

THE FIRST WORD

Exodus 20:1-2

Second Wednesday in Lent

March 9, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The Scripture reading comes from Exodus, chapter 20, verses 1 and 2. This occurs very shortly after God led the people of Israel through the Red Sea to escape from Egypt. And this is the introduction to the Ten Commandments. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From Exodus 20, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ And God spoke all these words, saying,

² "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

For our midweek Lenten series this year, we're going to be looking at the Ten Commandments. For the last four years, I've used these midweek services to preach through the catechism. It's an old tradition among Lutherans to do this. So four years ago we went through the Ten Commandments. The next year we went through the Apostles' Creed. The third year we went through the Lord's Prayer. And last year we went through the Sacraments. So we covered the catechism in four years. That might seem like a long time for such a small book. It's called the "Small Catechism" for a reason. But to me it actually seemed kind of rushed. There are five Wednesdays in the middle of Lent, not counting Ash Wednesday and holy week. So for the Ten Commandments, it meant we had to average two commandments a week. For this year, at least, I'm going to slow down the pace. We're going back to the beginning of the catechism and the Ten Commandments. I don't know if we'll go all the way through the catechism again at this slower pace, but for at least this year we'll try this. Instead of making the commandments fit into our schedule, we'll do one commandment per week. So that means we won't actually finish the Ten Commandments this year.

You might be wondering, *Why study the Ten Commandments?* They're not that long. In Exodus 20, it's only seventeen verses. That's about the length of a text for one sermon, not ten. And the commandments aren't complicated either. They simply and plainly tell us what we should do and what we should not do. There's nothing overly complicated about them. So it might seem that all you really need to do is memorize the Ten Commandments and then obey them. It's not complicated. And if that works for you, great. But I'm going to bet that it doesn't. That should be enough for us. We should be able to just look at the commandments, see what God requires of us, and then live accordingly. But we don't.

And there are at least two reasons for this. The first and biggest reason is our sinful nature. Sometimes we also call it the "sinful flesh," "the old Adam," or "the old man." Whenever you hear those different terms, we're talking about the same thing. It is our old, sinful nature that we inherited from Adam. It means we are naturally disposed to rebel against God. For as long as we live in this corrupted state, we have an inborn disposition to disobey the commandments. And

THE FIRST WORD (Exodus 20:1-2)

there is nothing to be done about the sinful nature except to crucify it (Gal. 5:24). You will not transform your sinful nature. You will not turn it around. You will not set it right. It cannot be done. The only thing to do with the sinful flesh is to crucify it. And, indeed, it has been crucified with Jesus Christ. That's what Baptism does (Rom. 6:6; Col. 2:11-12). It puts to death the old, sinful nature by joining us to Christ, and it raises the new man to life. The struggle we still have is that the old, sinful nature still clings to us. It has been drowned in Baptism, but, as someone once said, "The old Adam is a good swimmer." It keeps coming back. So our Christian life is a constant echo of our Baptisms. By daily sorrow and repentance, we return to the covenant God made with us in Baptism. In this way, the sinful nature is crucified or drowned over and over again, and the new man continually comes forth and rises to live before God in righteousness and holiness forever. This is the daily killing of the old, sinful flesh. And this is the work of the Law. The commandments convict and crucify the old, sinful nature, and the Gospel gives life to the new man. So that's part of why we study these commandments, to put to death the sinful nature. And the sinful nature is the biggest reason we fail to live according to the Ten Commandments

Another part of our problem is ignorance. And this is certainly related to the problem of the sinful nature, but I want to give a little extra attention to it. We fail to live according to God's commandments, because we are ignorant of them. And I don't necessarily mean that we can't list the Ten Commandments. Maybe you can. Maybe you can't. I don't know. Quiz yourself on this. Maybe as you're in the car on the way home, or when you crawl into bed and you're waiting to fall asleep, see if you can list the Ten Commandments. If you can list them, good job. Then try to do it in a random order. Ask yourself, "What's the Seventh Commandment? What's the Fourth Commandment? What's the Ninth Commandment?" and so on. Every Christian over the age of, maybe five years old, should at least be able to recite the Ten Commandments. I have no idea how many Christians actually can. I'm afraid the actual number might disturb us. But I get the impression that even if someone can't list them all, they still have some general idea of at least some of them. I think it would be pretty common for someone to say, "Well, I can't list them all, but I know there's one about not worshipping other gods. And you're not supposed to have sex before marriage. Don't kill people. Don't steal. Don't lie. And don't cuss." That's six out of ten, sort of.

But let's assume that Christians do know the Ten Commandments. We still might be ignorant. One of my goals for this series is that we would not merely know what the commandments are, but also what the point of them is. God commanded certain things of us. And it's easy enough to just memorize the top ten. But why did God command these things? What's the reason?

It makes a big difference, at least for me, to understand why something is commanded. Obeying commandments is hard enough in the first place, but it's even harder when you don't understand the reason for the commandment. It's like when a parent commands their child to do something, and the child says, "Why?" Sometimes I'm too impatient as a parent, or I don't know how to explain it, or I'm not even sure I had a good reason for giving the command in the first place. So I might say, "Because I said so." Have you ever said that to your kids? Or have you ever heard those words from your parents? Yeah. I think every parent says that at some point. And a parent has every right to say that, and it should be obeyed. That should be a good enough reason for a child. But how well does that work? In my experience, not very well.

And our attitude doesn't get better when we become adults. If anything, it gets worse. Have you ever had a job where it feels like your boss is just giving you busy work? I used to work part-time for a farmer. And he was a great guy to work for. Most of the time it was quite fun. But

THE FIRST WORD (Exodus 20:1-2)

I didn't like everything he told me to do. If I had a break down in the field, or if I had to wait for him to bring more seed, he would say, "While you're waiting, make sure you grease everything real good." I didn't like that. Laying on my back in a field under an implement with a hand-powered grease gun is not very enjoyable. I still did it, but since I didn't want to do it, I didn't see the importance of it. It kind of felt like busy work. Now I suppose it did help the machine, and if nothing else, it gave me incentive to avoid breakdowns, but I didn't understand it, so I didn't like it.

And we can take this attitude with God's commandments, too. Actually, we probably do this more with God's commandments than anyone else's. With our parents, employers, teachers, and other superiors, these authorities are visible to us, and they deal with our disobedience swiftly. But God does not appear close to us, even though he is, and he often delays punishment. So we easily disregard his commands. If a certain commandment doesn't make sense to us, we might dismiss it without understanding the consequences.

Here's what I mean: As a child, you might memorize the Sixth Commandment, "You shall not commit adultery." But then puberty happens, and you think, *This doesn't really make sense. It sounds like fun, and I can be careful.* If we don't understand why God says, "You shall not commit adultery," we might excuse ourselves from it, or we rationalize it by saying that's an old, repressive, and judgmental kind of morality.

But here's the thing about the commandments: God gives us commandments for our good. They protect us from harm, and they protect the gifts that he has given to us. So with the Sixth Commandment, when God says, "You shall not commit adultery," it's not because sex is bad. Quite the opposite. Sex is good. God instituted marriage and commanded sex before the fall into sin (Gen. 1:28; 2:24). It was God's idea, and it was a pretty good one. So the Sixth Commandment does not deprive us of this good thing. Rather, it sets appropriate barriers so that this good thing can be protected. And so it protects us from the painful and negative natural consequences on the other side of this barrier. And, of course, it also protects the children who naturally result from this thing that God created. At first the commandment might seem repressive and restrictive. And that is certainly the way the world looks at Christians today, but at the same time, they can't seem to figure out all the pain and brokenness that has resulted from disregarding the Sixth Commandment. God has given us this commandment, and every other commandment, for our good. So when we learn the reasons for the commandments, and when recognize the good things that God is protecting, we can actually delight in God's Law.

And God's Law is delightful. This truth is repeated several times in the Psalms (1:2; 40:8; 119:70, 77, 92, 174). There is joy in living by God's commands. I'm not saying it's easy. You know that it's not. But every commandment protects some gift that God has given to us. That's something we'll focus on in this series. With every commandment, we will identify a gift, or gifts, from God that are protected by the commandments. And so I hope we will all see that the commandments are not oppressive. They do not suck the joy out of life. And they're not a test either. Rather, they protect the joyful gifts God has given us, and we can delight in his commandments.

We have a fence around our back yard. It provides a safe a fun place for our kids to play. It's obviously restrictive; it keeps our children in and other people out. But without the fence, our backyard would be mostly unusable, especially for children. There is also a gate in this fence. We don't want our children to open the gate. So when the oldest one figured out how to use the handle, we put a little carabiner clip in the latch to lock it. And we made a rule that he could only play in the backyard when the gate was locked. And it was interesting that this little carabiner

THE FIRST WORD (Exodus 20:1-2)

clip became delightful to him. Instead of seeing it as restrictive, he actually saw it as permissive. Rather than restricting him to the backyard, it allowed him to be in the backyard. So instead of asking, “Can I go play in the backyard?” he would ask, “Can you lock the gate so I can play in the backyard?” And when he figured out how to open the clip, which didn’t take long, he would go and lock it himself. We would walk out in the backyard, and he would immediately run to the gate, lock it, and say, “Now I can play!” The restriction was delightful to him, because it gave him freedom to enjoy all the good things inside the fence, and he had confidence that nothing inside the fence would hurt him.

We should all look at God’s commandments that way. By restricting everything that is outside of God’s good and gracious will, the commandments give us freedom and safety to enjoy the things in his good and gracious will. So I hope we can see the Ten Commandments in a new light. They should still convict you of your sin. And they should drive you to confess that sin and seek Christ’s forgiveness. And at the same time, we can delight in them and see all of this, including the painful conviction, as God’s gracious gift to us.

The commandments are rooted in the grace of God. So far I’ve called them the Ten Commandments, and I’ll keep doing that, because that’s just the way we commonly refer to them, but technically there are only nine commandments. You may have noticed that the Ninth and Tenth Commandments are very similar. They probably belong together as one commandment, but we divide them up in order to get to the number ten. Other Christians divide the First Commandment into two commandments and slide the rest of them down. Again, they do this in order to arrive at the number ten. And we do have to get to the number ten, because later in Exodus and Deuteronomy, Moses refers to them as the Ten Commandments (Ex. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4), except he doesn’t actually call them the “Ten *Commandments*.” He calls them the “Ten *Words*.” So a much simpler, and a more honest way to get to ten is to take the Introduction as the First Word, and slide all the commandments down a slot. So the First Commandment is still the First Commandment, but it is also the Second Word. And the Second Commandment is the Third Word, the Third Commandment in the Fourth Word, and you get the idea. In the end, what we call the Ninth and Tenth Commandments fit nicely together as the Tenth Word.

Now there’s a point to this. It’s not just trivia. It rightly emphasizes the First Word: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex. 20:2; Deut. 5:6). We should not forget that this is the basis for the commandments. When God spoke the commandments to the people of Israel, he started by reminding them what he had done to redeem them. The Ten Words were spoken very shortly after the people of Israel crossed the Red Sea. It was at the very beginning of their forty years in the wilderness. The Exodus is the big redemption story of the Old Testament, much like the crucifixion of Jesus is the big redemption story in the New Testament. The Exodus is how the people of Israel became God’s people. He brought them out of Egypt. He delivered them out of slavery. This is how the LORD God purchased them. Another way of saying it is that he redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. That’s what the word “redeem” really means. It means to buy or purchase something. For God to redeem someone means that he purchases them, and so they become his possession. So God redeemed Israel out of slavery in Egypt. And this is the basis for his commandments. He does not say, “If you keep these commandments, then I will be your God, and you will be my people.” No. First he declares to them that he is their God, and they are his people. That’s the First Word.

THE FIRST WORD (Exodus 20:1-2)

Then he gives them nine commandments that will protect the gifts he is giving to them as their good and gracious God.

If you've never looked at the commandments this way, this is a huge paradigm shift. The commandments are not your way of pleasing God. It's not your way of becoming his child. He purchased you by the precious blood of Christ.

For the epistle reading tonight, we read from 1 Peter 1 because it compares our redemption through the blood of Christ to the Exodus. In verses 18 and 19, Peter says this, "You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot." You were ransomed. Jesus bought you. You are his. Jesus' Father has become your Father, not because of anything you have done, but only because of what Christ has done.

So often we reverse this in our minds, and it completely perverts our understanding of God, and it leaves us in despair. We think, *If I want to be a child of God, then I need to act like a child of God. I need to do enough to please him, and then he will call me his child.* That is so foolish. No one gets into a family by just acting like a member. Try this sometime. Go over to your neighbor's house and just act like you're one of their kids. Do everything the parents tell their children to do. See if that works. You know what? Actually, don't try that. They might call the cops. And it's certainly not going to make you a member of their family. Acting like a child of God will not make you his child. That's not how it works. God has made you his child through the precious blood of Christ. Jesus redeemed you. You are his.

Much like how the LORD redeemed Israel from Egypt, this same Lord, Jesus Christ, has redeemed us from our slavery to sin, death, and the devil. We belong to him. We are his. And this gives us a completely new way of receiving his commandments. They are not burdensome anymore, because our obedience to them is not what makes us God's children. Instead, we can receive them as gracious commandments that protect all of the good gifts God gives to us. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.