

ASPECTS OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

For many years after creation God's people lived without written Law from God. People knew God's requirements by natural knowledge. To some extent human reason understands God's Law naturally and agrees with God's verdict on sin. Many pagan thinking people have concluded that reciprocity is an important principle of human conduct. If you do not want people to steal your property, you should not steal theirs, and so on.

Though most of the Ten Commandments are moral Law, it was a special edition of the Law for the Israelites. It was introduced by God's claim on them after bringing them out of Egypt. The commandment to honour parents promised them long life in the land of Canaan. Old Testament people after Sinai were forbidden to carve any likeness. When the manna was first given, shortly before the Israelites reached Sinai, some went out on the Sabbath to collect it. Sabbath rest was not something to which they were accustomed until then. Although God had sanctified the seventh day at Creation, the only command He had given Adam and Eve was not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The Sabbath no longer applies after the coming of Christ, even though the command about the Sabbath was the longest in the Ten Commandments. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, mentioned the Sabbath only once, to say that it was no longer necessary to keep it (Col 2:16-17). It was a shadow pointing forward to Christ. The ceremonial laws about sacrifices and the rest were really Gospel shadows of the Saviour.

The Ten Commandments do not cover only external deeds and what seems reasonable. They inform us that God demands total, perfect, and pure obedience. In the state, a motorist who has been pulled over by the police can be prosecuted for what he has done, and if he uses abusive words to the officer, he can be charged for them as well. However, thoughts are beyond the policeman's power to do anything about. God's command not to covet includes people's thoughts and desires right across the other commandments. All of them also require true fear and love of God.

The Law shows which acts, words, thoughts, and desires are pleasing to God. The commandments also condemn sin, accuse and terrify consciences, and warn about the wrath of God. So the Law is an instrument of death and hell, and drives people who are proud of their performance to despair. However, the Gospel works faith in Jesus Christ's fulfilment of the Law and in His suffering and death. His passive obedience had paid the cost of God's forgiveness for sin in people whom the Law has driven to despair of any hope of satisfying God by their own performance under the Law.

People are mistaken if they think that they can keep them well enough to satisfy God. One of the most serious results of original sin is that people imagine that keeping the commandments is a way of achieving God's verdict of justification. Even when they acknowledge that they have nothing to pay to God spiritually, they think that they can pay Him ten million dollars. The Commandments show people that they are sinners, and that God will condemn and punish those who transgress the Law by acts, words, thoughts, and desires. Even after people have been born again by the Spirit of God, they cannot keep the Ten Commandments perfectly in this life.

One of the most important aspects of the right understanding of the Scriptures is the distinction between the Law and the Gospel. All of Scripture is rightly divided into these two parts. People who confuse God's commands with His promises of grace are bound to be uncertain about their salvation. The Gospel tells people about the righteousness of faith, which is different from the righteousness of the Law. The righteousness of faith rests on Jesus Christ's keeping of the Law in the stead of sinful people. His obedience to the Law in every detail is reckoned to sinners through faith.

To some extent God's Commandments restrain sin in the world. The Law is a disciplinarian. However, the Law also makes people worse. They resent God for making demands that they know that they cannot keep well enough to satisfy Him. When the Law enters, it increases sin. In some it produces despair. It also produces hypocrites, like the Pharisee who boasted before God in prayer that He was doing even better than God required, and who regarded his own performance highly in comparison with others, particularly in comparison with the tax-collector.

For Christians the most important thing is that the Law of God and their keeping of it have been removed as a principle of forgiveness and salvation. The only remaining principle of life and salvation is God's grace in Christ, which is received through faith in Him. This cannot be stressed strongly enough. Paul wrote: "They are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God has publicly displayed Him as the atonement cover through faith in His blood, to show His righteousness, because the sins that had been committed in the past He had let go unpunished, in His patience. God has done this to show His righteousness at the present time, that He may be righteous, and the One who declares righteous the person who believes in Jesus.

Therefore where is boasting? It has been excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No, rather, it is excluded on the principle of faith! For we conclude that a person is justified by faith, apart from the works of the Law” (Rm 3:24-28).

Because we still have our sinful natures, we need the Law of God to incite us to walk by the Spirit. We continue to need the instruction of the Commandments of God to prevent us from thinking that we can serve God by our self-chosen actions, and to remind us to live in continual repentance for our continuing sin. The greatest trap for people is to fall back on their own holiness and piety. Jesus’ most caustic words were addressed to the Pharisees, who thought that they were righteous and despised others.

Christians should delight in the Law of God, even though their sinful natures continue to do what they do not want to do and omit what they know they should do. Those who are in Christ Jesus are free from the condemnation of the Law. They can take delight in doing God’s will, not for the sake of salvation, but as grateful responses to their Saviour. Paul wrote: “Therefore do we make the Law invalid through faith? Certainly not! Rather, we establish the Law” (Rm 3:31).

The principle that Christians are no longer under the Law but under grace, and that they are free from the Law must be rightly understood. Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes. For those who in faith receive God’s forgiveness and reconciliation there is the continuing function of the Law to show what kind of responses in them are God-pleasing.

The basic Christian responses to the Ten Commandments are frank confession of sin and repentance. The Gospel works in them trust in such words of St Paul as: “When the time had fully come, God sent out His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order to redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive adoption as His sons” (Gal 4:4-5)