

Liberated Obedience

Exodus: Revelation and Redemption

Exodus 20:1-21

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A Brave New World

In the early twentieth century there were two important dystopian novels. Both predicted a tyranny that would accompany the advance of technology. The more popular of the two was George Orwell's *1984*. The other was Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Orwell predicts a future where freedom is destroyed by *external* forces like Big Brother in the form of spies, prisons, torture chambers, and the state. Huxley imagines tyranny at the hand of *internal* forces like desires, egotism, hedonism, and leisure.¹ In Orwell's world, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In Huxley's world, people are controlled by inflicting pleasure.² Who was right? Which tyranny has proved more oppressive in our technological age? Most would say Huxley's predictions have proved spot on!

We see something similar at play in Exodus. In Egypt, Pharaoh enslaves Israel. Egypt is an external tyranny that inflicts pain and prevents God's people from rightly knowing him and worshipping him. But the exodus isn't over after Israel comes out of Egypt. There is yet a greater enemy and threat to Israel's freedom. Not an external threat, but an internal one.

The worst slavery isn't captivity by external forces. The worst slavery is captivity of the soul. It is slavery to sin. Jesus says, "Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin" (Jn. 8:34). And until a nation or a person is free from the tyranny of sin, they're not truly free; their exodus is not complete.

And so, after Israel is saved from Egypt, God brings them to Sinai where they're sanctified, as we saw last week. God calls his people to be holy because he's holy. And how will they become holy? It took ten plagues to save them from Egypt. And it took ten commandments to sanctify them from their sin.³

In Exodus 20, we encounter the Ten Commandments, or the Decalogue. One of the most important passages in the Bible. We did a whole series on the Ten Commandments back in 2009⁴, so I'm not going to deal with the specific commandments this morning. Instead, I want to consider how the Ten Commandments fit within the overall book of Exodus. We're going to look specifically at the prologue and the epilogue of the Ten Commandments to see how the Decalogue makes sense in light of the context of Exodus.

Exodus 20:1-21⁵

¹*And God spoke all these words, saying,*

²*"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*

³*"You shall have no other gods before me.*

¹ Alastair Roberts and Andrew Wilson, *Echoes of Exodus: Tracing Themes of Redemption Through Scripture*

² Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

³ Roberts and Wilson

⁴ [Ten Stupid Things](#) Series

⁵ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

⁴“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

⁸“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

¹²“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³“You shall not murder.

¹⁴“You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵“You shall not steal.

¹⁶“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.”

¹⁸Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off¹⁹ and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.”²⁰Moses said to the people, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.”²¹The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

This is the Word of the Lord.

What is this text saying at its core? I believe it’s something like this: God calls his people to comprehensive, uncontested allegiance, but it’s a liberated obedience. I know that’s a mouthful. But we’re going to spend the rest of our time this morning unpacking this sentence. I’ll show you three ways the Ten Commandments are calling us to comprehensive and uncontested allegiance to God. Then we’ll see three reasons why this allegiance is a liberated obedience, not another form of slavery. Let’s begin with the call to allegiance.

COMPREHENSIVE AND UNCONTESTED ALLEGIANCE

A Covenant Relationship

How is God calling his people to allegiance? First of all, it’s through a covenant relationship. The Ten Commandments are the basic form of the covenant God made with Israel. Ancient covenants were written on two copies, one for the king and one for the vassal. That’s why the Ten

Commandments were written on two tablets of stone.⁶ And they follow the basic structure of ancient covenants between a king and a vassal state. All ancient covenants had at least four main features: They introduced the great king, they laid out the historical relationship between the king and the vassal, they laid out the stipulations of the covenant, and they laid out blessings for keeping and curses for breaking the covenant.

We see these features in the covenant God made with Israel. It's really clear in Deuteronomy, but we see those features in Exodus 20 as well. They start by introducing God as king. "I am the LORD your God" (v. 2a). Then they tell us how God became their king. "[I] brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (v. 2b). The commandments themselves give the stipulations of the covenant. And within the commandments we see hints of blessing and curse. There is a curse in verse 5, "I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me." There is a blessing in verse 6, "But showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments."

So, God is establishing a covenant with his people.

Exclusive and Pervasive

And he expects uncontested allegiance or an exclusive relationship. Israel had been slaves under Pharaoh. But now they were called to serve God *alone*. That's why the very first commandment says, "You shall have no other gods before me" (v. 3). The gods of the Egyptians and Pharaoh were not an option for them. And the gods of the Canaanites were not an option for them.

There'd be many temptations to serve other gods in the land. False gods that promised rain and fertility. But they were to have uncontested allegiance to Yahweh. And uncontested allegiance proves itself in comprehensive obedience. It demands my life, my all. Every area of their lives should be given in submission to God through obeying his word. The whole gamut—from love for God to love for neighbor, as Jesus said (Mt. 22:37-40). Their worship of *God* needed to be conformed to God's word. "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything" (v. 4). Their relationships with *others* needed to be conformed to God's word. First and foremost, in the home:⁷ "Honor their father and mother" (v. 12). But also in society: "You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness" (vv. 13-16).

You get the picture. This is an all-of-life kind of allegiance. But that's not all. It also required allegiance of the whole person. Thought, word, and deed. Their words needed to be in submission to God: "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain... You shall not bear false witness" (vv. 7, 16). Their deeds obviously needed to be in submission to God. And their thoughts needed to be in submission. This is seen in the tenth commandment, "You shall not covet" (v. 17).

All the other commandments have to do with words or deeds, but this one has to do with the heart. One commentator says, "This is where the Decalogue ends, but where every breach of the law begins."⁸ It's our hearts that lead us to break the other commandments. When we want what we don't have, we'll commit adultery, murder, steal, lie, worship false gods, break the Sabbath, you

⁶ Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*, p. 76; Alec Motyer, *The Message of Exodus: The Days of Our Pilgrimage*, *The Bible Speaks Today*

⁷ Motyer

⁸ Motyer

name it (cf. Jas. 4:1-2)! That's why Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount went after the heart, not just the actions.

Allegiance to God is comprehensive. It demands my life, my all. All your heart soul, mind, and strength.

Keep Only Unto Me

In a traditional wedding, before the father gives his daughter to be married, the man and the woman are called to state their vows of intention. These vows come before the main vows. This is how they read: "Will you have this woman to be your wedded wife, to live together in holy marriage? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her and forsaking all others, keep only unto her, so long as you both shall live?"

That last question is critical. "Will you forsake all others and keep only unto her, so long as you both shall live?" Marriage is an exclusive relationship. It doesn't work if it's not exclusive.

The same is true in our relationship with God. God demands of his people complete and uncontested allegiance. He's asking his people in the Ten Commandments. And he is asking us this morning. Will you forsake all others and keep only unto God as long as you live?

Or to quote the modern hymn: "My life he bought, my love he owns. I have no longings for another. I'm satisfied in him alone." Does God own your love? Do you give him complete and uncontested allegiance that shows itself in obedience to his Word?

As Christians, we're no longer under the law. But we're still called to obey Christ with complete, uncontested allegiance. What did Jesus say would mark true disciples? They would obey all that he commanded (Matt. 28:19-20).

Now to some, the call to obedience may seem like another form of slavery. For most people rules seem like restriction. They want to be liberated from rules and norms. They want to be autonomous, able to do what they want, when they want, and how they want. But the Bible teaches from Genesis to Revelation that God's *blessing* comes as we submit to his kingly rule in our lives. We're called to obedience, but it's a liberated obedience.

We see that in our passage this morning in three ways. The first two ways come out of the prologue to the Ten Commandments. The third way comes out of the epilogue.

LIBERATED OBEDIENCE

God's Glory and Our Good

First, obedience is *for* God's glory and our good. The prologue to the Ten Commandments begins with a statement of who God is and what he's done: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt..." (v. 2). This is a clue that what follows in the Ten Commandments will reflect something of who the LORD our God is. The Law reflects God's name. We're called to be holy so that we can reflect something of the holiness of God in our lives.

That's why the third commandment is so critical: "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain" (v. 7). This command is not just referring to cussing or making oaths. This has to do

with the whole of life.⁹ We need to carry the LORD's name well. We can't act in a way that does violence to his character.

This connection to the LORD's character shows up in the other commands as well. We shouldn't worship other gods, because there are no other gods. We should keep the Sabbath because God worked for six days and rested on the seventh day. Keeping the Sabbath is imitating God. In Genesis the prohibition of murder is linked to the image of God. We should honor our father and mother because God is a father. We should be faithful to our wives because God is a faithful husband. We should tell the truth because God doesn't lie.

You get the point. Going against God's word is going against God's character. And because we were created in the image of God, it's also going against our design.

God's commands are not for our harm. They're for our good and blessing. We were created to walk in them. And when we do, we're truly liberated. Psalm 119:45 says, "I shall walk in freedom for I have sought your precepts."

But when we walk outside of God's word, we don't walk in freedom. We walk in slavery and bondage. To illustrate, let me just give one example. Think sexual liberation. Has our so-called sexual freedom actually led to liberation? I don't think so! There are many in our day who mock the church's views on sex—"they're so outdated!" But others are more honest and speak of the deep pain caused by promiscuity, abuse, and adultery. They ache, because they've come to know that adultery adulterates!

Even non-believers see this. In her book, *The End of Sex*, Donna Freitas says, "The hookup culture is leaving our generation unhappy, sexually unfulfilled, and confused about intimacy. Amid the seemingly endless partying on America's college campuses lies a thick layer of melancholy, insecurity, and isolation that no one can seem to shake."¹⁰

God's commands are for our good. They reflect God's goodness and his desire for his creation to flourish. Marriage was created to give us a safe place to have sexual intimacy. The command against adultery was meant to protect us from the unhappiness, insecurity, and confusion that Freitas describes. Obedience to God is where true freedom comes from. That's the first way we see obedience as liberation.

God's Grace

Obedience is for God's glory and for our good. But that's not all. Obedience also flows *from* God's grace. The prologue says, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

I've said this so many times, so I won't say much more today. But I hope the point is crystal clear in your mind. The Bible doesn't start with rules. Sure, it includes rules and those rules are not bad; they're for our good. But the Bible doesn't start with rules; it starts with grace. Our obedience doesn't save us. God saves us before he sanctifies us. He makes us his people before he calls us to live as his people. Our obedience should be motivated by grace! Love for God is grounded in God's love for us. Love for neighbor is grounded in God's love and informed by God's love. We show

⁹ W. Ross Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known: The Missionary Heart of the Book of Exodus*, New Studies in Biblical Theology

¹⁰ Quoted in Randy Newman, *Unlikely Converts*

kindness to others as God showed kindness to us. We're faithful because God is faithful. We don't covet because God has given us all that we need and more!

We see this same principle at work in the New Testament. Husbands are called to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (Eph. 5:25). We're called to flee from sexual immorality because we were bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:18-20).

Our Need

Our obedience flows *from* God's grace. But it also points *to* our need for grace. This comes out in the epilogue to the Ten Commandments in verses 18-21.

In verse 1 God spoke to the people directly. And after they heard his ten words and "saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off."

Why were they terrified? Phil Ryken says it's because of the demands of the law. God is making an absolute claim on their worship, time, relationships, possessions, bodies, speech, and desires. In chapter 19 they promised they'd do all God's words, but now they realize just how extensive God's call on their lives is and they're afraid.

They're also afraid of the sound and the sight on the mountain. And the reason for that is likely because they fear God's judgment. In other parts of the Bible, smoke and fire are associated with God's judgment (Rev. 8:5).

So they're afraid that if they can't keep God's word they'll experience judgment. They're experiencing a truth the New Testament will later make clear. Although the law is good and promises life to those who keep it, no one can keep it! The law teaches us how to live the good life. But it also points out our sin and our need for a Savior (Rom. 3:20; cf. Gal. 3:24).

That's what Israel sees at Mt. Sinai. They see that they can't be in God's presence and listen to God's word without a mediator. So in verse 19 they say to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." God had already told them they needed Moses to serve as a mediator. Now they see it and believe it. That's the right response. When we're in trouble with the law, we need a lawyer.¹¹ We need mediation. And that's what Israel is calling for.

And what does their mediator say?: "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin" (v. 20). If they have a mediator, they don't need to be afraid of being struck down. But they still need to have a holy reverence for God that leads them to obedience.

Are you tracking with the flow of this argument? God's commands are good, but if we're honest, when we really look at them, we realize we're in trouble. There is nobody who keeps God's commands! Work through them this week and you'll see. At a heart level, nobody keeps them. They point to our sin and our need *for* a Savior.

¹¹ Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory*, Preaching the Word

The New Covenant

In fact, the Law's primary purpose is to point *to* our Savior. In Exodus, Moses is a type for Christ. Moses is a mediator who points to the perfect mediator. We can't obey God's commands. But Christ has obeyed God's commands. And he takes God's judgment on himself to pay for our sins. He's our substitute. He offers his perfect righteousness to God. And he offers his sacrifice for our sins. And he's our mediator. He stands between sinful humanity and a holy God. He's our great high priest. Through his blood we have access to God's word and to God's presence.

Without Christ, you should fear God's judgment. But if you place your trust in Christ, you don't have to be afraid! You can stand in God's presence because he stood in your place.

But Jesus not only lived the life we fail to live. And he not only died for us. He also enables us to live in allegiance to God. Christ ushered in the new covenant promised in Jeremiah 31.

The new covenant will not be like the old. Nobody could keep the old covenant (Jer. 31:32). But in the new covenant, we will be able to serve God in liberated obedience. Because in the new covenant we have the Holy Spirit. We have been born again. We have the law written on our hearts (v. 33). The Spirit gives us new hearts to obey God. Now this won't be perfect, but we can still live in relationship with God without fear because God promises, "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (v. 34). That's freedom!

"If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (Jn. 8:36). Free from sin. Free to worship. Free to serve God without fear in liberated obedience by the Spirit. God saves us by his grace not our works. And he sanctifies us for his service. He calls us to complete allegiance. And he enables what he requires. What liberty!

In light of this good news, let us heed the instruction of James. Let us, "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves...the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing" (Jas. 1:22, 25).