

Moses and the Mountain • Exodus 19-20

The prisoner released from the penitentiary . . . the terminal patient who is cured and lives . . . the suspended student who is reinstated . . . the terminated employee who is surprisingly rehired . . . the slave who is set free. They all face the same challenge: how to live when the nightmare is over and a new beginning has come.

That was the challenge facing the Hebrew people. For more than 400 years they and their ancestors had been enslaved by the Egyptians. They had pleaded with God for relief and release and God redeemed them and set them free. They were headed for the Promised Land. But how were they to live? For 400 years someone else had told them what to do. They had no idea how freed people behaved. They were not used to making choices and now God had saved them and given them the freedom to make their own choices. This is the story of God's wonderful gift of how to live as free people.

Their journey started in the land of Goshen, a province of Egypt. The day God set these slaves free they headed east toward the Reed Sea, which is just north of the Gulf of Suez which is part of the Red Sea. The waters were miraculously parted and the entire nation traveled across on dry ground. On the other side was the Sinai Peninsula that lies between mainland Africa to the west and mainland Asia to the east.

They lived in the desert for three months, still thinking of themselves as slaves. When they came to a place called Rephidim the time had come for a new sense of their identity and destiny. God had set them free for a reason. They were to become his missionaries to the world. They were to be a nation of priests. They were to show the whole human race how to live.

Were they ready? Did they understand? Were they willing? The answers to these questions are found in Exodus 19:1-8:

In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on the very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. After they set out for Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

...who decides how God is to be represented?

Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole world is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to Israelites."

So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the Lord had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, "We will do everything the Lord has said." So Moses brought their answer back to the Lord.

The story goes on in Exodus 19:16-20 to explain how God came to tell them how redeemed people should live:

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

The Lord descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain.

There at the top of Mount Sinai God met with Moses and gave to him the greatest moral code ever given to the human race. It was a new and revolutionary way to live. It called for the highest ethics and the best of relationships.

There are two ways of looking at what God gave to Moses and the Hebrew people that day. It can be

looked at negatively, as an impossible standard, a producer of guilt, a reminder of how far short we all fall of God's expectations. Or, we can see it as a possible goal with God's help. If he can free people from slavery then he can also give the moral and spiritual power and perspective to live by a superior standard. And that's exactly what God had in mind.

It is called the Ten Commandments. It was then and is now the way to live our lives. It was then for the Hebrew people who had been set free from slavery in Egypt. It is now for Christians who have been set free from the slavery of sin through Jesus Christ.

The first commandment is to make God # 1. In Exodus 20:3 we read, "*You shall have no other gods before me.*" This was a revolutionary notion. In the ancient world everyone was a polytheist. There were gods everywhere. Every nation had different gods. Everyone knew that the gods were always fighting and mating and making deals. Humans lived to walk the line between the competing deities. For 400 years the Hebrew people had been influenced and controlled by the Egyptians who worshipped their local Egyptian gods. Now they were being told that their God (Yahweh) was to always have precedence over all other gods. This was very risky. What if the Hebrews did this and the other gods didn't like it and got even?

There is actually a better translation of the Hebrew wording of the first commandment. It says, "You shall have no other gods besides me." In other words, Yahweh was not to be their top god. He was to be their only God.

We live in a world of many competing gods. Our gods have names like Luck, Money, Science, Counseling, Education, Happiness and Things. We often believe that they can do for us what we need done—cure our cancer, solve our problems, meet our needs and get us what we want in life. The Lord of heaven and earth says "no". He and he alone is the only true God and we are to swear exclusive allegiance to him and him only.

Commandment #2 is to have no idols. Idols may not seem relevant to those of us in America today. We do not typically have pagan temples like those that were common long ago. In fact, some Christian traditions don't even consider this to be the second commandment. If you grew up in the Lutheran or Catholic traditions you were taught that this is part of the first commandment. But there is a very practical problem with that—you end up with only nine commandments. It just doesn't have the same ring to

it as ten. So, Lutherans and Catholics split the last commandment into two parts saying that #9 is "Don't covet your neighbor's house" and #10 becomes "Don't covet your neighbor's wife." But we'll stick with the Jewish understanding which is to make "no idols" #2 and "don't covet anything" number 10.

The command to avoid idols is different from the command to have no other gods. Many Christians have pictures, statues and crosses that they say represent the one true God. "It is not idolatry," they say. "It is just a symbol." But the issue here is who decides how God is to be represented?

When you receive a roll of film back from the processor and find good and bad pictures of yourself, what do you do? Many people throw away the bad pictures and keep the good ones. In other words, you decide how you want to be represented. You don't want someone else doing that for you.

It's the same with God. God doesn't want us choosing how he is to be seen. He wants to choose for himself. He has chosen not to be portrayed by human artists and sculptors. He does not want to be known for the things he has made but for who he is. God did not choose a statue or drawing or even a cross to represent him. Instead, God chose only two means: baptism and communion. So those who hear and obey what God wants do not have idols because God says in Exodus 20:4, "*You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.*"

Commandment #3 is to not use God's name in vain. We are told in Exodus 20:7. "*You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.*"

God is sensitive about how his name is used. Most of us are. We are hurt when someone gossips about us. We take legal action when someone forges our signature.

I was told that at the Minnesota State Fair they held a Charlie Brown look-alike contest and the child who won was named Leith Anderson. I read every page of the Minneapolis Star Tribune to find and discredit this rumor. I couldn't find it. I'm still traumatized. My name is my name and I don't like others using it to associate with a cartoon character!

God doesn't want us misusing his name. The first understanding of this commandment was not what we most often think of today. It was saying that when you use God's name to swear a promise (as in a court of law), always make sure you keep the promise. It

applies to baptismal vows, marriage vows, court testimony or whenever the name of God is invoked. If you invoke God's name, absolutely do whatever you promised.

The second intent has to do with profanity. Don't use God's name in a frivolous way. One of the most frequent expressions in everyday modern American conversation is "O my God!" People say this when referring to the weather, sports or just about anything that happens. It is an insult to God. We wouldn't like it if others used our names this way and God doesn't like it when we use his name this way. It is a matter of respect. His name is not to be used in vain.

Commandment #4 is "*Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.*" God created everything in the world in six days and took the seventh day off. It was his special day to stop what he was doing and celebrate what he had done. God gave that special day to us. He wants us to have one day each week when we stop our usual work and celebrate God and his blessings. The word "Sabbath" means "stop"—so take a day each week to stop.

In the United States we celebrate Labor Day. It is a national holiday. Actually the word "holiday" comes from the words "holy day". It is a day when we don't work. It is a day when we celebrate. It is a good day. It is a gift. That is exactly what is being talked about in the fourth commandment.

There are a couple of interesting notes about the fourth commandment. One is that it has been greatly misused. Some legalists have tried to turn every Sunday into the Sabbath day and have a thousand regulations about what you can't do. It becomes a day of misery rather than a day of blessing. The other interesting observation is that it is the only one of the Ten Commandments that was not affirmed by Jesus. That doesn't mean that he did not value or believe in it, but he certainly did not emphasize it as much as the others.

What does this mean for us today? That's pretty simple: Take a day off. Work six days; rest one. Enjoy it. Focus on God. Thank God for your day off. If Sunday is your Sabbath, great! If it can't be Sunday, pick a different day. But, don't work seven days a week.

This is a commandment of trust. It demonstrates powerful trust in God to help us get done what we

must in six days even if that seems humanly impossible. It demonstrates we are working for God, not for ourselves.

Commandment #5 is to "*Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.*" God tells us to show our honor and respect for him in the way we treat our parents. We are to speak kindly to our mothers and fathers. We are to obey them when we are children. We are to defer to them when we are adults. We are to provide for them when they are old or have need of support.

Frankly, not all parents deserve honor, but that is not the point. The point is that this is the way redeemed God-honoring people live. We do not treat our parents on the basis of what they have done but on the basis of what God has called us to do.

Commandment #6 is found in Exodus 29:13 and says, "*You shall not murder.*" When Moses heard this command from God his mind must have rushed back to a day 40 years earlier when he had murdered an Egyptian slave master. Moses was a murderer.

Humans are created in God's image. Redeemed people honor that image. We do not destroy it. We do everything we can to protect and preserve the life God gives. We do not make excuses about circumstances and therefore try to justify murderous behavior. We are for life!

Commandment #7: "*You shall not commit adultery.*" Surprisingly, this commandment is not most about sex. It is most about marriage and keeping a lifelong exclusive relationship. God invented marriage. God blessed marriage. God believes us when we say we are committing to each other "for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; so long as we both shall live, so help us God."

Adultery is an offense against God even more than it is an offensive against a husband or wife. It is breaking what God loves and holds special. It is saying that lust is more important than love. Adultery is one of the most devastating and hurtful sins on earth.

We have ten thousand excuses for adultery. We justify it ourselves with unbiblical divorce, with unbiblical views about homosexuality, with insistence that personal happiness is the greatest good in life. But those who have been redeemed from the

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slavery of sin are to honor the marriage commitment and, in the words of the New Testament, *“to keep the marriage bed pure.”* That means no adultery!

Commandment #8 is *“You shall not steal.”* What’s behind all this is that everything belongs to God and God entrusts us with his possessions. If we steal something that God has entrusted to someone else we are playing God. Stealing is taking something that doesn’t belong to us and that God has chosen to be cared for by some other person. In America larceny-theft is one of the top crimes. It is seeing something we want and just taking it.

This commandment has a myriad of different applications. It can be robbing a bank or writing a bad check. It can be copyright infringement, especially with music. It can be tax-evasion or shoplifting. It can be leaving work early. There are many different ways to take something that we shouldn’t have.

There’s a story about a father who disciplined his son for stealing pencils at school. He said, “I just don’t know what is wrong with you. Don’t I bring home enough pencils for you from work?” Like father, like son!

Commandment #9 is found in Exodus 20:16. It is: *“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.”* God calls his followers to be like him. We are to love the truth, be committed to the truth and speak the truth. This is a call to avoid deception. It is possible to tell the truth technically but to intend to deceive. And, it is possible to give faulty information that we thought was correct but we were not intentionally trying to deceive someone else. The question is whether or not we want to deceive. As redeemed people we want to tell the truth about and to our neighbors.

The tenth and last commandment is *“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife . . . or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”*

Coveting is an inside sin. Usually it is known only to God and to ourselves. It is a deep internal desire to have what belongs to someone else. But what’s behind it is really the issue of contentment. It assumes that we will be happy if we get what another person has. The truth is that we will be happy only when we become content with what we have. Contentment comes from God and our perspective, not from getting what belongs to others.

The Ten Commandments: Does anyone really live this way today? Ascension Franco Gonzales is an illegal immigrant into the United States. He lives in Los Angeles where he earns \$1300 a month as a dishwasher. Of that \$1300, every month he sends \$800 back to his parents in Mexico with the hope that they can build a concrete block house. It has been partially built.

One evening he saw bags of money fall from an armored truck. He ran to the bags and, while not opening them, he could see packs of \$20 bills inside the bags. He didn’t know at the time that what was in those bags was a total of \$203,000 in cash. He took it home and agonized about what to do. Finally he called the authorities and turned over the entire \$203,000 to the police, knowing that by doing this he risked being deported as a result. He said he couldn’t keep it; it wouldn’t be right. He said he was raised by his parents to be a good Catholic and he could not steal what belonged to someone else.

We are Christians. We are redeemed people. We are blessed by God. We want to live God’s great way. It is the evidence that we have been set free. Jesus said in John 14:15, *“If you love me, you will obey what I command.”*

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