

## The God Who Commands (Part 1 of 4)

### God Is Not Like You: The Foundation of the Ten Commandments

Exodus 19:1-20:7

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*On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, while Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel." So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. (Exodus 19:1–7, ESV)*

*And 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. "You shall have no other gods before me. "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. You 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, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. "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. (Exodus 20:1–7, ESV)*

Over the years we have made many long road trips together as a family. For the most part, those have been enjoyable experiences. However, I must shamefully admit that the invention of both mounted DVD players with wireless headphones and iPods with ear buds has greatly helped to make these trips even better. If you are one of those hard-core "we-just-talk-in-the-car" kind of families, more power to you. We need people like you to balance out the rest of us!

However, regardless of what your M.O. is when you are traveling, there is one universal question which comes up in every car and on every trip: "Are we there yet?" A few months ago we were traveling together, and one of our boys asked that question. And much to my surprise and delight, Savannah firmly replied, "We'll get there when we get there!"

We burst into laughter. And later I learned that it was a line from the movie *The Incredibles*. Regardless, I loved it. We'll get there when we get there!

In our study of Exodus, we are there. We have arrived at our location, and Israel will not move for the rest of the book. Now, we have not arrived in the Promised Land, but in chapter 3:12, God made a promise to Moses:

*"He said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."'" (Exodus 3:12, ESV)*

The book of Exodus will bring the people no further. The books of Numbers and Deuteronomy will record the remaining story of Moses' and the people's journey through the wilderness. Exodus 19 marks the half-way point in this book, and from here God will unpack for the Israelite people what kind of people or community they are going to be. God will give His people His law and explain His rules for living. He will give them instructions in how to construct the tabernacle and what is required for true worship. The division of our series looks like this:

- The God Who Commands (Ex. 19-24)
- The God Who Is Holy (Ex. 25-33)
- The God Who is Near (Ex. 34-40)

It is in the commands of God, and everything that surrounds them, that we learn about two concepts that should not go together: the holiness of God and the nearness of God. We are going to unpack that over the next number of months, and we are introduced to some very foundational concepts when it comes to God and His relationship with people. We are going to see who God is, who we are, and what is required in light of this difference. In other words, there are sweeping, eternal, redemptive, and frightening realities with the fact that **God is not like us.**

## **1. Who God is**

Until this time God had dwelt in the pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day. He had powerfully delivered His people, and He had miraculously provided for them. But through all of the miracles, God was not near or close by. Coming to the mountain of God would change all of that. The events at the base of Mt. Sinai would change all of that. God is about to reveal Himself to His people, and verses 1-2 set the context for us. About three months after leaving Egypt, the Israelites make their lodging at the base of Mt. Sinai.

The beginning phrase in verse three is particularly important: "Moses went up to God." Frequently the worship of God is pictured as something that involves "going up" (see Psalm 24). In fact there are fifteen Psalms (Psalms 120-134), called Psalms of Ascent, which are Psalms that were sung as the people went up to Jerusalem. Don't miss the significance here of a very basic set-up: God is on a mountain while the people are below.

While Moses was on the mountain, God spoke to him, and what is said in verses 3-6 is extremely important. It is a preamble to the covenant that God is going to make with His people, and it says a lot about God.

First, God reminded them about the Exodus and what He did to the Egyptians and what He did for them (v 4). Don't miss that God said "I brought you to myself." Remember that the exodus became the defining moment for Israel and her relationship with God. God was their deliverer.

God's relationship with Israel and with all human beings in the future would be based on God's decisive and unqualified deliverance. In other words, God rescued His people apart from their own efforts. They were slaves. There was no hope. Yet God delivered them.

Second, God invited the people into a covenantal relationship with Himself (v 5-6). The basis of this relationship was God's grace to them in delivering them from Egypt. But understanding this relationship required obedience on their part. This will become a very basic part of the Biblical ethic: a right response to grace is obedience. God was gracious.

Obedience flowing from God's overwhelming graciousness will be a foundational way that people relate to their God. If they understand God's kindness, they will be obedient. God's endgame was not just relief from slavery; He wanted to show them a better way to live. God is going to transform them.

Third, God marked the people of Israel as His "treasured possession among all peoples" (v 5). They were to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. This harkens back to the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 12:2-3, where God told Abraham that "all people on earth will be blessed through you." God had chosen Israel as His own people in order to bless the world. God kept His promises.

There was nothing innately special about the people of Israel, and yet God set his love on them in order to bless the world. Of course the greatest blessing was Christ. And I think that God still has a plan for the people of Israel. The church has been the means by which God has mediated the gospel in the New Testament, but there is a coming a day when Israel, God's treasured people, will turn back to God.

Fourth, there is an important statement in verse five which summarizes most of what Exodus 19-20 is about: "... all the earth is mine." The God on this mountain is not one of many gods; He is the *only* God. He is the creator God, and everything belongs to Him. God is sovereign.

I'm not sure that I can overemphasize the importance of this point. Understanding the phrase "all the earth is mine" is, in my view, foundational to understanding the entire Bible, but especially when it comes to the required obedience in Exodus 20. God as creator and sovereign over all things has sweeping implications. A few examples:

- What right does God have to define what is right and wrong?
- How can we trust God that His way is the best way?
- If you choose to not follow His law, will there be consequences?
- If God acts in a way that doesn't seem fair or understandable to you, what will you do?

If your starting point is “all the earth belongs to God,” then it changes how you view everything! It changes how you view God’s election of Israel, His commands, His disciplinary actions, His judgment, and how you feel when painful things happen. If your starting point is more about fairness from your vantage point or about understanding why God does what He does or about things having to make sense to you – it will affect everything about your life. God will have to “justify” Himself to you.

But if the starting point is “God is sovereign,” it changes everything. I cannot emphasize how important and how liberating this truth is. The dynamics at the base of the mountain, including Moses serving as an intermediary and the thick cloud (Ex. 19:7-9), are designed to teach the Israelites a fundamental lesson: **God is not like you.** He likes you. But He is not like you.

This is where a relationship with God begins – with a correct understanding of who He is. He is gracious and loving, and He is a deliverer. But He is also holy, separate, distant, and transcendent. He is not like you.

## 2. Who You are

The second foundational truth expressed in Exodus 19 is the contrast between God’s transcendence and the people of Israel. Verses 10-24 are designed to clearly identify that God is remarkably different than His people – dangerously so.

After Moses reported to the Lord about the people’s initial and positive response, Moses was given instructions as to how he was to prepare the people. The encounter with God was something special, and the people were required to do a number of things. Verses 10-11 provide a good summary:

*“the LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.” (Exodus 19:10–11, ESV)*

The people were to make special preparation, paying particular attention toward cleanliness. God will unpack this concept even further in the rest of law, but it was established from the very beginning here. Human beings are not naturally acceptable to God.

Further, there were specific instructions given regarding a boundary around Mt. Sinai. The dwelling place of God was not to be touched. The implicit point established here is that human beings are unqualified to be near the presence of God. In fact, contact with what is holy by that which is unholy is deadly. The people were to assemble at the mountain, but they were not to touch it.

*“And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, ‘Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live.’ When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain.” (Exodus 19:12–13, ESV)*

This lesson will be repeated in the construction of the tabernacle with a hidden ark of the covenant, an inaccessible holy of holies, and limited access to God. It will also be repeated in the details of the law. As you will see in the next few months, God will go to great lengths in order to specifically show His people what holiness looks like. And the extent of what will be required will be impossible for them to achieve. That's the point!

On the third day, and after the consecration of the people, God came down on the mountain. The scene must have been overwhelming and frightening:

*"On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the LORD to look and many of them perish." (Exodus 19:16–21, ESV)*

The environment around Mt. Sinai, and the content of the Law itself, is designed to lovingly (don't miss this word) show the people of Israel that God's requirement of holiness is unbelievably far beyond their ability. "God is holy and they are not" – that is the message of this moment, and it will be the message of the Law. Now God will provide the means to resolve the dangerous problem of God's holiness and man's unholiness. But before that can be brought into play, God must first help them understand who they really are. The people of Israel have to understand who God is and who they are. They have to understand the difference. To miss this point would be tragic and dangerous.

Now if you've never read the Bible before, God's revelation of Himself in such distant and somewhat scary categories might seem a bit offensive. But if God really is holy, and if His holiness really is dangerous for sinful people, then an appropriate warning – a memorable caution – is not only justified; it is kind. If you see a child taking a butter knife and trying to stick it into a light socket, there is nothing unkind about you raising your voice, aggressively snatching the knife away, and giving a firm caution. In fact, to not do so is negligent and unkind.

When the Bible tells us that human beings are "dead in their trespasses" (Col. 2:13), that there is no one righteous (Rom 3:10-11), that the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23), and that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23), it is an act of kindness and love. For God to tell us what He is like and what we are like is unbelievably kind and gracious.

What's more, this is very much needed because the natural bent of the human heart is to believe that you are the exception to the rule, that you are not really that bad, and God can be treated casually. Our human default position is to treat God lightly, obedience as optional, God's holiness

as fantasy, and our own worth as supreme. In other words, human beings were made to worship, and due to our fallen condition, we would make ourselves little gods. Therefore, the point of the scene at Mt. Sinai is simple: Someone greater than you is here, someone who loves you but who is not safe for you to treat casually. You are not like Him.

### **3. What is Required**

Building upon the base of who God is and who we are, we can now better understand the Ten Commandments. In fact, if you look at Exodus 20:1-2, God summarizes again the nature of His relationship with His people. God doesn't establish His Law out of thin air; it is based upon who He is and what He has done. In other words, the commands of God are rooted in the essence of who God is.

*"And 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." (Exodus 20:1-2, ESV)*

Now after God says this, He will proceed to give the Ten Commandments. It is important for you to know that the Ten Commandments serve as an outline or a summary for the rest of the Law and reflect the fundamental ethic by which God desires for human beings to live. Therefore, the Ten Commandments are still relevant today.

The Ten Commandments can be divided into four sections:

- 1-3: God's Exclusive Claims for Himself (No other gods, no idols, and no misuse of the Name)
- 4-5: God's Basic Institutions (Sabbath Rest and the Family)
- 6-7: God's Human Obligations (No murder and no adultery)
- 8-10: Social Obligations (No lying and no coveting)

Each of these reflects the essence of God's heart but in different realms. Commands 1-3 specifically address how humans are to respond to God. Commands 4-5 identify how we are to respond to God's plan for life. Commands 6-7 explain how humans are to interact, and commands 8-10 identify fundamental requirements for society to exist.

Remember that each of these commands is established upon the reality of who God is. Therefore, they are perpetually binding moral commands. The commands are rooted in the very character and essence of God. In other words, they are fundamental to the created order.

Like other laws of the universe that govern our existence and survival, the Law of God provides the basic framework that God has designed for life. God establishes what is right and what is wrong; the definition of morality is given to us by God, and our agreement with His law or with the cultural norms surrounding His law do not alter whether or not right is right or wrong is wrong.

College Park, this is really important for us to understand because we have nearly lost this in our culture, and we are starting to lose it even in evangelical Christianity. What do I mean? Our post-modern culture is convinced that there is no real and absolute standard for truth outside of ourselves. In other words, there is a standard, but it is what I think, what I feel, and what I want to do.

For instance, just think of how culturally normal it has become to take the Lord's name in vain and to covet. Think of how typical it is to assume that the legal system, the government, or the person trying to sell you something is lying. When it comes to sexuality, it is viewed as weird and silly for a person to remain sexually chaste or for sex to be reserved only for two people in covenantal marriage. But I still have to say more, because that isn't clear enough for today. We now have the redefinition of marriage such that I have to say that God's design for sexuality and the family involved a man and woman. It used to be that the main categories for our culture were men and women. But now it seems that the new category is gay and straight.

I was reading an article recently which said that "as a society we were conditioned to believe our categories of sexuality and gender are rigid and absolute; but we forget how constructed and even arbitrary those categories can be." In one sentence the author summarized what I hear a lot, namely that love, acceptance, and your real identity are what really matter.

Some of you know someone who really thinks that way. Maybe you really think that. Part of the challenge is that I want you to understand, from the depth of my soul, that I'm not suggesting that you aren't loved or valued. You may be really struggling with who you are, what your identity is, and what is attractive to you. And without sounding judgmental, I would just want you to understand that we don't get to set the rules for morality – even sexuality. Our feelings, our emotions, and our desires do not determine the boundary markers for life. God does. Why? Because He is God.

God defines what is right and wrong because He is God. And the willful violation of His way of living is really a symptom of a much bigger issue – our desire to run our own lives. That is the root issue for any action outside of His Law. We want to be God.

But this is not just an issue about the redefinition of marriage and same-sex attraction. This relates to why, despite what our culture tells you, sexual activity outside of marriage, lying, coveting, and any violation of God's law is a rebellious end run.

It is so easy for our hearts to convince ourselves that we are the exception, that we have "needs," that there is a justification, or that you just want to be happy. But I'm telling you those choices turn out badly. At the time, they seem so right. But you are giving away a part of your soul. Every path that is outside of God's path leads to internal or external destruction.

And it seems that as our culture slips further and further away from the biblical ethic, we need to be reminded about 1) who God is, 2) who we are, and 3) what is required.

God can say, "You shall have no other gods before me" because of who He is. God makes this command not just because it is right but also because everything else is bad.

### **What's the Hope?**

God gave us the Law for a very specific reason. The Apostle Paul said the Law was designed to lead us to Christ (Galatians 3). In other words, the Law highlights the beauty of God's holiness and the impossibility of our complete obedience.

Do you know what that means? It means that if you are here today and you are struggling under the failures of your past or the struggles of the present, there is hope of you. It means that God's people are always comprised of broken people who "can't do it." The people of God are fundamentally those who come to an end of themselves.

The solution is to embrace your brokenness instead of trying to justify it, figure it out, or redefine it. The remedy is to acknowledge: "I'm not like you, God! I need your help." And it is the provision of the sacrifice of His son that changes you.

In Jesus, God wipes away your guilt. He completely forgives you. He welcomes you into His family. He considers you as though you've completely obeyed the Law. But there's more!

He puts the Spirit of Christ in you such that when you read the Ten Commandments, or when you hear "God is not like you," or when you hear that God sets the rules – it no longer makes you mad; it makes you glad!

Out the joy of God deliverance, you see the God-defined boundaries in life, and they make sense. They are good. Why?

Because you know that God is not like you.

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