

## WORLD COMMUNION The Shepherd Moses and the Law

[Deuteronomy 5:1, 32-33; Matthew 5:17-18](#)

The Story Before the Grand Story: A Christian Understanding of the Old Testament

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Sunday, October 4, 2009

Worship at 8 a.m. (Chapel); 9:15 and 11 a.m. (Sanctuary)

This is now the fourth sermon in a series of messages we are preaching on the story before the grand story and last week we met Abraham. Abraham is the father of this people that God has promised to bless and through them that the world will be blessed. With Abraham we have the beginning of what is called the period of the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And for a while their life goes well but then drought and famine cause Jacob and his people to go to Egypt where there is always water. They have a friend there through Joseph and the Pharaoh is friendly toward them. The Nile River, the longest river in the world, always flows and so during many of the famines in the Middle East, people came to Egypt. Jacob's people were treated well at the beginning but then finally were organized into a bitter bondage. This prepares us for another date in the life of this story. Abraham's date, 1800 years before Christ, the next date, 1290 years before Christ, a towering figure comes into the life of the Jews and his name is Moses. Moses the shepherd, Moses the law giver, Moses the deliverer who leads the people out of Egyptian bondage. We call that "the Exodus;" the Old Testament book of Exodus tells us this whole account.

At the beginning of that escape, the people are emergency oriented. They are running from Egyptian troops because the Pharaoh has decided not to let them go. But they do manage to escape, and they end up in the wilderness where they will live for 40 years. One of the Jewish feasts actually celebrates that 40-year period, the Feast of Tabernacles while they are a tenting people. The Feast of Passover celebrates the Exodus itself and so the people will wander for 40 years with Moses and finally they will enter the Promised Land. But during the early period of their life together their main preoccupation is the emergency of getting out of Egypt. But that can't go on forever. One of the finest books about the Ten Commandments that I have ever read is written by Joy Davidman, who later married C.S. Lewis. She wrote a book called *Smoke on the Mountain*. It is a marvelous book on the Ten Commandments. The introduction of that book is written by C.S. Lewis. And Joy Davidman has a curious line. She says, "You can't drown all the time."<sup>1</sup> When you are in an emergency you're drowning but you can't drown all the time. Finally you spit the water out and you end up on dry land and then you have to decide what you are going to do. That line from Joy Davidman is similar to a line Lewis wrote in the *Chronicles of Narnia: The Silver Chair* when Jill is weeping and Lewis coins his famous line, "Crying is alright in a way as long as it lasts but sooner or later you have to stop and then you have to decide what to do."<sup>2</sup> And that's what happened to the Jews in the wilderness. They can't drown all the time. They have to then decide, "How are we going to live?" How do we live now? Moses is their absolute leader and they can continue that way through the 40 years and maybe they'll continue that way with 'divine right of kings' throughout the rest of their life together. You might call that the totalitarian solution: an absolute leader who has all the power and the authority. But there is also an opposite possibility that, in fact, happens when Moses is absent; when Moses goes up Mt. Sinai to have an appointment with God. When Moses is absent, then anarchy breaks out, and everyone exercises the power that they have or think they have; and that opposite possibility, the absence of a central singular authority, we call anarchy. Now both are dangerous. They are dangerous in different ways. But they have the same result. The one single ruler if that were to be the way they would go for the rest of their life together, then there is no protection of the ruled against the ruler. It is the right to do whatever he or she chooses to do and for you as a person everything depends on your proximity to that power. The opposite possibility is just as bad and that is anarchy where there are a thousand equally terrifying tyrannies that exist all dependent on power. It's the law of the jungle. That's no better.

At that moment in the life of Israel, God gives to Moses a better way and another covenant. It happens on Mt. Sinai. Think about this. Moses trudges up Mt. Sinai, the absolute leader of the people and on Mt. Sinai he will receive a new covenant so that when he comes down Mt. Sinai he will carry two tablets with texts chiseled in stone which symbolizes the fact that these tablets are permanent. Those tablets are the Ten Commandments. When Moses comes down Mt. Sinai, he is no longer the absolute leader of the people, nor will any other leader after him be. Moses comes down the mountain under the law, under the *Torah*. *Torah* means "the way that God has revealed." It's the way that God prescribes for the people. And so he comes down carrying these tablets, no longer absolute; nor will anyone else be absolute after him. Next week we are going to meet David; a prophet named Nathan will be able to challenge David because he also is under the Law.

Well, let's take a look at that Law. The book of Exodus, chapter 20, tells of the commands Moses and the people received. It's also repeated for us in Deuteronomy, chapter 5. Twice in the Old Testament this covenant on Mt. Sinai (Mt. Horeb), is recorded for us. Here's what happened. He met God and God spoke these words to him. "I am the Lord, your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt." Notice it starts with grace. "I am the Lord, your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt; out of the land of slavery; you shall have no other Gods before me." The first of the Ten Commandments is a vertical one having to do with God and our relationship with God. In fact, I want to alert you to something. In these Ten Commandments I am about to read to you from Exodus, chapter 20, you are going to see there are four relationships that identify and describe who we are as human beings. The relationship that is vertical toward God; the relationship we have with regard to our self; the relationship we have regarding the earth around us, the world; and then horizontally, the relationships we have toward people around us. And those four relationships will describe the human dignity that we have as well as our human mandate. Listen to them as they unfold. Law 1: I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other Gods before me. Law 2: You shall not make for yourself an idol whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or the earth beneath or the water under the earth, you shall not bow down to them or worship them. That second commandment means no idols, nothing from the earth shall be given more meaning than it rightfully has or worshiped. We were given dominion to steward the earth but we are not to worship the earth, not to worship the crocodile, or the cobra, or the scorpion, or the earth itself, or the sun, or the moon and the stars. Law 3: You shall not make a wrongful use of my name. The Hebrew word *shwa* is used there, which is the word translated "vain;" you should not take the name of the Lord, your God in vain and the word means 'hollow.' In fact it is used to refer to witchcraft in the instance when the witch of Endor, was sought out by King

Saul; she was the witch of the hollow sound. So it is used therefore with regard to witchcraft but it is the word 'to hollow.' You shall not hollow the name of God; empty it of its meaning. Third Command. So the first three commandments have to do with our relationship with God. The fourth command has to do with us and our relationship with ourselves and the earth around us. Remember the Sabbath Day; *shabbat* means "seven," it means "rest," it means "cease." The cease day, the *shabbat*, the Sabbath day - keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do your work, the seventh day is the Sabbath to the Lord your God. Notice it treats your life in a rhythmic way. You are to be rhythmic in your life, six and one, seven. You are to live your life in terms of seven days and it moves on and says the seventh day is the Sabbath to the Lord, you shall not do any work, your son, your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, notice the animals are included, the alien who lives in your house. Did you know that Jewish law is the only law among ancient civilizations that has protection for the foreigner? The alien is protected by the law as well as the tribal insider. In six days the Lord God made heaven and earth and he rested on the seventh day. This repeats that great saga account of Genesis, chapter 1. Now the next command begins to reach outward toward the world around you. And it starts with those closest to you. "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God has given you." Notice it has a promise in it. The word 'honor' in Hebrew means "weigh heavy." Weigh heavy your mother and your father; honor them. And you will see that word "honor" is going to dominate the rest of the ethical relationships toward those around you. Honor your father and mother and it will go well with you. And then the commands move beyond family. "Thou shall not..." we now hear the beginning of negatives. Thou shall not murder; the Hebrew word *rasha*, "murder" means to cross over the existence of another human being. Therefore we shall honor other human beings. Notice the 'honor' is carrying on now. You shall not murder those around you. You shall not cross over their right to live. You shall not commit adultery, now it deals with the relationship you have with the one you committed your love to. You shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor, and you shall not covet your neighbor's house or his wife, or his slave, or his ox, or anything that is your neighbor's.

These are the Ten Commandments. Moses comes down the mountain with these words carved, etched in stone, so they are non-negotiable. They are never to be taken away. They are never to be eroded. They are there. Moses was in the presence of God and had this tremendous face-to-face experience with the glory of God and when he comes down we are told in the text that he put a veil over his face because the people would be so shocked by the glow that he had. It's interesting, St. Paul puts a different sense to it. Paul says Moses put a veil in front of his face not because he was afraid that people would be startled by seeing the glow. He put a veil over his face because he knew the glow was fading. That's St. Paul's interpretation, because Moses knew he was no longer absolute. He was no longer the one who was absolute. He was coming down under the Law and that's how Paul interprets that; I think Paul is correct. Moses will never be absolute again. The Law is above him. You have a right to appeal to the Law of God, the *Torah* because it's above even Moses. This covenant describes human beings in these four relationships. My relationship upward toward God, inward toward myself, my relationship to the earth around me, and my relationship to the world around me of people beginning with my parents.

I want you to now see something about the Law. I want you to see that the Law is profoundly positive. It's really a law of grand positives though there are negatives too in the 'thou shall not's.' Some people refer to the Ten Commandments as a series of 'thou shall not's.' Oh no, it's profoundly positive. Think of the first three commandments how positive they are. 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt.' That's sheer grace. 'No other Gods!' What a tremendous thing to be set free from. I don't have to worship Baal. I don't have to worship Adolph Hitler. I don't have to worship any other god. There is the one God. And no idols are needed. I don't have to worship the crocodile. I don't have to worship the cobra. I don't have to worship the earth, or the sun, or the moon, or the stars. I am set free from them and stone or silver representations. I now can study them. I can understand them. I don't worship them. I worship God. I am set free from that captivity. I don't have to worship money. Money is something I am the steward of as a part of the earth. I don't worship it. The Law sets me free from tyranny. And three: 'No hollowing of God's name.' God is able to speak for himself. He doesn't use witches to tell you what he is saying. So God speaks for himself. That is a wonderful positive. The first three commands and then the fourth commandment, the Sabbath. The Sabbath commandment is completely for you and in your favor. Our Lord said that, it is a commandment in your behalf. It shows you that you shouldn't be worked to death, even the animals shouldn't be. It's ecological. It's a commandment that says you need a rhythm in your life to keep you healthy. That's a commandment for you. And then the fifth commandment, 'honor your father and mother,' the people nearest you, honor them, weigh them heavy, don't take them lightly. You need a root system, you need to know where you are from, you need to know and love and treasure the people in your life. And then that honor goes on. You shall not cross over another person's existence. It means you shall value another human being's life. 'Thou shall not commit adultery.' It means you shall honor the one you made a promise to: your husband, your wife and therefore be faithful, even more, celebrate them. 'Thou shall not steal.' You shall be grateful for life and share. 'Thou shall not tell lies.' You shall tell the truth. That's a grand positive. All science is dependent upon telling the truth. You can't do a scientific experiment if you tell lies in your experiments so it opens up the world for truth. And 'thou shall not covet.' You should be grateful for all of life. Don't grasp at life's gifts, be grateful. Those are the Ten Commandments. They're totally positive.

We have always had, down through the ages, two responses to the Ten Commandments that go with the fact that we see how great they are but also the Law intimidates us too. We love the Law. We love the Law because it ensures our worth. Read Psalm 119. Psalm 119 is a long love song to the Law. It goes through the whole Hebrew alphabet saying how much I treasure the Law because the Law guarantees my worth. It guarantees my dignity against the tyrant and against the jungle. We love it. Can I give you an example? Suppose you took your family on a picnic. You went maybe to the Shenandoah Mountains or something. Maybe camped out for awhile and then you drove your car back with your kids. Your whole family is in the car. You're driving through a country road and then something bad happens. You develop car trouble late at night on a country road. But then something even more ominous happens. You notice a van was following you. They have been following you a little bit too closely you thought. And they had tinted windows. Don't you hate those cars with tinted windows! This van was following you and that was alarming to you. You're the dad driving and then you have the car failure. You have something go wrong with your car on the country road. And then the van slows to a stop just behind you. And you see three guys get out of the van and they look like thugs. They've got wrenches probably not to help you repair the tire but maybe to break the window and steal everything from your family. You're sitting there in terror as these guys begin to slowly walk toward the car. This is kind of a white knuckle illustration. But just then something good happens. You see two Virginia state police cars with all the lights on. It's just wonderful like Christmas came early. They had been following that van too. They had noticed the van earlier. They were tracking it. And you are in your car and they come roaring up behind the van and make

the arrest and you sit there with your family and what do you say to your children. "Hey you guys let's have a cheer for the Virginia state police." For the law. And it's law that is armed, it has power and authority. We live in western civilization under the law and we believe the law has the right and obligation to arrest marauders. And we are cheering them and saying, "Thank you, Law." What a wonderful thing to have these Ten Commandments. The tyrants in this case from the jungle cannot just destroy my family.

Well, I have a second illustration. Now you went to the Shenandoah with your family, had a great picnic and you're driving home with a much better car. This is a car that would never have car difficulty. And in fact you are bragging to your teenage son, "You know this car here. You haven't seen what this car can do. We're on a nice clear straightaway now and it's very safe. I am not texting. I'm totally concentrating and I am going to show you what this car can do. And watch, Jim, I am going to go up to maybe 80. I know it is a 70 mph speed limit but I am going to do it real carefully just to show you what this car can do. And we go to 70, 75, and then we go to 80. What do you think of this car? The motor is so quiet you can hardly hear it. Isn't that something?" And just then the marvelous lights of the Virginia state police are in the rearview mirror. The car comes up behind you. First you think to yourself they're maybe apprehending some criminals down the road. They're going to go by me. So I will slow down as they go by, but they don't go by. Ah, they've got me in their eyes and all those lights are on and they come up and park behind me and the officer starts to stroll up toward my car. Now let me ask you a question. Do you say to your kids at that point, "Hey you guys let's have a cheer for the Virginia state police." No you have a sick feeling in your stomach, really sick. You're calculating what the fine is going to be and if you are going to have to go to speeders school and all those things. Maybe your wife says, "Let's have a cheer for the Virginia state police." But you don't. I'll tell you why. Let me explain.

We love the law when it protects us from the marauder. We resent the law when we are the marauder. We resent the law when we're the one captured for adultery, captured for theft, captured for breaking the law, crossing over someone else's safety, or right to exist. Then we resent the law. We have a mixed feeling toward the Law and it goes right straight through the Old Testament and into the New Testament and into our own present life. We all have that mixed feeling toward the Law. And that is why I believe St. Paul rightly says, "The Law is the truant officer that brings us to Christ." It's good. The Law is good. Our Lord said that too, at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is our Lord's commentary on the Law. Every Rabbi was expected to give a commentary on the Law. And our Lord's commentary is the Sermon on the Mount. He starts it with the nine blessings just like Psalm 1. "Blessed is the man that walks not in the way of wickedness but in the way of the *Torah* of God." That's how he starts the sermon and then he says, "You are the light of the world, you are the salt of the earth," and then he says, "Think not that I have come to destroy the Law. I have not come to destroy the Law but to fulfill it" (Matthew 5:17), and then follows the Sermon of the Mount. As he takes the Law in his hands and explains it. The Law is good. St. Paul says it's a truant officer to bring us to Christ. It brings us to Christ.

We're coming to the Lord's Table now and the Law in a way is bringing us to the Lord's Table. Why? How? Two ways: First because we admire it and we want to meet the Lord of the Law. We read the Sermon on the Mount. And if you have read the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew, chapters 5, 6, and 7, you are profoundly impressed by the goodness of Jesus Christ, and he is the Lord of the Law. The goodness of the Law brings you to its Lord. I want to know the one who thought all this up. Who has such a high view of my dignity and so the Law brings me to its Lord. Secondly I am brought to the Savior because the Law breaks me. The Law reveals me. That's why we have the prayer of confession. It breaks me. I realize my woundedness. I realize my brokenness and know I want to come to the Lord who is able to resolve and able to heal the brokenness that the Law discovers. Isn't it interesting that our Lord, on the Thursday night that he was betrayed, when he took bread and wine and created for us the Lord's Supper, he didn't create it apart from a rich history. He took another feast that was already in place. The seder meal from the Passover is what our Lord's Supper is built upon. And the seder meal thanks God for the Exodus. The fact that God brought the people out of Egypt. And when the bread is broken in the seder they remember that God rescued the people out of Egypt. But Jesus surprises his disciples. He does not mention Egypt, instead he says, "This is my body which is broken for you" (Matthew 26:26). I'm broken so that you can come out of your captivity. Not out of Egypt but the captivity of your sin. The captivity of all the mistakes you have made in your life. And then the cup of Thanksgiving, this is a new covenant in my blood, my life, given for you. All of you drink of it. It's for you. And that goodness and that healing power is in the Lord's Supper. When we come to the Lord's Supper today, are we wounded, are we hurting? Has the Law, in a sense, revealed our own brokenness, my brokenness? Let us then come to the Table and be fed and be healed. Or are you here because you profoundly respect and are grateful for the Law and the Gospel that has assured you of your worth. Come to this Table and be fed by the Lord who has sealed that worth.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this text. Thank you for the Law. For the grand positives of the Law that we now celebrate together in the Lord's Supper. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

1 Davidman, Joy. *Smoke on the Mountain: An Interpretation of the Ten Commandments in Terms of Today*. Foreword by C.S. Lewis. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954.

2 Lewis, C.S. *The Silver Chair*. *The Chronicles of Narnia* series, 1953.

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