

No Longer Slaves: None Before Me

With this study we join Israel at the base of the mountain, hearing – through Moses or perhaps directly – the Lord’s voice thundering from on high. Ten Commandments incoming!

Remember what’s been going on for the people of Israel. That was Exodus 19, and the subject of an earlier message. YHWH knew that Israel would not take his commands seriously unless they had deep and sober respect for the God who spoke them. Cue thunder and trumpet blasts and fire and earthquake, and a mountain made holy by God’s presence, so that they must die who set foot upon it. The holy fear of God is one half of the scaffolding needed for the Ten Commandments.

Now read Exodus 20:1-2. The Lord’s first words to Israel are not command, but testimony: remember who I am, how I rescued you from Egypt, rescued you from slavery. It is the Lord saying, “I have loved you and redeemed you – that is why I do now command you!”

If we are not equipped with a deep knowledge of how we have been loved by God, we will lose sight of the love that motivates his commands to us. The Ten Commandments will become the Ten Impositions. And we will struggle to love him back; read Luke 7:47 and 1 John 4:19.

1. In what ways do you experience the love of God?
2. To what extent is your discipleship motivated by gratitude for God’s love shown to you?

Holy fear, and the certainty of God’s love, are together the needed scaffolding for the Commandments. They help us to take them with full seriousness, and to give ourselves in deep gratitude to obey them.

With this in mind, read Exodus 20:3: the First Commandment. Literally, it says, “You shall have no other gods before My face!” Nothing is to share the privileged space of God in our lives. Nothing is to influence our actions as he does, or to command our desire as he does, or to preoccupy our thoughts as he does.

3. When you have to take a major decision in life, what factors influence you?
4. In an average day, what most occupies your thoughts and desires?
5. In what way does the Lord figure among these?

Read Exodus 20:4-6. This is the second commandment, closely bound to the first. To have no other gods before YHWH is to have no idols. So don’t make

anything that could become an idol for you, which would influence your actions, command your desire, and preoccupy your thoughts.

The second commandment erects a “fence around the Law”, as the rabbis were fond of saying. It makes it more difficult to disobey the first commandment, by removing a source of temptation. Think about how challenging it would have been for the Israelites to hear this prohibition. Many among them would remember the saturation of religious imagery and statuary in Egypt, where every god had visual representation. Now they are told they cannot represent YHWH at all!

This is challenging also for us. Our world of experience is richly saturated in imagery, and nothing is beyond reach of the visual effects wizards in figuring things that are otherworldly and awesome. The idea that some things should *not* be represented in image is strange to us.

6. What is distinctive about our God that requires him *not* to be represented in an image or statue?
7. How does the advent of Jesus, the Son of God – fully God, fully human – change the form of our obedience to the second commandment?

Consider one form of temptation common in your life.

8. How could you put a “fence around the Law”, by *removing* the catalyst for temptation?

The sovereign authority of God in our lives, and God’s intolerance of idolatry: these are absolute. They stand at the opening of the Ten Commandments and all the Law to follow; the other commandments become possible, and make sense, if the Lord alone is God in our lives. Failure to submit to these – in holy fear and loving gratitude – will prove consequential not only in our lives but in the lives of those who follow us (Exodus 20:5). What we sow we will reap; our descendants also.

But how much more will those who obey the Lord see the goodness of the Lord – to a “thousand generations” (Exodus 20:6)! Great are the rewards, and the blessing overflows!

Conclude with a prayerful examination of your heart. What do you find there that competes with the Lord for sovereign influence? Ask the Spirit to free you from idolatry, and let him show you how to put a “fence around the law”. Praise the Lord for the overwhelming promise of goodness to the generations of those who follow him with a whole heart!