

March 7, 2021

Exodus 20:1-17

“The Goodness of the Law”

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The apostle Paul writes in Romans 13:10, "... love is the fulfilling of the law." We see **The Goodness of the Law** right from the very beginning in the garden. God made us to have a relationship of love with him and one another. He plants trees in the garden. Two of them are of great significance: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In his first sermon, the Lord God says, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die (Gen. 2:16-17)."

The Lord God, who loved humanity from the start, places two trees in the garden that all may show their understanding and love for the Lord God and one another. They have been planted for humanity to worship the Lord God. And the heart of worship is to receive love and every good gift while refusing all that would be contrary to that love and the gifts given. Having been so loved by the Lord God they are to love him and truly love one another. The Lord God has given himself and will not force our first parents into a relationship. Instead, they may receive the love given by refraining from one tree and ultimately eating from the one that will translate them into imperishable and immortal life in the unveiled face of God.

We feel the weight of our first parent's bad decision. Their decision is ours. And we are suffering as they had to suffer. But just because humanity has changed from very good to very bad does not mean that the law ceases to be good. The law is still about love and a right relationship with the Lord God and one another. No matter how many commandments have sprung from the garden and are connected to the message about trees we are to understand that each of them are about love and real relationship.

All the commandments fall into two categories. They are about our relationship with God and one another. So why is it that when we are faced with the commandments we do not feel loved? It is because we have become curved in toward ourselves. True love is fixed on another. The commandments also require intense labor for others, while breaking the commandments is a lot less work and a very fast track to self satisfaction. Let us also realize that this fast track to self satisfaction leads us to be alone and to face death - separation from the Lord God and one another.

When one is motivated by self-love and is faced with **The Goodness of the Law** in the commandments, which are about love and relationships, such are forced to deal with the fact that they are loveless and lost. This is the law functioning as a mirror or a spiritual autopsy. It shows that we are spiritually dead and in need of rebirth. No one likes discovering that despite feeling quite alive in sin they are, in fact, sadly dead. But the law is necessary and must do this in order that we might be emptied of ourselves and every notion that dupes us into believing that we can make our own heaven and have it too. The law of God primarily now serves to prepare us for the good news that Jesus has fulfilled the law for us in his life, and has paid the price for our failure to fulfill the law through his sufferings and death. John says it in these familiar words (1 Jn. 4:8-11): "Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

To this point, we have seen that the law is a necessary word to empty us of ourselves that we may be filled with the love of Jesus. Love is the fulfillment of the law and because Jesus has fulfilled the law for us in his life, and sufferings and death on the cross, he himself is love so that whoever believes in him is not only forgiven but loves as they have been loved. This brings us now to our Old Testament lesson and another use of the law.

In our lesson, the people of Israel are receiving the commandments of God. Now, it is absolutely critical for one to know and understand that the commandments were given at Sinai after the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. The context is given in our lesson when it says in Exodus 20:1-2: “And God spoke all these words, saying, ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.’” It is crucial to realize that, after these words are said, the commandments are then given. In short, the people were emptied of themselves in their horrific slavery in Egypt, which was a picture of slavery to sin and death and hell. They were set free and exited Egypt by the Passover lamb which pointed to Jesus the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Deliverance is from the promised Savior.

With this in mind, we begin to understand that the commandments were not given to the people for them to deliver themselves, for they had already been delivered by the Lord God. Since that is the case, why are the commandments given? The commandments summarize and make it crystal clear as to who the people are before the Lord God and one another. The people are recipients of God’s love, set apart to be his forever companions, and are bound to one another by faith as a forever family.

So, the commandments were given within the context of the peace that had already been given through the Passover lamb. This peace in the forgiveness of sins and escape from death and hell was what the people had received and were supposed to be celebrating at Sinai. In the commandments there are relationship boundaries that are being marked for protective purposes so that the salvation of the Lord God may not be lost. The commandments do not preserve faith, but are given so that there may be no question as to what destroys faith. Also, if and when faith is destroyed among the people, these same commandments will serve to once again empty those who have fallen away so that they may be restored in the sacrificial lamb who points always to the Savior.

For us Christians, the law no longer condemns, for Christ has come to fulfill the law. He has done everything right for us and has taken the punishment that we deserve on the cross. Everything is finished for us so that, believing in him, we might have the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. The magnification of the commandments, that we see in Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount* to his disciples, serves as a guide for us that we may also understand who we are before the Lord God and one another. We have received the cross of Jesus and have become his holy bride having been bound together into one, even to be counted as his very body with many members that take care of one another. And because we still carry around with us the sinful flesh, and are constantly assailed by devils and this unbelieving world, we need the commandments to continually put to death the sin within and push back sin without. Also, Paul writes in Eph. 2:10, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” We Christians then speak of **The Goodness of the Law**.

However, the law is not good in the minds of those who love darkness rather than the light, because their works are evil. As Jesus says, “For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed (Jn. 3:19-20).” Unfortunately, we are living in a time when the Scripture is not popular, and so we are seeing in abundant detail how this unbelieving world hates the commandments. When hatred of the commandments increases and becomes more manifest in a society, the more it indicates how loveless that society has become, despite the ongoing justification of evil always in the name of so-called “love.” To the unbeliever, love is permissive and understood as an embracing and elevation of what is contrary to the holy commandments of God. To the Christian, love is doing what is right before the Lord God and others, and it is a giving up of the self for another.

When a society grows in its hatred of the law it becomes more dangerous for the Christian, and may even cause the Christian to stop speaking the truth. But this cannot happen. If we do not proclaim **The Goodness of the Law** and show the ugliness of fallen humanity that is even found in our own sinful nature, then we will never have the opportunity to effectively confess the wonders of the undeserved kindness of Jesus Christ and his cross and empty tomb. The forgiveness of sins and the anticipation of heaven means nothing to those who cannot see their sin and the horrific final verdict that is foreshadowed in physical death. Perhaps we can be more careful and gentle in our speaking, but we can never ever stop speaking all together. As the apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians (4:13-15):

Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, “I believed, and so I spoke,” we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott