The Life of Love

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[0:00] Well now if you would turn to Exodus 20, back where we were a moment ago in page 64, you'll find that helpful. Some passages in the Bible are big, and some passages in the Bible are really big, and this is really big.

And we can't really do it properly today, so this is not going to be an exposition so much as offering you some thoughts to take away and meditate. This is one of two events in the Bible where God himself speaks from heaven.
Two times when he speaks his own words, he has just rescued his people from Egypt, he gathers them round himself at the mountain, and then he speaks these ten words.
But like most really important things in life, they have been badly twisted, distorted and misrepresented. And let me mention the three most common ways that the Ten Commandments are distorted.
First, some people look at the Ten Commandments and they say, see, I told you God was a killjoy. He's only interested in making sure we behave like little children. He is anti-pleasure, he's anti-anything that looks like pleasure, and all he really wants to say is, thou shalt not, thou shalt not.
[1:22] Now, on almost the opposite extreme are those who say, no, no, the Ten Commandments are a stairway to heaven. If you obey the Ten Commandments, God has to accept you.

I imagine, I have many friends who say to me, I obey the Ten Commandments. I have one I was speaking to recently, and he's an atheist. He said, I'm a good person, though I obey the Ten Commandments.
I said, what about the first one? He said, what's that? But there are a lot of people, I think, who say, well, I'm a moral person, I keep the Ten Commandments.
I don't steal. I mean, I don't declare everything on my income tax, but I'm not guilty of stealing. And I haven't killed anyone recently, but there are a number of people I'd like to. And I don't keep the Sabbath.
Well, I do keep the Sabbath except during skiing season. So that's a second way, I think, of misunderstanding the Ten Commandments. The third way of misrepresenting them, and this is closer to home, I think.
[2:24] Many Christians say that the Ten Commandments were for the Jews. They're Old Testament. And the Old Testament's all about laws and rules, but the New Testament, ah, it's about love.

Jesus has come to teach us about love. We're not under the law, and therefore the Ten Commandments are just not relevant. And although they're different, those three false views share one thing in common, and that is they have ripped the Ten Commandments out of their context. And of course, a text ripped out of context becomes a pretext. Because the context of the Ten Commandments is the covenant that God is making with his people.
It's more about love than it is about law. He's rescued his people. He's brought them to himself. He's doing something no God has ever done before. Do you remember last week in chapter 19, in verse 5, he says, If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you'll be my own possession among all the peoples, because all the earth is mine.
And you'll be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. We're in a marriage ceremony more than we are in a law court. But it's not a marriage ceremony between two equal partners.
[3:36] So, why does God give these Ten Commandments? And I want to offer you three ways of meditating on them to take home with you today for the rest of your life, if you will.

Why does God give these Ten Words? And the first has to do with covenant freedom. Look at the way it starts. Chapter 20, verse 1.

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God spoke these words and said, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. See, twice God reminds them, I am rescuing you.
I have brought you out of slavery. And God has brought them out of the promised land and he has defeated the army of the Egyptians. But they are not free.
They are not free. Because true freedom does not have to do with our external circumstances. True freedom is a thing of the heart and it comes from being bound to God in covenant.
[4:43] That's not the way we usually think, is it? But just think about this. I mean, God could have rescued them physically from Egypt. He could have set them up in the desert and made them fabulously prosperous, given them everything they wanted for a happy life.

But they would not have been free. And the reason God gives his Ten Commandments is that his people now need to learn how to be really free. And these Ten Words are the way of freedom. Because true freedom is not freedom to be myself, but freedom to be the person whom God made me to be. I made in the image of God. Fish got to swim and we've got to be made and we've got to be transformed back into the image of God.
And that is the exact opposite of the way we think about freedom today. Today, freedom means liberty from every external restraint. Freedom to express myself. Freedom to indulge myself. Freedom to choose my own path to be true to myself.
And you know what it leads to. It leads to broken relationships and it leads to broken lives and it leads to broken hearts. And we make ourselves the little petty gods.
[5:48] We make gods out of ourselves and we become insufferable in our selfishness. And the Lord God who rescues us comes to us and says, This is how you must learn freedom.

You'll have no other gods but me. This is what it means to be free. Honour your father and your mother. Take a Sabbath. True freedom is freedom from coveting. Freedom from telling lies. Freedom from being enslaved by my own desires. You see? You take the Sabbath. A very relevant thing for our frantic West Coast pace.
The only way to be free from the tyranny of being productive and successful is having one day of the week when you're not productive. Where you put down the idols which you serve during the week.
Very interesting. If you look down at the command, it's the longest command of all of them. And in verse 11, what is the reason God gives us to keep the seventh day holy?
[6:53] Because that's what God did. You see, God knows how easy it is for us to begin worshipping our performance. You know, try harder, get fitter, invest wiser, retire higher.

Suddenly you realise you're a slave again. And the Sabbath is the day where we put down our agendas and we remember God's. And we stop listening to that anxious inner voice that keeps driving us and keeps saying to us, try harder, people don't like you unless you try harder.
Look better, you're not valued in yourself. And we stop and we say, no, no, no. God's my creator. God is my saviour. I am not valued for anything I do or anything I produce. I'm valued because he loves me in myself and in himself.
It's the day we remind ourselves we're not business objects. And every single one of the commandments tells us what it means to be made in the image of God.
Take the sixth commandment, for example. You shall not kill. The word kill means taking innocent life. Why shouldn't we take innocent life?
[7:59] Because that other person is made in the image of God as well. See, the true value of the people who are sitting around us is not how we value them, but the fact that God looks at them and says they too are made in the image of God.

This has huge ramifications, doesn't it? In all sorts of controversial medical areas. This command applies to abortion, to human embryo harvesting.
It applies to euthanasia. And you will notice that the language of doctor-assisted suicide is shifting to me, to my rights. It's now voluntary euthanasia.
It's my life I choose to do with it. It's my right to die. But this commandment tells us, no, no, it's God who gives life and it's God who takes life away. And there is something unqualifiedly precious and good about life because we are in his image.
This is what the covenant is about. God is bringing us to freedom. I've rescued you, he says. It's like this, you know, God has succeeded in bringing them out of Egypt and now he has to take Egypt out of them.

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[9:13] This is what freedom is. It's to learn the shape of loving God and loving each other. And that is why God gives these Ten Commandments.

So there is something to meditate on with the Ten Commandments. It has to do with freedom. The second thing I want to commend to you, the second reason I think God gives these laws, has to do with covenant community.
You can't miss this as you read through Exodus. God rescues his people. He brings them to the mountain and he gathers them as a congregation for the first time and speaks to all of them and he says, I've borne you on eagle's wings.
I've brought you to myself. Now I want you to be a kingdom, a nation, a holy people, different, an alternate society in this world. I've blessed you so that my blessing might pass to others.
So you see, the blessing that was lost in Eden comes back to the world through a people now. It's a corporate.
[10:16] It's a communal picture. And just as God works differently, we, his people, are to look different in our families, in our economics, in our artistic lives, the way we handle our children and parents, the way we deal with truth and sexuality.

It's all part of being a covenant partner of God. And although every command is to use singular, what God is doing is he's not creating a whole bunch of individuals for heaven, but he's creating a new society.
That's still the way God works. In every city in the world, God is creating an alternate society, a little city of people who relate differently to all the issues of life than the city around them.
Our attitude to money, sex and power doesn't come from the culture. And God gives us these ten words to show how radically different we are. Look at the fifth commandment for a moment as an illustration in verse 12.
Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you. This is lovely. Here is God, here are the people, and God speaks straight past the parents to the children.
[11:31] Because God regards the children as full members of the covenant. They came out of Egypt just as the parents did. And God commands the children to have a particular attitude because ever since Abraham, children have been part of the circle of God's blessing.

And so God treats them as full covenant members. See, it's a communal reality. And the key attitude that the children are meant to have is to honour their parents, both father and mother.
I say this as a parent. The word honour has to do with the word weighty and heavy. Children are meant to highly regard their opinion of their parents as weighty.
But it's an attitude of the heart. And God doesn't spell out 5,500 different ways of doing this because it's an attitude of the heart. And the parent-child relationship goes through different stages. Last night, Bron and I visited a family that have just had a surprise third child. The child comes home, the family moves around. Some of us have older parents.
[12:44] And they are ageing and in financial need. To treat them with honour and dignity is part of Christian responsibility. And if your parents make ungodly decisions, you need to figure out how to keep the first commandment and the fifth commandment intention.

But the point is this. In a covenant community, parents are delegated authority by God. We mediate the life of God to our children. We teach and instruct them in the ways of the Lord because for a while we are responsible for their spiritual lives.
And children are to honour their parents because their parents are also the precious children of God as well. But everything about the law is profoundly communal. That's why it is absolutely impossible to obey the law and to keep the Ten Commandments if all your experience is just to come to church and leave quickly and have a couple of Christian friends in your life.
If that's the sum total of your Christian involvement, we can't be a holy nation. We can't be a covenant community. Being a covenant community means meeting with friends, holding yourself accountable, opening your life before the word of God and having friends speak into your life and asking each other, how can we be different?
If you're not accountable, you're not really obeying the law of God. We can't be a kingdom of priests. So I want to commend that as a second way of meditating on the law. Firstly, it's about covenant freedom.

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[14:08] Secondly, it's about covenant community. And thirdly and finally, it's about covenant love. It is. And this is the point of the first commandment.

Look back at verse 2. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me.
Now Martin Luther very helpfully pointed out that this commandment lies underneath all the other nine. So when we are honouring our parents or when we are seeking to take Sabbath or when we are seeking to tell the truth, it's an act of worship.
It's an act of setting God before our other gods. Luther says, idolatry doesn't mean going out into the forest and getting a tree and chopping it down and bowing down to it. Idolatry is a thing of the heart.
And what we do is we take other things and we make them God. God. We prefer them. We make them more important in our life than the Lord.
[15:18] See, a God is something to which we attach supreme importance. It's something you cannot do without. And you know it's an idol if it's taken away and the bottom of your world falls out.

An idol is something that we draw significance or goodness from. And that is why if we are having a problem in any area of life, it doesn't matter if you're struggling with being over busy or under generous or cannot tell the truth, it's because of this.
This is the problem underneath every problem. This is the sin underneath every sin. It's having someone other than God as the true centre of your life. And the most seductive idols, of course, are the ones that are good in themselves.
You know, the approval of others, a very good thing. But it's terrible if, it's terrible if your opinion of me is more important than God's opinion of me to me.
Do you understand that? Respectability and reputation, very good things, terrible tyrants. The wonderful and gracious good gift of family.
[16:30] It must not be placed in your life ahead of God or it's an idol. It's very searching, isn't it? See, what is it that we truly love? And I think often we don't know what we truly love until the thing itself is threatened or we suffer or we have to make difficult choices.

And then we know what's important. And that is why I think the last commandment is such a helpful diagnostic to us in verse 17. Don't covet your neighbour's house, wife, servant, ox, anything.
It's not got to do with keeping laws. It's got to do with what we love. You can look like you're keeping the laws and have a heart riddled with covetousness because our hearts are open to the God who sees all things.
So here are three ways of thinking about the Ten Commandments. The first has to do with covenant freedom, the second with covenant community and the third with covenant love. Well then, how is this relevant?
Now I warned you, this was a big sermon. So I often feel in my sermons we ought to take a half-time break. We're way past halfway, I tell you.
[17:47] When Bron and I went to France a couple of years ago, we had the privilege of seeing the Vaucluse fountain. It's a little pool of water in the side of a cave.

And there are divers who've dived to 1,500 feet and it just goes on and on and on and it comes out in all sorts of places and offers springs and creeks and rivers.
And the Ten Commandments is a bit like that. It goes all sorts of places. So I want to give you three... How do we think about this today? I want to give one way of thinking about the relevance of it and it has to do with the three persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
This is a very simple thing to say. The first is God the Father. If these words are given by God the Father, which they are, they express God's fundamental moral stance to all human beings outside the Garden of Eden.
They're different, you see, from the ordinances which begin in chapter 21. The ordinances are restricted to Israel in the land. They're geographic. But the Ten Commandments are given in an absolute sense.
[19:00] They're not limited by culture and geography. They transcend every social framework and they remain the permanent expression of God's moral will.

There's only one problem. We break all of them. And I don't think you can read the Ten Commandments without this sense of sadness. Even if you read on a couple of chapters, the next thing Israel does is they have an orgy with a golden calf in the middle of the camp.

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And as we hear these Ten Commandments, we have, I think, a greater sense of how deeply sinful we are. And I think that's intentional. Because, you see, built into the Ten Commandments is a longing for something better.
As we read these commands, we long for someone who can come and who can obey them fully. We long for someone who can come and cleanse our hearts and take this wretched, sinful heart and give us a new heart.
And, of course, at the end of the Old Testament, God says, I will make a new covenant with my people. And this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel.
[20:14] I will put my law within them and I will write it upon their hearts. So God the Father, it remains his permanent will. Secondly, God the Son.

One of the problems when we come to the New Testament is that Jesus intensifies the commandments. He says, you have heard it said that you shall do no murder, but I say to you, everyone who hates his brother has already committed murder in his heart.
And Jesus says in exactly the same passage, I haven't come to do away with the law, but I have come to fulfill it. So that Jesus is the first one who lives in open-hearted obedience to the law.
He's the first one to love God with all his heart, mind, soul and strength. And on the night before he is crucified, he has a Passover meal with his disciples and he takes bread and he breaks it and he says, this is my body which is given for you.
Do this in the remembrance of me. And then he takes a cup of wine and he gives thanks again and he says, this is my blood of the new covenant and it's shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.
[21:23] So you see, as the one who fulfills the old covenant, Jesus comes and he gives his life and as he dies on the cross, God takes all my covenant disobedience every time I've disobeyed any of the Ten Commandments and places them on Jesus and all his covenant obedience is given to me.

Christ redeems us from the curse of the law. And then the Holy Spirit, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit from heaven. When we place our trust in Christ, we enter the new covenant and what God does is he writes the law on our hearts by his Holy Spirit.
Just as on the mountain, God took a tablet of stone and wrote the Ten Commandments with his finger, now with his spirit, he writes the commandments in our hearts and he plants within us new hearts with a desire to obey his commandments.
That's the mark of the Holy Spirit. If you have a desire to obey the Ten Commandments, it comes from the Holy Spirit. So that is why for us as believers, the Ten Commandments are more precious than they were even under the old covenant.
They show us what it is to please God, our Heavenly Father. But because Jesus Christ has died, it means there is no condemnation and it means I'm not afraid of the law.
[22:53] In fact, I use the law, we ought to use the law to expose our idolatries and our sins as we did this morning in the service. And every time I come to the law it casts me back on Jesus Christ and it makes me long for Jesus Christ and thankful to Jesus Christ for all that he has done for me.

So let me finish by reading to you from Romans chapter 8. This is the place to finish, just the first few verses. There is therefore now no condemnation, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
For the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death, freedom. For God has done what the law weakened by the flesh could not do, sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin.
He condemned sin in the flesh in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh but according to the spirit.
Romans 8. Amen. women thank you. Amen. Amen.■

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