

DELIVERANCE

It would seem to be an obvious answer. If we are asked how the 10 Commandments begin we quote the first line as “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”¹ And having done so, and thought so for many years, we fail to realize that this answer starts us down the wrong road. That is not how the 10 begin.

But before we get into that, let’s look at a little background. The children of Israel are at the foot of Mt Sinai, having just left Egypt after having lived there for over 200 years under its polytheistic influence. True, they were the chosen people, the family of promise to Abraham and the descendants of Jacob whose name was changed to Israel. But after more than two centuries and multiple generations separating them from the patriarchs, and removal from the promised land, there was little memory of those days and promises.

Complicating the matter even further, they had become slaves of the Egyptians, forced to hard labor and under an edict that all new born male children were to be drowned in the Nile River. Now Moses, who had been adopted into the Royal Family of Egypt, had fled for his life under threat and had been gone for 40 years, living in Midian, serving as a shepherd of the flocks of his father-in-law.

It is in this setting that God called to him from a brightly glowing bush in the desert, introducing himself with the words, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.”² Thinking as we do in retrospect, it is hard to comprehend that Moses – the author credited with writing the first five books of the Bible – knew so little about the God of the Patriarchs. So this is where deliverance begins as God says:

"I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.... And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."³

After a bit of protest, Moses asks a question that seems strange to us. “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”⁴ To us who live in a monotheistic – or even atheistic society – that seems to be an odd question. After all, his name is God isn’t it? Well, no. God is a title, not a name. And in the religion of Egypt, under which influence they had been living for generations, there were hundreds of gods with different names and often different interests which were in conflict with one another.

It is the nature of polytheistic religion that attempting to appease them all is a constant and impossible task. It is with this in mind that Moses asks the odd question, "What is your name?" And God replied, "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you."⁵ The one and only. The existent one. The eternal. He has come to deliver Israel from their captors in Egypt. And indeed, slavery was one of the big issues being addressed. But even more important than this, was deliverance from the host of oppressive and crazy gods of the Egyptians.

The setting is that Israel is now free in the wilderness of Sinai. But they have no functional government. They have no crops. They have no income. They have no structure to their society. And they have no concept of a God who loves and cares for them. It is in this setting that we are now ready to ask the question, "How do the 10 Commandments begin?" And the answer is found in Exodus 20, verse 2, not in verse 3 which we usually think of as the start:

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me."⁶

Ok. So what difference does that start make? Actually, all the difference in where we go from here. If we begin with just the words, "You shall have no other gods before me" we make him out to be the biggest demanding ego in the universe who you had better obey – or else. But if we begin with "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt" you have an entirely different view based on deliverance. Deliverance not just from slavery, but from all those crazy and oppressive gods they had learned to fear in Egypt.

Granted, we live in an entirely different setting today, and the 10 Commandments frequently come in for a bum rap. In our secular society, at best, some view them as archaic, irrelevant and out of date and an attempt to stand in the way of our good times and fun. And those who still hold them in respect have often contributed to the poor reputation of the 10 by portraying them as a measuring stick, or threat, or as a means of salvation. But God did not give us the 10 to save us from hell fire. He gave us Jesus for that. Rather, he gave us the 10 to keep us from living in our own man made hell while destroying ourselves and one another in this earthly life.

While it is the grace of Christ that saves us for eternity, it is the 10 that serves as a second grace – a deliverance from our bent to self-destruction. For a band of escaped slaves, the 10 provided protection they had not known in the society where they had lived. Likewise, for us, the 10 saves us from corruption in society today.

It helps me to comprehend all this when I see the commandments as a package, bound together as a unit both from within and without. This "10 Package" begins, not with the first commandment, but rather with the fifth – the bridge connection between the two sections of the 10, or the foundation upon which the package is based. It is the family bond that holds it all

together, even to the point that the length of life and homeland security are affected by it. It is the basis of society, the seat of learning, the center of worship.

Once having established this base, we see four ascending levels of rights that the 10 provide. The first is the right to existence reflected in the first and sixth commandment. Deliverance from killing as proscribed in the sixth clearly establishes the right to human existence. But like it, the first commandment has double impact. Not only does it establish the right of God as the one and only, it at the same time delivers the people from the untenable existence of dealing with multiple gods who need to be appeased. Both the existence of God and of mankind are assured by this level of the 10 Package.

The second and seventh commandments address the right of purity in relationships. The term adultery comes into play in both, but it is actually a word derived from chemistry. It is defined as “corrupting, debasing, or making impure a substance by the addition of foreign or inferior material.” And in both our relationship with God and our relationship in marriage, the right to purity is established, and we are delivered from corrupt influences. When Israel wanders and strays from pure worship, God calls them an adulterous nation, employing the very language of the seventh commandment.

The third and eighth commandments deal with the right to possessions. “You shall not steal” is rather straight forward and easily understandable. Don’t take that which is not rightfully yours. But what can you take from God? There it is, “You shall not take the name of God in vein.” The reputation of God is tied to those who claim to be his people. Our frequent interpretation of this commandment is in the context of foul language. And even though this is clearly included, there is so much more. Stealing God’s good name by our crude, disrespectful and wicked behavior is unacceptable. Even in our religious practice – or perhaps particularly in this way – when we misrepresent him, we are guilty of destroying his good name and turning others from him.

While the first three levels of the 10 reflect relationship with rather tangible things such as existence, purity and possessions, the fourth level deals with symbolic relationships – the Sabbath and truthfulness. How so? you might ask. Look at the similarity of these two observations, the first from the prophet Ezekiel and the second from the Gospel of John:

“I gave them my statutes, and shewed them my judgments, which if a man do, he shall even live in them. Moreover also I gave them my sabbaths, to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord that sanctify them.”⁷

“I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth. As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth.”⁸

It is in commitment to truth and to rest in God's grace – think Sabbath – that we are sanctified. While the first three levels of the 10 address more physical objects and behaviors, the fourth level provides our right to purity on the inside through sanctification, not of ourselves, but as a gift of grace.

So there you have it. The 10 package bound together through the family unit as its base and connection to the four levels of deliverance. I guess that about wraps it up. No! you say. There is one more? Oh yes, the tenth commandment. But it is kind of a throwaway commandment anyway, isn't it? "You shall not covet" and then there is a rather lengthy list of the things you are not to covet. But after all, who is going to know if you violate this one. It all takes place in your own head.

Yet that is just the point. This is the commandment that actually does wrap it all up. It is the shield which surrounds the other nine. Before we would violate any of the others, we first covet that which is not rightfully ours. Putting it in contemporary language, perhaps we could translate it as the phrase "Don't even think about it." And that is a good notion. Otherwise, even if we did not actually violate one of the other nine, living in a constant state of longing for that which is not ours not only wears us down inside, but it also diminishes the value of what we rightfully possess so that we fail to enjoy our blessings. Ellen White makes an insightful observation about the 10 in these words:

"The ten commandments, Thou shalt, and thou shalt not, are ten promises, assured to us if we render obedience to the law governing the universe. "if you love me, keep my commandments." Here is the sum and substance of the law of God. The ten holy precepts spoken by Christ upon Sinai's mount were the revelation of the character of God, and made known to the world the fact that He had jurisdiction over the whole human heritage. That law of ten precepts of the greatest love that can be presented to man is the voice of God from heaven speaking to the soul in promise. "This do, and you will not come under the dominion and control of Satan." There is not a negative in that law, although it may appear thus. It is DO, and Live. The Lord has given His holy commandments to be a wall of protection around His created beings."⁹

Properly understanding the 10 requires that we start down the correct path at the outset. Like on any journey, if we choose the wrong path, we will get to the wrong destination. Deliverance is the road to be chosen. And the destination is the Kingdom of God. After all, it was Jesus who prayed, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

RESPONSIVE READING

LEADER: Lead me Lord to know your law, not as a code of boasted worth;
CONGREGATION: But as a shield of righteousness, a gift of God in my new birth.
LEADER: Lead me Lord, lead me Lord, lead me by Your law.
CONGREGATION: Lead me by Your gentle hand, close to You to draw.

- 1 Exodus 20:3 KJV
- 2 Exodus 3:6 NIV
- 3 Exodus 3:7-9 NIV
- 4 Exodus 3:13 NIV
- 5 Exodus 3:14 NIV
- 6 Exodus 20:2 NIV
- 7 Ezekiel 20:11-12 KJV
- 8 John 17:14-17 KJV
- 9 1BC 1105