

EXODUS

FREED TO FOLLOW GOD

tnt women — winter 2022
trinity baptist church

TNT
Exodus - Freed to Follow God
Winter 2022
6:30 p.m.

January 25	Session 8
February 1	Session 9
February 8	Session 10
February 15	Session 11
February 22	Fellowship Night
March 1	Session 12
March 8	Session 13

BAPTISTWAY PRESS® Adult Online Bible Commentary

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Studies in Exodus: Freed to Follow God

Lesson Eight

Treat God Like This

Focal Text

Exodus 20:1-11

Background

Exodus 20:1-11

Main Idea

Give God your complete loyalty and worship.

Question to Explore

What place does God have in a life like yours?

Quick Read

The Ten Commandments show us how to live to God's highest glory and our greatest good.

Commentary

Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? was the most popular show on television a few years back, with as many as 33.6 million viewers. It looks like a simple game, but I discovered personally that if you don't play by the rules, you cannot win. At the game's peak of popularity, its producers advertised a phone number that viewers could call if they wanted to qualify as a contestant. Out of curiosity, I called the number one night. I knew the answer to the question that the recording asked. But I got flustered and didn't push the buttons on the phone in the right order. I broke the rules. So, sadly, I couldn't play.

When did you last play a game? Chess, cards, golf, basketball at youth camp (a big mistake I made this summer)—they're all the same in one respect: every game requires rules. The rules do not exist to frustrate the players but to enable the game. Those who make and enforce the rules are not trying to hurt the participants but to help them.

In the same way, the Ten Commandments are “rules of the game.” These ten principles tell us how life works and how to live if we want to live well. They are guideposts along

the road, designed to keep us out of the ditch. They are road signs pointing the way home. They speak to life's most crucial subjects—God, ambitions, religion, stress, parents, enemies, sex, possessions, lies, and lust.

This week we'll consider the first four commandments as we learn to relate to God. Next week we'll explore the last six commandments as we learn to relate to one another and to ourselves. We'll look at the vertical this week and the horizontal the next. (Note: today's commentary will include more material than a single Sunday school lesson could use. My purpose is to give you resources as you follow the guidance of the Spirit in choosing those materials that will most help your class.)

Join Moses on the mountain

As we learned last week, the precise location of the mountain where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments remains open to question. A mountain known as Jebel Musa is the place preferred by most scholars. It rises to an elevation of more than 7,000 feet and forms part of a sandy plateau roughly two miles long and a half-mile wide. There is more than enough room for two million people to camp there. It is a huge granite peak, altar-shaped and awesome.

On this mountain or one like it, God inscribed two tablets. He wrote on both sides of each (Exodus 32:15).

Moses shattered these tablets in rage when he descended from the mountain and confronted the idolatry of the people (Exod. 32:19). God then made them again. Moses eventually laid them in the ark of the covenant (25:16). The ark of the covenant was the sacred box carried before the people for centuries and eventually placed in Solomon's temple. When the Babylonians destroyed the temple in 598 BC, they likely took the ark and the commandments it held. Many historians speculate that it is buried somewhere in modern-day Iraq, while some believe that Jeremiah took it to Egypt to prevent theft by the Babylonians and still others believe it is buried somewhere on the temple mount.

While the ark is lost to us, the words it contained are not. Imagine it: an obscure tribe of Egyptian slaves plunges into the desert to hide from pursuit and emerges with a code of ten laws that are still authoritative today, thirty-four or so centuries later. A depiction of Moses and these Ten Commandments adorns the courtroom where the Justices of the Supreme Court meet, deliberate, and lead our nation's legal system. These ten principles are still the foundation stones of moral and legal systems the world over.

We don't need to find Mount Sinai to live by the words God recorded there. As you study this week's text and prepare to teach its truth, you join Moses on the mountain of God. And you continue Moses' crucial work of giving the word of God to God's people.

Who comes first?

Our text begins, “And God spoke all these words” (20:1).¹ What follows is not based on human rules or principles, laws to be changed by the voters or the legislators they elect. The Author of these commandments is “the Lord your God” (20:2). He is “the Lord,” the Hebrew word *YHWH*—the holiest name of God, meaning *the One who is, who was, and who ever shall be*.

Too, the Lord is “God,” the Hebrew word *Elohim*—the typical name for the Creator God of the universe. Note that God is “the Lord *your* God” (italics for emphasis)—this Deity is personal. No Buddhist would say, *your Buddha*, or a Muslim, *your Allah*. But we can know this God personally, as you might know your wife or your husband or your children. He is the holy Creator of the universe and all time, who is yet our personal God.

What does God want of us? Here is God’s first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me” (20:3). It is categorically impossible to overstate the significance of this statement of monotheism and worship. Remember that the Hebrews had just come from Egypt, where the people worshiped Ra, Phthah, Osiris, Isis, Horus, the animals, and the pharaohs. The Hebrews were going into polytheistic Canaan, the land of Baal, Ashtoreth, Asherah, Molech, and Dagon.

The Hebrews’ own ancestors had made the Tower of Babel, to make themselves God. Joshua had warned them, “Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods” (Joshua 24:2). This would be the current generation’s tendency as well. In fact, they would make and worship the golden calf even as *YHWH* was giving this command to Moses on the mountain above.

So God said, “Have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3). “Before me” means *against my face*, and requires absolute and unconditional allegiance to God and worship of God alone.

What a shocking surprise! Before this, as Joy Davidman, Bible scholar and wife of C.S. Lewis wrote,

Everyone knew that the universe was a wild and chaotic thing, a jungle of warring powers: wind against water, sun against moon, male against female, life against death. There was a god of the spring planting and another god of the harvest, a spirit who put fish into fishermen’s nets and a being who specialized in the care of women in childbirth; and at best there was an uneasy truce among all these, at worst a battle. Now along comes a fool, from an insignificant band of desert wanderers, and shouts that all these processes are one process from a single source, that the obvious many are the unthinkable One!²

And, as Davidman continues, this discoverer that God is one “shouted it so loud that it has echoed down all time.”³ This was the greatest discovery ever made.

How are you doing with this, God's command to have no God but God?

The theologian Paul Tillich spoke of "ultimate concern" as an issue at the heart of all religion.⁴ We all have something or someone of ultimate importance to our lives. How do you know what yours is? Three questions may help:

- Where and how do you spend your time? That's the real currency of our day. The average Christian spends ten minutes a day in prayer and Bible study. If I told you I loved my family, that they come first in my life, but that I spent only ten minutes a day with them, would you believe me? Does your time serve God?
- Who are you trying to impress? If you had to choose between pleasing God and impressing your friends, or your girlfriend or boyfriend, or your boss, or your employees, whom would you choose? Is it your ambition to please God?
- For what would you sacrifice? When was the last time it cost you something significant to follow Jesus? Today, I hope.

How's your soul with the first commandment today?

What comes first?

"Worship" is *putting something or someone first in your life*. The verb can take any noun as its object. We can worship something made of wood, stone, flesh, paper, or spirit. If that which is first in our lives is anything or anyone but the Lord God, by definition it is an idol. What does God say about it?

"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" (20:4). "You" applied to every one of the Hebrews and applies to every one of us. "Shall not" is a command. If you and I find that we have an idol in our lives, we *must* get rid of it, right now.

"Make for yourself" reveals a basic principle for life: *if you can make it, don't worship it*. If you can buy it, sell it, or destroy it, don't worship it. I would rephrase this statement for our culture: "You shall not make *of* yourself" an idol. Anything we make *for* ourselves or *of* ourselves must not have first place in our lives, or it becomes an idol.

The ancient Canaanites made their idols of wood, sometimes of stone, often covered with some kind of precious metal. They made them in all sorts of forms, which is why the second commandment prohibits forms from the sky, the earth, or the seas—everything.

Such idolatry was a huge problem in the ancient world. The Egyptians worshiped idols, as did the Canaanites and the Jews' own ancestors. The ancient Greeks, the most brilliant civilization of all time, also worshiped gods such as Athena and Zeus—so many, in fact, that Paul commented on the number of idols he found in Athens (Acts 17:22-23). Idolatry was such a problem that the Hebrew Scriptures say more about this commandment than any of the other nine.

Why was idolatry so common? Because every human being is created with a need to worship God. We each have a “God-shaped emptiness” inside us. As Augustine confessed to God, “You made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”⁵

But it’s hard to worship something we cannot see. So the ancients would make physical images for spiritual gods, seeking to portray divine characteristics such as power, fertility, or glory. In time the means became the ends, and they began worshiping the idols themselves.

This God cannot allow, for God is a “jealous” God (Exod. 20:5a). The word is better translated *zealous* and points to God’s desire for an exclusive relationship with us. Just as no husband who truly loves his wife could wish to share her with another man, so God will not share us with another god. The term also shows that God truly cares for us, for we cannot be “jealous” or *zealous* about someone unless they matter to us.

Is the second commandment law or grace?

God says that he punishes “the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me” (20:5b). This is simply a Hebrew idiom, not a mathematical statement. The Bible teaches repeatedly that we must pay for our own sins, not those of others (Deuteronomy 24:16; Jeremiah 31:29,30; Ezekiel 18:1-4).

God is saying that our present-day idolatry has consequences for those who come after us, for they will likely follow in our footsteps. If I worship money, my children probably will, too. If I love Jesus, my family probably will as well.

This is why God says he shows “love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exod. 20:6). “Love” is the Hebrew word *hesed*, like *agape* love in the Greek—unconditional, unbreakable. God is not saying that we *earn* his love when we worship God alone. He is saying that we put ourselves in position to *receive* this love by his grace. Then we respond by keeping his commandments. Jesus said, “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love” (John 15:10). His disciple John said, “We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands” (1 John 2:3).

We can be idolatrous as easily as the ancient Jews or Canaanites, if anyone or anything becomes more important to us than our Lord. Consider again our three questions related to the First Commandment: *Where do you spend your time? Whom are you seeking to impress? For what would you sacrifice?* Your answer is your *ultimate concern*. Any answer that comes before your Lord is your idol. Do you have business with the Father on this issue?

Whose name do you honor?

The third commandment states, “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name” (Exod. 20:7). The grammatical form indicates that this commandment applies to each one of us, with no exceptions. “Shall not” shows that this is a commandment, not just a suggestion or principle for life. It is as important to God as the commandments not to murder or commit adultery. This is crucial to God.

“Misuse” means to take God’s name “in vain” (20:7, New American Standard Bible). The word means *groundlessly, emptily, without basis*, and includes frivolous, insincere, or unjustified use of the name of God. Its original context was legal in nature. When a person testified before the elders or council, the person was to speak “in the name of God.” This was something like our oath “to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.” The commandment was not to promise truth “in God’s name” and then lie or deceive.

Whom to honor

“The name of the Lord your God” is the central phrase of this third commandment. Jewish people associated the “name” of a person with his or her basic identity. For this reason, biblical characters were often assigned names to describe them. (“Esau” means *red*, because he had red hair, Genesis 25:25; “Isaac” means *laughter*, because Sarah laughed when God said she would have a son, Gen. 21:3-6.)

So the “name of God” deals with God’s basic character and identity. To speak of the “name of God” was to deal with God’s very nature, being, and person. For this reason, the names of God were sacred to the Jewish people. Each of them said something important about God.

- YHWH meant *the One who was, is, and ever shall be*. This name showed that God is eternally the Lord.
- “God” here is *Elohim*, literally *the God of gods*. This name says that God alone is God, above all other deities worshiped around the world. In a day of polytheism (worshiping many gods) and henotheism (worshiping one god while not denying that there are other gods), God alone is the God of the universe.
- *El-Elyon* (Gen. 14:22; Deuteronomy 32:8-9) means *God most high*, showing that God rules the world today.
- *El Shaddai* (Exod. 6:3) means *God Almighty*. This name shows that God has all the power of the universe, and we have none.
- *Adonai* (Isaiah 6:1) means *Lord of all*, indicating *the One who reigns*.
- *Jehovah-Jireh* (Gen. 22:14) means *the Lord who provides* for our every need.
- *Jehovah-Tsidkenu* (Jer. 23:6) means *the Lord is our righteousness*, so that we can be holy and righteous only as God makes us so.
- *Jehovah-Shalom* means *the Lord is peace* (Judges 6:24), pointing to the fact that only God can give us peace.

These are just some of God's names in the Scriptures. As you can see, the "name of God" describes God's character, identity, and person. In other words, the "name of God" means *God himself*. Consider some examples:

- "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Psalm 8:1).
- "May the LORD answer you when you are in distress; may the name of the God of Jacob protect you" (Ps. 20:1).
- "Sing to God, sing praise to his name, extol him who rides on the clouds—his name is the LORD—and rejoice before him" (Ps. 68:4).
- "He provided redemption for his people; he ordained his covenant forever—holy and awesome is his name" (Ps. 111:9).
- "The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe" (Proverbs 18:10).
- "A scroll of remembrance was written in [God's] presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name" (Malachi 3:16).
- "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" (Matthew 6:9).
- "Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me" (Matt. 18:5).
- "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matt. 18:20).
- "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19).
- "'Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and will glorify it again'" (John 12:28).
- "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).
- "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).
- "The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (Acts 5:41).
- "The Lord said to Ananias, 'Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name'" (Acts 9:15-16).
- "God exalted him to the highest place and gave him a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11).
- "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17).
- "Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads" (Revelation 14:1).
- "On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: 'KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS'" (Rev. 19:16).

Here's the point: to misuse God's name is to misuse God, to abuse God, to slander God's character and reputation. This issue was so important that the third commandment is the

only one of the ten with an immediate threat of punishment. It stands to reason, then, that we would want to know how to keep this commandment—what it means to dishonor God's name, and to honor it.

How to honor God

The first way people break this commandment is to *use God for themselves*. In biblical days people would swear falsehood in court, in the name of God. They made business deals or personal promises in God's name and then broke those contracts. They used God's name in a profane way, to curse someone or to express anger.

We obviously break this commandment today if we use God's name in profanity. Such language has no place in Christian character or conduct. When we use God's name in swearing or cursing, we dishonor God's character. We abuse God's reputation. We use God for ourselves.

We also use God's name when we manipulate others with it. The preacher who says, *God told me you need to give money to this ministry*; the husband who says, *God told me to divorce you*; the parent who says, *God will punish you if you don't do as I say*. We take God's name *in vain*, for our own purposes. We use God for ourselves. This, the Lord of the universe will not allow.

A second way people break this commandment is to *make faith into religion*. For instance, the Jewish people took this commandment to mean that they should never pronounce God's personal name. The scribes even wrote *YHWH* so that the people wouldn't pronounce it. The original Hebrew language had only consonants. So the scribes took the vowels from another name for God, *Adonai*, and put them under the consonants *YHWH*. This was to tell the reader to say *Adonai*, not *YHWH*. Over the centuries we've combined the added vowels with these consonants and created *Yahweh* or *Jehovah*, but this was almost certainly not how the name was originally pronounced.

When the ancient Hebrew scribes would come to *YHWH*, they would put down their pen, stand in the corner for a time of meditation and prayer, then take off their clothing, wash, put on new clothing, take a new quill pen, and write *YHWH*. They would then burn this pen and clothing, put on their old clothing, take up their old pen, and continue their work.

We can still make faith into legalistic religion today. If your faith consists of the time you spend at church, the Bible study and prayer you do at home, the money you give, so that you think God likes you better when you are religious and is ashamed when you're not, you've made faith into religion. Faith is relationship, expressed in religious ways. It is not a set of legalistic rules. Or else we misuse the name and worship of God.

The third way people break this commandment is to *trivialize God*. We can compartmentalize God, so that God is only one part of our lives. We know that we're going to heaven and that we have our "fire insurance." So we can come to church to pay our religious dues. But we don't let our religion affect our lives.

This approach explains the fact that ethical behavior is much the same inside and outside the church today. For example, a study found that the divorce rate among Baptists was even higher than it was in the outside culture.⁶ We make sure we don't misuse the name of God, we make God a part of our lives, and we think that's all God wants. But it's not.

Ultimately, to keep the third commandment means to *honor God with our lives*, to live so that we bring glory to God's name, character, and reputation, in all we do.

To be a "Christian" is to be a *little Christ*. Our lives reflect on Christ in all we do. We are the only Bible most people will read, the only church they'll attend. We are to live so that God will be honored by what we do. I became a Christian because of the joy I saw in Christians. So will others, because of us. Jesus was very clear: "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

How would your friends and associates say you're doing with the third commandment?

When last did you rest with God?

The fourth commandment deals with the "Sabbath," our translation of the Hebrew *shabbath*, which means *to rest from labor*. Who needs such rest today?

Who needs a Sabbath?

The three greatest killers of Americans are not cancer, heart attacks, and accidents, but computers, pagers, and telephones. The annual cost of running red lights, in medical bills, car repairs, etc., is \$7 billion. The amount of time saved by running a red light can be measured in seconds. We're asking the wrong questions.

Chuck Yeager, the famous test pilot, wrote his autobiography a few years ago. In it he told about an unusual event at Edwards Air Force Base in the late fifties. A pilot testing a Mach 2 fighter actually outraced the shells from his cannons and shot himself down. I've done that, running too fast for my own good. Haven't you?

Who needs time away, time alone with God? Jesus did. He spent forty days alone with God in the wilderness before beginning his public ministry. When Jesus began that ministry, one of his first actions was this: "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed" (Mark 1:35). Later in Mark's Gospel we read, "because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, [Jesus] said to [his disciples], 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest'" (Mark 6:31).

Still later in Jesus' ministry we read, "After Jesus had dismissed the people, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone" (Matt.

14:23). All through Jesus' life and even in Gethsemane before Jesus' death, Jesus practiced the Sabbath.

Who needs time away, time alone with God? I have learned this fact: we cannot be much *for* God until we have been much *with* God. The issue is not how to prioritize our schedule, but how to schedule our priorities. We must put first things first, for the sake of our souls, our homes, our marriages, our lives.

How? Let's learn how *not* to keep a *shabbath*. This may surprise you.

What is not a Sabbath?

The fourth commandment is the longest of the ten. The very length of this commandment suggests that the *shabbath* clearly matters to God.

So we are told to "Remember the Sabbath day" (Exod. 20:8). "Remember" means *to observe, to venerate*, like "Remember the Alamo." Observing this commandment is something we choose to do, intentionally and consciously. "Keeping it holy" means to make it separate, different, distinct, a day different from the rest of the week.

The Hebrews worked "six days," from sunrise to sunset, thus a typical seventy-hour work week. Labor was part of God's will for us beginning in the Garden, before the Fall, and will be as we worship God forever in heaven. But on the *shabbath*, we are not to work at all—and neither is anyone else. Everything alive, even animals, need this time away.

This issue is so important to God that God set the model for us. The God who neither slumbers nor sleeps (Ps. 121:3-4) didn't need a day off. He observed a Sabbath to teach us to do the same. This is the only commandment of the ten for which God has set a personal example.

What does God *not* mean? First, the Sabbath is not a legalistic religious requirement.

The Jews were so concerned with the *shabbath* that they devised 39 ways of breaching it, each divided into 39 ways, for 1,521 different Sabbath rules. A scribe could not carry a pen; a person could not kill a flea; he could not wear clothing it was possible to carry (because he might get hot and carry it).

A second wrong answer to the question: the Sabbath is not church attendance. The first Christians worshiped God on Sunday. This was the day Jesus rose from the dead and the day Pentecost birthed the church. Jesus *chose* to rise on Sunday; the Spirit *chose* to fall on Sunday. This is the "Lord's Day" (see Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Rev. 1:10).

But the Roman Empire did not observe this day as special in any way. So the Christians would worship and then go to work. This day was a normal day for their culture. They would observe a *shabbath*, a day or time of rest with God, separate from their church attendance.

Unfortunately, things began to change with Constantine in AD 321, who laid down the first law that work in the cities must stop on the Lord's Day. Christian theologians Alcuin (died 804) and Thomas Aquinas (died 1274) erroneously identified the Lord's Day with the Sabbath. The Reformers separated them. In fact, Luther (in his *Larger Catechism*) and Calvin (in the *Institutes* 2.8.32,34) were very adamant that they are two completely different concepts. They were right.

Going to church is not keeping a Sabbath. You may make Sunday your *shabbath* day, your day to be alone with God. But church attendance is not the same thing as the Sabbath.

How do we keep a Sabbath?

First, *get alone*. Make a time and a place where nothing else in your life can intrude. Your office at work or living room at home are probably not the best places. Find a solitary place and use it for your *shabbath*.

Second, *get alone with God*. Read the Scriptures, asking God to speak to you. Write in a spiritual notebook what God says to you. Keep a prayer list you work through with God. Read devotional literature that helps you draw closer to Jesus. Listen to Jesus. Jesus stands at our hearts, wanting to come in and eat with us, but we must be quiet enough to hear Jesus' knock at the door.

Third, *get alone with God daily*. One day a week isn't enough food for our bodies—or our souls. Make a daily appointment to be alone with God, in your *shabbath*. When is your next appointment with your Father?

Last, *get alone with God daily and retreat regularly*. John Stott, the great British pastor and expositor, once remarked that he needed an hour a day, a day a week, and a week a year in *shabbath* with the Father. What do you need? What's your strategy for this week? this summer?

Conclusion

Consider the story of Tattoo, the racing bassett hound. Tattoo didn't intend to go for an evening run. When his owner shut his leash in the car door and took off with Tattoo still outside the vehicle, Tattoo had no choice, however.

A motorcycle officer noticed a passing vehicle with something dragging behind it. As he passed the car, he saw that the something was Tattoo. "He was picking them up and putting them down as fast as he could," said the officer. The officer chased the car to a stop and rescued Tattoo, but not before the dog reached a speed of twenty miles per hour and rolled over several times. Tattoo was fine, but Tattoo asked not to go out for an evening walk for a long time.

Who has your leash today, you or God?

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in *Adult Online Bible Commentary* are from The Holy Bible, New International Version (North American Edition), copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by the International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.

² Joy Davidman, *Smoke on the Mountain: An Interpretation of the Ten Commandments* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), 21.

³ Davidman, 21.

⁴ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967), 401.

⁵ *Confessions* 1:1, in *Great Books of the Western World*, 2d. ed., ed. Mortimer J. Adler (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1990) 16:1.

⁶ Study by the Barna Group. See http://www.baptiststandard.com/2000/1_12/pages/divorce.html.

TNT
Exodus
Freed to Follow

Session 8

Spark: Exodus 20:1-11

Kindle

1. Who spoke these words to Moses?
2. How does God describe self in verse 2?
3. What is God's first command?
4. What is God's list of prohibition concerning "making a god" in verse 4?

5. Why should we not bow down to a god we have made?
6. What are we not to do with the name of God?
7. What are the instructions regarding keeping the Sabbath?

Explosive Thinking

1. The Ten Commandments begin with acknowledging God is above all gods we create or imagine. What are some of the gods of our own creation? In what ways do we bow down to them?

2. It has been said that God created us in God's own image and since then we have been doing the same in return. What is the danger in placing on God our values, our preferences or rationale? What are some cultural norms that we place on God and in doing so make a god of our own image?
 3. God is a jealous God and punishes the sin of parents to third and fourth generations. Yet, God shows love for thousands of generations of those who love God. What do you think God states this comparison this way? What does this say about God's love in spite of our sinfulness? What does it say about our sinfulness?
 4. What do you think it means to take the Lord's name in vain or misuse the name of God? Are there ways we take God's name in vain beyond using God's name as a swear word? Share your thoughts?
 5. What is the importance of keeping a Sabbath? Why do you think we need a day we set aside as holy unto God? How hard is that to do in our culture? Share with the group ways you seek to keep a Sabbath day.

BAPTISTWAY PRESS® Adult Online Bible Commentary

By Dr. Jim Denison, Pastor, Park Cities Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas

Studies in Exodus: Freed to Follow God

Lesson Nine

Treat People Like This

Focal Text

Exodus 20:12-17

Background

Exodus 20:12-17

Main Idea

Respect your fellow human beings and their rights.

Question to Explore

How is belief in God related to how we treat our fellow human beings?

Quick Read

These commandments define a life lived to God's glory and our good.

Commentary

Do you remember the game show *Family Feud*? One hundred people were surveyed on a subject. Then two families, five members each, tried to guess the most popular answers on these surveys. The game show aired from 1976 to 1985, was revived again in 1988 for one season, and aired again briefly several years ago. But the title describes our culture even more fully today than it did twenty-five years ago.

Our relationships need help. Fortunately, God cares. That's why God gave us the last six of the Ten Commandments. Today we'll survey more material than one lesson can use, in the hope that you will find help as you select those relational truths that your class most needs to study.

Honor your parents (20:12)

"Honor," the commandment begins.¹ The word means *to respect or venerate*. "Your father and your mother," God continued. In a world that relegated women to inferior status, this inclusion is significant. Note that Leviticus 19:3 restates it this way: "Each of you must respect his mother and father." There the mother is even listed first.

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“So that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you,” the commandment concludes (Exodus 20:12). The first meaning of this promise is that the nation of Israel would be secure in its society and land if it kept this commandment. But there are other meanings as well, as we will see in a moment.

Why honor our parents?

Note that God’s word makes the fifth commandment binding for all time. Leviticus 19:3 says, “Each of you must respect his mother and father.” None of us are excluded, no matter the circumstances of our situation. The Book of Proverbs adds, “If a man curses his father or mother, his lamp will be snuffed out in pitch darkness” (Proverbs 20:20), and also this gruesome hyperbole, “The eye that mocks a father, that scorns obedience to a mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures” (Prov. 31:17). This commandment is important!

The New Testament is clear as well. Jesus renewed this commandment when he told the rich young ruler, “Honor your father and mother” (Matthew 19:19). Jesus severely criticized the religious leaders of his day for not honoring and supporting their parents (Mark 7:9-13). The epistles are clear: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord. Honor your father and mother” (Ephesians 6:1-2); “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord” (Colossians 3:20).

We need to keep this commandment for the sake of our souls, our families, and our future. This is indeed how to “live long” on the earth (Exod. 20:12).

Perhaps this brief tale from the Brothers Grimm will make the point.² Once upon a time there was a little old man. His eyes blinked, and his hands trembled. When he ate, he clattered the silverware, missed his mouth with the spoon as often as not, and dribbled a bit of his food on the tablecloth. He lived with his married son. This son and his wife soon decided that they could not have such a distraction at their table.

So they led the little old man gently but firmly by the arm to the corner of the kitchen. There they set him on a stool and gave him his food in a bowl. But one day his hands trembled even more than usual, and the bowl fell and broke. His son and daughter-in-law, in anger and distress, then made a little wooden trough and fed him out of that. It was terrible to see him eating as would an animal, but that’s the way things were.

One day the couple’s four-year-old son was playing intently with some bits of wood. They asked him what he was doing. “I’m making a trough,” he said, smiling at them for approval, “to feed you and Momma out of when I get big.”

The man and his wife looked at each other for a while. Then they cried a little, and then they took the little old man by the arm and led him back to the table. They sat him in a comfortable chair and gave him his food on a plate. From then on nobody ever scolded when he clattered or spilled or broke things.

We need the fifth commandment, for our lives, our families, and our future.

What about dishonorable parents?

But before we find practical ways to honor our parents, we need briefly to ask a hard question: What if our parents are not honorable? What if they try to keep us from following Christ or otherwise doing what is right? What then?

Sometimes we must choose which commandment to break. When Corrie ten Boom's family was harboring Jews, one day the Nazis banged on their door and asked whether they had Jews in their house. Which commandment would they break—the sixth commandment, not to murder, or the ninth commandment, not to lie?

Jesus made it clear that following him would sometimes cause conflict with our family. His own family misunderstood him early in his ministry. Jesus specifically told his followers, “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt. 10:37).

This tragedy happened often to the early Christians who had to refuse a father's order to reject Christ, even to the point of death. In Jewish society as well, when a son turned from his father's faith the son became dead to his father. When I taught at Southwestern Seminary, I had a student whose Orthodox Jewish family held a burial service for him when he came to Christ. There is a tombstone in New York with his name on it today.

Ephesians 6:1 is clear: “Obey your parents *in the Lord*” (italics for emphasis). Martin Luther had to refuse his father's wishes that he become a lawyer, to become a minister. Thomas Aquinas's family locked him in the family castle for a year in their attempt to prevent his entering the ministry. Francis Schaeffer's father forbade his starting L'Abri.

Unfortunately, we must sometimes choose between our earthly father and our heavenly Father. In these situations the first commandment is clear: We can have no god but God—not even our parents. But these situations occur far less often today in our culture than they did in Jesus' day. I've seen only a handful of circumstances in my years in ministry where a child really had no choice except to disobey his or her parents in order to obey God.

If this is the situation for some in your class, invite them to ask God to show them what to do and to help them to be patient. Perhaps their parents will change over time. It is always too soon to give up on them. We are to honor our parents in every way we can, as long as we honor our Father. I liked what one Christian said. His father was a drunkard, and so he said, “I always want to honor the man I want my father to be.”

Insofar as we can honor our parents without dishonoring God, we must do so. This is the clear teaching of God's word.

How do we keep the fifth commandment today?

We are clearly to honor our parents—to prize them, respect them, and find ways to value them. How?

Act. Note that the commandment does *not* say, “*Love* your parents.” God’s word tells us to love God, the stranger, and our neighbor, but nowhere are we told specifically to love our parents. Why not? Because the best way to show love for our parents is to honor and obey them. This matters far more than any words or material gifts we might give to them.

We act into feeling; we don’t feel into acting. Don’t wait until you feel love for your mother or father—find a loving thing to do. Find a way to honor her or him. When we honor our parents, we find that we feel a new level of appreciation for them. So, find a way to honor them today.

Thank them. Thank your parents for the life they have given you and for the ways they provide for you still. Current estimates are that it costs the average parent nearly \$300,000 to raise one child from infancy to age 18. That doesn’t count the costs of college. Take the initiative. When parents have to ask their children to say thanks, it doesn’t mean nearly as much. Mother’s Day and Father’s Day are good but not enough.

Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, tells about cleaning out his father’s desk after he died. He and his brother found note pads, files, and stacks of legal documents attesting to the scope of his business responsibilities. But in the top drawer on the right side, he found a collection of letters that seemed to occupy a position of honor. There, neatly grouped in rubber bands, were all the letters he, his brother, and his sisters had ever written to their father. What would you find in your parents’ home today?

Obey them in the Lord. As we have seen, the Scriptures are clear here.

Support them when you can. As the population lives longer than ever before, more and more children are parenting their parents. This is often hard but always right. God’s word is clear: “Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God” (1 Timothy 5:3-4); “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim. 5:8).

Last, remember them when they’re gone. We continue to wear our parents’ name and to reflect on them in how we live. We will bring honor or dishonor to our parents as long as we live. I really like something my wife tells our boys: “We belong to everyone who loves us.” This fact should affect our decisions as long as we live—for our parents’ sake, and for our own as well.

Honor life (20:13)

The national prison and jail population in 1980 was 501,900. For 2003, the Bureau of Justice Statistics projected it to be 2,014,000. Recent demographics in North Dallas list crime as the greatest single fear we feel. A few weeks ago, my neighbor's car was vandalized. Recently one of our members had her purse stolen from her house. Since the Wedgwood Baptist Church shooting in Fort Worth, Texas, we know that even churches are not guaranteed safety.

The problem is not just with our society but with our personal lives and relationships. Isolated, hurting people, in strained marriages and families and relationships, are all around us.

Where are you at odds with someone today? When I ask you about the problem people in your life, what person comes to mind first? God wants to help you with that person and to help us as a society. That's why God gave us the sixth commandment.

What not to do

Our text today is very simple. The sixth, seventh, and eighth commandments are each expressed in only two Hebrew words: *No murder; no adultery; no stealing*. The grammatical form of "you" includes us all. "Shall not" indicates not a suggestion or principle but a law. The commandment applies today, tomorrow, and for all time.

"Murder" is the key word in the sixth commandment. What does it mean?

This is not the typical Hebrew word for "kill." Each time this word, *ratzah*, appears in the Old Testament, it refers to premeditated and intentional murder. This word and commandment does not prohibit us from defending ourselves (Exod. 22:2), accidental killings (Deuteronomy 19:5), involvement in war (Deut. 13:15), or capital punishment (Genesis 9:6). But it prohibits us from all other killing, for any other reason.

However, most of us have never killed anyone and certainly don't intend to. So why waste time dealing with this issue? Why not move on? Well, before we decide we're free to bypass the sixth commandment, perhaps we should remember what Jesus said about it. If we are "angry" with our brother, we are subject to the same judgment as if we murder him (Matt. 5:22). "Raca" is an Aramaic term of contempt, something like *Good for nothing!* If we call him "Raca," we must answer to judgment (Matt. 5:22). If we call him "fool," the worst form of contempt in the ancient world, a term that means he is immoral and corrupt in the extreme, we deserve the same penalty as Jeffrey Dahmer or Adolf Hitler (Matt. 5:22).

Is anyone in your class angry with someone? calling someone names? branding them immoral failures? Apparently there are many ways to "murder." Why are they wrong?

Scripture gives us at least three reasons. First, we are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). So, to hurt a person is to hurt God. This is like attacking your child or spouse. To

hurt my wife or sons is to attack me. Too, 1 Corinthians 3:17 says that we are the “temple” of God. If I attack your house, I attack you. If I attack you, I attack the God who dwells in you. If we don’t want to hurt God, we’ll keep the sixth commandment.

A second reason harming others is prohibited is that we are to treat others the way we want to be treated. This is the famous Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12), and it’s still the best way to live. Martin Niemoeller was a German Protestant pastor during the time of Hitler.

Niemoeller said, “First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Socialists and the Trade Unionists, but I was neither, so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew so I did not speak out. And when they came for me, there was no one left to speak out for me.” If we want to treat others as we want to be treated, we’ll keep the sixth commandment.

A third reason hurting others is prohibited is this: How we treat the person we hold in lowest esteem is how we treat Jesus. In Matthew 25, Jesus spoke of the hungry that weren’t fed, the thirsty not given a drink, the stranger not invited in, the naked not clothed, the prisoner not visited, and said, “Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me” (Matt. 25:45). If we want to treat others as we would Jesus, we’ll keep the sixth commandment.

What to do with problem people

We all know someone we could call a “problem person.” Jesus’ commentary on the sixth commandment gives us the help we need in seeking health and healing with them.

First, *release your anger* (Matt. 5:22). When Jesus tells us not to be “angry” with our brother, he uses a very specific Greek word, *orgizesthai*, which means long-lived, cherished, nursed wrath and anger. This is not *thumos*, the word for short-lived angry emotions, but the word for anger we choose to hold onto and feed.

Jesus does not tell us not to feel angry, but not to hold onto that anger. We cannot help our feelings, but we can manage them. Luther said we cannot keep the birds from flying over our heads, but we can keep them from nesting in our hair. So, refuse to hold onto your anger. Ask God to help you let it go today.

Second, *take the initiative to heal* (Matt. 5:23-24). To put Jesus’ words in our context, if you are on your way into the sanctuary for worship and you remember that your brother has something against you, leave church, drive to his house, and make things right. Only then should you come in here to worship God. Note: not if you have something against your brother but if your brother has something against you. Take the initiative to heal the relationship.

Do it now (Matt. 5:25-26). Again in our terms, if someone is suing you and you’re in the wrong, settle before you get to court. It will cost you far less now than then. It will never be easier to make things right than it is today.

Choose to pardon (Matt. 5:38-42). Jesus' words relate to an insult, as when someone slaps you on the right cheek with the back of his hand or a Roman soldier makes you carry his pack for him. You can retaliate, but you only hurt yourself. To forgive is to pardon. It is not to pretend you're not hurt, or excuse the hurt, but choose not to punish the one who hurt you. Ask God to help you choose to pardon, for God's sake and for yours.

Last, *pray for the person* (Matt. 5:43-44). This is sometimes the only thing you can do, but it is always the best thing you can do. It is hard, perhaps impossible, to hurt those we are praying for. Pray for the problem person in your life, today.

A Sunday School teacher was discussing the Ten Commandments with her five- and six-year-olds. After explaining the commandment to "honor your father and mother," she asked, "Is there a commandment that teaches us how to treat our brothers and sisters?"

A boy (the oldest in a family of seven) immediately answered, "Thou shalt not kill." He was right.

Honor marriage (20:14)

Marriage today seems to many to be a game, played for their amusement. God knows better. He wants us to be pure and holy. He has given us all we need to defeat the temptations of our culture and offers us hope even when we fail. Let's see what God says.

What is adultery?

Martin Luther had picturesque ways of putting things. As relates to our topic today, for instance, he once said, "If your head is made of butter, don't sit by the fire." On another occasion he declared, "You cannot prevent the devil from shooting arrows of evil thoughts into your heart; but take care that you do not let such arrows stick and grow there." We're going to use his metaphor for our study. So, our first question: What is adultery? What is this "arrow" the enemy fires at us?

Jewish law defined adultery as voluntary sexual relations between a married person and someone other than the lawful spouse. That much is clear. But there's more.

Adultery is not the only kind of sexual sin forbidden by God's word:

- "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:5).
- "I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people. . . . but now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat" (1 Corinthians 5:9, 11).
- "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male

prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

Satan has many such arrows. Jesus condemns them even further. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus articulated the purest standard to be found in all of literature: “I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:28).

Jesus forbids immoral action, and even immoral thoughts, as arrows from Satan. Why?

Why is adultery wrong?

There are three basic answers to our question. First, *sexual immorality destroys the family*. Sexual immorality is an arrow to the heart of your family and home.

Second, *sexual impurity destroys our witness*. The only credibility for a Christian is his or her character. If that is ruined, our witness and ministry is ruined. Satan knows this. If Satan can get me or you to sin sexually, even one time, he knows that our witness and ministry will be ruined, perhaps forever. Do you think it’s a coincidence that the great failures among prominent ministers in recent years have been sexual in nature? Aren’t these Satan’s arrows, fired at us all?

Third, *sexual impurity destroys our spiritual lives*, our souls. Listen to these profound words from Proverbs: “Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched? So is he who sleeps with another man’s wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished” (Prov. 6:27-29). This is an arrow to the soul.

How do we defeat this temptation?

God has given us some shields to use when we’re being attacked. First, *agree with God that sexual immorality is wrong*. Refuse to accept the culture of our day, the “sexual revolution” characterized by the slogan, “If it feels good, do it.” Hollywood is wrong. The advertisers who simply want to make money off us are wrong. Sexual immorality is wrong. Agree with God that all sexual immorality is wrong.

Second, *guard your heart*. This is Satan’s target. Jesus warned us not to look “at a woman lustfully” (Matt. 5:28). The Greek here does not refer to natural, normal human instincts, but to the man who looks at a woman with the deliberate intention of lusting after her. This is not about the first look but the second.

We are to do whatever it takes to keep this sin from growing in our hearts and souls. In the next verses (Matt. 5:29-30) Jesus said, “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. . . . And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.” This is rabbinic hyperbole, overstatement to make this point: We must do whatever it takes to keep from sinning.

Turn off the television set. Walk out of the movie. Cancel the magazine subscription. Block immoral internet sites. Change your friends. Change your job. Do whatever it takes to remove this cancer before it kills your soul. Say *no* to sin, now.

Third, *get help*. I believe every Christian needs an accountability relationship with someone. We need to empower someone to ask us the hard questions, to tell us when they see us going down the wrong road, to support and strengthen us with total confidence. Start with someone you already trust; covenant to make a time to be together this week; begin by sharing something with each other you'd not share with others. Ask God to help you help each other. If you're in trouble here already, you *must* get help.

Here's the bottom line: run. 1 Corinthians 6:18 says, "Flee from sexual immorality." If you think you're the one person in all of human history who can get away with this, know that you're being deceived. My college professor was right: If we say *maybe* to sin, eventually we'll say *yes* to it. If we turn down the lights, our eyes adjust to the dark. As do our souls. Stop now. Run, now.

What if you've sinned?

What if it's too late? What if you've already fallen here and the arrow has already pierced your heart and home? God's word gives us the help and hope we need. His Spirit can pull out the arrows of the enemy and heal their wounds.

The first thing to do is to *turn to God*. You may think your failure has forever ended God's love and care for you. Nothing could be further from the truth. Read this verse of Scripture: After citing the "sexually immoral . . . idolaters . . . adulterers . . . male prostitutes . . . [and] homosexual offenders," Paul said to the Corinthians: "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11). It's never too late to turn to God. He can pull out arrows we cannot.

Next, with God's help, you must *make right what is wrong*. Get out of the immoral relationship, now. The arrow will never be easier to remove than it is today.

Third, ask God to help you *make things right with others*. Who else has been hurt by your arrows? We need forgiveness from all those we have harmed, unless asking for that forgiveness would hurt them further.

Gordon MacDonald is an example for us. This well-known pastor committed the tragic sin of adultery. Immediately he confessed this to his wife and then to his entire congregation. He resigned his pulpit and entered into years of counseling and accountability. Over time another church called him as their pastor. Then, several years later, his original church invited him back as their pastor again. He serves there today and has a national ministry to hurting souls and broken lives.

God can redeem anything, given the chance. But we must be willing to make things right with all those we have wronged.

Luther was right—the arrows of the enemy don't have to kill us. God stands ready to help. But we must choose to let him, now.

Honor the rights of others (20:15)

In America, apparently no price is too high for the things we want. Who would have dreamed we'd spend \$5 for a cup of coffee or \$3 on a bottle of water? But we're drinking them. The price of gasoline hasn't been this high in years, but we're still buying it.

Our culture measures us by what we wear, drive, or own. Against all this materialism, we find the eighth commandment. Two words in Hebrew, four in English: "You shall not steal." Let's look at what the commandment means and how to keep it today.

What is stealing?

We steal, of course, when we *take the possessions of others*. My family's home in Houston was vandalized. A thief broke the window of our van in Atlanta and stole what was inside. Our church has lost technical equipment to thieves in recent years. A few months ago my car wouldn't start, and so I had it towed to a local repair shop. They wanted \$2,000 to replace the head gaskets; I took it to the dealership, which fixed the problem for a fraction of that cost and never had to touch the head gaskets. Stealing is taking the possessions of others.

We steal when we *take advantage of others*. We steal when we take advantage of our employer. We steal when we take advantage of the government by cheating on our taxes, money that honest citizens must make up. In short, we steal whenever we take financial advantage of others.

We steal when we *take the ideas of others*. When I taught at Southwestern Seminary I heard the motto from students: *If you steal from one source, it's plagiarism; from two sources, it's research.* No, it's not.

We steal when we *take the reputation of others*. Shakespeare said it well:

Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands:
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him
And makes me poor indeed.³

Before you say anything negative about any person, ask yourself first, *Is it true? Is it fair? Is it necessary?* To take the reputation of others is to steal.

How to keep the eighth commandment

Remember Jesus' famous parable of the Good Samaritan and its three attitudes toward life (Luke 10:30-37). The robbers said, *What's yours is mine, and I will take it.* The priest and Levite said, *What's mine is mine, and I will keep it.* The Samaritan said, *What's mine is yours, and I will share it.*

How do we develop Jesus' approach to things and people? First, we *see things as God does.* Material success is not the highest value in life—a relationship with God is. Jesus warned his disciples (Matt. 16:26): “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?” As God sees things, material success is a means to an end, given for the purpose of serving God with that which God has entrusted to us. If I value God more than possessions, I'll not offend God by stealing from you.

Second, we *acquire things as God directs.* Scripture gives us three ways we are to acquire possessions, a kind of philosophy of economics.

- We are to work hard. “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need” (Ephesians 4:28).
- We are to invest wisely. In Jesus' parable of the talents (measures of money), he commended the men who doubled their investments while criticizing the man who did not (Matt. 25:14-30).
- We are to pray dependently. When our need is greater than our supply, we are to pray and ask God's help. The early Christians gave to the common good of the believing community, and their resources were “distributed to anyone as he had need” (Acts 4:35).

As we work hard, invest wisely, and trust God, we acquire things as God directs. Then we will have no need to break the eighth commandment.

Third, we *use things as God leads.* God has blessed us with material possessions, so that we might use them to help others in his name. He gave the Samaritan a donkey and some money, to give to the man in need. We are to do the same with whatever God has given to us.

If I value you more than your possessions, I'll not steal what is yours. In fact, I'll give to you from what is mine. It is imperative that we see things, acquire things, and use things as God directs, that we keep the eighth commandment—for the sake of God's glory, and our good.

Honor the reputation of others (20:16)

When I worked as a graphic artist while finishing my seminary master's degree, I had a customer who kept a “lie book” in his pocket. Whenever he told someone a lie he would write it down so he could remember it the next time he saw that person.

Some commentaries claim that this is the commandment of the Ten we break the most often. Do you agree? Raise your hand if you've never lied. Be careful; don't lie. The psalmist lamented, "Help, Lord, for the godly are no more; the faithful have vanished from among men. Everyone lies to his neighbor; their flattering lips speak with deception" (Psalm 12:1-2).

What is "false testimony"? Why do we commit this sin? Why is it wrong? What can we do about it? These are our questions now.

What is a lie?

We live in what has been called a *post-modern* culture, where truth is considered to be subjective and personal. There's no right or wrong, just what's right or wrong for you. No absolutes—which is itself an absolute statement. So, let's be clear—what is a lie?

False words are of course lies. We lie when we tell half-truths, when we exaggerate, when we misquote, when we slander others and gossip about them.

False appearances are lies. The psalmist said of his people, "They take delight in lies. With their mouths they bless, but in their hearts they curse" (Psalm 62:4). Sometimes we gossip in spiritual guise. *Pray for the Does, they're having marital troubles; I'm concerned about the Joneses, their son (or daughter) is really struggling in school.* We pretend to care, which may be a lie.

Withholding the truth is a lie. Read Leviticus 5:1: "If a person sins because he does not speak up when he hears a public charge to testify regarding something he has seen or learned about, he will be held responsible." The sin of silence is as real as the sin of speech.

Too, *rationalization* is a lie. Everyone's doing it; it won't hurt anyone; no one will know. It's just a *white lie*. But *white lies* are a contradiction in terms.

Why do we lie?

The first sin in the Bible was a lie. In Genesis 3 we read that the crafty serpent asked the woman whether she was allowed to eat from any tree in the garden. When she answered, he lied, "You will not surely die" (Gen. 3:4). So she ate, Adam ate, and eventually they both died—as will we, unless Jesus returns first. The first sin in the Bible is a lie.

The last sinners named in the Bible are also liars. In Revelation 22 Jesus said to John, "Outside [heaven] are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and *everyone who loves and practices falsehood*" (Revelation 22:15, italics for emphasis).

The psalmist lamented, "Even from birth the wicked go astray; from the womb they are wayward and speak lies" (Ps. 58:3). Why are lies so common to us?

One answer: we lie *to compensate for our own failures*. We have some sense of the way things should be, of life as God intended it. But we know that we are not living this way, that we have sinned, fallen, failed. So we compensate. We create a false self, an “idealized self,” the person we wish we were. We spend the rest of our lives trying to live up to this person.

But no one can do it for very long. So, when we fall short of the perfectionism that drives us, we deceive ourselves and others. We lie. Cain lied to cover up his murder. David lied about Bathsheba to cover up his sin. Any sin they committed, or you commit, I can commit. There is no sin we cannot commit. If they lied to compensate for their own failures, so can I. So can you.

Another answer for why we lie: *to hurt those who hurt us*. If someone lies to us, we lie to them. We lie to get revenge. We repeat half-truths and rumors, we gossip and slander, to hurt people we think we have a right to hurt. After all, they did it to us, right?

Saul was convinced David was a threat to him, and so he became a threat to David. Saul lied to his son, his family, and his nation. If Saul lied to hurt his enemy, so can I. So can you.

Still another answer: *to get ahead*. We lie to get the account, to close the deal. To impress the girl or the boy. To please our parents. To further our own agenda.

Ananias and Sapphira lied about the money they brought to the church, so they could keep some of it for themselves. If they lied to get ahead, so can I. So can you.

Finally: we lie because *we are tempted by Satan himself*. Jesus called him “the father of lies” (John 8:44). Satan helps us along, encouraging us to be less than honest with God, others, and ourselves.

Why is lying wrong?

Now we’re ready for our third question: Why is lying wrong? If people did it all through the Bible, why is it so wrong? Here are the facts.

God says it is wrong. Read Psalm 101:7: “No one who practices deceit will dwell in my house; no one who speaks falsely will stand in my presence.” Too, consider Ephesians 5:25: “Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor.” God says lying is wrong.

Lying offends the character of God. Jesus is truth (John 14:6). The Bible calls our Lord “a faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he” (Deut. 32:4). Thus, lying runs counter to God’s very nature. Consider Proverbs 6:16-19:

There are six things the LORD hates,
seven that are detestable to him:
haughty eyes,
a lying tongue,
hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked schemes,
feet that are quick to rush into evil,
a false witness who pours out lies
and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.

See how God feels about deceit?

Lying sacrifices trust. Do you remember the last time someone lied to you—perhaps a national politician or leader, or someone in a personal relationship with you? Have you been able to trust the person since?

Lying destroys people. Once a lie has been told about someone, it can never be taken back. The rabbis used to tell about a man who repeated gossip and slander about his rabbi. Finally the man came to the rabbi, apologized, and asked what he could do to make things right. The rabbi gave him a bag filled with feathers. He told him to empty it into the wind at the top of a nearby hill. He did and brought back the empty bag. Then the rabbi told him to go back and pick up all the feathers, which by now had blown across the town and the countryside. Of course he could not. The man then understood the damage he had caused. Do we?

In short, *lies destroy*. Never underestimate their power or the damage they can do. Lies destroy.

How do we keep the ninth commandment?

Now we're ready for this question: How do we keep the ninth commandment? How do we deal with lies, in our lives and our culture?

First, *confront them as soon as possible*. Don't let their malignancy grow. Deal with this issue in your own life. If you find deceit in your words, your thoughts, your actions, confess it to God, right now. Deal with this issue with your children. Confess this sin to those you've hurt. This will hurt you and make it far harder to lie next time.

Second, *don't listen to the lies of others*. Know that if someone will lie about me to you, they'll probably lie about you to me. Be the one who stops the cycle of lies, rumors, and gossip.

Third, *live with consistent integrity*. Be the same person when you talk *to* someone as when you talk *about* them. Be the same in private as in public. Be one person, always.

Will Rogers once advised, “So live that you would not be ashamed to sell the family parrot to the town gossip.” That’s good advice.

Last, *stay close to God*. Jesus always told the truth. In fact, he *was* the Truth. The best way to keep the ninth commandment is to get close to God—to ask God’s Spirit to fill and control you, to stay right with God as the source of your life. Then all that comes from your heart and lips will be right.

Honor the creation of God (20:17)

The last commandment begins as do the other nine: “You shall not.” The commandment applies to us all, and it is still relevant today. Too, it is a command, not a suggestion or a principle. Someone said that God gave us the Ten Commandments in stone so we could keep them or break them but not bend them. So this is a command for all of us, for all time.

The key word, of course, is “covet.” This word simply means *to long after or desire earnestly*. It is a common theme in the Bible. Interestingly, the word itself is neutral. The question is not whether we will have desires, but rather what we desire and at what price. Some things we “covet” are good, as in wishing to emulate the great qualities of someone we admire. Some things we desire are natural, such as a good appearance or a nice car, or the ability to play golf well. So, what is *coveting* in the wrong sense?

The tenth commandment specifically prohibits two kinds of desires: to want something I should not possess, and to want something that belongs to someone else. These can be material things, such as “your neighbor’s house,” “ox or donkey.” Here’s a principle for life: Don’t love something that can’t love you back.

This can be the wrong desire for status, as in coveting your neighbor’s manservant or maidservant, ancient symbols of place and status. This can be the wrong desire for people, as with “your neighbor’s wife.” It is wrong to want anything I shouldn’t have, or to covet what belongs to you.

This commandment is crucial. If we keep it, we will keep the other nine.

- If we don’t covet status or power above God, we will worship God, refuse idols, honor God’s name, and keep God’s day.
- If we don’t covet status or power with others, we will honor our parents and refuse to hurt people.
- If we don’t covet people, we’ll refuse adultery.
- If we don’t covet things, we’ll not steal or lie.

Breaking this commandment is at the root of all our troubles. So, why do we?

Coveting things

We covet *things* because we have the idea that things will bring us happiness. It's no wonder. Thousands of people in our country spend forty hours every week designing ways to get us to buy more. They use music, slogans, sights, sounds, and colors. Their goal is to make us covet what they're selling.

Such coveting will only hurt us and hurt other people. It's never enough. A servant asked his rich master, "How much money is enough?" His reply: "Just a little more."

Recently someone interviewed on television people who had become instant lottery millionaires. He asked, "How many of you are happier today?" Not a single person raised his or her hand. One of the winners replied, "How many new suits can you buy? How many cars can you drive? Every time you get something nicer, it isn't good enough, because you see and want something even nicer." It's never enough.

If we covet, we will use people to get more things. The right approach is to love people and use things, not the reverse.

Coveting people and status

We covet *people*, with the idea that people will bring us happiness. That's what David thought when he saw Bathsheba. Thus, Uriah died, David was disgraced, and his family dwelt in permanent turmoil and dysfunction as a result.

Too, we covet *status*. This may be the greatest problem many in our society face. Things and people are a means to status. Cars, houses, and popularity are means to the end of standing and status. This kind of coveting is all around us.

We're not the first. Listen to Paul's confession: "I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet.' But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire" (Romans 7:7-8).

Here was Paul's problem: coveting. Paul did not covet things or people but status. He wanted to be a Pharisee of the Pharisees, the most zealous for the law and the rituals of their faith, the holiest man in the nation. Paul admitted that this was his own heart. Who of us cannot make the same admission?

So what is the answer to our problem? First, we admit that seeking things, people, or status we should not have is wrong. Seeking things, people, or status that belong to someone else is wrong. We start there. Then we admit that we cannot solve this problem ourselves. Our fallen human nature wants things, people, and status. We must have the nature of Jesus as our own.

This was Paul's experience. The same man who admitted that he had "every kind of covetous desire" (Rom. 7:8), later said, "I have learned the secret of being content in any

and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:12-13). We can keep the tenth commandment, with the help of Jesus.

Conclusion

The Holy Spirit is ready to help us keep the Ten Commandments. Will you admit that you need God's help? Will you ask for it? Will you trust God for it? Will you lead your class to the same humility and submission? Will you ask the Spirit to make you like Jesus? The results will outweigh whatever they cost you today.

An elderly man who lived on the island of Crete loved everything about Crete—the hills and mountains, the beaches, the sunrises and sunsets. So when he came to die, his sons laid him on the soil of Crete. He scooped into his hand some of that soil, and then he died.

He found himself outside the gates of heaven. They opened, and he started in. Then the angel saw his clenched fist and asked what was inside. "Crete," he said. "I go nowhere without it." The angel said that he would have to let it go to come inside. "Never," he said, and sat down outside the wall.

A week went by. The angel came back out and asked him to let go of the soil of Crete and come inside, but the man refused. Another week went by. Then an old friend from years before came out and asked him to release his dirt and come in, but he refused. Another week went by; his soil was dry and caked, and he cupped his hands under each other to hold it.

Then the gates opened, and his granddaughter came out to him. She said, "Grandfather, the gates open only for those with open hands." He looked at the soil of Crete in his hands and then finally released it. It fell through the heavens as he took his granddaughter's hand. The gates opened, and he went in. Inside was all of Crete.

What's in your hand today?

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² "The Old Man and His Grandson," see <http://www-2.cs.cmu.edu/~spok/grimmtmp/>

³ *Othello*, Act 3, Scene 3.

TNT
Exodus
Freed to Follow

Session 9

Spark: Exodus 20:12-17

Kindle

1. What is the promise connected with “honor your father and mother”?
2. List the five last commandments:
3. What do these commandments have in common?
4. What do you think it means to give false testimony?
5. What does the term coveting mean to you?

Explosive Thinking

1. What are ways you can honor your parents? Sometimes we have parents that live dishonorably or are not believers. How do you think you show honor to a parent who may not live an honorable life? How do we keep this command when a parent might be instructing us to do the opposite of what it means to follow Jesus?

2. Our author reminds us that murder is defined as premeditated and intentional taking of life. Why is this an important distinction? In what way does this command reveal the value of life to God?
 3. Jesus reminds us that to be angry is to have the same attitude of murder toward someone. That seems extreme to us, but Jesus wants our thoughts to be holy as well as our actions. It is not okay, according to Jesus, to live with a deep hatred for someone and wishing them harm as long as we don't harm them. What are ways to guard your heart against hate? Is there someone who you feel hatred toward? What can you do to be released from this?
 4. We are commanded not to commit adultery. Adultery is properly defined as voluntary sexual acts with someone who not your legal spouse. Most studies reveal that nearly 25% of all men admit they have committed adultery and 16% of women admit to adultery. Most believe that the number is much higher since these statistics are of those who admit adultery. Jesus reminds us that to lust after someone is to commit adultery in the heart. Because this is such a difficult matter to discuss let us instead meditate on these instructions when we are tempted with lust and adultery:

Adam Hamilton writes:

- A. **Remember who you are. You are a Christ follower, a spouse, a parent or grandparent. You are a church member and part of a friend group. Remember how important these roles are to you.**
 - B. **Recognize the consequences of actions. There will be guilt and shame.**
 - C. **Rededicate yourself to God**
 - D. **Reveal your struggle to a trusted friend? Be accountable.**
 - E. **Remove tempting situations.**
 - F. **Remember that sexual desire is a good gift from God and thus God has the best plan for this gift to be used and experienced. Can you trust God's way is best, even in relation to sexual behavior?**
5. We are commanded not to steal. Beyond taking a possession that belongs to another what other ways do you believe you can steal from another? In what ways have you been guilty of stealing from others?

Which of these instructions resonate with you the most?

6. Most of the time we view the sin of lying as the actual telling of a falsehood. Yet, this command involves the reputation of our neighbor and honoring them. List the ways our author suggests we can be guilty of this command? Which one is a struggle for you and why?

7. Coveting is not simply liking something another owns but is the attitude of wanting something that belongs to another and seeking to acquire it. We live in a world of comparisons. What do others possess that you compare your possessions too? Why is it hard to rejoice with others and be honestly joyful for them? What do you think you can do to be free from coveting the possessions of others?

BAPTISTWAY PRESS® Adult Online Bible Commentary

By Dr. Jim Denison, Pastor, Park Cities Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas

Studies in Exodus: Freed to Follow God

Lesson Ten

The Nitty-Gritty of Covenant Living

Focal Text

Exodus 21:12-17, 22-27; 22:21—23:11

Background

Exodus 20:22—24:18

Main Idea

Faithfulness to the covenant with God affects the details of every aspect of life.

Question to Explore

How does following God affect the details of your daily life?

Quick Read

God cares about Monday as much as Sunday.

Commentary

When I perform a marriage ceremony, I always ask the groom to pledge himself to his bride “for as long as we both shall live.” Then I ask her to make the same commitment to him. Imagine a marriage that existed only on Sunday morning, or for a few minutes during the day, or when one needed something from the other. Unfortunately, you’re picturing the way many Christians approach their relationship with God. The biblical worldview teaches that Christ is the husband, and we are the bride (see Ephesians 5:22-33). Our Groom wants us to be married to him full-time.

Why is it otherwise for so many of us? The “secular” versus “sacred” division in our souls can be traced back twenty-six centuries, to the ancient Orphic cult. A legendary Greek philosopher named Orpheus taught his followers that our souls existed in a preincarnate state. Their failures led to the creation of our bodies as prison houses where our souls could be reformed and purified. The goal of life is to get our souls back where they came from. So the “spiritual” is what matters—the “secular” does not.

This idea became persuasive for Pythagoras, then for Plato, and then for Augustine and the Western worldview. From then to now, we have lived comfortably in two worlds—the spirit and the flesh, the church and the world, Sunday and Monday.

Other religions know nothing of such a division, of course. Hinduism and its caste system affect every part of its followers' lives. Islam is to be practiced every day, with prayers five times each day. Buddhism is a way of life as much as it is a faith. Orthodox Judaism prescribes behavior for every circumstance of life.

Like other faiths, Christianity does not intend such a division. We are to present our “bodies” to God as our unconditional, daily commitment and sacrifice (see Romans 12:1-2).¹ Jesus lays claim to every moment of every day. The first affirmation of Christianity was “Jesus is Lord.”

In this week's study we will discover the comprehensive, holistic concern of God for every detail and aspect of our lives. As we walk through these passages together, ask yourself and then your class: *Which of these principles is especially God's word for you? Where do you have business with God today?*

Value people as their Maker does (20:22–21:17)

Our background text begins with further injunction regarding our worship lives (Exodus 20:22-26). We must be right vertically to be right horizontally. Our fellowship with our Father is the engine that pulls the train of the soul.

Value your servants (21:1-11)

Next the text moves from the highest Person in the universe to the lowest members of ancient society—slaves. The principles that follow are clear and specific:

- Free a Hebrew servant in the seventh year of his slavery, allowing him to take his wife with him if they were married prior to entering slavery (21:2-3).
- The master owns any children born to the couple during their slavery if the couple became husband and wife during slavery (21:4).
- A servant can choose to be enslaved for life (21:5-6).
- A daughter sold as a slave must be redeemed if she does not please her master; if she is married to his son, she is to be freed; if he marries another woman, she is to receive full provision as well; otherwise she is to be freed (21:7-11).

These strictures are often criticized as endorsements of slavery. In fact, they regulated this widespread practice and made its conditions far more humane. A principle illustrated by this text is that we should treat those who serve us as we would want to be treated by those we serve. Does this fact apply to your working relationships? to your home and family?

While this passage helped make slavery less onerous, it did not condemn the institution outright. Why not?

Excursus on slavery and the Bible

Slavery was an accepted part of life in Old Testament times. We know of no culture or ancient literature that questioned its existence or necessity. People became slaves in a variety of ways. Among them are these: they were born to enslaved parents (21:4); they were purchased (Genesis 37:28); they sold themselves to pay a debt (Leviticus 25:39-55). Too, breaking into a home was punished by enslavement (Exod. 22:3); prisoners of war were commonly enslaved (Joel 3:6). The Israelites enslaved the Canaanites they conquered in the Promised Land (Judges 1:28).

Slaves in Israel were considered to be property and could be bought and sold (Exod. 21:32; Lev. 25:44-45). They were granted protection against murder, permanent injury, or undue physical labor (see Exod. 21:20, 26; 23:12). Hebrew household slaves were circumcised (Gen. 17:12) and were included at religious meals (Exod. 12:44). But why did the Old Testament not decry this practice in general and move to free all those enslaved?

In many ways, it did. There were several ways a Hebrew slave could be freed (a process called *manumission*). An individual could be purchased and set free (Exod. 21:8). A slave permanently injured by his master was to be set free (21:26). Hebrews were to be held as slaves for no longer than six years (Deuteronomy 15:12). Too, the Jubilee Year, which occurred after every forty-nine years—thus the fiftieth year—was to free all Israelite slaves (Lev. 25:8-11, 50).

But still we ask, why did the Old Testament sanction this practice at all? In fact, it simply recognized a fact of all ancient civilization. Its rules minimized this evil, protected its victims more fully than did any other society, and provided means for their eventual freedom. But the New Testament would bring God's word on the subject to much fuller expression.

In the Old Testament era, the primary way people were enslaved was through capture in war. But in the first century AD, the breeding of slaves swelled their numbers enormously. Too, large numbers of people sold themselves into slavery as a means of improving their quality of life. Owning and using people as slaves was so commonplace in the Roman Empire that not a single ancient writer is known to have condemned the practice. But all that would begin to change with the advent of the Christian movement.

By the New Testament era, slaves outnumbered free in the Roman Empire on a scale of three to one. They were used to do all the manual labor necessary to life. What was the New Testament attitude toward this institution?

Slavery in the Roman era was dramatically different from the despicable practice as we know it in American history. If you had been walking through any first-century Roman city, you would not have been able to distinguish between slaves and free. Slaves served not only to do manual labor but also as doctors, nurses, household managers, and

intellectuals. They administered funds and cities. They were often given an excellent education at the expense of their owners, so that philosophers and tutors were typically slaves.

Even more amazing to us, it was common for people to sell themselves into slavery to secure such privileges. A person who desired citizenship in the Empire could achieve it by enslaving himself to a citizen and then purchasing his freedom. Slavery was more a process than a condition. While there is no doubt that many slaves were abused physically, sexually, and socially, it is also true that at least as many were part of the more privileged strata of society. The total dependence of the Roman economy on the labor of slaves made it impossible for the Empire to conceive of abolishing this institution. If an economist were to propose that we refuse all goods and services imported from outside America, we'd be equally surprised.

Does the New Testament then argue for slavery? Absolutely not.

No New Testament writer attempted to lead his readers to end the institution per se, as this was not possible in the Roman Empire. Those initiating such an uprising would have been quickly annihilated as rebels and threats to Caesar. But several other facts should be noted as well.

First, Paul abolished even the possibility of racial or social discrimination for followers of Jesus: “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26-28). Every believer is our sister or brother. The ground is level at the foot of the cross.

Second, wherever the apostolic church spoke to this issue, it did so with a view to freedom and equality. Paul appealed to Philemon to see his slave, Onesimus, “no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother” (Philemon 16). Clement, an early Christian leader, wrote in his letter to the Corinthians (about AD 90), “We know many among ourselves who have given themselves up to bonds, in order that they might ransom others. Many, too, have surrendered themselves to slavery, that with the price which they received for themselves, they might provide food for others.”² Ignatius (died about AD 107), another early church leader, wrote to Polycarp: “Do not despise either male or female slaves, yet neither let them be puffed up with conceit, but rather let them submit themselves the more, for the glory of God, that they may obtain from God a better liberty.”³

Third, the New Testament church gave those who were enslaved a family and a home. This was one reason why so many of the earliest believers were slaves. Pastors and congregational leaders were drawn from the ranks both of slaves and free. Christians made no distinction between the two, for their Father welcomed all as his children.

The example of the early Christians inspired William Wilberforce and countless other Christians to do all they could to abolish slavery, and we thank God that they were successful.

Value your neighbor (21:12-17)

Next the text treats five cases that could involve the death penalty:

- Someone who strikes and kills another, distinguishing between intentionally and unintentionally (21:12-13)
- Someone who kills deliberately (21:14)
- Someone who attacks his father or mother (21:15)
- Someone who kidnaps another (21:16)
- Someone who curses his father or mother (21:17).

In the next section we will discuss the death penalty in biblical perspective. For now, note several facts that are relevant to these principles. *One*: motive must be considered in punishment. A person who kills unintentionally is not to be killed (21:13). Such an addition was radical in the ancient world, where blood justice was typical. In that day, if you killed me, my sons would be obligated to kill you, no matter our circumstances or your motives. Exodus moved justice to the level of motive, introducing a crucial element in Western jurisprudence.

Two: parents must be protected. Children were to be executed if they attacked their parents, whether the attack led to death or not (21:15). Even cursing one's parents was cause for execution (21:17). The family unit was the foundation of ancient Hebrew society, as it is foundational for our culture today. Parents were to be elevated to a special status of recognition and authority and to be protected by the full measure of the law. There are no exceptions in the text.

Three: life and freedom must be honored. Kidnapping warrants execution, whether the victim lives or dies (21:16). Your freedom is as valuable as my life. At this early point in Hebrew history, the biblical worldview already worked against totalitarianism and for freedom and personal rights.

Jesus would later elevate these rights to the spiritual and emotional. Murder is wrong, but so is character assassination (Matthew 5:21-22). We are to seek reconciliation with each other, if we would be reconciled with our Father (Matt. 5:23-24). It's not enough to have something against your brother—if he “has something against you,” you must take the first step toward healing (Matt. 5:23). Is there a person in your life with whom you should initiate forgiveness today?

Jesus amplified the Exodus law to make clear this fact: how we treat others is how we treat our Lord. Our Savior could not have been more clear: “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matt. 25:40). If you mistreat my children, you mistreat me. If you honor them, you honor me. How does our Father feel about your relationships with his family?

Expect consequences to sin (21:22—22:20)

Our study has introduced the death penalty as commensurate for certain crimes. It now surveys those acts for which lesser penalties are appropriate.

God's concern for every aspect of life

Note the breadth of legal and moral issues addressed by our text:

- A fine when a pregnant woman is hurt but not seriously injured (Exod. 21:22)
- Retribution when serious injury occurs (21:23-25)
- Compensation for bodily injury to slaves (21:26-27)
- Payment when a bull gores a person to death, with execution of the bull and execution of the owner as well if the bull was known to be dangerous (21:28-32)
- Payment for the loss of another person's animal (21:33-36)
- Retribution for theft (22:1)
- Allowance for killing a robber, unless the theft occurred after sunrise (22:2-3)
- Retribution for stealing (22:3-4)
- Retribution for damage caused to the property of others (22:5-15)
- Retribution for seducing a virgin (22:16-17)
- Death for a sorceress, a person who has sexual relations with an animal, or one who sacrifices to another god but the Lord (22:18-20)

The scope of these edicts is remarkable, encompassing every dimension of life. Our possessions and property, relationships, and faith practices are all affected. It is difficult to think of an aspect of life that this part of God's word does not touch.

Excursus on capital punishment

Our study has introduced a subject that is difficult and divisive in contemporary culture: capital punishment. As I understand the debate, two schools of thought support this practice today. One is called *retributivist* and maintains that *the punishment must fit the crime*. In other words, those who commit capital offenses should receive capital punishment. The other typical means of supporting the death penalty is called *utilitarian*. This view believes that the (perceived) good consequences of capital punishment justify its practice. In this view, punishment should seek to reform the criminal and/or to deter future crime. Since the criminal obviously cannot be reformed after execution, the death penalty is defended as deterring those who would otherwise commit capital crimes.

The merits of these arguments are the subject of intense, ongoing debate in our country and far transcend the purpose of this commentary. The question before us relates to the biblical materials that speak to the subject. There can be little question that the Bible mandates capital punishment for a variety of offenses. Two passages are foundational: “From each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man” (Gen. 9:5-6); “Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death” (Exod. 21:12).

The death penalty is to be inflicted for: permitting a bull to kill a person (21:29); sacrificing to any god but the Lord (22:20; Deut.13:6-11); breaking the Sabbath (Exod. 35:2; Numbers 15:32-36); adultery (Lev. 20:10); showing contempt to a judge or priest (Deut. 17:12); and rebellion against parents (Deut. 21:18-21). The Lord himself executed wrongdoers for unauthorized fire on his altar (Lev. 10:1-2); rebellion against Moses (Numbers 16:32); deception and lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:5, 10); and stealing God's glory (Acts 12:23).

Despite the clarity of these edicts, there are many who seek to argue against capital punishment on biblical grounds. We'll leave the legal or social merits of the death penalty to those better qualified to comment on them. What follows are reasons it seems to me that the biblical materials could be viewed as arguing against capital punishment. I'll describe these arguments without implying any personal affirmation for their merits.

One: the Lord did not impose the later dictate of Genesis 9:6 with his own response to Cain's murder of Abel. Cain's crime fits every description of a capital murder: it was premeditated and thoroughly unjustified. Yet the Lord did not demand his death, but rather his exile (Gen. 4:10-12), and in fact placed a "mark" on him to prevent his death at the hands of others (Gen. 4:13-15).

Two: retributive justice is unfairly applied to capital crimes. "An eye for an eye" (Exod. 21:24) was not intended to require such punishment but rather to limit vengeance. In the ancient world it was more typical, if someone killed a person, for the person's sons to kill the murderer's entire family in retribution. The Exodus dictate limited punishment to the guilty party. It was intended as a principle rather than a legal dictate. A theft for a theft or rape for a rape would obviously make no sense at all. Retribution is to be limited, not necessarily required.

Three: if we are going to interpret the biblical statements regarding capital punishment as sanction for the practice today, we have no right to limit them to "capital" crimes as they are currently defined. Remember that the death penalty was to be inflicted for sacrificing to any god but the Lord (Exod. 22:20), showing contempt for a judge or priest (Deut.17:12), or disobeying parents (Deut. 21:18-21). It could be argued that our society has no logical right to refuse these sanctions while accepting the biblical prescriptions regarding murder. Additionally, we use the death penalty for crimes the Bible does not mention (such as treason). We should base our support for capital punishment on all the biblical texts, or none.

Four: Jesus' ethic of forgiveness should be applied to all who are guilty, including those who commit capital crimes. We are to forgive those who sin against us at least seventy-seven times (Matt.18:21-22; the number is symbolic of a limitless amount). If we will not forgive others, we cannot claim our own forgiveness (Matt. 6:14-15), for we are to "turn the other cheek" to those who injure us (Matt. 5:39).

Now, while admitting the extreme complexity of this issue, I will offer my own tentative suggestion of support for capital punishment on biblical grounds, by addressing the previous arguments in order.

First, let's consider God's decision not to execute Cain for the murder of Abel. It can be argued that at such an early point in human history, Cain's life was necessary for the propagation of the race. Whatever the merits of this suggestion, the Lord's later edicts made clear how God wished his people to respond to such crimes.

Second, what about the difficulty of seeking retributive justice for all crimes? This principle is not invalidated by the admission that it cannot always be applied literally. The fact that we would not require "a theft for a theft" does not mean that we do not seek punishment appropriate to the crime, such as a longer prison sentence for a larger theft.

Third, it is true that the Bible requires the death penalty for crimes we do not punish in the same way today. Some of the Old Testament edicts were temporal in context (as noted by the fact that they are not repeated later in Scripture). But the requirement regarding murder is repeated every time this sin is discussed, transcending cultural eras.

Fourth, what of Jesus' ethic of forgiveness? Some suggest that capital punishment is decreed only in the Old Testament and thus is not appropriate for New Testament believers. It is true that the New Testament does not contain injunctions requiring the death penalty. But it could not instruct its readers to execute capital criminals, because they had no legal means of doing so. The Hebrews were to stone such criminals themselves, but only the Romans could carry out the death penalty in the New Testament era. Too, God himself used capital punishment against Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:5, 10), and King Herod (Acts 12:23).

Biblical forgiveness does not necessarily extend to legal consequences. For the welfare of all, society has a right and responsibility to punish even those criminals whose victims have forgiven them. Saddam Hussein must face Iraqi justice, no matter the opinions of those personally victimized by his horrific actions.

But what of Jesus' edict to turn "the other cheek" (Matt. 5:39)? Here's the larger context: "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you" (Matt. 5:38-42).

It is always vital to interpret the text within its context, for the Bible can never mean what it never meant. In Jesus' day, as a simple matter of social convention, the left hand was never used in public. If I were to "strike you on the right cheek," I would use my right hand. Such an action would not allow me to use my fist but would rather require a back-handed slap. This was not an act that threatened your life but one that insulted you

publicly. Jesus was not dealing with a criminal or capital crime, but with injury to your status.

Jesus' instruction is clear: we must respond to such insults with grace rather than retribution. If Jesus' words are taken as instructing the entire legal process with regard to criminal behavior, they would require that we refuse to prosecute any crime or punish any criminal.

So I conclude that no biblical warrant exists for invalidating the scriptural mandate that requires capital punishment for capital offenses. As a result, I would adopt the position that such punishment is warranted within the biblical worldview. I am well aware that others differ with my interpretive position and that the issue is more complex than this commentary can discuss in detail. We also have not considered the legal or social implications of this issue, as they lie beyond any expertise I might claim.

This discussion has related only my personal understanding of the biblical issue, and in no sense speaks for others, including BaptistWay Press. This is an involved and emotional issue. Whatever our agreements or disagreements on the subject, we can relate to each other's positions with grace. The English minister Richard Baxter (1615-1691) lived by the motto, "In necessary things, unity; in disputed things, liberty; in all things, charity."⁴ May such a spirit guide us as we seek unity in diversity and God's glory in all things.

Obey God in every realm of life (22:21—23:11)

Our study concludes with consideration for the "least" in our society: the foreigner (alien); widow; and orphan (Exod. 22:21-24). In a culture that lacked any kind of "social security" system, an orphan could starve to death, and a widow could be forced into prostitution to support herself. Too, a foreigner could be excluded from any means of survival. Our text requires us to care for those who cannot care for themselves. Is such a person in your life today?

Next, financial relationships were to be governed by the law of grace (22:25-27). We are to help and not hurt, to refuse opportunity to take advantage of those less fortunate than ourselves. Think how different the issue of global poverty would be if nations and wealthy people obeyed these guidelines.

Now, worship relationships were further clarified by God's call to sacrificial faith (22:28-31). The people were commanded not to blaspheme God or the ruler God had placed over them (22:28). They must not refuse God their offerings (22:29) but give the firstborn to the Lord (22:30). Since they represented their Lord as children represent their Father, so they must be holy in all ways (22:31). When last did your worship require a true sacrifice on your part?

Finally, we return to relationships with our neighbors (23:1-11). Lies are forbidden (23:1); lawsuits are to be governed by honesty (23:2-3); possessions are to be honored (23:4-5); justice must be maintained at all cost (23:6-9); and the Sabbath is to be kept (23:10-12). Again, imagine the difference we would see in our culture if these principles were honored. Where do these principles require a change on your part?

Conclusion

Today's study has examined the full breadth of God's concern for our lives and relationships. No significant dimension has gone untouched. Perhaps you and your class could ask God which of these principles are especially God's practical word for you today. But know that if you ask, God will answer. And you'll be accountable for what you hear.

The tragedy of secular and sacred compartmentalization is that it dishonors God and discourages us. We were made by God to be in constant fellowship with him. Dividing our lives into *his* and *ours* only hurts us both. The greatest joy comes to those who walk most unconditionally in the word and will of our Creator.

The story is told here in Dallas about the Monday morning when Dr. George Truett was on his way to his study at the First Baptist Church. He found a young boy sitting on the steps of the church. The famed pastor, known to Baptists around the world, stopped to talk with the boy. Truett asked him where he went to church. He learned that the boy attended worship at First Baptist.

The pastor smiled and said, "Oh, then, you're a Christian."

"No, sir," the boy replied, "I'm not."

Dr. Truett was surprised and asked, "Why not?"

"No one has ever told me how to become a Christian," the boy explained.

Dr. Truett then sat down beside the boy on the steps. "You mean you've been listening to me preach each week but don't know how to come to Christ for yourself?"

"No, sir," the boy admitted.

Dr. Truett then took the boy's hand, explained salvation, and led him to faith in Christ. One of the most remarkable pastors in Baptist history was as committed to his Lord on Monday as on Sunday.

Are you?

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² *The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*, chapter 55. See www.ccel.org/fathers2/.

³ *The Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp*, chapter IV. See www.ccel.org/fathers2/.

⁴ *Columbia World of Quotations*. See www.bartleby.com/66/70/62770.html.

Session 10

Spark: Exodus 21:12-20, 22-27; 22:21-23:11

Kindle

1. What is the punishment in this covenant community for someone who takes the life of another intentionally?

2. What is the punishment for the covenant community for a person who unintentionally takes another life?

3. What is the punishment for attacking a father or mother?

4. What was the punishment in the covenant community for striking or killing a servant or slave?

5. What is the guide for punishment that is found in verses 23-25?

6. What is the instruction regarding the treatment of “aliens” who are in the community of covenant?

7. What is the punishment for the mistreatment of widows and orphans?

8. What is the guidance for the lending and borrowing of money?

9. List the all of the “do nots” you find in Chapter 23:1-11:

Explosive Thinking

1. Our author expresses two excuses in this chapter. One is on Capital Punishment and the other is slavery. In what way do you agree with the author's treatment of these subjects? In what way do you disagree with his conclusions? In what way do you think living in a democracy instead of a covenant community like Israel might change one's interpretation on these subjects? What questions do you still have regarding these issues?
 2. In this covenant community the care for those who were powerless were primary in the instructions of God. God gives attention to the "alien or foreigner" in their midst. God is concerned with poor and for those who may be without cloak or shelter. In addition, God is concerned with the widow and the orphan who were powerless in this culture. As a follower of Jesus, how do you believe you are to act toward the alien, the poor and the powerless? What are some tangible things you can do to follow these instructions of God?

3. Many see the punishment described in the covenant community as excessive. However, the phrase eye for an eye and tooth for tooth... was an instruction that was intended to halt endless cycle of revenge. Jesus gives us more teaching on this subject when he says:

You have heard that it was said, 'AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.' But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two." Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. Matthew 5:38-42

As followers of Jesus, we are to interpret all scripture through the teaching of Jesus and the acts of Jesus. How do you interpret these commands in light of Jesus' teaching? How is Jesus' teaching not a change in this command but a further revelation of God's intention for the way we live with others?

4. In Exodus 23:1-11 we are instructed to do what is right regardless of the situation. We are to do justice even when the crowd is against us. We are to care for the property of our enemy. We are not to oppress the alien. We are not to make false charges about others. In what ways can you live out these instructions in your life?

BAPTISTWAY PRESS® Adult Online Bible Commentary

By Dr. Jim Denison, Pastor, Park Cities Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas

Studies in Exodus: Freed to Follow God

Lesson Eleven

A Broken Covenant and a Second Chance

Focal Text

Exodus 32:7-34

Background

Exodus 32

Main Idea

When the people broke God's covenant, God gave them another chance through Moses' intercession.

Question to Explore

How does forgiveness come?

Quick Read

God will not share his glory, but God will share his grace.

Commentary

Last spring, Luke Tresoglavic walked into a lifeguard post on a beach north of Sydney, Australia, looking for help with the small shark attached to his leg. Mr. Tresoglavic was snorkeling on a reef when the shark attacked him. He swam 1,000 feet to shore, but the shark wouldn't let go. Some people on the beach tried to help, but to no avail.

So the man got into his car, drove to the clubhouse, and asked for help. The lifeguards flushed the shark's gills with fresh water. It then loosened its grip, with blood oozing from seventy punctures in the man's leg. Mr. Tresoglavic was treated at a hospital. The shark later died. Now it's safe to go back into the water.¹

What's hanging onto your heart this week, refusing to let go? What is the secret or shame that lives in your past, the guilt that haunts your thoughts, the skeletons in your soul? Where's the lifeguard who can set you free?

The people of Israel had come so far. They had been rescued from the mightiest king and army the world had ever seen, through the parted Red Sea. They had been fed miraculously by God and led forward toward a Promised Land where they would be kept

by their God for all time. They had committed themselves in covenant to obey this God for all time (Exodus 19:8). Now they were camped on the edge of the mountain where God was speaking to their leader. Here, on the edge of greatness, they committed the greatest sin of the Exodus. Why?

Human nature doesn't change. When I saw the Egyptian pyramids I realized that the pharaohs were as afraid of death as any of us. Because human nature remains constant, the Bible remains relevant. Too, because human nature doesn't change, any sin others can commit is a sin I can commit as well. If the Hebrews could worship a golden calf on the side of the mountain of God, so can we—unless we learn from their failure and take steps to prevent it in our lives.

What happened?

Moses had been on the mountain with God for forty days (Exod. 24:18). The same people he led from slavery to freedom were now ready to give up on him. They wanted a leader and a god they could see and control—one who would not leave their sight (32:2). So Aaron took the jewelry which was part of their plunder from Egypt (12:36) and fashioned a golden “calf” (32:3-4).² The word means *a young bull in its first strength*. (When the word translated “calf” is used in Psalm 106:19, the parallel word in Psalm 106:20 is the word for “ox.”)

It is possible that the Hebrews saw this image as connected with the omnipotence of the God whose power they had witnessed. Alternately, such an idol might have been reminiscent of Apis, the sacred bull of Egypt, although this pagan god was not worshiped in image form. The Canaanites often fashioned their Baal as a bull. The image is found in other ancient pagan worship as well. It may be that the Jews were simply venerating the fertility and strength associated with the animal.

Most likely Aaron made the idol by using gold leaf to cover a wooden form (given that it was later “burned,” Exod. 32:20). The people welcomed their new idol with sacrifices and parties (32:5-6). “Revelry” suggests in the Hebrew a sexual orgy associated with ancient fertility rites.

None of this sin escaped the notice of God (32:7-8). He knew the Hebrews to be a “stiff-necked people” (32:9), a metaphor taken from agriculture referring to a horse or ox that would not respond to its master’s rope. So God was ready to destroy the nation and make another from Moses alone (32:10). If Moses had not interceded on their behalf, the Hebrews would have been destroyed before their history had begun (32:11-14). Instead, the Lord “relented” (32:14). The word translated “relented” means that God chose a different strategy in response to Moses’ intercession rather than that God repented or changed his mind and character.

While Moses did not want God to annihilate the people, Moses would quickly take steps to punish their sin and prevent its reoccurrence. He smashed the two tablets of the Decalogue (32:19). He burned their golden calf, ground it into dust, and made the people

drink it (32:19-20). But the people were still “running wild” and were “out of control” (32:25). These phrases use the Hebrew word also used in Proverbs 29:18, “Where there is no revelation, the people cast off *restraint*” (italics for emphasis).

So Moses called Israel to himself, rallying the Levites, his own tribe (Exod. 32:26). The Levites’ faithfulness would lead to their later status as the tribe of priests. Moses sent them through the nation, killing 3,000 (32:27-29). After Moses’ second intercession (see more below), the Lord chose not to destroy the entire nation (32:30-33). But God punished their iniquity, lest they repeat it (32:34-35).

We can and should condemn such apostasy on the part of God’s chosen people. But we should also admit that we are no less sinful than they. Have you ever put an object of human invention before the Lord, allowing material things to assume greater importance than our Father? Have you ever grown impatient with God and gotten ahead of God’s will and plan? Have you ever indulged your sinful impulses at the expense of your relationship with a holy God? So have I.

Jesus died for their sin and ours. The ground is level at the foot of the cross.

According to legend, when Barabbas led his revolt in Jerusalem, several people were killed, among them the only son of a carpenter in that city. With revenge in his heart, that father bribed the Roman soldiers to let him make the three crosses used the day of Jesus’ execution. He made the cross for Barabbas much heavier than the other two, to increase the suffering of his son’s murderer. However, when Barabbas was freed and Jesus crucified in his place, our Savior had to carry his cross. That’s why it was so heavy that Jesus stumbled and Simon of Cyrene had to help carry it.

It’s only a legend, but its spiritual point is true. Jesus’ cross *was* heavier than any other—not because it weighed more physically, but spiritually. He carried the sins of the world on it—including those of the ancient Hebrews; including mine; including yours.

Why did it happen?

Now let’s ask, why did this tragic sin occur? And why do we still commit such sin today?

First, *we have inherited a sin nature*. Remember Psalm 51:5: “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” This verse does not mean that babies or fetuses sin; it means that we have all inherited a sin nature, a propensity to sin.

Romans 5:12 says, “Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.” We have each inherited a tendency toward sin.

Second, *we choose to sin of our own free will*. While we have this nature, we are nonetheless responsible for our own sin. God does not make us sin, and *the devil made*

me do it is a cop-out. Our family backgrounds and circumstances are often contributing factors, but the choice is ours. We choose to sin.

We choose to sin when we become impatient with the plan of God (Exod. 32:1), refusing to wait for God's will to be revealed to us. We choose to sin when we bow to peer pressure from others (32:2, 22), putting our status with them before our standing with God. We choose to sin when we elevate what we can see above the One we cannot (32:3-4).

We choose to sin when we give freedom to our carnal nature (32:5-6), imitating the immorality of the pagan culture that surrounds us. The Book of James is blunt: "Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death" (James 1:14-15).

So why do these things happen? Because we have a sin nature and we choose to sin, we are deceived into thinking we can do so without consequence. The results are disastrous and devastating.

An elderly man and his grandson were talking together. The boy said, "I feel as if I have two wolves fighting in my heart. One is selfish and proud. The other is pure and kind. Which will win?" His grandfather replied, "The one you feed."

What do we do when we sin?

King David had an affair with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. She became pregnant. To cover his sin, eventually David had Uriah killed and took the widow as his wife. But God knew what David had done, and God sent the prophet Nathan to expose David's sin.

In this one event David broke nine of God's Ten Commandments. He broke in order the tenth, coveting his neighbor's wife; the seventh, by committing adultery; the eighth by stealing her for himself; the sixth by murdering her husband; the ninth, by lying about his sin; the fifth, by dishonoring his parents; the second, by making an idol of Bathsheba; and the first and third, by shaming God and his name. At least he didn't break the Sabbath, as far as we know.

If King David could commit disastrous sin, so can any of us. But from his repentance we discover steps to our own. A quick review of Psalm 51 may help you and your class deal with the sins that the Exodus text exposes in us all. How do we respond to our failures with our Father?

First, *we turn to God* (Psalm 51:1-2). Ask for God's "mercy," which is not getting the punishment we deserve. Seek God's "unfailing love," the Old Testament word for *grace*, which is getting the love and forgiveness we don't deserve. Ask God to "blot out" your transgressions, a Hebrew phrase that means to wash the garment until it is clean and the

stain is gone. Our tendency when we sin is to run from God and God's church, when we need to do the opposite. The sick need a doctor; the sinner needs God.

Second, *we admit our sin to God* (Ps. 51:3-4). Our human reaction is to excuse our sin, to transfer blame to others, or to rationalize what we have done. A lawyer once told that he had never met a guilty defendant. Every one had justified his or her behavior somehow.

David was honest—he admitted his “transgressions,” which means *to cross the boundaries of what is right*. He acknowledged his “sin,” his moral failure. He stated correct theology: “Against you only have I sinned” (Ps. 51:4). We hurt other people, sometimes in horrible ways; but by theological definition we “sin” against God.

Third, *we come to God in repentance and contrition* (Ps. 51:16-17). Rather than seeking to excuse sin (Ps. 51:16), come before the Lord on bended knee and with broken heart. When we are genuinely contrite and sorry for our horrible choices and actions, we position ourselves to receive the forgiveness God’s grace wants to give.

God promised in 2 Chronicles 7:14, “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and forgive their sin, and heal their land.” But we must bow before God in humility and contrition.

Fourth, *we claim God’s cleansing* (Ps. 51:7-12). When we confess our sin, God does truly forgive and cleanse us. Hyssop was used by a priest to sprinkle the blood of a sacrifice over the sinner. So God cleanses us by the blood of his Son, Jesus Christ, who paid for all our sins. First John 1:9 is clear: “If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” Every time.

Last, *we make restitution to those we have hurt* (Ps. 51:13-19). David vowed to “teach transgressors your ways,” from his personal experience, so that “sinners will turn back to you” (Ps. 51:13). He would “sing of your righteousness” and “declare your praise” in worship (Ps. 51:14-15). He would lead the entire nation to “righteous sacrifices” as their godly king (Ps. 51:19). In other words, he would make restitution to the nation he had so injured. In fact, David wrote this psalm for public use by the people, not just private use in his worship, so that all would know of his sin, his repentance, and God’s grace.

We make restitution—not so that we can earn God’s forgiveness, but in gratitude for it; not so that others will forgive us, but so that we can help those we have hurt. We do this by grace, as God has been gracious to us.

These steps must be taken now, before the spiritual cancer metastasizes and the patient dies. Oswald Chambers was right: “We have to recognize that sin is a fact, not a defect; sin is red-handed mutiny against God. Either God or sin must die in my life. The New Testament brings us right down to this one issue. If sin rules in me, God’s life in me will be killed; if God rules in me, sin in me will be killed. There is no possible ultimate but that.”³

How do we respond to sin in others?

Our Exodus text has shown us how and why we sin. Before we close our study, let's learn from Moses how to respond to the sins of others.

This great man of God interceded for the people twice (Exod. 32:11-14, 31-32). Later, when the people refused to follow him into the Promised Land, he interceded on their behalf a third time (Number 14:13-20). Moses' intercession was crucial to their continued survival at the hands of God.

At his first intercession, Moses turned down an opportunity to remake the nation from himself (Exod. 32:10), a dream that dictators and conquerors have wished to fulfill ever since. Instead, he asked God to "blot me out of the book you have written" if God would not forgive their sin (32:32). This "book" is the "book of life" (Ps. 69:28; see Isaiah 4:3). The New Testament would reference it as the book of those who have eternal life (Philippians 4:3; Revelation 3:5). In other words, Moses was willing to forfeit his eternal standing with God for the sake of his people.

From Moses' example we learn to respond to the sins of others by intercession. We have no right to judge them, for there is no sin we cannot commit ourselves. Moses did not fall into their apostasy on this occasion. Moses, however, would commit his own sin later (see Num. 20:1-13) and join the people in forfeiting his right to enter the Promised Land. Rather than seeking retribution or revenge, it should be our response to intercede and pardon. Justice and judgment belong to God alone.

Have you heard of the *revenge industry*? This is a new kind of business that caters to those who have been wronged and are unwilling to forgive. One such business sells dead flowers, black roses, boxes of fish heads, melted chocolates, and stones with curses on them. Another has five full-time employees and had to hire six more for Valentine's Day week. Yet another will sell you a variety of magic-spell kits and voodoo dolls for the person you hate.

Only in America, you say? No, the revenge industry is as old as Cain, the brother of Abel, and as appealing to us as it was to him. Rather than seek retribution, we are to offer intercession, leaving the outcome with the Lord.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was martyred while practicing these very words, said about those who sin, "The Christian must treat his enemy as a brother, and requite his hostility with love. His behavior must be determined not by the way others treat him, but by the treatment he himself receives from Jesus; it has only one source, and that is the will of Jesus."⁴

During the Cold War, some sympathetic West Germans threw food and clothes across the Berlin Wall to their starving, shivering neighbors in the East. The Communist

government was enraged and threw mounds of trash across the Wall to the West. The West Germans put a sign on the trash that read, “Each gives what he has.”

As you pray for others, guard your own soul. Learn the truth of Scripture: “Be sure your sin will find you out” (Num. 32:23). You are not the one person who can sin without consequence. Sin will defeat and destroy you, given the chance. Guard your own soul. Stay close to God in God’s word and prayer, so close that the enemy has no foothold in your life. Stay accountable to people you trust, so they can tell you when they see something wrong and help you stay right. Stay on your knees, for the sake of others and for your own soul as well.

Closing

Exodus 32 records one of the great tragedies in Hebrew history and profiles the sins that still plague the human spirit. Undoubtedly you and your class face some temptation this week that fits the pattern we have studied. At such a time, we have a choice—we can be Aaron or we can be Moses. We can choose to seek the rewards of sin or the rewards of godliness. We can follow our own will or that of our Father. Choose wisely.

The Russian rabbis told the story of Isaac, son of Yekel, living in Krakov. Isaac was a very poor man whose family was often hungry. One night in a dream he saw the distant city of Prague, with a certain bridge and a treasure buried beneath it. The dream recurred vividly every night for two weeks. Finally he decided to walk to Prague to see for himself.

After several days on the road, he arrived in the city, found the bridge, and went beneath it to look for the treasure. Suddenly a soldier grabbed him and started questioning him. What was he doing prowling under the bridge? Being an innocent man, he told the truth: he was looking for a treasure he had dreamed was underneath the bridge.

The soldier roared with laughter: “You stupid man! Don’t you know that you cannot trust what you see in dreams? Why, for the last two weeks I myself have dreamed that far away in Krakov in the house of a Jew named Isaac, son of Yekel, there is a treasure buried underneath the stove in his kitchen. But wouldn’t it be the most idiotic thing in the world if I were to go all the way there to look for it? One could waste a lifetime looking for a treasure that doesn’t exist!” Still laughing, the soldier gave Isaac a kick and let him go.

So Isaac, son of Yekel, walked back to Krakov, to his own home, where he moved the stove in his kitchen, found the treasure buried there, and lived to a ripe old age as a wealthy man.

What joy is waiting for you at home with God?

¹ See www.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/asiapcf/02/11/australia.shark.ap/.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in *Adult Online Bible Commentary* are from The Holy Bible, New International Version (North American Edition), copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by the International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.

³ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (Westwood, NJ: Barbour and Company, 1963), 175, reading for June 23.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, rev. ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), 164.

TNT
Exodus
Freed to Follow

Session 11

Spark: Exodus 32

Kindle

1. Where was Moses as chapter 32 begins?
2. What do the people want Aaron to do for them?
3. How and what does Aaron make for the people?
4. What was planned in front of the newly created god?
5. What is God's response to what the people have done?
6. What does Moses argue before God?
7. What does Moses say to Aaron regarding the building of the golden calf?
8. What happens as a result of this sin against God?
9. How many are put to death as a result of this sin?
10. What does Moses ask of God?
11. What is God's response?

Explosive Thinking

1. Moses was away, and it seemed in this moment God was silent. The people grew impatient with God and with Moses and demanded Aaron to create a new god. The Golden Calf was more than likely a creation of a familiar god from Egypt. In a moment when they believed they could not rely on God, they turned to a god that was familiar and tangible. How do we sometimes create or turn to a god that is familiar when we grow tired of waiting on God or decide we cannot trust God to act?
 2. Aaron is seen as a passive and reluctant participant in this sin but yet still a participant. How hard is it to go against the crowd? In what ways do we tend to be passive in regard to sin and reluctant participants?
 3. God's anger burns against the people and Moses makes intercession. What do you think your role is regarding the sin of others? In what ways can you make intercession with others in regard to their sin?

4. The consequences of this sin against God are the killing of about 3,000 as a result. This seems like a drastic response on behalf of Moses. In what way does this indicate the seriousness of sin? How does God sending Jesus to die for our sin support this view of sin? How do we tend to view sin?
 5. Moses confesses to God that the sin of the people is great and asks for God's forgiveness. Moses offers his own standing before God for the forgiveness of the others. How should we view the sin of others? What "sacrifice" can we make to help others find forgiveness through Christ?

BAPTISTWAY PRESS® Adult Online Bible Commentary

By Dr. Jim Denison, Pastor, Park Cities Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas

Studies in Exodus: Freed to Follow God

Lesson Twelve

Starting Over

Focal Text

Exodus 34:1-28

Background

Exodus 34

Main Idea

Making a fresh start spiritually calls for renewing our commitment to God's covenant.

Question to Explore

When have you found it necessary to renew your commitment to God's covenant?

Quick Read

It's not too late to get right with God—but there are strings attached.

Commentary

Have you ever viewed a work of impressionistic art? I was recently at the Dallas Museum of Art and found myself before a large Monet. The closer to the painting I moved, the more chaotic it became. When I stood fifteen or so feet away, Monet's individual brush strokes melded into a beautiful, picturesque scene.

The thought occurred to me: my life is but a very small part of a very large work of art. I cannot see how my few years and deeds are part of a larger landscape, but I know by faith that they are. One day I will be privileged to see my life from the vantage point of heaven and know that the Master Painter guided my brush to the Painter's glory and my good.

However, there are times when I get my part of the painting wrong. I smudge the paint, get outside the design I am intended to follow, or use the wrong color. The good news is that I can clean off what I have done and paint over it. The Master Painter will help me begin again. But the Painter wants me to get it right this time.

Where do you need to begin your painting again today? How can you?

Page 1 of 7

Come back to God (34:1-4)

This week's study hinges on a simple invitation from God to Moses: "Present yourself to me" (Exodus 34:2).¹ The Lord could have rejected Moses as the representative of his sinful people. Instead, the Lord invited Moses (and thus the people Moses led) back into relationship with him.

Moses was to make two new tablets on which the Lord would write (Exod. 34:1). Some Bible scholars believe the two tablets were identical to each other. One was for God and the other for the people, as was typical in covenant agreements. Since both were placed in the ark of the covenant, the idea is that God received his copy as the people preserved theirs. The "words" God wrote on them were covenant provisions and legal stipulations (as the Hebrew for "words" makes clear).

In this simple invitation we find our partnership with God. As we work, God works. When we do what we can, God does what we cannot. The Sovereign Lord of the universe does not need our works or our resources, but the Lord chooses by grace to use them for his larger purposes. How horrible it would be for the Father to look at our lives and say, *You have nothing to give.* You and I cannot produce the revelation of God. But our lives can be the tablets on which God's word is written for the world to see.

Note that Moses was to come to God alone (34:3). No one can come back to God for us. Faith cannot be inherited; repentance cannot be secondhand. Many believe they are Christians because their family went to church while they were growing up, or because their parents are godly people. You may be teaching people this weekend whose faith is the product of their circumstances.

But each of us must come to the Father ourselves. Attending your wedding does not make me married, for I must stand at my own altar. One day we will each stand alone before God in judgment (2 Corinthians 5:10), and so we had best learn to stand alone before God in grace. When last did you challenge your class to climb a spiritual mountain to meet with the Father alone each day?

Moses did as the Lord required (34:4), for obedience is the means by which we come back to God. We do not do this, though, to merit God's grace. Nothing Moses did here atoned for the people's sin or earned relationship with God. Obedience positioned Moses to receive the word and grace that God intended to give.

So we find here the first step in beginning again: come back to your Father. Don't wait until you're well to see the doctor or clean to take a bath. If you need a fresh start in your life and soul, go to God immediately. It will never be easier to return to your Lord than it is right now.

Accept God's offer of renewed relationship (34:5-10)

In response to Moses' obedient return, God "proclaimed his name, the Lord" (34:5). In giving Moses his name, the Lord was extending personal relationship, renewing the covenant of grace by which their relationship existed.

"The Lord" translates *YHWH*, God's personal name first revealed to the world through Moses at the burning bush (see 3:15). It conveys the sense of God's omnipresent sovereignty—the God who was, is, and ever shall be. His declaration in the Book of Revelation is similar: "I am the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty" (Revelation 1:8). When God gave Moses his name, God in effect held out his hand of welcome and relationship.

Trust God's grace (34:6-7)

Next God proclaimed his gracious character. Since the Lord's nature does not change (see Hebrews 13:8), the descriptions that follow still characterize our God today:

- "Compassionate." The Hebrew word *rachum* comes from the same root as *rechem*, which means *the mother's womb*. So the word shows God's compassion for us to be that of a mother for her newborn baby.
- "Gracious." The word means to express kindness, especially to one in need.
- "Slow to anger." God's anger is real, but he comes to it only after we have refused his grace. It has been well said, *God deals with us as gently as he can or as harshly as he must*.
- "Abounding in love and faithfulness." "Abounding" means to possess more than we could ever expect or imagine. "Love" translates the Hebrew word *chesed*, meaning covenant or steadfast love, the Old Testament equivalent to grace. "Faithfulness" points to God's complete trustworthiness under all circumstances.
- "Maintaining love to thousands" shows that God's covenant love extends to us all. There are no conditions except that we accept and live in this covenant.
- "Forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." "Wickedness" translates the Hebrew word *avon*, referring to inherent crookedness or original sin. "Rebellion" points to the results of our sin nature. "Sin" speaks to moral failure. All of these are forgiven by God's amazing grace.

Note that these characteristics of grace are repeated often in the Old Testament: "The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion" (Numbers 14:18); "You are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love" (Nehemiah 9:17); "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love" (Psalm 103:8); "You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (Jonah 4:2).

Where do you need such grace in your life? How will you extend this grace this week?

Fear God's judgment (34:7)

After proclaiming his name and his grace, God next proclaimed his righteousness (34:7). His holiness will not allow him to “leave the guilty unpunished.” Rather, God “punishes the children and their children for the sin of their fathers to the third and fourth generation” (34:7).

This problematic phrase does not mean that innocent people are punished by God for sins they could have done nothing to prevent. The Hebrews apparently understood the phrase in this way, so that Jeremiah and Ezekiel corrected their theology: “The soul who sins is the one who will die” (Ezekiel 18:4; see Jeremiah 31:29-30).

This warning points to the natural, inevitable consequences of our sins. Note that in Hebrew society it was typical for sons to settle near their parents. Given the age at which people married in those ancient times, it was not unusual for a man to have immediate relationship with three or four generations in his home or neighborhood. His sins would have direct consequences for those under his direct influence.

One winter night, a drunken father made his way home from the neighborhood bar. He heard a noise behind him, turned, and was shocked by what he saw: his small boy, walking in his staggered footsteps through the snow. The father never drank again.

The consequences of our sins do follow us. But God holds us directly responsible for our own moral failures.

Renew God's covenant (34:8-10)

Moses stepped by faith into a new relationship with this gracious, holy God. He fell before God in worship, pleaded with God to continue his presence with his people, prayed for God’s forgiveness, and asked to be God’s “inheritance.”

God responded with two covenant promises. First, God would do “wonders” no other nation had ever witnessed. They would see God’s mighty hand in his wilderness provision, the parting of the Jordan River, the fall of Jericho, and the miraculous conquest of Canaan. Second, others would see God’s awesome work through his people. Perhaps they would then come to make the Hebrew God their own Lord.

We come back to God by trusting God’s grace, fearing God’s judgment, and accepting God’s covenant love for us. If the Lord would receive back the idolatrous Hebrews, he will receive you and me as well. No sin is beyond God’s pardon, no soul beyond God’s love.

Walk in God's word (34:11-28)

God’s covenant is offered by grace, not works. But we must live in that covenant in order to experience its benefits. Radio waves may be filling the room where you are reading these words, but you must turn on a receiver to hear them. The covenant requirements

that follow are each intended for God's glory and our good. They are not a works righteousness but a relationship founded on grace.

Do not compromise your faith (34:12, 15-16)

First, the people were warned not to allow the sins of others to become their own. They were not to make a treaty with the people who lived in the Promised Land or do anything else that would allow the pagan Canaanites to continue to live there (34:12a). This statute was not required because God does not love all the peoples of the world but because "they will be a snare among you" (34:12b). They were in fact "a snare." Canaanite idolatry and sexual immorality would continually plague Israel.

Such idolatry would tempt God's people to "prostitute" themselves to other gods (34:15). The Bible often speaks of our relationship to God as that of a husband and wife. (See Isaiah 54:5: "Your Maker is your husband—the Lord Almighty is his name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the god of all the earth.") Spiritual adultery is as wrong as marital unfaithfulness.

Worship God alone (34:13-14, 17)

Now the covenant moves from reaction to initiative: remove anything that might tempt you to dishonor God with your worship or your life. The "Asherah poles" were used by Canaanite worshipers to venerate their goddess of fertility. So they may have been locations of sexual immorality; hence their specific mention here. We all have a place of unusual temptation, and we must remove it before we succumb. As Luther was fond of saying, *If your head is made of butter, don't sit near the fire.*

Ours is a "jealous" God (34:14) in that God insists that God's people maintain their covenant with him. This is for our good and for God's glory. We today think of jealousy as a fault or weakness, but here it simply points to the fact that God loves us passionately and wants the very best for us as his children.

Thus verse 17 prohibits "cast idols," any material distraction from the one true Lord. Anything that is more important to you than the Lord can be a "cast idol" today. Is there any possession you would not give up if God asked?

Remember God's grace (34:18, 22-23)

The "Feast of Unleavened Bread" (34:18) was an annual reminder of God's mercy and provision in their lives. Observed in mid-March to mid-April (their month of "Abib"), it was one of the three annual feasts at which God's grace was to be celebrated (34:23).

A second celebration was the "Feast of Weeks" (34:22), since it was held seven weeks after the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Held in mid-May to mid-June, it is called "Pentecost" in the New Testament.

The third celebration was the "Feast of Ingathering" (34:22; or "Tabernacles" or "Booths"). It was observed in mid-September to mid-October.

In these ways, the Hebrews were to remind themselves of God's continued grace and their covenant relationship with their Lord (see also 23:14-17). In what ways could your class continue such reminders in a Christian context?

Offer sacrifices of worship (34:19-26)

All genuine relationships come at a cost. So it was with the Hebrews' covenant with their God. The firstborn, usually considered the most valuable of the livestock, was to be returned to the Lord, even as they were to "redeem" their firstborn sons with a sacrifice (34:19-20).

All were to bring sacrifices of some kind to the Lord (34:20). Too, the Sabbath must be kept, even when it is not convenient to do so (34:21). The more you cannot spare time for God, the more you must. They were to celebrate God's goodness according to the three feasts God prescribed (34:22-24; see 34:18).

In all their worship, they were to give God their best, not just what was convenient (34:26). In the same way, our worship and offerings today are not sacrifices unless they cost us more than we can spare.

Note the prohibition, "Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk" (34:26b; also in 23:19). This injunction apparently referenced a Canaanite worship ritual. There is nothing intrinsically wrong or unhealthy about this practice, but such activity participated in pagan worship and so must be avoided. The later rabbinic rule against serving meat and milk in the same meal derives from this injunction.

Exodus 34:10-26 is sometimes called the "ritual dialogue," in distinction from the "moral decalogue" we call the Ten Commandments. Perhaps these ten "words" or commandments relate to the rituals of worship even as the Ten Commandments relate to the moral issues of life. However, verse 28 seems to include all we have read as part of the "Ten Commandments," showing that the descriptive term could be used for more material than Exodus 20:1-17, where the Ten Commandments are first listed.

As we return to God, we must walk in God's word and will. We refuse to compromise our faith (again), choosing to worship the Lord alone. We remember God's grace as we offer sacrifices of worship. Our gracious Lord receives all we offer him by faith.

Conclusion

Today we are given the same covenant opportunity that God extended to his people in Exodus 34. We can write these words on our lives (34:27), meeting with the Father until our hearts are right with him (34:28). In this way we can renew our own covenant with our Maker and Redeemer.

Remember the scene in Joshua 24 where Joshua stood before the assembled tribes of Israel at the end of his life and leadership. He reminded them of God's faithfulness and challenged them to renew their faithfulness to him. They replied, "Far be it from us to

forsake the Lord to serve other gods! . . . We too will serve the Lord, because he is our God” (Joshua 24:16, 18).

Is God calling you and your class to a similar renewal of covenant this week? What step are you to take next?

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TNT
Exodus
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Session 12

Spark: Exodus 34

Kindle

1. What is Moses to bring to the Mountain of God?
2. What does God say he will write on the stones?
3. What message does God proclaim about His own character?
4. What is God going to do as a great sign for the people of Israel?
5. Why are the people of Israel not to make a treaty with the other nations?
6. What are the two feasts the people are to keep?
7. Name the other commandments you find in this passage.
8. What was Moses' face like when he had been with the Lord?
9. With what did Moses hide his face when he spoke?

Explosive Thinking

1. The fact that God allows the stones of the Ten Commandments to be recreated is a sign of God's mercy. God says he is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness. Describe a time when you experienced God's grace and faithfulness:

Share a time when God gave you a second chance:

2. We sometimes forget that the Promise Land was already inhabited. Yet, God says he will clear the way for the Israelites, but they are to tear down the altars of the foreign gods and they are not to make a treaty as to create an opportunity for sin against God. In what ways do we compromise with sin?

Our "foreign gods" are many times the things we know compete for the allegiance and worship of God. What are some of the foreign gods we have in our lives and in our culture? In what ways do we keep our foreign gods as a "backup plan" even when we have made a commitment to God?

3. When Moses returned from the mountain, his face was radiant, and the people knew he had been with God. What are some of the ways that others know we are followers of Jesus? What should be obvious about following Jesus in your opinion?

BAPTISTWAY PRESS® Adult Online Bible Commentary

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Studies in Exodus: Freed to Follow God

Lesson Thirteen

God Dwelling Among Us

Focal Text

Exodus 25:1-8; 29:43-46; 33:7-11,14-16; 40:16-38

Background

Exodus 25:1—31:11; 33; 35:4—40:38

Main Idea

Throughout history, God has taken measures to dwell among people in special ways.

Question to Explore

Where is God?

Quick Read

Moses' preparations for tabernacle worship serve as a model for our encounter with God today.

Commentary

A skeptic once wrote on a board, *GODISNOWHERE*. A believer saw the message, smiled, and announced, “God is now here.” Which will it be for you and your class this Sunday? this day?

As we conclude our study of Exodus, we come to some of the most applicable passages to be found in the entire book. Moses' work in establishing and preparing the tabernacle illustrates ways we encounter God today. If we will do this week what Moses and his people did, we will meet God as did they.

Our Lord longs for our presence. Do we long for his?

Encourage the offerings of the people (25:1-8)

The God who inhabited the tabernacle obviously could have built it. God made the universe in six days; God could have made this movable tent. But God called them to do

what they could, so he might do what he could. This is the divine partnership God intends with all God's people.

Note three facts about these offerings. First, they were to be the best the people could give. "Gold, silver and bronze" were the finest, most precious metals available to them (Exodus 25:3). "Blue, purple and scarlet yarn" were the colors and fabrics of royalty. "Fine linen" was used by Egyptian royalty. "Goat hair" was sturdy material used to build tents, employed here to ensure that the tabernacle would withstand years of use (Exod. 25:4).¹

"Ram skins dyed red and hides of sea cows" would be akin to fine leather today. "Acacia wood" was so hard that insects could not easily affect it (25:5). "Olive oil for the light" was difficult to ignite, but it would burn for a long time and produce a pleasing aroma (25:6). The "spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense" included some of the most valuable and costly spices known to their day (25:6; see 30:23-33) . The "onyx stones and other gems" used for the priestly ephod and breastpiece were likewise valuable and beautiful (25:7). The God who gave his best for us deserves our best in gratitude.

Second, these gifts were made to God, not to people: "bring *me* an offering" (25:2, italics added for emphasis). We do not give *to* the church today, but *through* the church to God. We cannot write our checks to "God," and so we make them payable to our local congregation. Then the Lord tells the church how to spend the Lord's money. We do not adopt budgets or mission giving strategies so that our members can decide how to spend their money. Rather we follow the Spirit's leadership in formulating and following such plans so that God can show us how to spend his resources. Giving is vertical, not horizontal.

One of the great frustrations I have experienced across twenty years in the pastorate is the degree to which members think of giving as dues rendered for services received. We envision our tithes and offerings as bills we pay to a kind of social club. We participate in those activities that meet our needs, and then we pay for those services we choose. Our giving is horizontal—from people to people.

In God's plan, our gifts are made to him, through his church, for God's kingdom on earth. They are to be provided from hearts that are grateful for God's goodness to us. No other spirit or purpose meets God's desire for his people.

Third, their gifts were to be made voluntarily. "Offering" (25:2) is the word for a contribution made by their choice, not the "tithe" for which they were obligated. Each person "whose heart prompts him to give" was to provide such offerings. God wants us to give from hearts of gratitude, not guilt—not so that God will bless us, but because God has.

When we give our best to God from grateful hearts, God honors our gifts and uses them to do what we cannot: "have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among

them” (25:8). God always inhabits the praises and worship of God’s people. When we give as God directs, God gives his joyous presence to our worship and lives.

Expect the Lord to dwell among us (29:43-46; 33:7-11, 14-16)

Our next section makes this assurance even clearer. God promises that he will meet with his people, consecrating their place of worship with his glory (29:43). He will be their personal God (29:46). As God spoke with Moses face to face in the “tent of meeting” (33:7-11), so God would meet with God’s people in this larger tent they would construct. His presence would stay with them through all the years to come, distinguishing them as God’s unique people on earth (33:14-16).

These promises are conditioned only on the faithful obedience of God’s people—not so they could earn God’s presence, but so they could receive and experience it. They could come to the tabernacle with expectation that the Creator of the universe would meet them in their worship. They would never be disappointed.

What do you and your class expect from your worship this Sunday? Do you believe that God will hear your praise, speak to you through God’s word, and receive your offerings and worship? Do you expect to be transformed by your experience of God’s presence? Or do you expect a routine religious hour and act? You will find no more than you seek.

So this week, seek God’s presence, nothing less. Measure worship by the degree to which you honor the Audience of One, and experience God’s power as a result.

There is only one place in Scripture where we are given an action we “must” do to worship God. When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, Jesus declared, “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). To worship “in spirit” is to engage personally and passionately in the veneration of God. It is to worship with our attitudes, not just our actions—with our hearts, not just our hands; with our emotions, not just our attendance. To worship in “truth” is to engage our minds in the study of God’s revelation. It is to seek that word for which God brought us to this service, and apply its truth to our lives. We have not worshiped God unless we have sought God in the personal, passionate, intellectual pursuit of God’s holy presence.

When we seek God in this way, we can expect to meet him in God’s glory and grace. In fact, we must.

A young preacher once asked the great pulpiteer Charles Spurgeon the plaintive question, “Why is it that more people don’t respond when I preach?” Spurgeon asked, “You don’t expect people to come to Christ every time you preach, do you?” The young man immediately shook his head and said, “No, of course not.” Spurgeon smiled grimly and answered, “That’s why they do not.”

Prepare to experience the presence of God (40:16-38)

We can come to worship with our grateful offerings of sacrifice and praise. We can expect to meet with our Lord. But we must also make the proper preparations to experience God's holy presence. What Moses did, we each can and must do this week.

Offer total obedience

"Moses did everything just as the Lord commanded him" (Exod. 40:16), this section begins. Moses' obedience was the key to all that God would do with the tabernacle and its worship across the years to come. We must raise our rod over the Red Sea before the Lord will part its waters. We must step into the Jordan River before God will stop its flood. We must march around Jericho before the Lord will topple its fortified walls. We must step into the Promised Land before God will give it to us.

The disciples had to follow Jesus before they could become "fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19-22). The leper had to believe Jesus could heal him before Jesus would (Matt. 8:1-3). The centurion had to trust in Jesus' healing power before his servant could be made well (Matt. 8:5-13). And on the pattern goes.

Our obedience does not earn the help and power of God. Rather, it positions us to receive that which God already wants to give by grace. You could not read these words unless you were close enough to your computer (or the printed page) to see them. I could not write them unless I were close enough to my keyboard to type them. We must obey the word and will of God in order to be close enough to receive all God intends to give. Obedience to God's lordship is the first step to experiencing God's presence.

Is there any area of your life where you cannot say that you "did everything just as the Lord commanded" you (Exod. 40:16)? How long has it been since you challenged your class to make a complete surrender of their lives to the Father's sovereignty? Obedience is the first step into the joy of God's presence.

Build the fireplace so God can send the fire

Now Moses must construct the tabernacle from the materials given to God by the free gratitude of the people. Every detail was crucial to their experience of God's presence. Each detail speaks to our worship today.

First, Moses constructed the tabernacle itself (sometimes called the Holy Place). The Testimony (the two tablets of the Mosaic law) was placed in the ark of the covenant. The ark then was placed inside the tabernacle in a curtained area known as the Most Holy Place (40:20-21). It was enclosed within the larger, curtained Holy Place. Within the Holy Place was located the golden table for the bread of the Presence, the golden lampstand, and the altar of incense (40:22-25).

The bronze altar for sacrifices (40:26-29) and basin for ritual purification (40:30-32) were then placed outside the tabernacle (or Holy Place and Most Holy Place). The outside courtyard of the tabernacle was constructed last (40:33).

God honored the preparations of his servant by bestowing his holy presence on the tabernacle and by giving his protection to his people throughout their travels (40:34-38). This portable tent would prove crucial to their future as a people, and to the work of God on earth.

The details with which the tabernacle construction is recorded give us pause. It seems plausible that the record is intended to convey more than historical information, especially given that the tabernacle was replaced by the temple well before the Old Testament reached its final stages of literary completion. Why did the Author of Scripture intend us to possess such detail?

A wrong answer is to allegorize the description, forcing each physical component to carry a deeper, unrelated spiritual meaning. By this approach, for instance, Clement of Alexandria found spiritual lessons where none were intended by the biblical writer. Clement (about AD 153—215) was a brilliant theologian, but he was a Christian deeply influenced by Platonic Greek philosophy. Plato suggested that the physical and visible are but “shadows” of the spiritually real. Clement applied this worldview to the tabernacle, with fascinating but misleading results.

Clement saw in the colors of the veil the elements of God’s creation—purple for water, linen from the earth, blue for air, scarlet for fire. The outside covering of the Holy Place represented popular unbelief. Since *YHWH* is four letters, the four pillars used for the entrance represented the name of God. The seven branches of the lamp stood for the seven planets. The hidden ark represented the world of thought, hidden and closed to the masses. The high priest’s robe represented the world of sense; its bells stood for the days of the year; the twelve stones on his breastplate represented the circle of the zodiac.²

Rather than adopting such a speculative approach, let us allow the New Testament to interpret the Old. The author of Hebrews stated that the tabernacle was only a copy of the heavenly sanctuary where we will spend eternity (Hebrews 8:5; 9:24; see Acts 7:44). While the tabernacle and its sacrifices were temporary, the Lord Jesus and his sacrifice were perfect and permanent (Heb. 9:11-14). By Christ’s atoning grace, we now have access to the Lord in his perfect sanctuary (Heb. 10:19-22). In the tabernacle, only Moses, Aaron, and his descendants were permitted access to the Lord (Exod. 40:31). Now we are all washed by the blood of the Lamb (see 40:32) and welcomed into the holy presence of God.

But we must prepare ourselves to experience God’s presence as fully as did Moses. We enter God’s presence “with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise” (Psalm 100:4). We come to the spiritual basin of cleansing by confessing our sins to God and asking God’s forgiveness (see 1 John 1:8-10). We step to the altar where we offer our sacrifices of praise, worship, service, and finances (see Romans 12:1-2). And we are ushered by the High Priest into the throne room of the Holy Father (see Heb. 4:14-16).

When last did you prepare in this way to experience God’s presence? Did you come to worship last Sunday with your heart ready to praise the Lord? with your sins confessed

and cleansed? ready to offer the sacrifice of your finances, time, and life? Are you prepared to worship God in God's holy presence this Sunday? Is your class?

Unlike the ancient Hebrews, we can each experience the divine presence each day and each worship service. But we must build the fireplace before God can send his fire.

Conclusion

God has always desired to dwell with his people. He came looking for the sinful Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:8-9). He came for Moses in the wilderness (Exod. 3:4). He came to meet with his people in the tabernacle, and later the temple (2 Chronicles 7:1). He came ultimately for fallen humanity in his Son, the One who left the throne room of glory for the thorns and cross of shame (see Philippians 2:5-11). Jesus *tabernacled* among us in his incarnation, pitching his tent within our fallen condition (see John 1:14; *tabernacled* is the background reference of the Greek word translated "made his dwelling" in John 1:14). Moreover, this promise comes at the end of the last book of the Bible: "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Revelation 21:3).

In the meanwhile, we can meet with God in the tabernacle of our lives. Our bodies are the temple of his Spirit today (1 Corinthians 3:16). We can join God each day and each Sunday, if we will come with the offerings of grateful hearts, expect to experience God's presence, and prepare to step into God's holy joy. The glory of the ancient tabernacle can be our daily experience. In fact, it should be.

A bedridden elderly man became frustrated that he did not sense the presence of God when he prayed. He shared his problem with his pastor, a longtime friend. The wise pastor suggested that the man place a chair beside his bed and speak to the Lord as though the Lord were in that chair. His friend agreed to do so.

Early the next morning, the daughter of the elderly man called the pastor at home. She had gone into her father's bedroom to check on him, and found him dead. Through her grief, she said, "There's something that confuses me. When I found my father, there was a chair beside his bed. And his hand was in that chair." The pastor said, "I understand."

Do you?

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² Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, 5:6, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1989), 2:452-4.

TNT
Exodus
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Session 13

Spark: Exodus 25:1-31, 29:43-46, 33:7-11,14-16, 40:16-38

Kindle

Chapter 25

1. What offerings are to be brought to the Tabernacle?

2. What instruction does God give regarding the Tabernacle?

3. Describe the construction of the ark?

4. Describe the construction of the table?

5. What are some unique instructions concerning the lampstand?

Chapter 29

6. What does God promise to do at the Tent of Meeting?

7. Who is to be consecrated to serve as priests?

Chapter 33

8. What did the people do when Moses entered the tent of meeting?

9. How did God speak to Moses?

10. What did the pillar of cloud mean?

Chapter 40

11. How did the pillar of cloud function as a guide for the Israelites?

Explosive Thinking

1. Our author reminds us that giving to God is not the same as rendering funds for service. Our gifts and offerings are made to God out of love and because we are obedient. What is the hardest part of giving financially to the church for you? What blessing have you received when you are obedient to God in regards to giving?

2. God promises to be in the midst of God's people. God promises God will meet the Israelites at the Tent of Meeting. God promises us that where two or more are gathered in the name of Jesus, God is with us. Share a time when you sensed the presence of God in a time of worship in a small gathering of Christians. How did you know that God was present?

3. Moses and the people prepared a place and themselves to meet God. In what ways do you prepare to meet God in a personal time with God? How can we prepare to meet God in the corporate worship service of the church? What are some things that cause us to miss God's promised presence in worship?
 4. The Psalmist declares in Psalm 42:2 "My soul thirsts for God. When can I come and meet God." Read these translations of this verse:

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? NIV

I thirst for God, the living God. When can I go and stand before him?
NLT

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? ESV

My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God? KJV

My soul (my life, my inner self) thirsts for God, for the living God. When will I come and see the face of God? Amplified Bible

Now read this full passage from **The Message**:

42 *1-3 A white-tailed deer drinks
from the creek;
I want to drink God,
deep drafts of God.
I'm thirsty for God-alive.
I wonder, "Will I ever make it—
arrive and drink in God's presence?"
I'm on a diet of tears—
tears for breakfast, tears for supper.
All day long
people knock at my door,
Pestered,
"Where is this God of yours?"
4 These are the things I go over and over,
emptying out the pockets of my life.
I was always at the head of the worshiping crowd,
right out in front,
Leading them all,
eager to arrive and worship,
Shouting praises, singing thanksgiving—
celebrating, all of us, God's feast!*

Do you desire to meet with God? What are you doing to put yourself in the right frame of mind to meet with God daily and worship God with others? As we long for God's presence, God longs for our presence.

5. Share your biggest takeaway from Exodus: