

Moses and the Law of God (part 2)

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[0 : 0 0] Why do we need law? Why do we need God's law? We live in a culture that is in some ways suspicious of ideas of authority. So the question of why the law matters, especially God's law, I guess we could go back all the way to the beginning. Ever since Genesis 3, there has been a suspicion, a resistance towards God's law. Adam and Eve enjoying perfect life in the garden were tempted to believe that God's law forbidding the eating of the fruit of the knowledge of the tree of good and evil, that was restrictive, that God was a God who in His laws was holding people back from their best. We sang Psalm 119 just before we read Exodus 20, and it might have seemed strange to us if we sort of stopped to think about what we're singing to say, your statutes are wonderful.

We don't normally think that way about God's law, but the psalmist is somebody who knew God's law are a reflection of God's character and will, therefore there is a goodness in them.

And if we understand what God's law is, and if we love God's law, it's our way to love God Himself. As Jesus said, if you'll love me, you'll obey my commands.

We're going to think about how the Ten Commandments fall within Israel's journey. You know, we've followed them in their journey so far. We've seen them being moved from slavery into freedom, from being controlled by Pharaoh, surrounded by the gods of Egypt, and now they are following the true God, and they've arrived at Mount Sinai. In chapter 19, we were there a few weeks ago now, I guess, they heard the gospel. Here is what God has done for you. It's there in the prologue of chapter 20 as well.

I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt. So they're a saved by grace people, and now they're hearing the law. Here is what God calls a saved by grace people to do in response.

[2 : 0 8] I think as a church, we're actually going to come back to the Ten Commandments probably in the spring of next year, because there's so much that's helpful for us. But for now, I want us to just consider how could, if we were Israelites there at Mount Sinai, as the law was being delivered, how could we sing along with the psalmist, your law is wonderful? And what is good about the law?

What did it mean in their story to have God speak these Ten Commands to them? And think about how can we sing, your laws are wonderful today. So we're going to look at three things together, the Ten Commandments and our obedience, the Ten Commandments and freedom, and Ten Commandments and our mission.

So let's begin with our obedience. Whether we think about it or not, there is a question that's being asked daily, perhaps even hourly. The question of whose will will be done. In any moment where we have a moral or ethical decision to make, we're asking ourselves the question, whose will will I do? That's one of the striking things about the story of Israel. There's been this shift where previously they've been under the will of evil Pharaoh, and now they're being invited to live under the will of God. And so perhaps we ask, well, who is God to make such a claim on people and on their obedience? And actually within the Ten Commandments, we discover some truths about who God is. So in Commandment number four, there in verse 11, we discover God is our Creator. He is the

Lord who made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and all that is in them. So as our Maker, He both has rights over us. He is our Lord, but He also knows how life works best. Also verse 2, as we've just reminded ourselves, He is the Redeemer of His people. So part of the reason why we obey is because God has been so faithful in keeping His covenant promises and taking us out of spiritual slavery and giving us freedom. In verse 5, here's a different description of God. I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.

And one of the images, the themes that runs through the Bible is that God pictures His relationship with His people as being like a marriage covenant. And so God is saying to His people here, I am

jealous for your hearts. I'm jealous that you would love me. God is absolutely committed to His people. He's absolutely faithful to His people. And our obedience as His people is then to be a response to His faithful love. Verse 20, the people know by instinct that God is an awesome God. [5 : 12] In verse 19, they say to Moses, speak to us yourself and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us or we will die. Moses said, do not be afraid. God has come to test you so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning. There's a right kind of fear as we recognize how awesome God is. It's rejoicing and trembling at His greatness and goodness and then being obedient in light of His holiness and because of His glory. So God's point about Himself within the Ten Commandments has been clearly made. He alone has the right to say to us, my will be done. And He also has the right to say to us, not your will, but mine be done. And perhaps our instinctive reaction as people is that that doesn't sound altogether positive it sounds limiting. It is a challenge on human pride, human independence to hear God, to hear anyone say, I have rights, to say what you should and shouldn't do.

That's in the moral realm. Let's just move for a moment to the physical realm, to the normal stuff of life, and then we're going to return to the moral realm. But boys and girls, think about this. When you go to any classes, and I know you go to lots of different classes, but think about either your music class or a dance class or your sports clubs, what happens there is that there will be a teacher of some kind, and they will instruct you and say, no, don't do it like this. Do it like that. And if you are paying attention, you will listen. If you want to make progress, you will accept that, oh, there is somebody who is in charge of me, and they're telling me not to do this and to do this, so I'm going to follow their instructions. And what we do, and we do this as adults as well, is we are then limiting my will to obey the commands of someone else.

And we know that that's good for us, even at the times when we don't like it. If you play piano, you probably don't enjoy doing scales. If you play a sport, you probably don't enjoy repetitive drills, but they serve a good purpose. And so we will limit our will and obey commands if we understand it's for our good. And also, I think most of us are able to see that unlimited freedom, as much as we think maybe that's a good idea, taken to its conclusion is actually a bad idea. That's why I think Roald Dahl's super helpful. Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, a wonderful book. Just one character, Augustus Gloop, if we remember Augustus Gloop, the great big silly nincompoop. His problem, oh, I can just eat all I want, this is wonderful. Guzzling all the chocolate, and he gets stuck and gets sucked up the pipe.

Unlimited freedom sounds wonderful until we realize it's not. That's a normal life, well, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory is not really a normal life, but if we go back to the moral realm, when our Creator and Savior God gives us commands, we're invited to know that obeying Him looks like progress. Progress in our joy, progress in our flourishing.

[8 : 36] This is the way we were made to live. He is the one who we should be glad to limit our will for. Now, the challenges that we face in this are many, at least a couple to think of. What happens when God's wisdom, the wisdom that we find in the Ten Commandments or in God's Word, when God's wisdom is not the same as the wisdom that we hear all around us in the world?

Then we have a choice to make, don't we? Where will we go for wisdom? Who will we choose to obey? Whose voice will we listen to? If you want a good accessible book on the Ten Commandments, Kevin de Young wrote one. He has a really helpful way of illustrating that sometimes the wisdom of the crowd is not always wise. So, some of us will remember back in 2017, the UK government spent a lot of money building a polar exploration boat. And they then, some of us definitely remember, and they invited the public to vote on what they thought this boat should be named. And they gave lots of wonderful, high-sounding, you could call it the Ernest Shackleton, you could call it the Endeavor.

All these, what did the public vote for? Bolty McBoltface. Which is a better day, they gave it the name David Attenborough, which is just a bit sad. But the wisdom of the crowd is not always wise, and so we need to recognize there's points of challenge, and we need to be ready to listen to God's wisdom.

Here's another challenge. When God's will challenges me, challenges us, will we submit? You know, again, to borrow from the children, it's easy to obey, relatively easy to obey our parents when we agree with them. It's a lot harder when we don't, and that happens sometimes.

Obedience says, I will let God's rule overrule my will. I will follow what makes God happy, not my own version of personal happiness. Now, just a moment's reflection for any of us, I am sure will

reveal that by God's perfect and holy standard, all of us have broken God's law.

[11 : 04] This is a standard that we can't keep. Deep down in our hearts, there are moments when we too are suspicious of God, when we seek freedom from Him and from His laws.

And that should move us to give thanks for the gospel, to give thanks for Jesus, the Son of God, who prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, not my will, but yours be done. His perfect obedience, leading Him to give His life as a sacrifice to fully pay the penalty for our sin, for our selfishness, for our unfaithfulness. And as we receive His grace, that fuels our grateful obedience.

So, that's the Ten Commandments and our obedience. Let's think next about the Ten Commandments and our freedom, which maybe seems somewhat surprising. Freedom, of course, is one of these sort of big ideas. It was the rallying cry of William Wallace in Braveheart. Freedom is what lies behind the rebels fighting to defeat the empire in Star Wars. Freedom, at the more mundane level, perhaps is the daydream of many of us in our busy lives of multiple responsibilities. Oh, if we just had freedom for a few hours.

But what is freedom? And what freedom will we choose? Again, perhaps commonly when we think of freedom, we think of freedom from. Freedom from restriction, freedom from responsibility, freedom from oppression, freedom from a certain set of limits. In the moral realm, people think about, well, I would like freedom from anyone telling me what to do. Freedom from any higher being any God telling me what to do. So, I get to define my own identity, how I choose to live.

So, for many people, freedom is freedom from. Let's think about the story of Israel and their reception of the Ten Commandments, which gives us actually a different way to think about the freedom question.

[13 : 31] Because part one of the book of Exodus, those first 15 chapters, very much are freedom from. So, Israel is set free from the evil tyrant Pharaoh. They are set free from cruel rule. They're set free from being surrounded by false gods and false worship. They're being set free from being worked to death. But part two of Exodus, and actually the reason for part one, is that they are set free to know their God. God's people are set free from slavery to enjoy relationship with Him. It's not, now we're saved, we've got political freedom, full stop, that's it. We've got the dream. No, it's freedom to belong to God. And now, it's freedom to discover the limits that He sets in order for their life as individuals and as a nation to work best. They've been saved by grace to know their God.

And that's where how the Bible speaks about freedom is perhaps different from how many people instinctively think about it. Because true freedom in life, the Bible says, is freedom to live within the limits that our good Creator sets for our well-being.

The classic example in terms of thinking about freedom within limits would be the goldfish. We have a couple of goldfish in our house, in our kitchen. Imagine them swimming around in the same place month after month, year after year. Eventually, they decide to get wise and think, hang on a minute, there's more freedom to be found out there. There's all that space out there on the kitchen floor. So they make a desperate dive to find freedom. Will they be more free as they escape their little tub? Of course they won't be. They'll be flapping around and eventually they would die if nobody picked them up. Because goldfish need to live within right limits. Their limits, the limits of a body of water. But those limits are not bad for them, those limits are good for them.

And it's so important for us to recognize that freedom is not freedom without limits. True freedom is understanding what are the actual limits that are set for us as people that will allow us to flourish well in our lives. And God, our good Creator, gives them to us here. These are good, life-giving limits, boundaries to live well. Jesus summarizes them in terms of, here is what freedom looks like, being free to love God and to love our neighbor. That's how He summarizes the Ten Commandments as those who have been saved by God's grace.

Jesus would say to the people in His day, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. And so we need to see the Ten Commandments as a gift for Israel. It is a gift for them to have a new and a better master, to have a new and a better identity, and to have a new way of freedom.

[16 : 38] Just to consider two commands to illustrate that God's law gave them and can give us freedom. Think about commands four and five. First of all, command four, which you find there in verses eight to eleven, which begins, remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Okay, so think about Israel's story in Egypt. Okay, they never had physical rest. Back-breaking labor day after day after day, until the day they died. And not only did they have no physical rest, they had no spiritual rest either.

They were not allowed to worship the one true God. The only worship that they saw was false worship that did not invite them into the rest of grace. Then they hear command four, remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. What are they invited to there? They're invited into freedom, because now they're being returned to the rhythm of creation. Back there when God made the world, there was that pattern established of six days of work and one day of rest. And so now there is a day when there is complete physical rest for everybody, including the animals, including the stranger within them. And it's not just physical rest. They're also invited into God's rest, into God's Sabbath rest. They're invited to rest in order to worship. They're invited to know the God who is, to come away from all the busyness of life to worship Him, to recognize that He is holy, and He's given that day for their holiness as a gift to them.

Think about in our secular society where we live. So, modern life as a general rule has seen so many of those rhythms being broken down with the seasons, you know, because of the fact that we can get our food from wherever, you know, we don't just eat seasonal crops, we don't just eat seasonal fruits and vegetables.

Because of the erosion of Sunday trading laws, we don't have that sense of here's busyness and here's rest. Rather, every day feels the same. Every day feels relentlessly busy. Those boundaries that used to exist aren't there anymore, which is both for many people physically exhausting and spiritually draining.

So, we as the people of God are given this command for our freedom too, to come out of that, the relentless busyness that God invites us to Himself, to rest and to worship.

[19:38] What about command five, this transition command where we move from thinking about how are we to love God to how are we to love our neighbor? There in verse 12, honor your father and your mother so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. Just think for a moment about how life in a family must have been in Egypt. The only one authority figure really was Pharaoh. He was cruel, he was wicked, he was relentless. He was setting out to destroy family life for the Israelites. Remember, he is the one who gave the command to throw baby boys into the river Nile. He is the one who is giving the command that the dads of those children to make bricks day after day after day. And so now they come out of that horrible situation and they enjoy freedom and they receive this command. And this command is freedom. Here they're being taught about God's design for the foundation for society, which is the family. The family, which is so important because here by God's design is a place where children can learn about good authority. Where children can learn to listen and to respect. A place to learn to trust.

And it's a command that comes with a promise. So that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. If you look at any sociology studies, bears this out generally, where people live in stable homes with a mom and a dad. There is less likelihood of falling into addiction or to crime. There's better better attainment. It is a good design for the strength of society to have a family and where authority is recognized. Think about in the secular society in which we live. Most people have disregarded or forgotten that is a God. There is a God and He is absolute authority. And when ultimate authority gets lost, the idea of authority in general begins to erode. What we're beginning to see, of course, is the breakdown of family units. We're seeing a decline in respect and trust in authority figures. Parents perhaps struggling to know how to discipline or to apply limits because they never saw it themselves in their own homes. What God gives is a wonderful freedom, is a wonderful gift. Here is stability and structure and good authority. It's actually freeing for us if we find ourselves in authority to recognize God establishes these patterns. And also we are to exercise our authority in the way that God does. If we are placed in any position of authority in the family or elsewhere, we are to use that to serve and to love those who are under us. And it's also freedom for children as well and for those who live in positions where they are under authority. Here are the people, here is the wisdom, here is the guidance that God would have me to listen to. And so there is freedom here in establishing these proper limits.

In our sinful rebellion, we often choose a version of freedom which is freedom from God and from the rule of God. Freedom from His wisdom to guide our lives. We find ourselves fighting and struggling against God's commands. In the gospel, we hear wonderful words from Jesus. He says, come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. He says, take my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly and lowly and you will find rest for your souls. We look at Jesus in the gospel and we understand here is the one person, the only person who has ever perfectly obeyed.

And we look at the cross and we see Jesus carrying the heavy yoke, the heavy burden of our sin in order to forgive us. He has been faithful where we have been unfaithful. And this Jesus is the one who invites us to come to rest in His love and kindness and then to work with Him and to work for Him in seeking to pursue obedience, in seeking to love God and to love our neighbor with the grace that He supplies and the freedom that we enjoy in Him. One last thing to think about, and to take this from the journey of God's people, is the Ten Commandments and our mission. Because the Ten Commandments actually help to serve God's mission because God's mission is that He be known throughout the world, and what He needs then are a people that we'll represent Him. We will be hearing for the next few weeks from politicians, different views on how society will flourish. You can read manifestos, here are the policies, here are the pledges.

Remind us we need prayer and wisdom, a chance to pray this evening. But think of the Ten Commandments as God's manifesto for a new society, an alternative society, a people who live according to His will, a people who've been set free to pursue new lives of love, where they are set free to love and worship their God and to love their neighbors. A society of dignity and value, of honor and respect for all people. For all people, for the environment, for the animals. A way of life that cares for the weak and for the oppressed. We're going to think next week about some of the various laws as they are applied in society in chapters 21 to 23. And Israel was radically ahead of any other society in their justice, in their mercy, in their provisions for the poor, as they represent God and His values.

[26 : 39] Because as God's people live by the values of the kingdom, we're inviting people to see and to say, this is what God is like. Remember when Jesus said, let your light shine so that men might see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

There is to be a connection between the way that we live and God being glorified and people being drawn in. How does that happen? It happens in part, at least, as we are obeying, living according to God's commands as a people changed by grace. We get to see our calling as God's people. We get to see Israel's calling in chapter 19, actually, and verse 6. There is a description there, although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. So, the people of Israel are called out of slavery. They're called to belong to God. And now they're given this mission to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. What does it mean to be a kingdom of priests? Well, at a very basic level, it means that they are called to represent God in the world, that God's people are to do service for God to the people around, to lead people into true worship.

What does it mean to be called to be a holy nation? To be holy is the idea of being set apart as belonging to God, that their lifestyle is to represent the fact that they are citizens of God's kingdom, functioning as a light, drawing others to know God. So, their mission is to represent God in the world, to be set apart so that others can see God's values being worked out.

And here in the Ten Commandments, those values are worked out in the way that we love our God, in the way that we love our neighbor. When we think about what Edinburgh needs from us as a church, what Edinburgh needs from Christians, if we want to seek the greatest good of the city, is to love God and to love our neighbor with the desire that others would become worshipers, that they too would enjoy God's grace and God's love. Because imagine the impact, go back to the days of Israel, if Israel lived out these commands as they were established in the promised land. Imagine what a world would be like if God's people lived out these commands.

Let's begin at number six, you shall not murder. Remember Jesus talking about you shall not hate in your heart. Imagine a society where the protection of life was paramount, where people, societies would protect the weak, the unborn, the elderly, the refugee. Verse 14, you shall not commit adultery.

[29 : 50] Imagine a society where there was no unfaithfulness, where family life was protected, where we were avoiding the trauma of family breakdown. Imagine a society where husbands and wives were living together in such a way that the love of the Lord Jesus for His church was being reflected.

Verse 15, you shall not steal. Imagine a world of total security, where property was respected, no plagiarism, no piracy, no extortion, no scamming. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

No more gossip, no more gossip, no more slander, where people's honor, where people's good name was protected, where there was no twisting of the truth to make sure that we always appeared in a bad light and others appeared in a negative light. Verse 17, you shall not covet your

neighbor's house, wife, servant, and wife, servant, and wife. Imagine a community whose hearts were so set on loving others that they practiced contentment and could be glad if they saw God doing good in the lives of others. What a difference this would make. To take these laws seriously both makes us realize this is a wonderful way to live and to take it seriously also forces us to realize we can't and we don't. And so the law then teaches us clearly that we need to confess sin and we need to trust in Jesus. Think about our mission to be, and Peter uses the same imagery to speak to the church, we are a royal priesthood and a holy nation. Jesus comes as the true priest. He sacrifices for the sake of others. He prays and he serves. He is the true Israel. He is the only obedient one. His life is the beautiful life that shines the glory of God. And his mission of grace transfers people into his kingdom. People that can't keep his law by his grace are forgiven and transferred into his kingdom.

And then he gives us the spirit so that we can begin to serve him in his mission. And as we think about how wonderful this world would be if people lived this way, as it represents to us the world that we all want deep down, we're invited actually to live with hope.

[32 : 50] Not just that Jesus perfectly obeyed, which is wonderful in itself, but the Bible tells us that when Jesus returns, when sin and death and all that is wrong will be dealt with forever, this perfect society will be established. The kingdom of God will be established on these lines forever.

And until that day, may God help us, help us to be that kingdom of priests, that holy nation, by God's grace to be on that mission of displaying his glory, by choosing to limit our freedom to say, not my will, but yours be done.

Let's pray that God would help us. Father God, we thank you for...