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Sunday, March 3, 2024

Lent 3—Rethinking Religion: Rethinking Worship – Exodus 20:1:17

*We love, because the Lord first loved us. Amen.*

*The LORD is Serious*

*Dear Friends in Christ,*

Storm clouds roil above. Dazzling lighting streaks through dark clouds that hide the sun. Booming thunder steals the breath away. The earth shakes and so do all the people as the mountain in front of them **trembles violently**. Fire roars and smoke billows as though there were a hundred, no a thousand blast furnaces on its slopes. An otherworldly trumpet blares in the ears – louder and louder!!! (Exodus 19, Deuteronomy 5, Hebrews 12)

This is backdrop for our first lesson. This is what the Bible says was happening when we read: **Then God spoke all these words I am the LORD your God...** and so on.

There can be no doubt what God say in these verses deserves our utmost attention when He punctuates it with fire, earthquake and trumpet! Clearly, **the LORD is Serious**.

We usually call what we hear about in this lesson: **The Ten Commandments**. And with good reason – much of our reading is made up of commands, teaching what to do and not do. It has been well said, these are the **Ten Commandments**, *not* the *Ten Suggestions*. This isn't optional. This is what commands His people.

Now we don't have the time to dig into all the details, like seeing how parts of what we call the **Third Commandment** only applied to Israelite ceremonial law and yet what still applies is that God still commands us to make time for His Word where He brings us true rest, true **Sabbath** in Christ alone. That means not only does God command that if we have the physical ability, we are to go to church to hear His Word, but we are also to gladly pay attention to it and live by it!

You see, the commandments are not a simple checklist of 10 little actions. They are chapter headings about what God commands in every aspect of life: our direct relationship with Him in our hearts and words, in our prayers and telling others about His saving name.

The other commandments cover every relationship and aspect of life with our fellow human beings: authority in home, church state, taking care of our life and protecting and helping others, a godly view and use of marriage, family, sexuality, our possessions, and how we should speak to and about others.

Do you see how **serious the LORD is** that He says: **You shall not covet**. **Coveting** takes place only in the heart and thoughts. That means God's commands are not just about outward actions, but they are spiritual, they touch the motives of the heart and what goes on in our heads.

So we sin when we think the worst of others even if we put on a nice smile on the outside. We sin when we worry and fear because we forget or don't trust God's promises.

We commit **adultery** not by using God's gift of sex outside the marriage of one man and one woman, but also by jokes that treat marriage as cheap, with lust in the heart and by staring at sinful images on a TV, computer or phone.

And God is not joking, but is **serious** about all these commands – just remember the fire and smoke and the threat of punishment for all who demonstrate they **hate** Him by going against His commandments.

But why **is the LORD Serious** about these laws? It is *NOT* – repeat – *NOT* because these laws can save us or earn us heaven. And we *DO NOT* become God's people by keeping these laws.

Look at our reading. Before God spoke any commands in our lesson, He said: **I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, where you were slaves...** God did not say to Israel, *if* you keep my commandments I'll rescue from Egypt. If that were the case, Israel would still be slaves in Egypt, because just like us, they broke God's commands.

It was not the commandments that made them God's people, but His undeserved love that chose them and made them His own already, just as He said: **I am the LORD your God.**

So, the purpose of the commandments was to give His people a way to respond to His love for them. These laws let them put their faith in God into action according to His good and wise design.

As His people set free from slavery, the law guided how they were to live in that freedom that came entirely from Him!

Wait? Freedom and law side by side? We need to explain that, especially since we're Americans.

You see, true freedom does not equal *no limits*. That's not even true of most American freedoms. And that's not how we were made.

Consider a fish in a stream. Is the fish limited and oppressed by the water? No! The water is where the fish was made to be able to swim free. For the fish to leave the limits of the water would not be freedom, but death!

In the same way God gave His commands not for his good, but for ours, to guide us to live in freedom within His law. Yes, the Bible says there is freedom and blessing in following God's law. No, we cannot save ourselves by the law, especially since we are sinful, but there is still freedom and blessing in God's commands.

Imagine if everyone followed God's commands. You wouldn't have to lock your doors! There would be no bullying, no hurtful words that cut the heart, no war, no reckless drivers putting others in danger, no fighting, no broken families, no guilt. **The LORD is Serious** about His law because wants what is good for us!

And doesn't this show us just how rotten and evil our every sin is?! God in love commands what is good, and our naturally depraved hearts want to fight back against His good commands, view them as sucking the fun out of life instead of wisdom and freedom. God shows us nothing but love and goodness, and we repay Him with evil – and that's what every sin is, including the selfishness, lust, greed and worry of our hearts.

The law cannot save us, but it certainly condemns us and reveals the ugly nature of our hearts that constantly rebel against what God says is good and right. How well we deserve to be swept away by the consuming fire of His judgment.

Dear Christians who believe you deserves God's judgment and repent of your sin with grief and shame, where shall we turn?

Right back to these words: **I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, where you were slaves.**

**The LORD is** equally **Serious** about these words and the promise of the Savior to which this verse is connected. You see, in **seriously** undeserved love, God made a promise to send a Savior for a world of lawbreakers, a Savior He had said would come from the people of Israel and be born in the land of Israel – the Savior Jesus who would be born in little Bethlehem.

But that could never happen is Israel, the people of the promise where **slaves** in Egypt.

And so, **the LORD is Serious** about saving a world of lawbreakers that He rained plagues down on slave master Pharaoh and his people, including thunder and lightning with hail and utter darkness, until they let His people go.

On a night of darkness, by the death and blood of an innocent Passover lamb, God rescued His people from slavery to keep His promises. The Lord Himself lived with His people and led them in a pillar of fire and cloud. He brought them through the sea on dry land. We call these events were **the LORD brought Israel out of Egypt** and freed them *the Exodus*. *Exodus* is a Greek word for Departure.

But God didn't just use the Exodus to keep His promise to send Jesus, the Lord also uses the events of the real and historical Exodus to teach us about what Jesus has done for the world. That's why you'll find constant mention of *Exodus* details and imagery throughout the whole Bible – in the Psalms and Prophets, in the details of Jesus' life, in the letters of the Apostles and the book of Revelation too!

We only have time for two quick examples. Consider how often the number 40 comes up in both the Exodus and the life of Jesus. You see, the real, historical events of the Exodus, like all of the Bible, point us to Jesus. Jesus brings the greater Exodus – release from slavery to sin and death!

God lived among Israel at the tabernacle and temple. Today's Gospel tells us Jesus' body-the body is the fulfillment of the temple, His body is where God becomes man, lives with us to save us.

And so, Jesus rescued us by doing what we could not. He kept every commandment perfectly – day in, day out, in thought, word and action. Jesus alone fulfilled the law and did so to give you the record of his holy obedience.

And then Jesus endured a day of **darkness** when on Good Friday, the consuming anger and righteous judgment of God against all sin rained down on Christ like plagues, so that we would be set free.

By His blood and Death, Jesus pays in full for every way we have disobeyed his laws – from our often being half-hearted toward Worship, to our wandering eyes, to our often-coveting hearts. All our sin and its punishment – paid for, forgiven. The voice of God announces it loudly, this time not from Mount Sinai, but from the cross: **It is finished!**

Because Jesus kept His promise to raise up the temple of His body on the third day, you can be certain everything He says is true. And in His Word He tells you: **If the Son of God sets you free, then you are free indeed** (John 8).

Just as God assured the Israelites they were *His* free people when He said: **I am the LORD your God**, so the Triune God has said that to you personally when He placed His saving name upon you in the water and promise Word of baptism – saying you are His!

Because **the LORD is Serious** about saving you and you are free through Spirit given faith in Jesus, now you will be safe even on that final day of darkness, when the heavenly trumpet again blares in the ear and Jesus comes on the clouds of heaven. On that day He will raise up your body to life and glory in that perfect world to come, where if we have doors in the new heavens and earth you won't have to lock them, there will be no sorrow, no sin, no pain, no death, only life with Christ and His people forever!

Dear Christian, see how amazingly God has loved you in Jesus Christ, see how good He is to You! Then see again His commands and know they are also for your good, and then let us put our Holy Spirit given faith in the freedom of forgiveness into action and follow and live what He commands.

Yes, on this side of heaven, we still battle with a sinful nature and so we falter with weakness. But do not grow weary of doing good, but know where to go with your sin. In repentance keep looking to Jesus whose obedience and victory over death saves you, and then go forth with the strength God give you to live as the free and forgiven child of Jesus' **serious** saving love has made you. Amen.

*To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood – to Jesus be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.*