

Grace Before Law

Exodus 20:1-2

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus 20. Today we are beginning an exposition of what has been called in the English language for the last 500 years, the Ten Commandments. In the Hebrew Bible this section is known as the Ten Words or the Ten Pronouncements, but as begin to study them together it's important for us to remember that we live in a day and time that doesn't like law. We are very suspicious of law. We have an anti-authority spirit about us. We live in a day and time where the law is regarded as something impersonal, abstract, distant, tyrannical, restrictive and threatening and we need to realize how the mindset of the age impacts us in our thinking about biblical law. That's one reason why we chose to study chapter 19 prior to our study of God's law as it's set forth in chapter 20, because chapter 19, and frankly the two verses we're going to look at today, are devoted to setting the table, to giving the context, to explaining the situation and circumstance and relationship in which God's law is being given and propounded. That context is a context of grace; it is a gospel context; it's a context of redemption; it is a context of covenant relationship and realizing things will help you lose those suspicions about law and authority and rule and rights and wrongs which pervade the mindset and the psyche of those in our generation.

There's nothing more relevant or more timely or more practical for us to recover now than a biblical understanding of the biblical description of infleshed love and righteousness. You could really define the law that way. The law is infleshed love and righteousness. It shows you what righteousness looks like in a specific circumstance. It shows you what love looks like in a specific circumstance. That's what the law is. It is a reflection of the character of God and an authoritative expression of what it means to love and to be righteous.

And the subject of God's law is vital. If you have carefully and prayerfully pondered the subject, the way that God's law relates to the Christian you have done well, because a proper understanding of God's law is essential for a healthy Christian life and experience. And we've been trying to give a background in order that we might understand the role of the law as we study it in Exodus 20. The law of God is founded in grace and is the expression of love both to God and man. The law of God is founded in grace. That's a lesson that we learned very clearly in Exodus 19 and it is the expression of love. We learn that from the way

Jesus Himself summarizes the law in the New Testament.

What does it mean to love? To keep his commandments he would say and yet we live in a day and time where there is a great deal of suspicion of that even in the church. If you are found in your prayer closet mumbling the words 'how I love your law, O Lord,' your wife may report you to the ecclesiastical authorities as a closet legalist. I mean, that's not how evangelicals talk. Aren't you a legalist if you talk about loving the law? And yet the Old Testament saint's highest expression of his devotion to, and loyalty to, and love of God was, 'how I love Your law, O Lord' and you say, 'yes, but that was the Old Testament.' Well, think about that for a minute. On the night before His crucifixion, in the upper room to the only core of disciples He had left on planet earth, Jesus said to them, "If you love Me, keep My commandments." The expression of love that He wanted to see from His disciples to Him was obedience to His commandments. In fact, if you sneak a peek at the last verse that Brister Ware read in Mark 3:35 today, you will see Jesus define His disciples as those who do the will of His Father. That's a New Testament description of a disciple, of a believer, of a follower of the one true God, not just an Old Testament description but a New Testament description and therefore the subject of the law, the subject of obedience and how they relate to God's call of grace and the gift of faith is vital for us to understand. So let's look to God's word in Exodus 20:1,2 and hear it attentively:

"Then God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Amen.

And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired and inerrant word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Lord and God, as we study Your word, we ask that You would enable us with the psalmist to behold wonderful things from Your law. This we ask in Jesus name. Amen.

The two verses that we are going to look at today are an introduction or a preface or preparatory words. We actually could say that all of chapter 19 plus Exodus 20:1,2 are an introduction to the law of God. So often sermon series on the Ten Commandments pick up with the first commandment. When they do they miss a vital context for understanding what the commandments are and how they are supposed to function. Now I am a student of introductions, not mind you, because I'm good at them, just as I'm not very good at illustrations. I'm not very good at introductions but introductions do interest me and I really like people who do them well. It makes me a little envious. Introductions are interesting.

Sometimes introductions serve as disclaimers to soften a blow. You know, you want to tell something nice to someone before you say something hard. Young men, you've heard something like this before sometime, "I really like you as a friend but..." Now you see, that introduction and by the way you know exactly

how to read that introduction: ignore everything prior to the 'but' and only focus on what comes afterward. I mean, the introduction there is to let you down gently. It never works but that's the intention of it. And some introductions function that way. That's not the function of this introduction.

Some introductions serve to interest the audience in the topic that's going to be talked about. You may have a real dog of a topic and you know that "If I don't get these folks in the first two minutes they're gone" and so sometimes speakers will even use an introduction that has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the topic that he's going to speak about. And people go away afterwards saying, "That was a really great story but I have no idea why he told it."

Sometimes introductions are a way to say 'thank you'. I particularly see this in books a lot. A colleague of mine took thirty years to write a book. Now when you do that you have some really big thank-yous to say to your wife. Now he was English and so this is how he did it, "He also expresses gratitude to his wife who was willing to marry this book along with its author in 1958 and is only now finding her released from the one bond though not, he is happy to say, from the other." In other words, she didn't divorce him and that was nice.

Some introductions serve to loosen up the audience or to win them over. James Carville, the advisor to the former president Clinton, was speaking to the LSU banking school a few years ago. Now you wouldn't have found many members of the Democratic National Convention at the LSU banking school and so he was quite nervous and so he opened with saying, "Before I start my talk I'd like to make one announcement, will all the Democrats meet me in the phone booth at the back of the room after the meeting." This immediately loosened up the audience and they were more kind to him than they might have been in other circumstances.

But this introduction and preface is different from any of these kinds of uses for a preface. In fact, this introduction and preface here not only in chapter 19 but here in chapter 20:1-2 is absolutely essential for your understanding what God is going to say in verses 3 to 16. You won't understand the Ten Commandments unless you understand what God is saying here. And so there is much to learn for our spiritual good and for God's glory from studying this preface.

I. Our obedience to God will be strengthened when we take in the fact that this is actually His will.

And in fact I want to suggest to you that this preface itself supplies you with motivations for being obedient to God's commands and there are five of them I'd like you to see in the passage. Let's begin in verse 1. Now you look at those words and you say to me, "Ligon, there is nothing here. It just says, 'then God spoke all these words, saying...'" But pause just a minute, my friends. Notice

here that at the end of chapter 19 Moses has stopped speaking. Moses is not the one who is mediating these words to the people of God. God Himself is going to speak the Ten Commandments to the people of God in Exodus 20. And so we are being reminded here that this is God speaking. God Himself is giving the commands. What a beautiful way to stress that what He is about to command is His will. It's not Moses' will. It's not a collected tradition. It's not the ideas of men. This is the will of God. God Himself is going to say, "Moses, step aside. I'm going to speak directly to My people." And the people of God are going to tremble as God Himself speaks to them. God gives the commands and by that we learn that this is His will and our obedience to God's will is strengthened when we take into account the fact that it actually is His will.

Sometimes it's hard to obey what the Lord has called us to do. We find ourselves in situations where to do that would be to our own hurt and when we do that it is important for us to remember that is, in fact, God's will. This isn't made up by someone else. This is expressing precisely what God wants. You know there are times in life when you don't know the will of God meaning how God is planned to cause things to fall out. You may have a sick child and you may not know what God's plan for the future is for that child but in this instance you know exactly what God's will is. God's will is that you would live this way. God's will is that you would behave this way. And what did Jesus say you ought to pray in the New Testament? "Thy will be done." Now, just as I said before, sometimes you have to pray, "Thy will be done" when you have no idea what that will is going to be. That is very difficult to do sometimes. But here you know exactly what that will is and so you can pray, "Lord, Thy will be done and I want to thank You that I know exactly what that will is You have spelled it out in Your word here in these great commands."

We have a propensity in our own day and time to question authority and God meets that propensity by making it clear that is precise what He wants us to do; He speaks Himself these words. And that's the first thing that we learn in this passage. Our obedience to God's will is strengthened when we realize this is in fact exactly what He wants us to do. This is His will, not someone else's. That's what we learn among other things in verse 1.

II. Our obedience to God will be increased when we realize He is our covenant sovereign Lord.

There's a second thing though I want you to see. In verse 2 the very opening phrase is, "I am the lord your God." You see God announces Himself here as the Lord God. Now pause for a second. Moses has been speaking to the people of God. Now God is speaking these words. Have you ever asked yourself, "Why does God start off saying, 'I am God.'" do you think anyone there didn't know that it wasn't God talking to them? We know that they were totally awestricken by God's speaking to them. There was going to be no possibility that they missed

who this was that was speaking to them ,so why does He start off by saying, "I am the Lord your God"? They all knew that and they were terrified. Because He wanted to stress to them His lordship. He wanted to point to His incontestable sovereignty, His ownership over them, and our obedience to God is increased when we realize that He is our covenant and sovereign Lord.

And that's a thought that is alien to us today. We don't relate to other human beings as *lords* anymore. In the day that the King James translation was made you did. I was reading an article earlier this week by a person who was making fun of old hymns and one of the things he said was, "You know, old hymns always have stuff in them about kings and crowns and diadems," and he says "we don't know anything about those things today" and that's true, but that's not to our benefit, because the Bible constantly uses those images of authority and lordship as illustrations of our relationship with the one true God and we just don't have people that we relate to as lord. Not the most despotic employer do we think of as a lord. We're totally against hierarchical relationships in our day and time. They're alien to our thought form. You want to make a preacher nervous. Send him to the women's national assembly of any evangelical denomination and give him the text, I Peter 3:6 to preach, in which we are told that "Sarah called Abraham lord or master," and I'll give you one nervous preacher. He'll spend thirty minutes assuring you what that text does not mean because we are nervous about that kind of thing. Well, it's the case with all of us, not just with women relating to men, but all of us relating to the lord. We don't have lordship relationships and that's why it's so important for God to begin this preface by reminding you, "I am your Lord. You belong to Me. I own you. You are mine." The little children sing, happily, "I'm in the Lord's army." O, how true, but we don't live like it when we grow up. We don't salute and execute when the Lord speaks, and the Lord is reminding us, He is indeed our Lord and that is a calling on our life. And therefore the realization that God is our Lord and that He owns us impacts the way we obey Him.

III. Our obedience to God will be enlarged when we remember that He speaks His commands to His children.

Thirdly, if you look at verse 2, notice how God addresses the people, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out..." God is addressing Himself directly to the covenant community here. He's even using a singular to speak about the whole nation ,and I could do a long digression on the significance of that but here's what I want you to see. God gives these commands in the context of speaking to His people as His own household, as His own children, and our obedience to God will be enlarged when we remember that He gives His commands to us as His children. You hear, "Your God makes it clear that these commands are being given to the covenant community, to the church," if I can use that kind of language.

Now that doesn't mean that God's moral law is not universal and it doesn't mean

that God's universal law is not universally applicable, but it does mean that it is given here in the context of a covenant relationship. The law is given as the household rule and teaching of our heavenly Father and that is very significant, especially in a day and age that is so suspicious of law as abstract and distant and tyrannical and restrictive and non-relational, to realize that the law is given in the context of the household by the heavenly Father, makes all the difference. Obedience to the law for the believer has always been in the context of a loving committed relationship of divine blessing established by God by grace. From the very beginning the law did not function as the way that God would bring us into relationship with Himself, but the way that that relationship would be expressed once He had, by grace, brought us into His kingdom. And that sort of an attitude about law makes all the difference in the world. Suddenly, when it's your loving heavenly Father who's given you the command it makes all the difference.

My wife is a typical first child and I might even say a typical first daughter. She was absolutely devoted and loyal to her parents. She longed to please them in the way she related to them and I remember her telling me a story. A young man who was a cadet at The Citadel, the military university of South Carolina, had asked her out and her father, perhaps being wise and sensing the allure of a man in uniform took his daughter aside before she went out on this date to one of the official cotillions or balls that was being put on by The Citadel and said, "Ann, I want you to know that I trust you and I know that you won't do anything that will disappoint me." Well, Anne said that was it! There was no way that she was going to do anything to disappoint her father in her conduct. She was going to be absolutely upright in all her conduct in that date. Why? Because of her relationship to her father. She longed in the best possible way to bring pleasure and honor to her father and to his name and therefore the command that was implicit in his words was not burdensome to her. She longed to do it because she loved her heavenly father and the law is given in that context.

IV. Our obedience to God will be sweetened when we remember we are obeying our Redeemer.

Fourthly, if you look at verse 2 again, God emphasizes His role as a redeemer in this preface to His household commands. Notice what He says, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out...I redeemed you." God is stressing that He is the Redeemer. Our obedience to God is sweetened when we realize that we are obeying our Redeemer. The emphasis here is on the Lord who brought us out. God is our Redeemer. That is what is being stressed.

Once again we are being that in salvation grace is prior to law. God does not say, "Obey these ten words and then I will bring you out of Egypt." He says, "I've already brought you out of Egypt. Now therefore obey these words," and it makes all the difference in the world. He is not saying conditionally, "I love you and I'll save you if you earn it." He's saying, "I've saved you by grace. You've contributed

nothing to it. This is what my children look like. Live this way." And realizing that God is our Redeemer makes it a little easier to do some of the difficult things that we're called on to do as faithful believers in this life.

Sometimes God calls us to do very difficult things and we need to remember that He is our blood stained Redeemer. Maybe the Lord has called you to live in harmony with a difficult man and perhaps you need to remember that it's the Lord, your Redeemer, who calls you to do that. Perhaps the Lord has called you to be absolutely upright and act with integrity in a business situation. If you act with integrity it is going to cost you dear and you do it because it's your Redeemer asking you. It's the One who bled and died that you might have life who says, "Live this way, do this thing."

V. Our obedience to God will be constrained when we remember what we have been saved from and for.

And finally in verse 2 notice that He emphasizes what He's redeemed us from, what He's saved us from. God reminds Israel in verse 2 that He has saved her from sin and misery. He has separated her from Egypt, and Egypt in the Old Testament becomes a symbol of worldliness and sinfulness, and Israel's purity and separation from Egypt a sign of that separation from sin. And He's freed Israel from slavery, brought her out of this cruel bondage. God has saved Israel, in other words, from ethnic oblivion and from a cruel bondage. He saved her from sin and misery and yet the same is true of us. When we read these words we may not have been physically brought out of a land of bondage and of slavery but we have been bought out of bondage to slavery and sin. And our obedience to God will be constrained when we remember what we have been saved from.

Have you ever had an acquaintance or a friend who in his or her pre-Christian past had engaged in one of those sins that is still a sin that brings a horror to our society? And there are not many of them left, but one of those sins that you just wouldn't really want to talk about having been saved from it, because you know that everyone in the room would look at you and wonder for the rest of your life. And yet you have seen that person come out of whatever that lifestyle or sin may be, and seen them transformed by grace, and walking with and serving the Lord, and maybe even thinking about serving the Lord in full time Christian service in some capacity, and you know that that person knows what it is to be in bondage to sin and to be freed by God's grace to serve Him. And there's no burdensome command the Lord could give that person because the Lord has saved that person from the pit and that person knows that he or she was in that pit.

But you notice that that person knows not only what he or she is saved from, but also what he or she is saved for, not to live how he wants to live, not to live the way he used to live, but to live for God, saved for obedience. And it's the same in the old covenant and the new, "I've brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of

the house of slavery. Now therefore keep My commandments. Don't worship the idols. Honor My name. Honor my day. Honor your parents. Don't murder and so on. I've saved you from what you once were . I've made you to be what you were not. Now live this way." We're not only saved from sin and misery... we're saved to and for obedience.

And my friends, that's not just an Old Testament thing. It's not just in the Old Testament that we are saved for obedience. When the apostle Paul wants to summarize salvation by grace in Ephesians 2:8-10, after telling you that you're saved by grace and not by works, he tells you that you are "Saved by grace, not by works." For good works. We're saved for obedience. So, my friends, you see how this preface makes all the difference in understanding the ten words that are going to be spoken and I hope that as you think about these ten words over the next three months as we go through them, that you'll frequently go back to the preface and remember the context in which your loving heavenly Father has expressed the will which is in accordance with His own character for your lives. Let's pray.

Our heavenly Father, we thank You that You have saved us by grace and to and for obedience and we confess that that is not where we are. We are not walking perfectly and uprightly before You. In fact, some of us still resist the very idea of obedience and yet, O Lord, we know that You have not saved us to leave us in our present condition but that You have saved us to transform us so that we would love You and we'd love our brethren as You would have us love. And so we ask by Your grace that You would take us and keep us and seal us for Your courts above and that You would change us by grace. In Jesus name. Amen

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