

Today we're taking a closer look at the LAW of the LORD – mainly the core Torah – the 10 commandments. These are Yahweh's rules to the people.

Greg read for us the Psalm – the wonderful words of the song that glorify the works and attributes and laws – or rules - of Yahweh. The psalmist says, “The laws are perfect, sure, right, clear, true, more to be desired than gold and sweeter than honey.”

But frankly, I find these laws to be not really as sweet as honey...more like restrictive and shame-inducing when we mess up and have to ask for forgiveness. Here are the laws given to Moses at Sinai:

Read Exodus 20:1-17

We may say, “Ok...I've done all that...but why do I still feel that things aren't right between me and God?” Too often we use these laws as restraints. To prevent us from sinning – or as a measuring stick against which we are sure to always fall short. After all, isn't that what God wants for us? To live these laws?

But what if we look at these laws – these 10 commandments – as rules that direct our behaviour towards where our heart should lie – rules that point toward freedom instead of oppression?

What if we look at these laws from the perspective of ex-slaves wandering in the wilderness - no longer compelled to do their master's bidding – yet still not free nor secure. What if we looked at these commandments from their perspective. Who would these laws be protecting? What freedom would they give? What do these laws say about the ONE giving them, and, ultimately, what are these laws directing the people toward?

The Commandments start off with an introduction “I am the LORD your God.” It doesn't sound all that strange – but in ancient Hebrew, what those first free people would have heard is *anoki Yahweh Elohim ata*. **I am I AM WHAT I AM, your mighty one with power over all the heavenly beings.** This is where the former Hebrew slaves hear God's name first.

I am I AM WHAT I AM, **YOUR** God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (therefore) you shall have no other gods before me. In other words, “Look, I AM brought you out of slavery. I AM your savior. I AM the one who rescued you. No one can force you to bow down to your master's gods – none of these helped you when you cried out. I AM not going to leave you. I AM more powerful than all the others. I AM here for you. I AM your God, your ONLY God. I AM only your God.

The introduction continues with the second commandment: We read, “do not make idols and worship them – why? Because I am a jealous God and I will punish the children for their parent's sins to the 3 – 4th generation. But for those who love me and keep my commandments, I will give my steadfast love to the thousandth generation.”

I always have trouble with these verses because to me it talks about an either-or God who holds grudges. I found it quite interesting that the word we translate into the English ***punish***, actually means: *to attend to, take stock, visit, pay attention to, observe* (Logos Bible Software: Brown Driver Briggs).

Considering the freed slaves, we could read this command in a new way. We could hear, “*Worship me only - Don't replace me with something else. I am a jealous God. If you reject me this way, I will give close attention to the lives of your children and their children and so on. For those who love me and keep my commandments, I will be steadfast love to the thousandth generation.*”

When I read this as words of freedom, I see God, not as a vindictive and punishing God, but as one who is and will be fully engaged fully present – observing and honoring and loving even those whose parents or grandparents made some big mistakes. This is a God who says, “*you no longer need to doubt my presence with you – or make up for it by creating idols. I really am with you. You don't need to make idols to know that I love you to the 1000th generation.*”

The third commandment continues with the identification. We know it as, “Do not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.” Personally, I don't really know what that means. Growing up, I thought it meant don't say, “Oh my God! Or “Jesus H Christ!” and thus profaning God's name because you're using it like an expletive.

But the more I think on the passage – the more I wonder whether it is adding attributes to God that aren't God's. And this is a touchy subject. We can read in the Bible that God is a vengeful God who encourages the Israelites to get rid of their neighbours (Joshua entering the promised land). And we read that that God encourages care for the widows, orphans, AND aliens in their midst (Deut 27:19 for one).

Which imperative do we follow? Likewise, we read Jesus saying, “I did not come to give peace, but a sword (Mtt 10:34)” and later, “Those who live by the sword will die by the sword (Mtt 26:32)”. Later in our epistles Paul writes to the Corinthian church that women need to be silent in church (1 Cor 14:34). Later in the same letter he sends greetings from Priscilla and Aquila (1 Cor 16:19) – Priscilla and Aquila – a woman and a man - two of Paul's colleagues working together as missionaries and house church leaders. (See also Acts 18:26)

What are we to believe? What is God teaching us? How do we know whether we are using God's name in vain when we preach or say what we believe God to teach?

This is where I believe a broad understanding of the story and context, as well as Spirit led reading, discussing and discernment of the text from within the community aids us in figuring out what kind of God Yahweh is and what it is that Yahweh wants us to do.

For those who were slaves, understanding that Yahweh was different than the other gods around was likely lifesaving. Here was a God who was FOR them – not against them, and here was a God who would provide for them and protect them – not bring them to harm. THIS is what the former Hebrew slaves learned. To then go and teach that Yahweh God demanded human sacrifice and suffering was assigning attributes to Yahweh that were not God's. Thus, using God's name in vain.

The next two laws – Remember the Sabbath and Honour your parents, I have paired together because they share a similar theme and hope. In our time – we may honour the Sabbath by spending time with family or napping, or hiking, watching sports or tv, and generally not working. For us the Sabbath is less a time of honouring our rest, and more a time of not working. However, for the former slaves, Yahweh's promise of and command for a Sabbath was life changing. After generations of wearing life-killing exhausting labour – what a joy to learn that their God honoured their work and, for the sake of

their bodies, their relationships and worship, demanded they take a day off. Likewise, what a joy to know that those in power were no longer able to work them to the bone but would be obligated to give a day of rest. This commandment was and is a blessing.

The next is also – the 5th commandment is “honour your mother and father. Children treating their parents with respect is different than adults treating their parents with respect. As adults, honouring our parents is sometimes hard because it may mean that they make decisions that we would rather they not make and still we need to honour them as people – as OUR people. It is easy to take parents for granted. It is easy to become annoyed. But we will miss them in our own way when they are no longer with us – and many of us still have more questions to ask. But for the former newly freed Hebrews, this command was a reward or even a blessing for keeping the laws of Yahweh. The life of a slave was not a long life. This command to honour one’s parents would have brought delight into the crowd because it was a promise that they or their parents would live long enough to be honoured in the land gifted to them by God.

These first 5 commands would have been simply wonderful for the Hebrew people to hear. Yahweh’s law was something new and something good. Yahweh was THEIR Elohim, they did not need to make idols to know that God was with them, they could trust Yahweh was FOR them – and anyone saying otherwise was putting words into Yahweh’s mouth. Yahweh wished for them to rest and flourish for many long years in the land given to them if they would obey Yahweh’s law.

The next five commandments fleshed out how these newly freed people were to live within community. Just as the first 5 were both command and blessing, these too have a similar expectation. But most importantly, these next 5 commands are predicated on Yahweh as the master, and not their former slave masters. Therefore, we could read each of the following commands as starting with the phrase, “Because I AM your God.

“Because I AM your God, you shall not murder. *No more are you ruled by your slave masters who require you to kill whomever they say to kill.*” Because I AM your God, you shall not commit adultery. “*No more will you be breed-stock, producing more slaves for the master. Instead, you will be free to marry and raise families.*” Because I AM your God, you shall not steal. “*No longer will you be forced to pillage and loot under orders and against your own will.*” Because I AM your God, you shall not bear false witness. “*No longer will you be torn between honesty and death when brought before your master.*” And lastly, “Because I AM your God, don’t covet your neighbour’s stuff. “*You have enough. I always provide. Be pleased with what is in your tent. It is a blessing.*”

This way of looking at the Ten Commandments liberates us from the danger of being rule bound. It frees us from seeing God as a fierce master. When we look at these commandments with new eyes then we are freed from seeing them only as a way to keep our sinful natures in line or as causing us shame and fear for our mortal soul when we break them. When we look at these commandments with new eyes then adherence to the law becomes joy in the freedom of being loved and chosen.

Today, as it was before, Yahweh is OUR God. Christ teaches us how to live God’s law of freedom. God’s love for us leads us from the enslavement of shame onward to new life in Christ.

Thanks be to the one who was and is and is to come. Amen