commandments are God's words calling into being a people who did not exist before – Israel, the covenant people. It is as though Yahweh God is saying, in Ten Words, “Let there be Israel.”

The Obedience of Free People

We talked about the child being taught and trained to become a certain kind of person, working, of course, with the child's own nature. At first, rules and commands are given for safety and basic behavior. Those rules and commands, however, are not ends in themselves; they are safety precautions and training devices. It's possible that a child could grow up very obedient to the rules and commands without ever learning what his or her parents really wanted and without becoming the kind of person the rules and commands were intended to encourage. Sometimes overly obedient children grow away from the intention of the teaching and training.

When religious people make the Ten Commandments into ends or goals in themselves, they miss the real purpose of the commandments. Strict obedience can breed pride or anxiety, and the strictly obedient person may not be truly obedient at all. We had already talked about the greedy person's being a thief at heart. The vengeful person is a murderer at heart. The lustful person is an adulterer at heart. The overly controlling and manipulative person is an idolater at heart.

God is training the Israelites to be a certain kind of people. They are not just to keep rules and obey commands; a dog can be taught to do that. They are to become God's own people at heart.

We read Jeremiah 31:31-34 and discussed what it means to have the torah written on one's heart. True obedience comes when we will (want, desire) what God wills. Then, we not only obey, but obey without even being conscious of obeying. Then, we also naturally extend the commandments to mean much more than they require literally. “You shall not steal” is extended

to not cheating, not taking unfair advantage, and not hogging. “You shall not murder” is extended to not harming, not putting other people down, and not degrading or dehumanizing anyone. “You shall not commit adultery” is extended to loving your husband or wife and to respecting people of the opposite sex. It is further extended to respecting other relationships.

We read several of Jesus’ extensions of the commandments in the Sermon on the Mount: Matthew 5:21-24 (murder), Matthew 5:27,28 (adultery), Matthew 5:33-37 (honesty), and Matthew 5:43-48 (loving our neighbor). We also read Matthew 5:20 where Jesus says his followers’ righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. He is not telling us to be greater legalists than the legalists. He calls for torah written on the heart (the human will).

A Closer Look at the Ten Commandments

We related the Ten Commandments to the two: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, being, mind, and strength; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. The first four of the Ten guide us in responding directly to Yahweh (loving Yahweh our God). The first says literally we are not to put any other gods in Yahweh’s face: “before me” means in front of God’s face, not merely ahead of Yahweh in order, as though we could have other gods as long as we kept Yahweh first in line. There are to be no others. Yahweh’s commitment is wholehearted, and Israel’s response must be the same. This is not religion; this is love, and love is very particular and (in that sense) exclusive. The marriage vows do not make room for any other lovers.

A graven or carved image (an idol) is an attempt to guarantee access to the god and even to control or manipulate the god. The intelligent idolater did not think the idol was actually the god but just a representation of the god (an image) through which the god could be accessed. Of course, the less thoughtful idolater probably thought of the idol as the actual deity. Today, the most popular and effective idol is probably the currency: it represents power and gives access to power and influence. We have printed “In God We Trust” right on the idol in which much of our society trusts.

The only image of Yahweh on earth is humanity, created in God’s image. Yahweh cannot be controlled or manipulated. There is no guaranteed access to Yahweh. This God is absolutely free, and in that freedom chooses to love us and commit to us.

Yahweh’s name is to be respected (hallowed). It is not to be used to swear to a lie. It is not to be abused in any way, because it represents Yahweh. There is to be respect for Yahweh’s integrity.

We only touched on the Sabbath. Despite Medieval Catholicism and Puritan Calvinism, Sunday is not the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a Jewish holy day – sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. Sunday is the Lord’s Day, the day of resurrection, and the early Christians worked on

it. The Sabbath was meant to be a gift and a day of trust in Yahweh's goodness, grace, and provision. In our frantic world, there is no day of rest or trust. It's always overtime. Jesus says the Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath. It was not meant to be a day of blue laws and self-righteous restriction, but a day of grace. Strict Sabbath observance was used as a weapon against Jesus, to get him crucified.

God's Creative Word

“And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” Light has no choice but to shine; it cannot rebel. Creating a covenant people is another matter. We do have the power to make choices. We can refuse to shine. God will not take that choice from us. The issue is the *obedience of free people*. So, with people, God's creative word of command must become torah, teaching, that is to be written on the heart.

Addendum

We got into a discussion of other faiths, and in that discussion I raised an issue that we talked about for a few minutes. It's not an easy one.

If truth were universal, then people would come to that truth from many different starting points and many different directions, but all would be moving equally toward the same truth. Everything would participate in that universal truth. I suggested that for us, however, truth is covenantal. It is the truth of God's redeeming love.

But, then I asked how it could be that I sometimes feel a more collegial relationship with a rabbi (or even a Buddhist priest) than with some Christian ministers. Since Christians are all one in Christ, this feeling of sometimes being more in harmony with certain non-Christians seems strange.

I found some help in understanding these feelings from the theologian Douglas John Hall in his discussion of something in the study of ethics called the “middle axiom.” Our basic or core beliefs lead us to draw conclusions that become, themselves, beliefs and commitments. For example, our belief in Yahweh's bringing the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt may lead us to believe our God wills freedom and dignity for all people. So, we make certain commitments to human liberation and to justice. Other people, however, come from different core beliefs to those same commitments to human liberation and justice. We meet, not in our core beliefs, but in the middle axia, the secondary beliefs we derive from our core beliefs. So, in a particular pursuit of justice or freedom, we may be joined by Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and even atheists or agnostics.

Can we, then, say it does not really matter what our core beliefs might be, as long as we meet at the middle axia? No. That is to take the second commandment (Love your neighbor as yourself) but throw away the first (Love Yahweh your God). Sometimes, however, Christians try to follow the first commandment (to love God) without the second (to love our neighbor). Then, we do not meet at the middle axia – at the places where love for God encounters the neighbor.

One Christian believes commitment to Jesus requires compassion for all people. Another believes commitment to Jesus means contempt for non-believers. The two do not meet at the middle axiom. They derive very different attitudes and ways of life from their common core belief that Jesus is Savior and Lord.

Do these derived beliefs and commitments matter? In Luke, Jesus asks, “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ but not do as I say?” In Matthew, the saying is even sterner: “Not everyone who calls me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven (kingdom of God), but the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” So, it would certainly seem that confessing Jesus to be Savior and Lord is not enough.

During the period of slavery in America, churches in the South wrote slave catechisms instructing the slaves to be obedient and loyal to their masters to please God. Faith in Jesus was made to support tyranny and oppression. Christianity and racism are still tightly joined together for some people. Our own Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has declared the two incompatible, but other issues still divide us.

This whole matter gives us much to ponder. How are we to judge it out? In terms of people’s salvation, we are not. In terms of being faithful to Jesus, we must make judgments and choices, but always with the realization that justification comes by grace alone. What does God do with a Christian who makes unfaithful and ungracious, even malicious, choices from a belief that Jesus is Savior and Lord and with a non-Christian who makes faithful and gracious, even compassionate, commitments without the core belief? Here we trust our God. We know that salvation comes from Jesus, but we do not know all the ways in which it comes. We know he is the way, the truth, and the life, but we do not know all the ways in which God’s grace works through him to lead people to the Father. So, we trust God and God’s love. That’s the best we can do without knowing. It would still be the best we could do if we did know.