

Sermon 57, Introduction to the Ten Commandments, Exodus 34:28

“If the law might be dismantled as to new creatures, then why doth the Spirit of God write it with such legible characters in their hearts? . . . Now that which the Spirit engraves upon the heart, would Christ come to deface and abolish?” — Thomas Manton, *Psalms 119*, vol. 1, pg. 5

Proposition: The Decalogue is God’s covenant with His people, meaning that it is the summary of what God did for you and how you ought to respond to Him.

- I. God Made a Covenant Promising Life and Salvation by a Mediator, Gen. 3:15, Gal. 3:16
- II. He Summarized that Covenant in the Decalogue, Ex. 34:28
- III. That Covenant Is Still Valid, Gal. 3:29
 - A. Same Promises, Ex. 15:17
 - B. Same Mediator, Ex. 23:20-21
 - C. Same Core Stipulations
 1. Faith in God, Gen. 16:4
 2. Obedience to God, Ex. 20
- IV. That Covenant Has a Different Administration Now
 - A. Church instead of Tabernacle
 - B. Baptism instead of Circumcision
 - C. Lord’s Day instead of Sabbath
- V. What Hasn’t Changed
 - A. The Need to Obey God
 - B. The Standard of Obedience to God: The Ten Commandments

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, do you remember last week’s sermon? “You Don’t Understand Holiness.” That was its title. And do you know what approach the Almighty took to rectify that lack of understanding of His holiness among His people? Yes, that’s right. He promptly revealed the Ten Commandments to them. These are words for a people who don’t understand holiness, who don’t know who their God is or what He requires of them. They are words that tell you what it looks like to exist for God, that tell you how to walk as someone delivered from Egypt, that tell you how to be a man or woman of God. Today we are going to look at the broader context of the Ten Commandments, and specifically at God’s statement that they are the words of His covenant, the ten words (Ex. 34:28). By God’s grace I will show you that these Ten Words are God’s covenant, meaning that they tell you what God has done for you and how you ought to respond to Him.

I. God Made a Covenant Promising Life and Salvation by a Mediator, Gen. 3:15, Gal. 3:16

The first point I want you to see is that God made a covenant to save His people. In the beginning, or rather, shortly after the beginning, Adam and Eve fell into sin in a major way. They ate the fruit God had told them not to eat, and they knew that they were naked and going to die. But God, speaking to the Serpent, indicated that He was going to intervene and save His human creatures. He told the serpent that He would put enmity between the Serpent and the Woman, and the Serpent's Seed and the Woman's Seed.

Now, God did not say that directly to Adam and Eve. He did not say, "Eve, you will have a seed who will crush the Serpent's head." Rather, the Almighty let our first parents overhear His words to the snake who was an archangel — or, really, an archfiend. In one sense, they were words that the archangel Lucifer could understand in a way that Adam and Eve could not begin to understand on that dark day in Eden, the last day of perfection in God's new world. But nonetheless, He let our parents overhear His promise, and they could know that God was threatening the Serpent and putting him on notice that his gruesome comeuppance was coming soon.

Fast forward to Galatians 3, where Paul is reviewing the history of the covenant. He reminds the Galatians that the promises — the OT promises of life, salvation, dwelling in the house of the LORD forever — were made to Abraham and to his seed. Now, I want to ask you the question: Is the seed of Abraham different than the seed of the woman? Is the promise of God getting more complicated, with one promise to the woman's seed and another to Abraham's seed? Abraham's seed received the promise that in Him all the families of the earth would be blessed. The woman's seed (not present in the garden — at least, His presence is not mentioned in the text) received the promise that He would crush the Serpent's head.

Are these two different promises to two different seeds? The question is borderline absurd. No! The seed of the woman and the seed of Abraham are the same seed. They are both Jesus Christ, born of a woman, the son of David, the son of Abraham. He blessed all the families of the earth by crushing Satan's head at the cross. The promise of Gen. 3:15 was made to Him. It was expressed to Satan as a threat. But it was expressed to the Son of God as a promise.

In other words, this promise of God to His Son that His Son would crush Satan and bless all the families of the earth is not an Old Testament promise, or a promise just for the Jews. It is a promise for Christians too; indeed, it is explicitly a promise for the whole human race, for the world that Jesus came to save, for all the families of the earth.

II. He Summarized that Covenant in the Decalogue, Ex. 34:28

But God's covenant is not merely concerned with His promises. It also has stipulations for us, for those with whom He enters into covenant. This is highlighted by the statement later in Exodus that Moses "wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Words" (Exo 34:28). In what sense were these "the words of the covenant"? After all, a covenant is a relationship. A covenant is not a statement, written or verbal. But it does involve words, as do pretty much all human relationships. We talk to animals. We even talk to our computers and cars. That's because we are

spoken creatures, and as soon as God created us He spoke to us. We are made to hear, and to talk. And so, when God enters into a covenant, promising to His Son that His Son will come and save us, that covenant relationship is defined and structured by words — specifically, by Ten Words.

It has been the instinctual reaction of Jews and Christians throughout the centuries to recognize that there is something special about these Ten Words as they define our relationship to God. The whole Bible is from the mouth of God and is the express words of the Holy Spirit. But these words are the only portion of the text that were not given through an intermediary. These alone were written with the finger of God. They were spoken audibly to the people as well by the voice of God.

The manner of delivery alone should tell us that there is something fantastically important about these words that describe the covenant, the relationship in which God promises to crush the serpent's head and deliver the woman's seed from sin. But the explicit statement that these words are the written version of the covenant is a further clue to this same truth.

God entered a covenant to save His people by the Seed of the Woman. He gave a preview of that deliverance when He delivered Israel out of Egypt, crushing Pharaoh (who wore a snake on his head).

Now, some readers of the Bible conclude that this promise was only for Israel, and thus that the Ten Commandments were only for Israel. God's amazing promise was limited to deliverance from Pharaoh and life in the Promised Land. Brothers and sisters, that is not true. Here's where the Bible clearly says that God's promise to save by crushing the serpent's head is still valid and ongoing.

III. That Covenant Is Still Valid, Gal. 3:29

“And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:29 CSB). That is the upshot of Paul's summary of the Biblical witness in Galatians ch. 3. The covenant of grace, the promise to crush the serpent's head by means of the woman's seed and bless all the families of the earth through Abraham's seed, is still active for all who are in Christ. Indeed, we are the seed of Abraham if we belong to Jesus. That is what Paul says. If you believe in Christ today, if you belong to Him, then you are the seed of Abraham. You are not The Seed, the singular seed — but you are one of the multitudinous seed, and the promises to Christ apply to you as well. By your faithful Christian walk, you too overcome the wicked one, crushing his head and blessing all the families of the earth.

So the promise of Abraham's Seed and the Woman's Seed still stands; to be a Christian is nothing less than to be Abraham's Seed and the Woman's Seed and thus inheritor of all the promises.

A. Same Promises, Ex. 15:17

Come back with me to Exodus 15, the song of the sea. Here we see a clear statement of the goal of the Exodus. As we discussed a few months ago, the Promised Land was never the final goal. Oh no. The final goal was to arrive at the mountain of God, the sanctuary made not by human hands but by the hands of God Himself. In other words, from the beginning of God's campaign against Pharaoh in Ex. 1 the goal was to bring His people to heaven. And brothers and sisters,

that promise is the same promise for Israel of old and for us as believers today. We are headed to Heaven, the place of God's eternal presence in light and glory. And so were the children of Israel as they left Egypt through the Red Sea.

You can't tell me that there was one covenant for Israel and a different one for us, with different rules, but that the goal of both was Heaven. The ultimate promise of the covenant is "I will be their God, and they shall be my people." That promise is repeated clear through the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. Same promise. Same covenant.

B. Same Mediator, Ex. 23:20-21

Furthermore, the Sinai covenant had the same mediator as the covenant of grace — namely, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the great angel or messenger of the covenant, whom we delight in. He accompanied Israel as they went up from Sinai to the Promised Land; He is the one we know as Jesus, the Son of God. God's name is in Him. That is, He is entirely and truly God, just like the Father and the Spirit. And He was active at Sinai and in the giving of the law.

C. Same Core Stipulations

Finally, the covenant God made with Israel had the same two core stipulations as we have in our relationship with God today.

1. Faith in God, Gen. 16:4

The first, rightly highlighted by the New Testament, is the demand for faith. Abraham believed God, and that was counted to him for righteousness apart from sacraments, apart from obedience, and apart from performance. He simply believed, and through that faith he received God's gift of righteousness.

2. Obedience to God, Ex. 20

But of course, though salvation is by grace through faith, and that is the basis of the Christian life for Abraham and for us, it doesn't end. That is the point of the Decalogue. Yes, God will unilaterally crush the serpent's head and bless the families of the earth through His Son. But once you've been delivered from the serpent, once you've been counted righteous by faith, now what? The New Testament says it clearly: Walk worthy of the calling with which you've been called (Eph. 4:1). If you are in relationship to God, that determines how you ought to live. In every relationship, there are certain parameters. In your walk with God, He has marked out the path of righteousness with these ten markers, these ten waypoints that describe exactly where you ought to go and where you ought not to go.

And so, since the covenant in which we are Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise is still valid because it has the same mediator and the same stipulations, we need to know and obey these commands.

IV. That Covenant Has a Different Administration Now

That said, there has been one major change. That change is not to the substance of the covenant. We vehemently reject New Covenant theology, Roman Catholic theology, and Dispensationalism, all of which assert in one way or another that God's way of dealing with His people today is substantially different from His way of dealing with His people before Jesus came. We disagree. God's way of dealing with His people is different only on the surface. In

substance, it is the same. God's way of salvation through the seed of the woman who is the seed of Abraham has not changed. I frequently tell people that I believe in and practice the Judaism of King David, with slight modifications because there is no longer a tabernacle or animal sacrifices. But that is my attempt to get at this basic Reformed contention that only the administration has changed. God's way of salvation by grace through faith in Christ is no different for me than it was for Adam, Moses, Abraham, and Solomon.

Now, a few external rites and customs have changed. The most important are these three:

A. Church instead of Tabernacle

First, the Lord's house, the church, is the new location of God's dwelling with His people. The substance of that dwelling is the same, but the location has changed a little. He now lives with His people gathered to worship Him, instead of permanently residing in a tent or building to which only the priests have access. The church does what the tabernacle did; it is God's place of residence on earth. But obviously, on the surface it is different from the tabernacle. It is not a portable tent with an altar and the ark of the covenant. It is a gathering of God's people for worship.

B. Baptism instead of Circumcision

The rite of entry to the covenant has changed too. Instead of circumcision, which by drawing attention to the male organ of generation focused attention on the coming Seed, we now undergo baptism, which highlights the cleansing that we have in Christ. Circumcision looks to the coming seed; baptism looks to the washing of regeneration we have in Him.

C. Lord's Day instead of Sabbath

The final major change is in the day of worship. The OT had a "Pause Day," my literal translation of "Sabbath." Sometimes God tells us to just stop. Just stop! Take a day off each week to spend time with Him. That day changed from the 7th to the 1st day at the Resurrection, thus prompting the NT to call it "the day particularly belonging to the LORD" (Rev. 1:10).

Again, this is not a change of substance, just a change of administration. Christ is the substance of what the Bible calls the "Old Covenant," and He is the substance of the New Covenant as well. In both administrations, the goal is to know Him as the one who crushes the serpent's head and delivers His people.

V. What Hasn't Changed

But though those three minor activities have changed, what hasn't changed is that, as the seed of the woman and the seed of Abraham, we need to live by the family rules.

A. The Need to Obey God

I have a whole book about why the Ten Commandments are not God's standard for us anymore. The book makes me mad, and I want to write to its (Baptist) author and tell him that he is a doofus who has no business teaching theology to anything smarter than a stuffed bunny. But here's the thing, the thought experiment he refuses to perform.

Imagine that with the change of administration God now tells you that it's good to commit adultery, good to dishonor your father and mother, good to worship idols or use images of Himself, good to covet in your heart or steal your neighbor's wallet.

Yeah. You can't imagine that. That's because the law of God is written on your heart and you know, in an ineradicable way, that right and wrong are right and wrong and they will never change into their opposites. You can say all day long that the Ten Commandments were for Israel (which is true) and therefore that they are not for us (which is absurd). But you can't tell me that moral precepts identical to the Ten Commandments no longer bind us, because if you really mean that, then you are committed to the proposition that murder, adultery, and theft are positive goods — an absurd conclusion.

No matter what particular laws from the OT expired with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish way of life along with it in AD 70, the need to obey God did not and could not expire. It would be logically impossible for God to say "Hate me with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength," because if we obeyed that command it would be a sign of our love and if we disobeyed it then we would be loving Him, and loving Him means keeping His commands. In other words, it would be self-contradictory for Him to stop requiring obedience.

B. The Standard of Obedience to God: The Ten Commandments

Now, as we'll see in weeks to come, lots of sincere Christians think that, materially speaking, all the commandments still apply except the ones against images and for the Sabbath. They would say that this isn't because these precepts are in the Ten Commandments, but because they are the law of nature, or written in the New Testament, or something like that. But brothers and sisters, all Christians agree that at least 8 out of 10 are still substantially binding. That's something. What's more, as we will see, the character of God has not changed and the covenant of God has not substantially changed. These laws sum up His character, and tell us how to be like Him. That's unquestionably true for 8 commandments, and, as we will see in due time, there are good reasons to believe that it is true for all 10 of them.

So the Seed of the Woman has crushed the serpent's head, and now He invites us to be like Him in holiness and in joy. You didn't understand holiness, as we saw in last week's sermon — so here is a primer, ten little words to memorize and act upon. Do this, and you will know what holiness is. You will be like God. You will be a blessing to your neighbor and a lover of your God. Do it by hearing and keeping the Ten Words of His covenant. Amen.