

The Ten Promises: Introduction - *Jealous for Our Freedom* - wk 1

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - Oct. 4, 2020
(Based on Rev. Darrell Johnson's sermon series *The Manufacturer's Specifications*)

Today we begin a new series of studies - a new series in the 10 Commandments. For this series I'm drawing from Rev. Darrell Johnson's book of sermons on the 10 Commandments called "*The Manufacturer's Specifications*."

We find the 10 Commandments in Exodus 20:1-17.

Let's start with the setting in which the words of Exodus 20 were first spoken. Nearly three million people, who fifty days before had been freed from slavery and oppression, were now making their way across the Sinai Desert on their way to the Promised Land. They had made camp at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

On that particular day, the mountain slowly became engulfed by smoke, which was pouring from what appeared to be fire on top of the mountain. Lightning flashed in the thick cloud. The sound of trumpets grew louder and louder. The whole mountain began to quake.

The people stood watching, for they knew that the Living God, the Mighty God, the Holy God had descended upon the mountain. The people trembled in awe, and they feared for their friend and leader Moses. For, while the lightning flashed, the trumpets blasted, and the ground

shook, Moses was on the mountain! The Liberating God had called him up into that cloud of smoke.

Finally, Moses came down from the mountain. He emerged from that truly awesome and terrifying Presence unharmed. Indeed, he glowed! And he had a word from the God whose name is Yahweh. More exactly he had *ten words* from Yahweh. Still more exactly, Yahweh's *ten words* had Moses.

Throughout the Bible, the Ten Commandments - sometimes called *The Ten Words* (as in Exodus 34:28) - are celebrated as a gift of God's grace, as a great gift of God's great grace. As Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad puts it, "*God, declaring the Ten Commandments - God, speaking the Ten Words - is celebrated as a saving act of the first order.*" So much so that Israel, by God's specific direction, gladly established an annual, week-long feast to celebrate the giving of the Law.

Israel observed three annual feasts: Passover, Tabernacles, and Pentecost. They were as big a deal centuries ago as Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving Day are in our time. Passover celebrates the exodus - God's freeing of Israel from four hundred years of slavery in Egypt.

Tabernacles celebrates the forty years Israel spent wandering in the desert, when God graciously provided water and food, when God graciously guided the people

with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, and when the people lived in tents and God graciously dwelt among them in a tent called the Tabernacle. Pentecost (the word simply means “the fiftieth,” referring to fifty days after Passover) celebrates God’s gift of the Law. And the dominate note of that feast is joy.

Imagine that! People celebrating with joy because Someone has interrupted their lives by speaking a new Law. Why? Why would anyone want to celebrate the giving of the Law?

The answer is the thesis I want to put before us at the beginning of this series. It is a surprising thesis. Especially in our day, when the whole idea of right and wrong is being discarded as obsolete. The surprising thesis is this: *The Living and Holy God speaks the the Ten Commandments in order to protect and enhance the life of freedom.*

The Living and Holy God, who has a name, a personal name - the name “Yahweh” (which is usually translated and obscured by the title “LORD”) - and who wants to be called by that name, speaks the Ten Commandments in order to protect and enhance the life of freedom. God had rescued the Hebrew slaves from, and had rescued the Hebrew slaves for: from slavery and oppression, for relationship with Yahweh and with each other. That is how it always is with God: God frees us from, to free us for.

God freed them from slavery of all kinds, for relationship, for intimacy and wholeness and trust. From the top of the mountain ablaze with fire, shrouded in smoke, the Living and Holy God declares, **“I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of slavery.”** And then, from the top of the mountain, Yahweh speaks Ten Words in order to protect and enhance their new freedom.

As we read the rest of the bible, one of the surprising discoveries we make is how closely connected the giving of the Law is with the promise of life. Again and again we hear the claim that in speaking the Law, Yahweh is speaking life:

Life through the Law: Exodus 19:7-10, **“The law of Yahweh is perfect, restoring the soul; ...the precepts of Yahweh are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandments of Yahweh are pure, enlightening the eyes.... They are more desirable than gold, yes, then much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.”**

Really? God’s commandments are more desirable than gold? They are sweeter than honey? Why?

Israel celebrates the giving of the Law of Yahweh, because Yahweh gives the Law in order to protect and enhance life, the life of freedom. It is a surprising thesis.

Following Darrell Johnson’s lead, I want to work with this thesis today in three steps. First, I want to defend the

thesis that “God gives the Law in order to protect and enhance life, the life of freedom.” Second, I want to demonstrate the thesis that “God gives the Law in order to protect and enhance life, the life of freedom.” And third, I want to deal with the problem posed by our apparent inability to live God’s Law.

But, before I do any of that, I want to make sure that the whole discussion takes place under the umbrella of the first line - the opening line of the Law. If we lose touch with this line, the commandments become a crushing burden and there can be no celebration.

The first line, the opening line, is **“I am Yahweh your God...I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the house of slavery”** (Exodus 20:2).

This is very important: God’s commandments are spoken after God’s work of redemption. That is, the Law comes after grace- the Law is given in the context of grace. More specifically, Israel is already “saved” when she receives the Law. Which means, keeping the Law is not the means for “getting saved.” Israel is already in relationship with God before God speaks the Law. Keeping the Law is, therefore, not the means for winning God’s favor.
Hallelujah!

In his so-called “letters of freedom” - his letter to the Romans and the Galatians - the Apostle Paul, argues that where Israel of old went wrong was separating the

commandments, “Thou shall not” from the prologue, “I am Yahweh your God who has redeemed you.” Israel, and much of the Church after her, thereby changed a gift of grace into a means to get grace. *But the Exodus text is crystal clear: the Law comes after grace, as a gift of grace, given to protect and enhance a life of grace.*

Some people seem to think that the first line of the Law is this: “Keep these commandments and then I will free you; keep these commandments and then I will love you.” No! A thousand time no! The first line of the Law can be paraphrased, ***“I am Yahweh your God, I already love you, I have already acted to free you.”*** God then speaks the 10 Commandments to protect and enhance the life of freedom given to us by grace.

I. Let me now defend this surprising thesis. There are two basic lines of defense: the first is sociological; the second is theological.

A. The Sociological Defense

After the exodus from Egypt, the pressing issue became how to live together on a daily basis. It is the pressing issue after any revolution: “Now what?” “How do we make this work?”

Out in the desert, Israel had two options. Either Moses can continue as the absolute leader-ruler, or the community can simply evolve around natural power

centers. The first option leads to a dictatorship, the second to anarchy. The first option fails because there is no protection of the ruled against the rulers. The second option fails because there are no clear boundaries, no common ground for dialogue and co-operation; and, therefore, there is no security.

Out in the Sinai desert, the Living God gives Israel - and all peoples - a third option, a way between the two extremes of dictatorship and anarchy. In place of any human authority, God speaks the Divine Law.

It is significant to note that, after receiving the Law, there is a new boldness in Moses. Why? Moses had a new boldness because he now stood upon and stood under a higher authority than himself. Now he could say, "Thus says the Lord."

The gift of the Law also sets the lowest citizen free. From now on the "average Israelite" has a place from which to challenge the most powerful of leaders. The "average Israelite" could now walk into Moses' tent and also say, "Thus says the Lord." The gift of the Law frees the ruler and the ruled. Where there is a common standard of right and wrong, there is great freedom.

History has shown that the rule of relativism, you do what's right for you and I do what's right for me, only and always leads to confusion. When there is no rulebook, how do you know how to play the game? But why this rulebook?

Why these particular commandments? Why not another set of commandments? I mean that was long ago, surely we can get an updated list of commands for today. So why these?

That brings us to the second line of defense of our thesis. The theological defense and the thesis being: that God gives the Law in order to protect and enhance life, the life of freedom.

B. The Theological Defense

Yahweh's commandments protect and enhance freedom because they "fit the species." Which explains why, until recently, they have held such a central place in Western civilization. Even those who did not affirm their Divine origin still held Yahweh's Ten Words in high regard. There is something about them that "fits" us human beings.

Why? For this one simple reason: Yahweh knows what makes us tick.

The Law-giver is not only the Redeemer, the Law-giver is also the Creator. This is critical to realize and affirm. The Law-giver is the One who made us. Yahweh drew up the blueprints for the human species. Yahweh is the One who designed us magnificently complete creatures. And in Yahweh's Law, we are given "*The Manufacturer's Specifications.*" "When all else fails, read the owner's manual."

In the Ten Commandments, the Creator and Owner tells us how we humans best function in the created order. You can see then, that to ignore or go against Yahweh's Law is to go against the grain of our essential nature. When we violate Yahweh's good Law, we violate reality. We violate ourselves.

This is clearly the case with the sixth commandment, "**You shall not murder.**" But it is also the case with the ninth commandment, "**You shall not bear false witness.**" Twisting the facts always complicates life, constricting movement, draining life of vitality.

So, too, with the fourth commandment, "**Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Yahweh your God. On it you shall not do any work.**" The Living God is not imposing some arbitrary rule upon life. Nor is God simply giving "friendly advice to weary people."

The Living One is telling us a mystery. The Creator is telling us something essential about ourselves: that human beings are sabbatically constituted - "six plus one" is stamped upon the very fabric of our being. In the commandment, God is saying, "*This is who you are: you were made in such a way that you operate most effectively, most humanely, on the sabbatical rhythm - six plus one.*"

The same is true with the seventh commandment, “**You shall not commit adultery.**” God is not imposing some arbitrary rule upon life; God does not want to squelch joy. The Living One is telling us a mystery about our humanity. The mystery is that we were made for fidelity; hopping in and out of bed with many partners violates who we are.

Yahweh’s Law protects and enhances because it “fits” the species. E. Stanley Jones put it this way: “*The Law is not an ‘imposition’ on the human species, it is an ‘exposition’ of how the human species was created to live. That is why John can say in his first letter, ‘His commandments are not burdensome’ (1 John 5:3).*” They tell us who we were created to be.

This line of defense goes still deeper. For Yahweh did not, so to speak, spin the Law out of thin air. The commandments emerge out of Yahweh’s nature and character. And, therefore, the commandments reveal Yahweh’s nature and character. In the Law, the Living God is painting a self-portrait. “**You shall not bear false witness.**” Why? “Because I, your God, will not. I am utterly reliable. I mean what I say and say what I mean.” “**You shall not commit adultery.**” Why? “Because I, your God, will not. I am utterly faithful. I keep my commandments; I protect My relationships.”

Yahweh’s Law emerges from who God is; and, therefore, like God, is eternally relevant. When Yahweh came to us

as one of us, as Jesus of Nazareth, He said in His Sermon on the Mount,

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law... I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished” (Matt. 5:17-18).

The Law of God is as enduring as the Universe of God and as enduring as the character of God. God’s Law protects and enhances the life of freedom because it makes for order and because it reveals the structure of reality, telling us who God is and who God made us to be. To neglect or to transgress the good Law of the good God is to buck reality. We are most free when we live by Yahweh’s Ten Words.

II. Let me now demonstrate the thesis that “God gives the Law in order to protect and enhance life, the life of freedom.”

The first three commandments protect and enhance relationship with the Living God.

“You shall have no other gods before Me.”

“You shall not make for yourself an idol.”

“You shall not take the name of Yahweh your God in vain...”

Exodus 20:3-7

These three commandments free us by warning us of our capacity for idolatry. Idolatry always destroys life, for we were not only made by the Living God, we were made for the Living God. If we allow any other god, or god-substitute, however good, to come between us and the Living God, we are going to lose. Yahweh alone can fulfill our deepest longings. For our sakes Yahweh calls for exclusive allegiance. “I am the jealous God,” the God who passionately desires relationship and will tolerate no false lovers. And for our sakes, God forbids making any likeness of the Divine for, in the words of Alan Cole, “no likeness could possibly be adequate, and...each type of image would imprint its own misunderstanding” of God on our hearts (Exodus, p. 155). God wants to be known as God really is. As so Joy Davidman, who married C. S. Lewis, said “the first three commandments set us free from little gods...for the One, True, Living God” (Davidman, Joy. Smoke on the Mountain: An Interpretation of the Ten Commandments. 1954).

The fourth commandment, as already noted, protects and enhances a balanced life. “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” Here God sets us free from “rat-race-ness” for “human-race-ness.” Freedom, not to mention effectiveness, is found in the six plus one rhythm.

Commandments five through ten protect and enhance our relationship with the community. God begins with the relationship closest to us, with parents. Commandment five: “**Honor your father and your mother.**” “Honor” means

more than “obey.” It means to highly prize (see Proverbs 4:8), to show respect for, to take care of. The fifth commandment is given to protect us in our old age, to safeguard a place for the aged within the community.

Commandment six, “You shall not murder,” safeguards our neighbor’s physical life. Commandment seven, “You shall not commit adultery,” safeguards our neighbor’s marriage. Commandment eight, “You shall not steal,” safeguards our neighbor’s property. Commandment nine, “You shall not bear false witness,” safeguards our neighbor’s reputation.

Oh, how foolish we are to throw away God’s good words! Once we play around with these commandments, the fabric of community begins to unravel. And there is a return to slavery. No wonder the Psalmist cries the way he does in Psalm 119:136: **“My eyes shed streams of water, because they do not keep Your Law.”** How he would have cried in our day when day after day, night after night, on our televisions, adultery and murder are glorified? How he would cry in our day when little ones and old people are thought of as “in the way,” virtually treated as non-persons?

The key commandment that protects and enhances the life of freedom is the tenth: **“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house, you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey [or his new Mercedes] or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”**

Here God frees us from ourselves. God frees us by warning us about our hearts, telling us that our hearts have a tendency to crave what is not our own. That is putting it mildly! Here God calls us to examine and check the unspoken desires and yearnings. For if I crave my neighbor's spouse long enough, the desire gives birth to fantasizing, which one day leads to action. If I crave my neighbor's status long enough, the desire can move me either to usurp her position by force, or whittle her down by spreading rumors. The Loving God wants us to live! So He protects us against our sin while it is still inside.

Now, the fact is, breaking the tenth commandment is a sign, the clearest sign, that we have broken the first commandment - that we are, at that particular moment craving what is not our own, living for another god. For the sign that we are living in exclusive allegiance to Yahweh is contentment - contentment with Yahweh's love for us. **"Yahweh is my shepherd, I shall not want"** Psalm 23:11.

III. We are now ready for the third step in our study today; dealing with the problem posed by our apparent inability to live God's good Law. If God's Law is describing the freedom life, if God's Law reveals who God is and who God made us to be, and if we keep failing to live up to it, then we are in a awful bind. What is the way out?

Yahweh to the rescue! Jesus - Y'shua in Hebrew - His name means **Yahweh-to-the-Rescue**. More literally "Yahweh saves!" The Lawgiver comes down from the top

of the mountain, all the way down, and becomes one of us. And as one of us, “**born under the Law,**” as Paul says (Galatians 4:5), Jesus frees us to live the life of freedom. How? Not by discarding the Law and not by watering it down to make it fit our sinful condition. That is the error of liberalism. Not by rubbing our face in the Law; not by banging the Law over our heads. That is error of fundamentalism. Instead, Jesus - Yahweh-to-the-Rescue- does two unexpected and amazing things.

First, He forgives us! He forgives those who are sorry for their transgressions and rebellion. The Author of the Law pardons the repentant law-breakers! *“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound.”* The Apostle Paul puts it most vividly in his letter to the Colossians:

“Christ has utterly wiped out the damning evidence of broken laws and commandments which always hung over our heads, and has completely annulled it by nailing it over His head on the cross” (Col. 2:14, J. B. Philips).

The Lawgiver comes down from the mountain, enters the valley of transgressions and rebellion, and then climbs another mountain. And on that mountain, on Calvary, the Lawgiver takes upon Himself the judgment we law-breakers deserve. And through that act, He restores the broken relationship and relieves the crippling guilt. Yahweh-to-the-Rescue heals the awful breach in reality.

And then He does a second thing. He empowers us to obey. He empowers us to live “The Manufacturer’s Specifications.” The two actions always go together: forgiveness and empowerment.

As a human being, Jesus Christ perfectly lives the good Law. “Yes,” we say, “but He had an advantage. He was the Son of God- God the Son.” True. The very life of God dwelt in Him, enabling Him to live consistent with the blueprint. But what does the Gospel say? What happens to people whom He calls into relationship, into discipleship? Does He not transfer the “advantage” to them? Yes! Yahweh-to-the-Rescue breathes His Spirit into us, granting us His super-natural power to live the life of freedom.

Again the Apostle Paul puts it so well in Romans 8:3-4: **“For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk by the power of the flesh, but [by the power of] the Spirit”.**

Jesus Christ overcomes the problem posed by our inability. He suffers on the cross and sends the Spirit. He forgives us and empowers us.

I noted at the beginning of today’s message that Israel celebrated the giving of the Law at the Feast of Pentecost. Is it mere coincidence that Jesus Christ poured out His

Spirit on the Church at Pentecost? It was no coincidence at all! For the Spirit of Yahweh comes to enable the people of Yahweh to live Yahweh's design for human life.

On the day when God spoke from the mountain top, engulfed in flame and smoke, the people were told to write God's Ten Words on their wrist bands and on a band that dangled in front of their eyes. So jealous was God for their freedom that God also told them to write the commandments on the doorposts of their homes and on the gates in front of their homes. Supposedly, seeing the Law before them, in all of their comings and goings, would issue in obedience. And that helped, but only for a while. For the problem was the heart. The problem still is the heart.

And so, God promises a new covenant, a new arrangement. Centuries after the mountain-top encounter, God says through the prophet Jeremiah:

“Behold, days are coming when I will make a new covenant...not like the covenant which was made with their ancestors in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them. But this is the covenant which I will make with them after those days. I will put My Law within them, and on their heart I will write it” (Jeremiah 31:31-33).

That is what the Spirit of Yahweh comes to do. He comes to do heart surgery, not to put a pacemaker into our

hearts, but to put the good Law in our hearts. The Holy Spirit comes to make us into “new covenant” people. Taking God’s “freedom law” off the tablets of stone, off the doorposts, off the courtroom and schoolroom walls, off the wrist bands, and engraving them on the flesh of our hearts.

In the light of all of this, I think you can see that in the final analysis God’s commandments turn out to be God’s promises. God’s Word is the performative word, the Word that bring into being what it announces. And because of what God does for us in the sending of His Son and Spirit, the Ten Commandments turn out to be the Ten Promises.

“I am Yahweh your God,
 Who made you
 And who became one of you,
 And who went to the cross to free you
 from the consequences of your rebellious life.
 And I am Yahweh your God,
 Who comes to live with you and in you through My Spirit.

“Therefore, because I am Who I am,
 And have done for you what I have done for you,
 One day you will no longer buck up against the grain of reality.
 One day you will have no other gods before Me;
 You will have no distorted ideas or images of Who I am;
 You will not use My Name in vain;
 You will live a holy, sabbatically-balanced life;
 You will honor your mother and father;

You will not murder;
You will not commit adultery;
You will not steal;
You will not bear false witness;
And one day you will not covet.”

“And one day you will love me with all of your heart
and soul and mind and strength.

“And you will love your neighbor as yourself.
And one day you will love one another as I have loved you.”

Make it so Lord, for your glory; make it so!