

“Delighting in God’s Law”
Exodus 20:1-21
June 13, 2010

INTRODUCTION:

In our survey of the Old Testament, I’ve chosen what I consider to be the 13 most significant events in the 39 books that form our Old Testament. The giving of the law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, is the event we are looking at today. This is the only time in all the Old Testament when God speaks directly to the gathered nation, compared to his more normal pattern of speaking through prophets. His direct address on this occasion serves the purpose of highlighting the importance of this event.

Not only does God show us the importance of his law by speaking it directly, but Satan also shows us the importance of God’s law by attacking it. In his hateful attacks upon God, he is not going to waste his time on unimportant targets. His first temptation targets the law of God, as he persuaded Adam and Eve to interpret God’s law as burdensome and confining. God had told Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Satan’s interpretation of this law was that it arose out of God’s desire to deprive Adam and Eve of true satisfaction. He wanted them to view the Law of God like we sometimes see the petty rules of some governmental bureaucracy. Freedom and joy would come, he suggests, by casting aside God’s law instead of by keeping it.

It is still quite common to believe that keeping the law of God leads to misery instead of freedom. Several years ago, Ted Turner, creator of CNN, was speaking to the National Newspaper Association about the irrelevance of the Ten Commandments. “When Moses went up on the mountain, there were no nuclear weapons, there was no poverty. Today, the commandments wouldn’t go over. Nobody around likes to be commanded. Commandments are out.”

A negative view of commandments is also not uncommon in the church. In an article he wrote for *Books and Culture*, Philip Yancey tells about a friend of his named Susan, a woman who claims to be a committed Christian. He writes that this woman

told me that her husband did not measure up and she was actively looking for other men to meet her needs for intimacy. When Susan mentioned that she rose early each day to “spend an hour with the Father,” I asked, “In your meetings with the Father, do any moral issues come up that might influence this pending decision about leaving your husband?” Susan bristled: “That sounds like the response of a white Anglo-Saxon male. The Father and I are into relationship, not

morality. Relationship means being wholly supportive and standing alongside me, not judging.” (Jan-Feb, 1998, p. 15).

One of the changes that occurs in the heart of a believing Christian is a different attitude toward God’s law. It becomes a delight instead of a burden. The psalmist says that the blessed man is the one whose **“delight is in the law of the Lord”** (Psalm 1:2). Can you get just a small glimpse of what it would be like for you to delight in God’s law? We delight in those things in which we find value and beauty. Note three benefits of God’s law in this passage.

I. God’s Law Is a Loving Expression of a Relationship.

The sequence indicated by verse 2 is significant. **“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”** The law then proceeds after this statement. God first establishes the relationship with his people by delivering them from bondage, and then gives them these commands. The sequence is relationship leading to obedience, not obedience leading to relationship. The law is personal rather than impersonal. It’s not like the law of the land, which comes to us without a person attached to it. The law expresses our relationship with God rather than establishes it.

There is a sense in which obedience characterizes all relationships. Any relationship, even the most casual, involves certain claims. When you buy an airline ticket, you establish a temporary relationship with the airline and the airports. This relationship results in certain claims being made upon you which somewhat limit your freedom. You have to go through a security line to get on the airplane. Your carryon can’t be above a certain size. You have to board the plane in a certain order. The marital relationship makes a much greater claim upon us. A husband or wife can’t set their own schedule, spend whatever they want, vacation whenever they want, as well as numerous other limitations. But those who are happily married gladly endure these limitations because of the loving relationship that exists.

The first of the Ten Commandments is the most important because it establishes the high level relationship existing between God and his people, with the resulting claims God has upon us. **“You shall have no other gods before me”** (v. 3). God is to be our only ultimate loyalty, with all other relationships coming under this one. To make anything or anyone else ultimate is to violate this core loyalty. Since this is to be our highest relationship, there are to be no claims higher than the ones God makes upon us.

So our obedience is an expression of the relationship God makes with us, not the means of establishing this relationship. One of the reasons we don’t delight in God’s law is that we don’t read verse 2 before reading the law, with the result that we lose the sequence of relationship and then obedience. In

other words, we don't receive God's law as an expression of our loving heavenly Father, with the result that we hear it improperly, leading us to dread it rather than delight in it. A couple of years ago, an elder in this church responded to an e-mail I had written making some request of our elders. His e-mail response was composed in red letters, all capitalized. I read his remarks as if they were expressed with a raised, angry voice. In an attempt to avoid disunity, I called this brother to talk things through with him. When I did so, I found that he had mistakenly used red for his font and capitalized everything. The words of his e-mail, read again by me with an assumption of his friendliness toward me rather than anger, took on a completely different meaning. We often don't hear God's law correctly because we read it as if he is an angry God laying down his requirements for his blessing upon us. Instead, we must read it as coming from a God who has loved us through Jesus.

Just before I got married, my father wrote me a long letter that was filled with practical wisdom about a variety of different topics, including matters like how to manage money, marriage and decision making. He was passing on to me the wisdom of his experience. I never had any doubt about his motives in writing such a letter. He was not saying to me, "Only if you keep these commands I am giving you will I love you." He had demonstrated through the years his unconditional love for me, even though I had tried his patience on many different occasions. His commands were not conditions of his love but evidences of his love. Because he loved me, he wanted to save me the suffering resulting from foolish decisions. We need to hear God's law in the same way.

II. God's Law Brings Freedom.

God gives himself a title in verse 2: "The Lord your God, who brought you out of the house of slavery." The theme of the book of Exodus is the deliverance of God's people from their slavery in Egypt to the freedom of serving God. God delivers his people from bondage and makes them free. His law furthers this purpose of freedom. Admittedly, this sounds foreign to modern American ears. To us, freedom is the ability to do whatever we want. So how can the law bring freedom when in truth it brings limitations? Clearly, the law does limit our lives. When it says, "**You shall not commit adultery**" (v. 14), limitations are introduced. Sexual intimacy becomes limited to the spouse to whom one has made a lifelong commitment. To Americans, freedom means I can have sexual relations with any willing partner of my choice. Clearly, the biblical view of freedom challenges the American view of freedom.

Notice two things about the biblical view of freedom. First, freedom is not life without any boundaries, but life with the boundaries that will result in human flourishing. Remember that the theme of the book of Exodus is that of freedom from bondage. Early in the book, the author reports of the harsh service required of God's people by their Egyptian taskmasters (1:13-14). Then

Moses brings to Pharaoh God's word to him, **“Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness”** (7:16). Interestingly, the word “serve” is the same word in both cases. Freedom is not life without any boundaries so that we can do whatever we want. Rather, it is life with the particular set of boundaries that will bring about human flourishing. The law of God limits as the railroad tracks limit the locomotive, a limitation that leads to the realization of its greatest potential. The law limits us like the rules of a good mother, who doesn't let her son do whatever he wants. He wants to exist on a diet of ice cream, French fries and cookies, and spend his time watching videos and playing games. But his mother introduces limits that will bring about his flourishing. Similarly, God is saying to us in these commands, “I call you to freedom, and these are the limitations that will bring freedom to you. Make me your ultimate loyalty. Worship me as I direct rather than employing aids of your design. Revere my name. Be faithful in observing a pattern of work and rest. Honor your parents and honor life, marriage, property rights and truth. Don't live your life consumed by the desire for things you don't have. These are the limits that will lead to full human flourishing.”

There is a second component of freedom that emerges in this passage, stemming from the setting of this scene. Where are God's people when God speaks to them his law? They are in the wilderness, which in the Bible is symbolic for deprivation and chaos. At creation, God brought order out of chaos. As his image bearers, we do the same as we keep his law. When we find ourselves in the chaos of life in the wilderness, our tendency is to set aside God's law and do whatever we think needs to happen for life to work. So if we enter a time of economic difficulty, we think that we can set aside obedience for the sake of survival. When life is uncertain and chaotic, like a wilderness, and we don't know which way to turn, obedience to God's law directs us and liberates us. The law brings freedom not just in a setting of prosperity, but in the chaos of the wilderness as well.

III. God's Law Brings a Joyful Heart of Dependence.

The first and last of the Ten Commandments are especially significant. We've already noted how the first commandment, to have no other gods than the one true God, establishes God's right to have authority over us. The tenth commandment is also uniquely significant. Though there is a heart component to all the commandments, this last commandment that forbids coveting is aimed only at the heart. God is telling us here not to allow the desire for those things he has chosen not to give us to become the focus of our lives. Obeying this command leads not to the misery that Satan seeks to deceive us into believing, but to a daily heart of joy. It does so in two ways.

Obeying this command not to covet what God has chosen not to give us leads first to a present-mindedness that gives us joy today. By its very nature,

coveting takes our attention away from what we have in the present, and focuses it on a desire to be realized at some future point. It robs us of present joy with a promise of future acquisitions. Maybe you've known people who live for a life of ease through an early and prosperous retirement. They covet such a life in a way that robs them of joy in the present. This command directs us into a life that will bring joyful gratitude in the present.

Second, this command also leads us into dependence on God and his control of our lives. It leads us into contentment even if God has chosen to give our neighbor something that is nicer than what we have. Let's think about this a little more carefully. Imagine a friend driving up one day in a brand new car that is clearly much nicer than your ten-year old clunker. What would be required for you to genuinely celebrate that instead of being envious? The only way I know to do so is to regard something you have as being far more valuable than your neighbor's new car. What might that be? There is only one answer. Jesus speaks of it in the parable of the hidden treasure. **"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field"** (Matt. 13:44). The treasure is the life God has given us in Christ, and his bringing of that life to us through Christ.

CONCLUSION:

Let me close with two applications. First, I would like to invite you to repent of the way you may have been reading God's law. Perhaps you have been reading it as the petty, confining demands of a cruel God as a condition of establishing a relationship with him. Instead, they are to be read as an expression of a loving Father who desires freedom for his children. The only way I know to come to read it in this way is to receive the love of God through Jesus. If you don't know Jesus as God's great treasure, then you will not be able to read the law correctly. So your first step is to believe in Jesus.

Second, once you begin reading them correctly, you become more open to repenting of your disobedience. So the second application is to repent of any transgression of these commandments. Perhaps you have been living a life of covetousness, expressed through a lack of generosity. Perhaps you have taken God's name in vain, seen in an overly casual view of worship. Maybe you have stolen what is not yours through some deception such as lying about your taxable income. Maybe you have sullied the reputation of another by repeating a rumor, thus bearing false witness against your neighbor. Maybe you have looked at someone to whom you are not married, and allowed yourself to imagine life with that person to the point that you have come to desire it. God commands us to repent of these sins and to receive the forgiveness he has earned for us in Christ.