



## Week 5

### Mt. Sinai & the Ten Commandments

#### Day 1 - Exodus 19:1-6

*<sup>1</sup> On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. <sup>2</sup> They journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. <sup>3</sup> Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the Israelites: <sup>4</sup> 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. <sup>5</sup> Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, <sup>6</sup> but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites."*

#### Understanding the passage:

God appeared to Moses in the burning bush when he was tending his father-in-law's herd and wandered off to Horeb. Exodus 3:12 records God telling Moses, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain."

Three months after they escape from Egypt, the Israelites find themselves at the base of that very mountain (Mt. Horeb and Mt. Sinai are interchangeable names for the same mountain). As if the signs and plagues were not enough, God continues to show the Israelites that they can trust God.

At this point, the people don't know what to expect. With the benefit of hindsight, modern readers know that God is going to make them into a people with a land and a covenant. But consider the perspective of the Israelites: they had a harrowing escape and have been wandering for months. For all they know, there's no end to the manna nor the nomadic and sparse life. It must have been a great relief when God began speaking to Moses.

God's words to Moses, which he was then to deliver to the people, were meant to prepare the Israelites a new communal identity and values, as well as for a relationship with God. This

relationship is immediately defined by God trying to care for the people. At first glance, it appears that God is offering conditional love or making a threat: they will be God's treasured possession but only *if* they keep the covenant and obey God.

Consider the way a parent tells a child, "Listen to me or you will end up hurt. Slow down or you will fall. Don't touch that or you will get burned." These are not threats; they are beacons pointing to safety. The instruction to listen to God's voice and obey the commands is pointing them to God's generous and faithful care.

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. How does God show faithfulness in this passage?
2. What do you think it means to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation?
3. How would their obedience determine God's purpose for them?

### **Day 2 - Exodus 20:1-6**

*<sup>1</sup> Then God spoke all these words,*

*<sup>2</sup> "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; <sup>3</sup> you shall have no other gods before me.*

*<sup>4</sup> "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me <sup>6</sup> but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

### **Understanding the passage:**

Before God gets to the Ten Commandments, God starts with a proclamation: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." These words remind the people that God is in the freedom business. God imagines a life for them that is not lived in slavery – to Pharaoh, to work, to deceit, to violence, to idols of their creation. God did not bring them out of slavery so they could fall into a different kind of slavery.

When God gave them these commandments, God was not setting forth law and order. It was instead about rooting them in different ideals than they were used to. They aren't things we should put in our Outlook "to do" list. Don't forget to not commit adultery today! Check. No, they were intended to define the community, their relationship with God, and their relationships with one another. They are about freedom, not constraint.

The Ten Commandments were there to teach a group of recently freed slaves who had grown up knowing only oppression of Egyptian culture and laws how to live in community with one another. They were to live differently than their lives as slaves and be countercultural to the Egyptian culture they had grown up around.

Though they were not cause-and-effect laws, the Ten Commandments were not just a fluffy idealized picture of what God intended. They were meant as a moral code that bound the community to God and to one another. The first part of the first command – that God brought them out of slavery in Egypt – was a reminder of God's love for this group of people. This defined their community and their relationship with God.

***You shall have no other gods before Me.***

This commandment immediately distinguished the Israelites from their Canaanite neighbors. The rejection of all gods except Yahweh is not yet monotheism; notice that the existence of other gods is not denied. But the command to only worship God was revolutionary.

God knew that their lives would be shaped by the nature of what or who they worshipped. The author David Foster Wallace wrote: "You get to decide what to worship because here's something else that's true. In the day-to-day trenches of adult life there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship."

Whatever the Israelites worshipped would be the thing that would displace God from their hearts and cause them to turn against this new, fragile community. The prohibition was meant to put up guardrails to help them not stray.

***You shall not make for yourself an idol.***

The second commandment compliments the first, but is specific to the physical creation of gods. This also separates them from the Canaanites because images and statues were essential to worshipping pagan deities.

It also reminds the people that faith is not going to come from touching, controlling, managing, or seeing the physical presence of God. It's tempting to look for reassurance of God's presence by having something to hold or see. The prohibition of idols is a big leap for these people who have been subject to Egypt's gods for generations, but it is the building block of trust with Yahweh.

**Questions for reflection:**

1. What are the other little gods that get in your way of worshipping God?
2. What do you think it means that God is jealous?
3. Are loving God and keeping God's commandments the same thing?

**Day 3 - Exodus 20:7-11**

<sup>7</sup> "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.

<sup>8</sup> "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor and do all your work, <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

**Understanding the passage:**

***You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.***

The third commandment prohibits the vain use of God's name. What does that even mean? Is this a prohibition against using God's name in a string of profanities? The penalty is serious: "for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain. " Does that singular outburst condemn you forever?

It's sage advice not to attach God's name to a swear word, but it's not the point of the commandment. In her book, *Bearing God's Name*, Carmen Joy Imes explains the broadly agreed-

upon position of Biblical scholars that the verb translated into English as "take" actually means "to bear, to carry, to lift up, to raise high." The meaning of the word vain is "false and inconsequential." This reframes the commandment: "Don't carry God's name into the world with falsehood." Be an accurate picture of God. Don't attach God's name or character to something that is contrary to God. To carry the name of God means being God's image bearers in the world.

***Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.***

<sup>2</sup> On the sixth day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. <sup>3</sup> So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. (Genesis 2:2-3)

The concept of a day of rest was introduced at the creation of the world, but until the Hebrews left Egypt, it wasn't a day that they observed or participated in. It was simply something God had done. This changes when the people are wandering and without food, and God provides manna. In Exodus 16, God commands them to collect only a day's worth of manna each day, except for the sixth day because they were to collect two days' worth on that day so that they didn't have to collect on the Sabbath. This would have been another revolutionary change to their lives. As slaves, they were used to working seven days per week without a break. By not having to collect food – in essence, not having to do any work – on the Sabbath, God shows them what it means to rest.

This is codified in the Ten Commandments with the instruction not to work *to keep the day holy*. It's not just about physical, bodily rest from labor. It's about pointing people to God – the God who rested on the seventh day. Sabbath isn't fulfilled by taking a day off of work. It is fulfilled by remembering all that God has done for them and trusting that God will continue to take care of them. It was meant to force them to acknowledge their dependence on God.

In modern times, Sabbath is an oft-ignored commandment. Christians are mindful of not committing adultery or murder or stealing, but it is uncommon to think of violating the Sabbath as a sin. We've chosen to worship the god of productivity, which doesn't free us but actually enslaves us. Not practicing the Sabbath is a return to slavery... exactly the opposite of God's intention.

**Questions for reflection:**

1. In your own words, what does it mean to take the Lord's name in vain?
2. How well are you carrying the Lord's name?
3. What are your current Sabbath practices? How do they help your relationship with God?

**Day 4 - Exodus 20:12-14**

<sup>12</sup> *"Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.*

<sup>13</sup> *"You shall not murder.*

<sup>14</sup> *"You shall not commit adultery.*

**Understanding the passage:**

***Honor your father and your mother.***

The word honor in Hebrew is *kabed*, which means heavy. Give heaviness to your parents does not translate clearly into English, but the intention is that one would treat their parents with weightiness rather than dismissiveness. To give weight, or honor, to one's parents is about more than not speaking unkindly to them, about obeying their every command, about agreeing with

them. It is to respect them in their proper place in one's life. It means that they are to be recognized as heavyweights, as people who matter.

The rabbinical tradition holds that this commandment means children will take care of their parents when they can no longer take care of themselves. It ensures a flourishing society by making sure their needs are met. This is demonstrated when Jesus is on the cross and he says to the beloved disciple, "Behold your mother." He was ensuring her care after he passed. Jesus also alluded to this commandment in Mark 7 when he criticizes the Pharisees for directing their corban, which was an offering, to the temple (presumably for public recognition) rather than taking care of their parents.

### ***You shall not murder.***

Biblical scholars have argued for millennia about this commandment based on the Hebrew word translated as murder or, in some Bible translations, as kill. The Hebrew word is *ratsach*, which can have a meaning that encompasses all taking of life (in war, in retaliation, as punishment, in one-on-one conflicts) while others translate it more narrowly to only concern the intentional shedding of blood. The latter translation is more focused on community control.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "you've lost the plot. It's not just about the actual killing. It's about the way you should be in relationship with your brothers and sisters. Don't stay angry at them, because when you allow that anger to fester, it leads to murder. Get to the root of the issue." The modern theologians Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon wrote, "Christians are not simply prohibited from killing, but also invited to live in a way that does not force us to kill."

### ***You shall not commit adultery.***

The command against adultery in the ancient world was not a general prohibition against fornication, but about relationships that violated an existing marriage covenant. As with murder, God's intention with giving the Ten Commandments to the Israelites was to create a new kind of community, one in which people did not take advantage of each other. Breaking up marriages with adultery would cause ripple effects through families and the whole community. Setting boundaries around relationships are intended to protect people from pain and brokenness.

Jesus' furthering of this command is a deeper ethic. It is not just about violating the letter of the law – having an affair – but about what leads to that act. The essence of the commandment, and of Jesus's prohibition against lust, is whether or not someone will be a person of integrity and whether they will keep their promises.

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. How do you practice honoring your parents?
2. Does your anger ever get the best of you? Why?
3. Spend some time in prayer asking God to help you define and adhere to boundaries that keep your relationships safe and healthy.

### **Day 5 - Exodus 20:15-17**

*<sup>15</sup> "You shall not steal.*

*<sup>16</sup> "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

*<sup>17</sup> "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, male or female slave, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."*

### **Understanding the passage:**

#### ***You shall not steal.***

God wants the people to remember that all things belong to God. God demonstrated through the manna and the quail that God would take care of them. When someone steals, they are essentially saying, "I am in control! I don't like how God distributed this, so I am going to take it for myself." Stealing is a way of saying that there is no trust that God will provide. That makes the victim of our theft not just the other person, but God as well.

#### ***You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.***

The story of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21 records the effects of false witness – it results in death. When the penalty for certain actions was death, making false statements carried a heavy weight. It also creates a community of mistrust, which undermines the entire fabric of their society.

Like the prohibition against adultery, this commandment has a deeper sense of testing integrity. God wants them to be people of authenticity so that they might flourish. Everything about them needed to line up – their words, their actions, their thoughts. Jesus emphasizes this in his criticism of the Pharisees as hypocrites, which in Greek literally means actor. He calls them actors because their words and their actions don't line up.

#### ***You shall not covet.***

This final commandment undergirds those about adultery and stealing because it forbids the root causes. But it stands apart in that it is about an internal struggle, not an external action. You cannot *see* someone covet. It's about the state of one's heart. The Israelites were not so different than modern Christians in that we all have the capacity to perform or refrain from certain external actions, but simply acting a certain way doesn't change the desires of our hearts. And the longer we try to act differently on the outside than we feel on the inside, the more we will struggle.

God put desires in our hearts and created us with the capacity for desire, so coveting is not simply about desire. Instead, it's about desires that are preoccupying, out of control, and no longer proportional to our lives. The things we desire go from things we would like to the things that have control over shaping our whole lives. The 13th-century Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas said, "We were created so we would love people and use things. The nature of sin is that we love things and use people." Our love of things creates chaos in our relationships with people.

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. Have you experienced the breaking of trust in a community? What impact did it have? How did the community recover, if at all?
2. Why are you tempted to lie?
3. What practices do you need to put into place to maintain control of your desire for more, more, more?

**Video Discussion Questions:**

1. How does the reminder that God brought the people out of slavery before giving the commandments help?
2. Where do you see a 'relenting God' in this week's readings?
3. What is the function of the Ten Commandments?
4. How is a covenant different than a contract?
5. How do the Ten Commandments relate to your life?
6. What would it be like to live in a society that perfectly lives out the Ten Commandments? What would be different than the way we live now?
7. In Matthew 22:37-39, Jesus said the most important commandment was "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." How are these two objects of love – God and neighbor – reflected in the Ten Commandments?
8. Which of the Ten Commandments is most challenging for you to uphold?
9. What is your biggest takeaway from this week?