

“The Spirit Behind The Law” – Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

One of the great battles going on in both the secular and the religious worlds is the conflict over just how zealous to be concerning applying the law. We see every night on the news more violence rooted in the establishing of a new caliphate. We read on the web the vitriolic arguments on whether the church should be more inclusive. Television channels are full of heated debates over the degree of zealotry to be exercised in applying or modifying the law. Even the most popular movies and television shows highlight issues of law enforcement.

This is nothing new – the fascination with law goes back way beyond the dawn of television shows such as NCIS, CSI, and Law and Order in all their various flavours. Crime, cops and the law have long been favourite themes in movies as well. One can hardly think of movies about the law without thinking about The movie about The Law – The Ten Commandments (it was on again last night!) and remember Charlton Heston as Moses coming down the dusty mountain, robes flowing in the wind, thunder and lightning at his back, hair and beard flying free, and a gigantic tablet in each hand. The background music swelling (no, not the party music from the base camp below ... that’s a different part of the story) but instead music that is much more martial, stirring, somber and serious. Somber and serious also describes the look on Moses’ face, a look that apparently set the tone for the next three thousand years. After all, he was carrying the Ten Commandments, wasn’t he? Carrying the very Law dictated to him by God on Mount Sinai, a Law meant to prescribe every action of God’s people. Weren’t these the very rules that when broken would define a person as condemned?

Caution – spoiler alert – the answer is no! Sadly, though, people have slipped time and again into misunderstanding the Ten Commandments as a tool with which to condemn, to isolate, to exclude people. Time and again since Moses came down from the mountain carrying these commandments from God, people of faith have misunderstood the nature and purpose of these commandments. Time and again the clergy and powerful within Temple, synagogue and church have misused these commandments to abuse people. Over the ages people have formed around these commandments layers of practices, laws and regulations harder than the coldest heart.

This is exactly the situation that Jesus railed against in his tirade in the Temple and in his other condemnations of the Pharisees. In the almost two thousand years between Moses delivering the Ten Commandments to the Israelites and the ministry of Jesus the Law had evolved into a highly-complex set of rules. That was not necessarily in and of itself a bad thing, but the hypocritical misuse of the Law by the religious and the self-righteous certainly was. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, for you are like whitewashed tombs, all clean on the outside and on the inside full of dead bones and unclean things”, Jesus challenged and condemned. “Woe also to you lawyers! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them” he charged. “You have turned my Father’s house into a market place” he raged in the Temple, overturning tables and scattering the coins. How could it have come to this? How could a faithful people have gone so far off the rails in understanding what God had done in giving the Ten Commandments, and the Law? Apparently their leaders had lost sight of the context in which the Commandments were issued, even though it is well described in Scripture as part of the Exodus experience..

The giving of the Ten Commandments was part of the Exodus experience, but in hearing that we all tend to say, “yeah, yeah, Moses, bulrushes, Egypt, Pharaoh, Red Sea, chariots, Charlton Heston, yadda, yadda, yadda”. Let me say it again, so you can hear it clearly: the giving of the Ten Commandments was part of the Exodus experience. The giving of the Law

was a highly significant part of what the Israelite people saw as their defining moment, their rescue from slavery in Egypt. But note carefully - the Ten Commandments were given by God to His people after He had saved them from Egypt. The people of God received these Commandments as a result of being saved by God's grace and mercy, not as a way to find that salvation. In giving these Commandments to His people, God was declaring anew His covenant with them, defining the way in which He wanted his people to live in that covenant. It's vitally important to understand the difference between the cart and the horse, and to get them in the proper order. Obedience to the Law, to these Commandments, is a response to God's grace and mercy, not a way to earn them. Instead of seeing the Commandments and the Law as a mine field laden with religious traps for the unwary, in which any misstep can result in being blown out of God's favour and out of the lineup into heaven, we need to understand the Commandments and the Law as a User's Guide to God's Grace, a way to respond to what God has already done, a way to live and proclaim that grace and mercy already received.

It's no wonder that the Israelites had a bit of trouble with this totally new system. They were of course fully familiar with the laws of all the nations around them, laws written in an impersonal third-person kind of way – you know the kind of thing: “When someone steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters or sells it, the thief shall pay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep.” The Israelites were, however, totally unprepared for this new and unique to them form of Law: short commands or prohibitions, very personal (second-person, ‘You’), not linked to circumstances, unequivocal. In these commands there was no ‘if’ or ‘when’, these were commands to be followed at any and all times. These Commandments were and are distinctly Israelite, and totally different from anything they had encountered or experienced in life. Given the way the Commandments were given, and the religious rites that accompanied them, the covenantal nature of them is clear, and we can readily see that following them, living them, keeps the follower within the covenant established by God.

Now I'm not going to analyze the Commandments one at a time (yes, there is grace and mercy, even here!) – that's better done in Bible Classes – but there is one structural characteristic that I want to point out. There are, of course, ten of them – all except numbers Four and Five are prohibitions (“don't's”) and those two are more positive (“do's”). It's interesting that those two are positive, because they form a bridge, a transition between the first four that define our relationship with God and the last six that define our relationship with other covenant people. The link between these two groups is a pair of “do's” instead of the “don't's” that people usually associate with all of the Ten Commandments.

In terms of priorities, it is clear that the First Commandment is foundational. The prohibition against worshipping other gods is the basis for all other regulations. We should note that this is not the same as monotheism; quite the opposite it assumes that there are alternative gods to worship, and this is as true today as it was. The gods we worship today are perhaps more subtle and complex than the idols and graven images of Moses' day, but no less enticing. Fame, power, wealth come to mind immediately, but the list is long: fitness, leisure, and although it pains me to say it, technology! The expectations of us set down in these Commandments are as applicable today and should be taken as seriously today as they ever were. Recognizing that, how do we avoid falling into the trap of misusing the Commandments as a legalistic and moralistic trap for others.

The best way to avoid that trap is to hear what Jesus had to say. When the Pharisees – that zealous gang of legal literalists – tried to trap Jesus by asking him which was the most important commandment His answer was clear and simple yet powerful: “all of the

commandments are good”, he replied, “but I will give you a new one”. With an answer that paralleled the overall structure of the commandments (remember that four/six split re God/others) Jesus told his challengers, and us, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”[Mt 22:37-40]

I guess if we see the Ten Commandments as the full Law we could call this short version from Jesus the “Pocket Reference Card”, a powerful condensed version that encompasses not just the letter of the Law, but more importantly the spirit or Spirit behind the Law. Using this as a definition for how we should live in God’s covenant in Christ provides a simple way to avoid the trap of legalism and exclusion. It means we have to work at it, however, because with such a simple yet all-embracing definition we have to decide for ourselves whether each and every action, thought, deed of ours fits the criteria. With this simple version there is no way we can stand proud just because we had observed the letter of the Law. Instead, we have to examine not only our actions but more importantly the motives that underlie our actions to see if both the motives and the actions are consistent with loving God AND loving our neighbour – often a much more difficult task.

But that is the task to which we are called ... to hear the Ten Commandments of God’s covenant with Israel reformatted in the New Commandment of God’s covenant with the world in Christ Jesus, and to live out that double-barreled new commandment of love – loving God, and loving others. That’s the kind of Law that will implement not only the Spirit behind the law but also the full grace of God exhibited in Christ our Lord.