

MARCH 7, 2021

COVENANT

LENT III

CONTRACTS & COVENANTS

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EXODUS 20:1-17

The ten commandments are easily one of the best-known parts of the whole Bible. The words “thou shalt not” echo through most of our minds when we think about them. Some of the ten commandments have even been incorporated into our legal systems as acts that will land you in prison... although I think the strangest encounter I’ve ever had with the ten commandments was seeing them carved into a big slab of granite in a flower bed outside the main entrance of a hotel I was staying at in Albuquerque. Not really what you think of as a decorative piece of garden art. Whether it was Sunday School or Cecil B. de Mille, these 17 verses of Scripture have escaped the confines of the church and become well-known all on their own.

I wonder if part of the reason for their fame is the dramatic way that the ten commandments entered into history. God’s people, considerably battered by circumstance, encamped at the bottom of Mount Sinai; thunder and lightning and a thick dark cloud upon the mountain. There’s trumpet-sounds and God’s voice booming, and everyone is afraid except Moses, who responds to God’s invitation to go up the mountain, and into God’s holy presence.

The ten commandments are really just God’s opening remarks, his executive summary – like Jesus with his beatitudes serving as introduction to the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon on mount Sinai includes verse after verse of detailed instructions about how to worship God properly at the altar, restitution for crimes against one another, like theft and assault, laws about what we would call social justice, property crimes, and even how to properly celebrate religious festivals and holy days.

God is comprehensive in his law-giving, and the ten commandments capture the scope and breadth of what God wants them to do. These are the rules; obey them.

But here’s the thing: Israel, together as a people and individually, they broke those laws. And before we start to think too highly of ourselves, let’s think back over the past year, or even the past week. How would we do?

Most likely, we'd all do okay on the big ones, like murder and theft; I doubt if anyone's been coveting their neighbour's donkey lately, either. But if we've ever missed a crucial putt or been cut off in traffic, we've probably used God's name as an exclamation at least once. Doing anything on the Sabbath other than spending time with God or reflecting on our faith, well, that's not resting from work and keeping it holy. And who hasn't, even just for a flicker of a moment, looked at something someone else had, and thought...I want that; a relationship, a house, the latest iPhone, clothes, vacations...in truth, we are all destined to fail, when it comes to obeying these laws that God has tasked up with keeping. It's inevitable; we will not meet our obligations; we won't hold up our end of this agreement.

God makes all kinds of promises to us, and God delivers on every single one of them: freedom from sin and wholeness, care and provision, to be our Saviour and our redeemer. In return, God asks us to follow ten rules, things we are to do or not do. And although God is always faithful, we are serial defaulters on this particular agreement.

So what does God do with our inability to keep up our end of the deal?

God makes a covenant. And covenants are a fundamentally different way of coming to an agreement.

We've probably all signed a contractual agreement at some point: a tenancy agreement, a mortgage, an employment contract, many kinds of business transactions. Contracts are well-suited for those kinds of situations. Each party gives as much as necessary and the mutual goal is achieved. Both sides get something out of it, but generally-speaking each person is concerned with getting what they want out of it, whether that's a new employee or a new house. And if either person fails to live up to their half of the contract, then the agreement can be broken in favour of the faithful party.

But from the very beginning, God's agreement with us has been rooted – not in contract – but in covenant. And the terms of our covenant agreement with God are shaped by God's character, by who God is and what God is like. Yes, God expects us to love him and obey him, to participate in his world- and humanity-saving work, and to care for each other. But our failure to do so – our mistakes, our limitations, even our unwillingness – doesn't affect God's commitment to us. God remains faithful, even when we break his laws, whether those laws are the ten commandments or the much more challenging instructions Christ gives us in the gospels.

Is that the point of God's law? That we're doomed to fail, to be constantly on the back foot, at a disadvantage, when it comes to God? Always guilty and asking for forgiveness, never moving beyond a constant cycle of aspiring to live as God wants us to and failing to manage it?

Was that what God intended for Israel?

Is that what God intends for us?

In just the first nineteen chapters of the book of Exodus, God has recognised his people's suffering and enslavement, taken the unprecedented act of sharing his divine name with them, shown power stronger than the Egyptian Pharaoh, led the people across the Red Sea to freedom, and provided guidance, food and water in the wilderness.

And even before all that, there is a rich history between God and Noah, between God and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and their families.

The ten commandments are not benchmarks for us to meet, or fail to meet; our membership among God's people is not conditional upon perfect adherence to these laws. They are not how we get in: into God's care, into a loving relationship with God. The ten commandments are spoken at a moment in history at which God and God's people have already been in relationship for generations. They've already obeyed and failed to obey, and God has already remained steadfastly committed to them, acting powerfully and generously on their behalf.

As he delivers the ten commandments to Moses, the first words God speaks are words that name and claim his people: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt.

I am your God – you are the people whom I have saved.

That's the beginning of the law: a declaration by God that we are his, and he's willing to do what it takes to keep us. We do not travel alone; we are claimed. And we walk together, as a people, a community. And the ten commandments tell us a lot about the God we follow and what that community, what our lives together, ought to be like.

Maybe that's kind of a different way of looking at God's laws and rules: as descriptions of what our lives should be like, a description of society, of human community, as God intends them to be.

It's community that honours God, community in which there will be work and rest in balance, where life and faithfulness are valued, where relationships are founded on trust. It's community made in the image of God, shaped by who God is and what God values.

God values life: so there is a day of rest, a command against taking life, encouragement to honour the people who brought you into life and the people who raised you.

God values faithfulness, so we are commanded to worship only him, and to keep the promises we make to our spouses.

God values relationships, so we don't steal from our neighbour or tell lies about her any more than we would allow envy or selfishness to make us want what our neighbour has rightfully earned or been gifted with by God.

Connecting all of these things...is trust.

In our words, in our actions, in our commitments, in our relationships, God's commands make trust the basis of our life together, and it's at the heart of our relationship with him. And you know, God has trusted God's people then and now with something pretty important: his name. God sharing his name with Moses and thus Israel at the burning bush was a long time coming. Throughout the book of Genesis, God was identified not by name – Yahweh – but by his relationships: the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

When we read it, we know now what God's name is; we know vastly more about God, because we know Jesus. But they didn't.

Now that they knew God's name, Moses and God's people could act in that name; they could misuse it or misrepresent it, or they could honour it. We think of taking the Lord's name in vain as swearing, and that's part of it; but that kind of exclamation is a relatively new thing, when we look back across the thousands of years between Sinai and today.

Misusing, dishonouring God's name, means attaching it to ideas or actions or words that misrepresent who God is and what God's about. So it's a profound act of trust on God's part to give us his name to use, to claim us as his own and let us claim him back, knowing full well that we're going to make mistakes.

The trust between God and us is mutual, but it's not based on contractual obligation, complete with consequences when we default. Trust is based on love, and covenants are all about self-giving love, love that seeks the best for the other, not for ourselves.

To be clear, God's covenants with are made in full understanding of what we're like. God is a wise parent, when it comes to us, knowing our strengths, our talents and our faith, but also our imperfections, our failings, and our limits.

And like a good and wise parent, God gives us these laws not as a burden, or as a means to punish or even with the intent to restrict us. God gives us his law – his Word – to help us live together in ways that value what God values, to help us live the kind of holy, set-apart-for-God lives, that God wants for us.

No matter how many times a law or command is given, failure on our part is inevitable at some point. But God knew – God knows – what he's getting into with us. And yet, God's love and grace endure, and God chooses us anyway. Thanks be to God! Amen.