

GENEROUS OBEDIENCE

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Exodus 20:1-20

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So, we are in the midst of a sermon series on living generously, you'll remember, which is not about financial generosity, but includes that, because it is about living generously in every aspect of our lives—living as a response to the gracious generosity God has shown to us. When I knew that I was preaching this Sunday and I saw that the Ten Commandments was one of the lectionary options, it all made perfect sense to me. Obedience to God is an important part of our lives as Christians, but too often we have thought about obeying God in terms of following a set of arbitrary rules handed down by some cosmic taskmaster. And that is particularly true when we think about the Ten Commandments. But that is a skewed view of what obedience to God is all about.

This happens, I think, because we often take the Ten Commandments out of context. There are certain parts of the Bible that have worked their way into our common culture, for whatever reason, and are used in particular out-of-context ways such that their use and meaning get somewhat altered. You are familiar with these. If you have played team sports, you will recognize that there are those who say the Lord's Prayer before big games and rather than understanding it in its context, now treat it as a sort of "magic prayer" that serves a superstitious purpose. And sometimes when you see a large crowd, sometimes again, at a sporting event, but really, any large crowd, you will often see signs that say "John 3:16"—not the content of the verse, just the citation. John 3:16. Now this works just the opposite way that it works with most Bible verses. For so many people, they know some small amount about the Bible but not where it is: "I know the Bible says not to judge other people, I just don't know where that is in the Bible." Or, "I know there's a story about Jesus changing water into wine, but I have no idea where that is." But there are probably a lot more people who know the citation John 3:16 than who know what it actually says. It has become a symbol for something other than what it is. And then there's the Noah saga, which has become a cute way to decorate a nursery, or a diaper bag, or children's clothing—but which in the Bible is actually a fairly gruesome story of destruction.

The Ten Commandments have functioned in much the same way in our culture. They are often referred to as a moral code that ought to be universally understood, isolating them from their Biblical context. Periodically, the idea of posting the Ten Commandments in public places emerges as an idea that is meant to somehow encourage the public to obey the law. That somehow, if only the general public saw them posted, that if they were immortalized as a statue, or a plaque, or in some other way, that that would somehow solve the problems with immorality in our community or country. There are a lot of problems with this, but for our purposes, the biggest issue is that that thinking rips the commandments out of the context of the relationship of God and God's people and uses them as a civil bludgeon. And doing that removes the sense of joy and freedom from the commandments. The commandments then become all about something other than living in covenant relationship with God and God's people.

I confess that I am not immune to this way of thinking, or of this temptation to pull out the commandments and use them like club to get someone else back in line. Recently we were

on a family trip, and our youngest was having a particularly difficult time listening to us, her parents. We were in a hotel, and Jay said, “Listen here, missy, I’m going to read you something about honoring your parents. I’ve just got to find it.” (See, even pastors on vacation know that something is in the Bible and don’t always know exactly where it is.) So he went in the hotel nightstand, and got the Bible the Gideons had so generously left for us. And started looking. Because after a long day of vacation, two seminary educated pastors couldn’t remember—Exodus 20? 21? 22? While Jay was looking he was mumbling, “well, God says you are supposed to listen to your parents, honor them…” And then this same youngest, who was probably at this point unwrapping all the hotel room soaps, or mixing our dirty clothes with our clean, or using the bedspread to build a yurt, or doing some other irritating behavior that you can imagine a preschooler could do in a hotel room, pipes up with her Wesleyan Childcare education: “It goes…Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother. Exodus 20:12.” My oldest looked at her and her mouth dropped open. I looked at her and said, “repeat that.” She cut her eyes at me, put her hands on her hips and said: “Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother. Exodus 20:12.” She had memorized that verse of the Bible, and she could quote it. She just couldn’t do it.

And frankly, this is the case for all of us. You and I know the Ten Commandments, or at least we can name most of them if asked, but we can’t entirely fulfill them. One thing that I imagine sometimes happens when we examine ourselves in light of them, is that we take a look at the commandments, and we think to ourselves, we basically have them licked except for maybe coveting and Sabbath keeping. And then, we do some mental gymnastics and decide that those two aren’t really the ones that count, anyway. We decide that the big ones are murder and adultery and stealing. And that the ones we violate aren’t the big ones. That they are the ones that aren’t that important to God. And so we justify ourselves. But the truth is, we don’t really keep the big ones, either. And what is also the truth is that it isn’t so much about checking off whether we’ve kept them or not, but about what the purpose of the commandments is in the first place.

Because we misunderstand the commandments if we think they are checklist that we are able to completely fulfill ourselves. This is what we get when we abstract them from their context. But context is important. And their context is God’s covenant relationship with God’s people. And that means the people of Israel and that means you and me. God gives the commandments to form a community—a community that lives in relationship to one another and in relationship to God.

But most of all, the Commandments are given in response to what God has done for us. We see this in the very beginning, in the part that we call the preface, or the preamble, to the Ten Commandments. This is an important part of the text that we sometimes skip right over. When God tells the people of Israel about their history, about their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, God is reminding them about how grace comes first. Grace always comes first. If we think of ourselves as those who are able to fulfill the law on our own, we’ve missed the point of the Gospel. Just as God frees God’s people from bondage in Egypt, so God in Jesus Christ frees us from the bondage of sin. In both cases, it is God’s grace that comes first. And then, it is in response to that grace that we obey. Generous obedience. Obedience that comes from the joy and freedom of receiving God’s grace. If we think of it in any other way, we’ve missed the whole point.

God’s promise comes first. God doesn’t say, “I’m freeing you from bondage because you’ve kept these commandments.” Or even, “If you keep these commandments, I’ll free you.”

Neither of those. Instead, God says, “Because I’ve freed you, because you are now free people, live this way. Now keep these commandments. This is how you respond to being free.”

One of the most profound ways I know of thinking about the commandments comes from 16th century Reformer John Calvin. For Calvin, the commandments are not just a list of taboos, a list of things to avoid doing. Instead, they should actually be interpreted as giving shape to what it is we should do. It is a positive view of the commandments—one that requires not just avoiding all those thou shalt nots, but also doing something which contributes to one’s relationship to God and to one’s community.

Not all of the commandments are phrased negatively—two of them are phrased positively—remembering the Sabbath and honoring parents. But for the other eight, the words of the commandment are written in the negative. Calvin, however, suggests we look for the virtue that is encouraged when the vice is prohibited. For example, in the commandment “You shall not kill,” more is meant than simply to avoid hurting anyone or even desiring to hurt them—instead, it also contains, according to Calvin, “the requirement that we give our neighbor’s life all the help we can.”¹ You and I can do the same exercise with the rest of the commandments. For instance, it is not enough just to avoid misusing God’s name. It also means that we are to speak of God and God’s activity in the world in a positive, appropriate, and life-giving way. When we are commanded not to worship other gods, not to make false idols, that means that we should, in fact, put considerable effort into our worship of the one true God. When we are commanded not to bear false witness against our neighbor, it is not enough to simply avoid doing that—we also are to build up our neighbor, encourage them, and speak well of them when we have the opportunity. When we are commanded not to covet what our neighbor has, it is not enough to simply avoid coveting—we also are to wish our neighbor well and be happy for their successes and gifts. You get the idea. The commandments become the form in which we can live out our Christian life, not condemning us, but inspiring us to love of God and love of neighbor.

Of course, there’s a downside to taking this positive view of the Ten Commandments. It takes away any smugness we might have about our own keeping of the commandments. When we consider the positive implications of the Ten Commandments, we have to confess not just what we have done wrong, but all the good we have left undone. Because again when we think about the commandment not to murder, we aren’t able to just point to those who commit such obviously atrocious acts, like the horrific work of the shooter in Las Vegas. That is certainly included, in a very clear way. But also included is the call on our lives to do whatever is needed to protect life. To support life. To encourage life. And so when situations like that occur, we also have to look for our own culpability. In that particular situation, and in any situation. When there has been a shooting, what do we do that brings or protects life? Or what do we fail to do that could bring or protect life? We have to examine our own thinking and acting about gun culture in the United States. And we have to ask ourselves hard questions about that. And even when the disaster is natural, like this hurricane season we’ve witnessed—we have to ask ourselves what our response has been. What are we doing to bring life or protect life? Are we participating financially, or in any other way, or are we not. All of this is contained in the commandment not to murder. All that we have done or left undone.

¹ Calvin, Institutes, 2.8.9

And that is probably a lot. When we consider all that we have left undone, that is where we find that we never really can live up to all that is asked of us. That is where we can remember so many missed opportunities and times when our own desires got in the way of the good we could have done. So it's appropriate to examine ourselves in the light of the commandments. But as we do so, we remember always that they are given as a gift, not as a burden; that they are designed for freedom, not bondage; and that in all of this, grace comes first.

And so we are thankful that it is not up to us. And if we actually recognize this grace, then it is to this grace that we respond again, each day, trying again, each day, out of gratitude, and out of a sense of generous obedience. Because God was first so generous to us.

Amen.