

DHW

LESSON 17

THE BOOK OF EXODUS

CHAPTER 20 - A

INTRODUCTION

God had told Moses that if the people would hear His voice and keep His covenant, then they would be *a peculiar treasure, a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation* (Exodus 19:5, 6). This covenant God made with Moses and the people of Israel was not a new covenant that cancelled the previous covenant God made with Abraham (Genesis 17). The covenant God made with Moses here at Mount Sinai, known as the Mosaic Covenant, was a covenant of law that expressed the intention of God in their relationship with Him and with one another.

The Mosaic Covenant began with the giving of the Ten Commandments (Hebrew, literally,

“ten words”).¹ These Ten Commandments gave the fundamental moral laws regulating their relationship with God and with man. Considering them together, the Ten Commandments encompass a vertical (God-oriented) and a horizontal (man-oriented) relationship. We learn straightaway that what matters in life is man’s relationship with God and with his fellow-men. Some people have criticized these moral laws as being too restrictive. But a proper study of these laws will show that if they follow them they will live peacefully and in harmony with one another.

One more important characteristic of the Ten Commandments is that they are absolutes, meaning, “true, right, relevant in all situations”. The keeping of these commandments is not conditioned by persons or circumstances. The motivating or compelling force of these

¹These “ten words” in Hebrew עֲשָׂרַת הַדְּבָרִים (*asarah debarim*) or translated the Ten Commandments, or The Decalogue which is another given name,

commandments is the LORD God. The name, a combination of *LORD* (Yahweh, Hebrew, יהוה) meaning who is ever present and personal, and *God* (Elohim, Hebrew, אלהים) meaning the Almighty Creator is sufficient ground for all to obey the commandments.

The study of this chapter should bear fruits of repentance and re-consecration on our part to the LORD our God and to improve our relationship with others. These commandments form the basis in which Israel might have a proper relationship with God and with one another. These commandments are therefore essential to the people of Israel to obey in order that God's promises that they would be *a peculiar treasure, a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation* might take effect.

The outline of the chapter is as follows:

- 1) The LORD God, the originator of the Ten Commandments (20:1-2);

- 2) The first four commandments (20:3-11);
- 3) The fifth commandment (20:12);
- 4) The final five commandments (20:13-17);
- 5) God's purpose for His awesome appearance to Israel (20:18-21);
- 6) God's final instructions concerning the worship of Him (20:22-26).

STUDY THE WORD

The LORD God Gives the Ten Commandments

The living and true God, who is the Creator of the heaven and the earth and made man in His image had chosen the people of Israel to be His *peculiar treasure, a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation*. His purpose was obvious. He desired that the people of Israel would obey His commandments. And they in turn would set an example to the world so that the

world could live in peace with the living and true God and also with his fellowmen. The commandments are truly efficacious to the general welfare of the inhabitants of the world. They indeed testify to the greatness and goodness of God, who created man and gave the commandments so that man who obeyed them could live in harmony and peace.

An added reason for the people of Israel to obey Him was that He had delivered them from slavery and oppression in the land of Egypt. God reminded them that they should not forget what He had done for them. They should show a sense of gratitude by keeping the commandments which He gave them, yet they themselves would benefit tremendously by faithfully keeping them. Such is the wisdom and graciousness of the LORD God!

The First Four Commandments Relate to Relationship with God

The First

*I am the LORD thy God . . .
Thou shall have no other gods
before me (20:2, 3).* This first commandment singles out the religion of Israel as monotheistic—the belief in one God. This sets the Israelites apart from all the inhabitants of her neighbouring countries, namely, the Egyptians and the Canaanites, who worshipped a plurality of gods,

This commandment forbade the worship of other gods. In reality, there are no other gods. People may worship other gods which are the figures of their imagination; these are man-made gods. As Christians we know this.² But there is only one God, and He is

² In his discussion about food offered to idols, Paul mentioned that idols are no gods although they are called gods. *But to us, Paul wrote, there is but one God, the Father of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him (1 Corinthians 8:4-6).*

Yahweh, El Shaddai—the LORD God Almighty, who revealed Himself to Moses and Abraham.³

The emphasis is not just to establish that there is only one LORD God, but it is also a call to undivided allegiance, loyalty, and commitment to Him, as expressed in the phrase *before me*. The command was not just to the children of Israel, although it was first given to them through Moses. The word, *thou* (second person singular, used by the KJV translators) applies universally to every individual. The duty of man is to worship His Creator God, who is *Yahweh*, for *all the earth is mine* (19:5). Not to do so renders him guilty of sinning against God by breaking the first and greatest commandment of all.⁴ And the

³ Exodus 6:3 *And I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty, but by my name JEHOVAH was I not known to them.*

Genesis 17:1 *And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.*

⁴ Matthew 22:37 *Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy*

penalty of sin is death and everlasting separation from God.

This call to acknowledge the LORD God and worship Him only, totally, completely and wholeheartedly is a logical response. No other person, not even our parents, wife, children, and friends and even other things such as our career, pastimes, and money should come before God. This is what this first commandment means and expects of man, who is His creature.

The Second

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image . . . Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them (20:4, 5). This second commandment is linked to the first commandment in that it prohibits man to worship the true God in the wrong way. Man must not make any carved image or idol to represent the living and true God. Each man may not claim that his man-made image or idol is a

heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. 38 This is the first and great commandment.

representation of the living and true God, and that he is worshipping the same God as the Jews and Christians do. This second commandment forbids such a way of worshipping the LORD God. The children of Israel were guilty of this very sin later as reported in Exodus 32. The people of Israel became impatient because Moses was too long up on the mountain with God. They called Aaron to make a golden calf, and said to the Israelites, *This be thy God, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt* (v.4). They made a golden calf to represent the LORD God.

The Roman Catholic Church has made the crucifix with the image of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. They can give all kinds of explanations, but there is no excuse for the commandment clearly and categorically declares that man must not make any carved image of God and bow down to it or serve it. Roman Catholics bow, kneel, pray before the images of Christ and Mary.

We must be watchful over ourselves that we do not commit the same sin by using any other objects to represent God or the Lord Jesus Christ, in particular, the emblem of the cross. However, if people hang a cross in their homes, it is not breaking this commandment, provided they do not kneel and bow before it. Just like in books the pictures (two dimensional) are drawn to tell the story of Jesus. We break the commandment when we make them to become objects of worship. In this regard, some even worship the Bible. This is nothing but idolatry. And it is abominable to God.

Interestingly, the basis of this commandment is that God says that He is *a jealous God*. The word *jealous* in Hebrew is a strong word. The jealousy describes here portrays God as holy, caring and loving, and He will not allow another to usurp His place of devotion. If anyone who is the object of His love, breaks this commandment, it is tantamount to

hating God, and the consequences of his sin is severe. The breaking of this commandment is sin and the wages of sin is death.

God also showed that this sin would affect future generations. They too would imitate their parents and be similarly condemned. And the effect of this sin would affect even to the third and fourth generation. However, God would show His mercy to thousands of them, that is, to subsequent generations who would love Him and keep His commandments.

This cannot mean that children are punished for the sins of their parents. Scripture clearly teaches that each individual is responsible and accountable for his sins.⁵ Each soul is accountable for the final judgment and punishment upon himself. No one is punished

by God for the sins of another. But that does not mean the consequences of a person's sins do not affect other people. Drunkards and drug addicts affect not only themselves, but also their families and even others. On the other hand for those who love God and live righteously before Him, God would show them mercy.

The Third

Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain (20:7; Hebrew literally – lift not up the name of the Yahweh your God for emptiness or nothingness). This is the third commandment. God's name is *Yahweh*, the LORD God; His personal covenant name. But it is much more than merely a name. God's name is associated with the reality of His personality, character and conduct. The name of God is the embodiment of His Personality and Being for He is holy, majestic, transcendent, and supremely powerful. Therefore, the people of God must not use His

⁵ Ezekiel 18:20 *The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.*

name lightly, carelessly or in a silly way.

It does not mean that one may not use the name of God. What is forbidden is that one must not misuse the name of God. Every child of God bears the name of God and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. As a child of God, he must be careful how he speaks about God. He must not utter profanities that would bring dishonour and disrespect to the name of God. When one speaks about God, he must not speak carelessly and thoughtlessly. The breach of this commandment is so serious that it will not be unpunished. The LORD states very clearly that He would punish the offender. What the punishment might be, the LORD did not reveal. But the offender will be punished for sure. We must therefore be very careful that we do not take the name of the LORD our God in vain. This requires that we increase our knowledge of Him and not be careless in our speech and ways.

The Fourth

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy (20:8). The keeping of the Sabbath has been interpreted variously by believers of different theological persuasions. In the days of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Pharisees criticized the Lord Jesus Christ and His disciples for breaking the Sabbath. The Seventh Day Adventists teach that no work should be done on the Sabbath (their understanding as the seventh day that is Saturday). Then there are those who consider the Lord's Day that is Sunday as the Sabbath, the day of rest, and they too would not work, and some would not even cook on that day for the family, nor buy food from food-sellers. These people would cook an extra portion the day before the Sabbath, and on Sunday would only heat the food for their meals.

A careful study of this commandment in the light of Scriptures should bring out the right principle of keeping the Sabbath as commanded by the LORD. One thing that needs to

be said at the outset is, whatever way one believes to be the way that the Sabbath should be kept, one must not condemn others for not keeping the Sabbath as the way they do.

We are told to keep the Sabbath holy. Firstly, let us ascertain the meaning of *Sabbath*. The word means “to rest.” It has the basic thrust of putting an end to something, to sever.⁶ It refers to the seventh day of the week on which God rested after creating the heaven and the earth in six days. Of course, we know from Scriptures that God does not rest from working for God still works since then (John 5:19; 14:10).⁷ Now the Sabbath is also used to refer to a sabbatical year in which

the land would not be tilled and used for the whole year (Exodus 23:11; Leviticus 25:4).⁸

Secondly, the meaning of *holy* is “to be clean, pure, consecrated.”⁹ Since it was *the Sabbath of the Lord thy God*, it teaches that the seventh day in the week is to be consecrated to God, and belonging to Him. God declared that He *blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed* (same word as ‘holy’) *it*. And if God blesses the Sabbath, God will bless all His people who remember and keep the Sabbath unto God. On every Sabbath day, the Israelites held a holy convocation (assembly) to praise and sing songs to the Lord (Leviticus 23:3; Psalm 92:1).¹⁰ Many years later

⁶ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., & Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (TWOT), reference number 2323.

⁷ John 5:19 *Then answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise.*

John 14:10 *Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? the words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works.*

⁸ Exodus 23:11 *But the seventh year thou shalt let it rest and lie still; that the poor of thy people may eat: and what they leave the beasts of the field shall eat. In like manner thou shalt deal with thy vineyard, and with thy oliveyard.*

Leviticus 25:4 *But in the seventh year shall be a sabbath of rest unto the land, a sabbath for the LORD: thou shalt neither sow thy field, nor prune thy vineyard.*

⁹ TWOT, 1990.

¹⁰ Leviticus 23:3 *Six days shall work be done: but the seventh day is the sabbath of*

through the prophet Isaiah, God said to His people, (Isaiah 58:13, 14): *If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it*

Thirdly, God took a very serious view of requiring His people to remember and keep the Sabbath. Anyone who broke the Sabbath would be put to death (Exodus 31:14, 15).¹¹

rest, an holy convocation; ye shall do no work therein: it is the sabbath of the LORD in all your dwellings.

Psalm 92:1 *{A Psalm or Song for the sabbath day.} It is a good thing to give thanks unto the LORD, and to sing praises unto thy name, O most High:*

¹¹ Exodus 31:14 *Ye shall keep the sabbath therefore; for it is holy unto you: every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death:*

PRACTICAL VALUE

These commandments were given by God for the welfare of the people of the world. God, who made us, knows human nature and these laws were given so that man may know who his Creator is and how he should relate to Him and to his fellow-men. The first four commandments require man to acknowledge Him and to worship and love Him with all his heart, soul, spirit and strength. Man's first and foremost relationship is to his Creator God and none else.

And the LORD God precisely stipulates four things that man must strictly observe. Man must not have any other gods, and applying this commandment to us in these days, "gods" can take different forms instead of idols. Today, television movies, career, pastimes, friends, and especially

for whosoever doeth any work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. 15 Six days may work be done; but in the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD: whosoever doeth any work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death.

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money can be our gods in our hearts. This is wrong.

Another important commandment which we must uncompromisingly do is to keep the Sabbath day holy unto the Lord. Sunday is observed as the Sabbath day of the Christian faith, and providentially most countries in the world observe Sunday as an off-day from work. We must free ourselves from all other activities on Sunday in order to worship God corporately in church for this is the will of God. For that hour of worship, we should not let anyone or anything to prevent or deprive of this holy event. When we faithfully keep this commandment, we are honouring and showing our undivided love and loyalty to Him, our LORD God! AMEN