

# Jealous for Our Freedom

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Date: 10 September 2017

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let us pray. As we now give our attention to the words we've just heard, we pray that you would help us understand and you would draw us more deeply into the reality of which these words speak. For we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Before beginning the exposition this morning, I'd like to take a brief moment and just tell you what joy it is for me to be able to serve you in this way during this time of transition.

Since the first time I preached here, which was October 2000, when then Senior Minister Bruce Milne needed to be away and asked me to step in, since that Lord's Day, 17 years ago now, this space around this pulpit is sacred space to me.

This is the space where I feel the presence and favor of God as nowhere else. So I thank the leadership of the church for letting me stand in it again.

By the way, I feel fully Canadian. Well, we begin today a new series of sermons in the famous, but sadly now largely unknown, Ten Commandments. Why?

[ 1 : 43 ] Some of you saw the words Ten Commandments on the marquee and said, oh my. Another said, this is 2017.

Why spend time on the Lord's Day, on 11 Lord's Day in a row, as it will turn out, in commandments, for goodness sake. In commandments spoken centuries ago and in a very different cultural context.

Why give so much attention to Ten Commandments when there are seemingly much more important things we could attend to? It may surprise you to know that the giving of the law, as the Ten Commandments as a whole came to be known, was celebrated in ancient Israel with great joy.

Really? Really? Yes, really? People celebrated God speaking commandments as a great gift, as a great act of great grace.

Commandments as grace? Really? Yes, really. Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rott wrote, God declaring the Ten Commandments was celebrated as a saving act of highest order.

[ 3 : 06 ] Why? Well, the answer is found in asking the prior question. Why did God speak the commandments in the first place? Recall the context in which the Ten Words, as the Bible prefers to call them, recall the context in which these words were first spoken.

The event took place around 1,300 centuries before the birth of Jesus. Nearly 3 million men, women, and children were making their way across the Sinai Desert on their way to the Promised Land.

I mean, talk about mass evacuation. They had been set free from 400 years of bondage and oppression in the land of Egypt. It was one of the largest refugee movements in history, certainly in that time of history.

They had made their way to the foot of Mount Sinai. Ever thought of how much of the biblical story takes place on mountains? On that particular day, the mountain had become engulfed by smoke, which seemed to be pouring from a fire on top of the mountain.

Lightning was flashing through the thickening cloud. The people were understandably trembling in awe, many of them fearing for their lives, all of them, especially fearing for the life of their friend and leader, Moses.

[ 4 : 25 ] For while the lightning flashed and the trumpets blasted and the ground shook, Moses was up there on the mountain in the midst of all of that smoke and fire. After a period of anxious waiting, Moses comes down from the mountain.

And to everyone's relief, he emerges from that awesome, 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. And even more exactly, the ten words had Moses. Now, as I said, Israel would go on to celebrate the event as a great act of saving grace.

So much so that Israel established an annual week-long festival to celebrate the giving of commandments. Israel observed three commandments.

Annual feasts. Passover, Tabernacles, and Pentecost. They were as big a deal in the early centuries as Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day, and Thanksgiving are for us.

[ 5 : 41 ] Passover celebrates the Exodus, God's liberation from 400 years of oppression and slavery. Tabernacles celebrates the 40 years that Israel spent wandering in the desert.

When God guided the people with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When God graciously provided water from the rocks and bread from heaven. When the people lived in tents and when God himself lived among them in a tent called the Tabernacle.

And Pentecost. The word simply means 50th, referring to 50 days after Passover, which celebrates the gift of the law. And the dominant note of that feast is joy.

Imagine that. People celebrating with joy because someone broke into their lives and spoke commandments.

Why joy? Why joy? Why joy? Why joyfully celebrate the giving of the law? Well, the answer is the thesis that I want to have us focus on this morning.

[ 6 : 49 ] The living, holy God, the creator of all things, frees us to flourish as human beings. And here's the thesis. The passionate lover of our souls speaks the Ten Commandments to protect and enhance the life of freedom and flourishing.

I'll say that again. The living God, the passionate lover of our souls, speaks these Ten Commandments to protect and to enhance a life of freedom and flourishing.

Now, where do I get this from the text we read in Exodus 20? I get it from the first line of the law. Let me ask you a question.

Without looking at the biblical text, what is the first line of the law? Many people will say, you shall have no other gods before me. That is not the first line.

It is the first commandment, but it is not the first line of the law. The first line of the law is gospel. Pure gospel. Exodus 20, verse 1.

[ 7 : 58 ] I am Yahweh your God. I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the house of slavery. That is the first line. The point. When God speaks the commandments, Israel is already in relationship with the holy living God.

I am Yahweh your God. When God speaks the commandments, Israel is already saved. I have brought you out of the house of slavery. Which means keeping the law is not a means to earn the relationship with God.

Keeping the law is a way of living the relationship with God. The apostle Paul, whom many people call the apostle of freedom, argues that where Israel of old went wrong and where the new Israel of today, the church goes wrong, is separating the commandments, thou shalt not, from the first line, from the prologue.

I am Yahweh your God who took you out of the house of slavery. For centuries now, people have turned what is to be a gift of grace into a means of getting grace.

The God who has a personal name, Yahweh, the name by which he loves to be called and usually is obscured by the word Lord, speaks the commandments into, as my friend Earl Palmer puts it, a relationship already established, a freedom already won.

[ 9 : 26 ] When he speaks the commandments, Yahweh has already rescued slaves from, to free them for, from bondage and oppression, for relationship and freedom.

That's always the way it is with God. That's how he works. He frees us from, to free us for. From all kinds of slavery, for, relationships with God and others.

And God then speaks the ten words to protect and enhance this freedom already won, this relationship already established.

Am I making sense? Now, this is why, as we read the rest of the Bible, we discover this surprising close connection between the giving of commandments and the experience of the goodness of life.

Again and again, we hear that in speaking the commandments, Yahweh is speaking life. Deuteronomy 5, 29, God says, Oh, that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear me and keep my commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their children forever.

[ 10 : 37 ] Moses says in Deuteronomy 30, 15 to 16, See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love Yahweh your God, to walk in his ways, to keep his commandments, that you may live.

We see this connection between the commandments and the goodness of life in Psalm 19, which Andrea read at the beginning of the service. The psalm is composed in two halves.

The first half celebrates the goodness of God's creation. The second half celebrates the goodness of God's law. Life through creation, the heavens are telling the glory of God, and life through the law.

The law of Yahweh is perfect, restoring the soul. The precepts of Yahweh are right, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of Yahweh are pure, enlightening the eyes. They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold, sweeter also than honey.

Really? Really? God's commandments are more desirable than gold and sweeter than honey? Why? The thesis I am inviting you to consider.

[ 11 : 48 ] Israel celebrates Yahweh speaking the ten words, the ten commandments, because Yahweh speaks the ten words, the ten commandments to protect and to enhance the freedom that makes for full human flourishing.

Well, let's work through this thesis in three steps. First, defend the thesis. Second, demonstrate the thesis. And then third, deal with our apparent inability to keep these commandments.

So first, defend this thesis. And there are two basic lines of defense. There's the sociological and there is the theological.

The sociological defense. After the exodus from Egypt, the pressing issue became how to live together on a daily basis. This is the pressing issue after every revolution.

How do we now make it work? It was the question after the revolution that Sharon and I experienced in 1986 in the Philippines, the people power revolution. How do we now make it work?

[ 12 : 57 ] Now, out in the desert, Israel has 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 dictatorship. The second to anarchy. The first option, dictatorship, fails because there's no protection of the ruled against the rulers.

The second option, anarchy, fails because there's no protection from one another. There are no clear boundaries. No common understanding of what is true and what is right.

There's no ground for dialogue. And therefore, there's no freedom. 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. My friend Earl Palmer put it this way. Moses goes up Mount Sinai, the absolute ruler of the people.

[ 14 : 05 ] He comes down from Mount Sinai, set free from his own absoluteness. He comes down as a man under authority.

It's significant to note that after receiving the law, Moses is even bolder. He has this new boldness because he now stands upon and under a higher authority himself.

Now he could say to the people, thus says the Lord. The gift of the law also freed the lowest citizen. Because from now on, the average Israelite had a place from which to challenge the powerful leaders.

The average Israelite could now go into Moses' tent and say to Moses, thus says the Lord. The gift of law frees the ruler and the ruled.

Where there is a common understanding of right and wrong, there is great freedom and flourishing. Which explains the paralysis of the so-called free world.

[ 15 : 10 ] There is no common ground. The Washington Post laments, common decency can no longer be called common. Richard Newhouse was right. We are a society with a naked public square.

We have no standard by which to say right is right and wrong is wrong. We have no moral order. Transcendent values have been removed. Now it is everyone for themselves.

History has shown that the rule of relativism only and always leads to chaos. When there is no rule book, how do you know how to play the game?

Rejoice, says Moses. The living God wants us to play the game with great gusto. And so he gives us the rule book. But why this rule book? Why these particular commandments?

We come to the second line of the defense of this surprising thesis. The theological defense. Yahweh's commands protect and enhance freedom because they fit the species.

[ 16 : 15 ] Which explains why, up until recently, they have held such a central place in Western civilization. Even those who did not affirm the divine origin of these words, yet held Yahweh's ten words in high regard.

Because there was something about them that fits us human beings. Why is this? For one simple reason. The one who speaks the commandments knows what makes us tick.

The lawgiver is not only the redeemer. The lawgiver is also the creator. This is important to realize and affirm. The giver of the law is the one who made us.

Yahweh is the one who drew up the blueprints of the human species. Yahweh is the one who designed us incredibly complex creatures.

And in Yahweh's law, we are given the manufacturer's specifications. And as they say, when all else fails, read the owner's manual.

[ 17 : 19 ] In the Ten Commandments, the creator and owner tells us, humans, how we best function in the created order. You can see then that to ignore or go against Yahweh's law is to go against our essential nature.

When we violate God's good law, we violate ourselves. This is clearly the case with the sixth commandment, you shall not murder. But it's also the case with the ninth commandment, you shall not bear false witness.

Twisting the facts always complicates life and it leads to chaos as we are witnessing today. 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. Now, God here is not imposing some arbitrary rule on us. Nor is God simply giving advice to weary people.

The living God is revealing a mystery. The creator is telling us something essential about ourselves we would have never discovered on our own. He's telling us that we are sabbatically constituted.

[ 18 : 32 ] That this rhythm of six plus one is built into the fiber of our being. And 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 a six plus one rhythm.

The same is true of the seventh commandment. You shall not commit adultery. God is not here imposing some arbitrary rule on human life. He's not trying to squelch joy.

The living God is telling us a mystery about what it means to be a human being. And the mystery is that we were made for fidelity. And hopping in and out of bed with other sex partners violates who we are.

Yahweh's law enhances and protects because it fits the species. You've heard me quote before, E. Stanley Jones, who says that the laws, the commandments, are not an imposition on the human species.

They're an exposition of the human species. Telling us how we were made. This is why the apostle John can say in his first letter, his commandments are not burdensome.

[ 19 : 39 ] They tell us who we were created to be. The theological line of defense goes still further. For Yahweh did not, so to speak, spin this law out of thin air.

The commandments emerge out of Yahweh's nature and character and reveal Yahweh's nature and character. In the law, as it were, the living God is giving us a self-portrait.

You shall not bear false witness. Why? Because I would never do it. I'm utterly faithful to my relationships. I say what I mean and I mean what I say. You shall not commit adultery.

Why? Because I would never do that to you. I never turn on my relationships. This conviction that in the law, the lawgiver is revealing his character, is built into the Hebrew word for law.

It's the word Torah. Torah comes from the verb which means to shoot or to throw or to teach and thus to reveal. When a person teaches another person, he or she shoots ideas from his mind and heart into the other's mind and heart.

[ 20 : 47 ] And in so doing, reveals to the other what is on his or her mind and heart. When Yahweh, through his commandments, he shot from his own heart and mind into our hearts and mind what was on his heart and mind.

This explains why Psalm 1, Psalm 19, and Psalm 119 all speak of loving the law. Loving the law?

Is the psalmist nuts? No. Because the psalmist knows that in the Torah, the Torah in God has broken through and revealed who he is.

And the psalmist loves who's revealed. Yahweh's commandments are not an alien ethic, is the way to summarize it. They emerge from who God is and therefore, like God, are eternally contemporary and eternally relevant.

This is why when the lawgiver becomes a human being in Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus says in his Sermon on the Mount, Do not think that I came to abolish the law. 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.

[ 21 : 59 ] The law of God is as enduring as the universe and as enduring as the character of God. So, God's law protects and enhances the life of freedom and flourishing.

First, because it makes for order. And second, because it reveals the structures of reality. Telling us who God is and what God is like. To neglect or transgress the good law of the good God is to buck reality.

We are most human when we live by Yahweh's ten words. This is 2017 and I just said that.

Now, let me demonstrate the thesis. The first three commandments protect and enhance relationship with God. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make any images of me.

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. These commandments free us by warning us of our capacity for idolatry. Idolatry always destroys life.

[ 23 : 02 ] Because we are not only made by the living God, we are made for the living God. And if we allow any other god, any other god substitute, however good, to come between us and the living God, we lose.

Yahweh alone can fill our deepest longings. And so, for our sakes, Yahweh calls for this exclusive allegiance. I am the jealous God. Meaning that I'm the one who asks for this exclusive allegiance, who desires a relationship of intimacy.

And I will tolerate no false lover. That's good news. And for our sake, God forbids us making any likeness of the divine. For in the words of Alan Cole, no likeness could possibly get it right.

And every likeness would be imprinting a misunderstanding on our hearts. God wants us to know God as God really is. The fourth commandment, as already noticed, protects and enhances a balanced life.

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Here God frees us from rat raceness for human raceness. Freedom, not to mention effectiveness, is found in this six plus one rhythm.

[ 24 : 16 ] I believe that much of the neurosis and sickness of our time is due to not obeying this command. And I believe there would be much sanity and wholeness restored to our order if we would obey it.

Commandments 5 through 10 protect and enhance our relationship with the community. God begins with the relationship closest to us, our parents. Commandment 5, honor your father and mother.

This word honor means more than obey. It means to highly prize, to show respect for, to care for. The fifth commandment is given to safeguard a place for the aged in the community.

It's to protect us in our old age. Commandment 6, you shall not murder, is protecting our neighbor's physical life. Commandment 7, you shall not commit adultery, is protecting our neighbor's marriage.

Commandment 8, you shall not steal, is protecting our neighbor's property. And commandment 9, you shall not bear false witness, guards our neighbor's reputation.

[ 25 : 17 ] The key commandment that protects and enhances the life of freedom is the 10th. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife or male servant or female servant or his ox or donkey or his new Lexus or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Here God is protecting us against ourselves. Here God is telling us something about our hearts. He's telling us that our hearts have this tendency to crave what is not our own.

Tell me about it. And here God calls us to examine and check those unspoken desires and yearnings. For if I crave my neighbor's spouse long enough, I begin to fantasize.

And one day I will act. If I crave my neighbor's status long enough, the desire will move me either to usurp her position or to bring her down by spreading rumors.

The living God wants us to live. And so protects us from ourself right from the beginning. You shall not covet. The fact is, breaking the 10th commandment is a sign, the clearest sign, that we have broken the first commandment.

[ 26 : 38 ] That we are in this particular moment of craving, craving what is not our own, living for another God. And the sign that we actually are keeping the first commandment is contentment.

Contentment with Yahweh's love for us. Yahweh is my shepherd. Third, I shall not want. Okay, now we're ready for the third step in our study. Dealing with the problem of our apparent inability to live God's good commandments.

If God's law is describing the free, flourishing life, if God's law reveals who God is and who we are, and if we keep failing to live up to it, then we're in an awful bind.

Is there a way out? Yes, there is. Yahweh to the rescue. Jesus. Yeshua.

Meaning, Yahweh to the rescue. The lawgiver comes down from the top of the mountain, all the way down, and becomes one of us.

[ 27 : 48 ] And as the apostle Paul says, as one of us, he is born under the law. And then as one of us, Jesus frees us to live this flourishing life.

How? Not by discarding the law. And not by watering the commandments down to fit the sinful human condition.

That is the error of liberalism. Not by rubbing our face in the law or hammering it over our heads. That's the error of fundamentalism.

Instead, Jesus, Yahweh to the rescue, does two unexpected and amazing things. Pardon and power.

First, he pardons. He forgives those who are sorry for their transgressions and rebellion. The author of the law pardons repentant lawbreakers.

[ 28 : 46 ] Amazing grace, how sweet the sound. The apostle Paul put it most vividly in his letter to the Colossians. Christ has utterly wiped out the damning evidence of broken laws and commandments, which have always hung over our heads.

And he has completely annulled it by nailing it over his head on the cross. The lawgiver comes down from the mountain. He enters the valley of transgression and rebellion.

And then he climbs up another mountain, Mount Calvary, where he takes upon himself the judgment all the lawbreakers deserve. And through that act, he restores the broken relationship, relieves the crippling guilt.

Yahweh to the rescue heals this breach in reality. And then he does a second thing. He empowers us to obey. He empowers us to live by the manufacturer's specifications.

These two actions always go together. Pardon and empowerment. As a human being, Jesus Christ perfectly lives the good law.

[ 29 : 47 ] Yes, we say. But he had an advantage. I mean, he's the son of God. He's God the son. Of course he can live the law. The very life of God lived in Jesus of Nazareth, enabling him to live this law. But what does the gospel say?

What does the gospel say? Happens to people who become disciples of Jesus. Yahweh to the rescue. What happens to us? Does he not transfer his advantage to us?

Yes, he does. Yahweh to the rescue breathes his spirit into us, granting us his own supernatural power to live this free, flourishing life.

Again, the apostle Paul puts it so well. Romans 8, verses 3 to 4. 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 offering sin for sin.

He condemns 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 who walk by the power of the spirit.

[ 30 : 49 ] Jesus Christ comes to deal with the problem of our inability. He suffers on the cross. He sends his spirit. He pardons and he empowers us. I noted at the beginning that Israel celebrated the giving of the law at the Feast of Pentecost.

Is it any coincidence that Jesus Christ poured out his spirit on the church at Pentecost? No coincidence at all. For the spirit of Yahweh comes to enable the pardoned people of Yahweh to actually live Yahweh's design for human life.

On the day when God spoke from the mountaintop, engulfed in flame and smoke, the people were to write the ten words on their wrist.

Talk about a Fitbit. And on a band dangling in front of their eyes. So jealous was God for their freedom that God also told them to write them on the doorpost of their house and on the gates to their property.

Supposedly, seeing the law in all their comings and going would issue in obedience. And it did for a while. But there was a problem. It was the heart. And it's always a problem.

[ 32 : 01 ] So, God promises a new arrangement, a new covenant. Centuries after speaking the commandments, God says through the prophet Jeremiah, Behold, the days are coming when I will give a new covenant.

Not like the covenant which they broke when I took them out of the house of slavery. My covenant which they broke even though 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. That is what the Spirit of Yahweh comes to do.

To do heart surgery. Not to put a pacemaker in our heart. But to write the good law in our hearts. The Holy Spirit comes to make us new covenant people. Taking the ten words off the tablets.

Off our wrists. Off the courtroom walls. And engraving them in the flesh of our hearts. In light of all of this, I think you can see that in the final analysis, God's commandments turn out to be His promises.

[ 33 : 07 ] The ten commandments are ten great promises. God's Word not only informs, it performs. God's Word always brings into being what it announces.

The commandments turn out to be promises. I am Yahweh your God who made you. Who became one of you.

Who went to the cross to free you from the consequences of your rebellious heart. 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 because I have done for you what I have done for you, one day you will not buck up against reality.

One day you will have no other gods before me. One day you will have no distorted ideas of who I am. One day you will not use my name in vain.

[ 34 : 08 ] One day you will live a holy sabbatical life. One day you will not murder. One day you will not commit adultery. One day you will not steal.

One day you will not bear false witness. And one day you will not covet. You will be so satisfied in me that you will covet nothing else.

One day you will love me with all your heart and soul and mind. One day you will love your neighbor as yourself. One day you will love one another as I love you.

It's a promise. Make it so, Lord, for your glory. Make it so for our full human flourishing, which is your glory.

Make it so. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.