

You Shall Know I AM:

The First Table of the Law (Exodus 20:1-11)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on February 17, 2019

Introduction

- ❖ We've been working our way through the book of Exodus, and we've arrived at Mt. Sinai. Now we're ready to hear from God as he gives his Law to his people. I wonder if some of you are feeling a bit apprehensive – having sat down in your pew only to discover you're going to have the Ten Commandments preached to you. Don't worry it'll only be the first four today. But one could argue that they're the most out of step in today's world.
 - **I think it's safe to say that if you told someone today that you're going to listen to someone preach the Law to you, they'll probably cringe.** They'll say that sounds either boring or uncomfortable, as shame-inducing. They'll worry that you're trying to manipulate or guilt-trip them to conform to some standard of behavior.

- ❖ Let's be honest, when we hear the word "law", the words that immediately come to mind are not "*my delight*", "*my meditation*", "*sweeter than honey to my lips*", or "*a lamp unto my feet*". Yet those are the very descriptions the psalmist used in Psalm 119 to praise the goodness and greatness of the Law. **If you told the psalmist that he's going to hear a sermon on the Ten Commandments, he'd be jumping for joy.** You heard that in the passage we read during the Call to Worship. Listen again to **Psalm 119:47-48**, "*47For I find my delight in your commandments, which I love. 48I will lift up my hands towards your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes.*"

- ❖ That sounds so foreign to us. I wish I felt that way about the Ten Commandments, but I don't. **I don't think I could say I love the Law. Now I could totally say I love the Gospel.** I love the good news of what Christ accomplished in his death and resurrection. I have no trouble saying that's my delight. But the OT Law? Didn't the Gospel set me free from the Mosaic Law? Didn't Jesus fulfill the whole thing? Isn't the Church under a different covenant? We're the New Covenant people of God, so is it even appropriate for us to speak so positively and lovingly about the Law?
 - That's the big question I want us to tackle: **How should Christians today see and respond to the OT Law, particularly the Ten Commandments?** I'm not surprised if many of us see the Law rather negatively. We're so glad to be born and saved on this side of the Resurrection – to be part of the NT people of God under the Gospel and not part of the OT people of God under the Law.
 - But my aim this morning is to demonstrate how the Law is *not* a burden for people to be freed from and *not* a holy standard for us to achieve. **I'm going to argue instead that the Law is a blessing from God for those who are redeemed.** It's God's good gift to his people.

- ❖ **To see this reality, you need to understand a very important principle for interpreting Scripture – to always read a text in its context.** That means you shouldn't export the Ten Commandments from the book of Exodus and carve it into a monument or paint it on a fresco in a courthouse. Because you're bound to misinterpret and misapply the Commandments if they're read out of context.

- Read out of context, it might reenforce this perceived antipathy between law and grace – as if they’re mutually exclusive concepts. But our text proves otherwise. **Did you notice how the giving of the law was preceded by the giving of grace?**
- ❖ Look back at vv1-2. *"¹And 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* **So before God gives the law, he first reminds his people of who he is and what he's done for them.** I am the LORD. I am Yahweh – that's the covenantal name of God. The name associated with the covenant he made with their forefathers, with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex 3:6).
 - And this sovereign and gracious God redeemed them from Egypt back in chapter 14. So pay attention to the context. **Well before the law was given to Israel in chapter 20, their redemption had already been accomplished and a covenantal relationship with God had already been established.**
- ❖ **It would be a very different scenario if God gave Israel the law while they were still in the house of slavery.** And if he said, “Here are my commandments. If you keep them, then I will redeem you and make you my covenant people.” That’s how we often interpret it. We assume that law-keeping was a condition foisted upon Israel, and we tell ourselves we’re so thankful to be under the New Covenant, which is all about grace instead of law.
 - But that’s a false picture of the Old Covenant and of the Law in particular. **Grace preceded the giving of the Law.** What we see in Scripture is God graciously entering into a covenant with an undeserving people and graciously redeeming them from their slavery, and *then* he gives them his Law. Grace and redemption preceded Law. **These Ten Commandments were meant to reveal to Israel what a redeemed life looks like in relationship with the LORD your God.** They’re a blessing not a burden!
- ❖ So this morning we’re only covering the first four. Sometimes they’re called the First Table of the Law. They focus more on how we treat God. They’re vertical in orientation. The Second Table of the Law (five through ten) focus on how we treat each other. They’re horizontal in orientation and have a distinct social dimension.
 - **This morning I’ll focus my attention on how these first four commandments are true blessings to receive by faith and obedience – and not burdens to bear by sheer grit and determination.**

The Blessing of the First Commandment

- ❖ So let’s begin by looking at the first commandment. After reminding his people of their covenant relationship and their recent redemption from Egypt – **the LORD begins with a command calling for absolute allegiance from his people.** He wants exclusive loyalty. Look at v3, *“You shall have no other gods before me.”*
 - Now some commentators have noted that this first commandment doesn’t lay out an explicitly monotheistic claim that Yahweh is the only God and all other gods are false. The phrase *“before me”* could be taken as saying you shall have no other gods “in preference over me”.

- ❖ That's probably right at this point. While it's not affirming the existence of all the various gods of the Egyptians or Canaanites, it's true that Moses is not explicit about Yahweh being the One and Only God. He doesn't do that until later in Deuteronomy (4:35, 39; 6:4; cf. Isa 44:6, 8; 45:5-6). **But without question, the first commandment is demanding exclusive and absolute covenant allegiance to the LORD God alone.**

- ❖ Pastor Fred mentioned last week that many scholars have noted the similarity between the Mosaic Law and ancient near eastern treaties – in particular, what's known as **the suzerain-vassal treaty**. A suzerain was a conquering king who would establish a treaty with a conquered people, the vassals. So this type of treaty or covenant laid out the stipulations for what it looks like for these vassals to live under the reign of their new king.
 - And like we noted earlier, the key is that the covenant relationship is already established *before* the giving of the law. The law or treaty is meant to describe how to live in this relationship. **And a common feature that headlines all of these suzerain-vassal treaties is some line calling for exclusive allegiance, and then the rest of the document spells out what that means or what it will look like.**

- ❖ If you think about it, this suzerain-vassal relationship is a fitting description for God's relationship with the Redeemed. **Whether we're dealing with Israel or the Church, God has conquered his people – not with the sword – but with his sovereign love.** He has won us over and defeated our resistance. He has captured us by his grace. And now as our Suzerain, the LORD has every right to demand absolute and exclusive allegiance.
 - In other words, we shall not worship any other gods. We must not give our worship – our allegiance – to any idols. The concern of the first commandment is idolatry. **That's because idolatry is the fundamental problem behind law-breaking – while the worship of God alone is the fundamental solution for law-keeping.**

- ❖ **Tim Keller has been a helpful guide for understanding how all forms of law-breaking are ultimately related to idol worship.** His book *Counterfeit Gods* made this point (really he was just unpacking what Martin Luther taught five hundred years ago). Luther taught that any violation of commandments two through ten includes a violation of the First Commandment. You don't break the rest without breaking the first.
 - **The reason is because any form of law-breaking – any form of sin – is fundamentally a form of idol worship.** Maybe you're not bowing to a literal idol of wood or stone, but you're bowing to some functional god – trusting it to give you what only the One True God can give.

- ❖ This makes a lot of sense. Think about it. Why do we break the eighth commandment (“*You shall not steal*”)? **Why do we cheat on our taxes?** Because money has become an idol. We trust in money to provide a sense of fulfillment or security – more than we trust in God.
 - Why do we break the ninth commandment (“*You shall not bear false witness*”)? **Why do we lie to save face?** Because the approval of man is more precious than the approval of God. We lie to construct a better image of ourselves because we worship the opinion of others more than God. That's idolatry, putting another god before him.

- ❖ This is how the first commandment is a blessing to us. You shall have no other gods before me is not a demand made by an insecure, suspicious God who can't abide the thought of sharing us with other gods. **No, it's coming from a God who sees his beloved people forsaking him, the fountain of living, life-giving waters, only to crawl on our hands and knees to drink from broken cisterns containing brackish, muddy water, if any.** That's how the LORD describes our idolatry in Jeremiah 2:13.
 - **That's what we're doing when we persistently turn to people, possessions, or pursuits in this world to satisfy our deepest longings.** God knows they will fail you, so he commands you to give him and him along your whole heart, soul, mind, and strength because he loves you and wants to fill you with his living, life-giving water. Church, he's trying to bless you through this first commandment.

The Blessing of the Second Commandment

- ❖ So what about the second commandment? How is it different from the first and how is it also a blessing to us? Let's read it again in v4, "*⁴You 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.*"
 - Now to some people this sounds a lot like the first commandment. Doesn't that just mean don't worship idols? It's the same thing. Not quite. **If the first commandment is concerned with worshipping the right God, then the second commandment is concerned with worshipping the right God in the right way.** Another way to put it is that the first commandment is about *who* we worship while the second is about *how* we worship. Or more like how *not* to worship. We're *not* to make an image of God.
- ❖ When ancient people carved idols out of wood or stone and depicted them as creatures and such – they didn't actually think that carved image was literally their god. It was understood that the statue or effigy was an earthly representation of their god. It was such a common practice that Israel had to be warned not to adopt it in their worship of the LORD.
 - **To identify God with a particular created image is just one step away from regarding God mainly in terms of that image.** But in so doing, his glory – as you perceive it – has been diminished. In making an image of him, you've limited him. You've belittled him.
- ❖ That's the problem we're going to see later on in chapter 32, when the Israelites make an image of the LORD in the form of a golden calf. No one thought the golden calf was literally Yahweh. No, they were trying to convey something of God's majesty and might – and cows symbolized strength and if you make it out of shiny gold – it's majestic strength.
 - But even though the LORD is majestic and the LORD is mighty, that's not all he is. No *one* created image is going to suffice. **No *one* created image is going to capture the infinite worth and perfection of the LORD.** To try to capture the inexhaustible glory of God in one image will inevitably fail and lead to blasphemy. You'll end up with a false image of God – an idol.

- ❖ And God doesn't take too kindly to that. Look back at v5. *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.*
 - **Now I know some people get tripped up at this description of God being jealous.** Isn't it beneath God to be jealous? Isn't he better than that? Look, there's certainly a form of jealousy that's childish and petulant. **But there's also a form of righteous jealousy that's rooted in a covenantal love.**
- ❖ Imagine if I happen to overhear my wife telling a friend that she's so thankful to be in love with a godly man – who's 6' 2" with wavy blonde hair and bright blue eyes. You would think something's wrong with me if I said, "Well at least she got the godly part right." You'd expect a husband to be jealous for his wife's affection. **And if she says she loves you and you alone, but her image of you sounds a lot like *not* you – then there's an obvious problem.** That's why God prohibits his people from constructing visual images of him.
- ❖ Let me quickly address a question some of you might be wondering. **What about pictures of Jesus? Is that permitted?** Because he *is* God Incarnate. He does have a face that could've been drawn or sculpted and throughout history there have been thousands of attempts. And I've got children's books with pictures of Jesus in them. Should I go home and burn them?
 - I stand to be corrected, but I don't think it's a violation of the second commandment for your kid to draw a picture of Jesus. I think, because of the Incarnation, it's in a different category. **But in the end, parents should be teaching their kids to talk to Jesus more than drawing Jesus.** And my issue with most pictures of Jesus is that he never looks like a first-century Palestinian Jew. He always looks like a member of whatever culture the artist comes from.
- ❖ That's the problem, isn't it? **Whenever we try to make visual representation of God, it always turns out to be a picture of God made in our own image.** That's the biggest danger we face today. Few of us are tempted to draw or sculpt an image of God. But we're all prone to forming self-made mental images of God that, in the end, are just reflections of ourselves.
- ❖ If you ever find yourself wrestling to accept what a passage of Scripture is teaching because it doesn't sit right with you – if you catch yourself saying, "My God wouldn't do that or say that" – **then beware because it probably means you've constructed a self-made mental image of God that's ultimately just a reflection of yourself.**
 - This is why the second commandment is such a blessing to God's people. It's meant to protect us against ourselves and our own tendency to create insufficient pictures of God made in our own image. You shall not make for yourself a carved image of him.

The Blessing of the Third Commandment

- ❖ So now let's turn our attention to the third commandment. What is this one about and how does it bless the people of God? Look at v7, "*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.*"

- **This commandment is concerned with honoring God by revering his name.** As other translations put it, by not misusing his name. History tells us that ancient Jews were so concerned with violating this command that they refrained from using God's name altogether. They simply referred to him as the Name.

- ❖ **But the third commandment is not forbidding the use of God's name but the misuse.** God is not against us using his name. He intentionally revealed it back in Exodus 3. He is Yahweh, the Great I AM. The divine name is used almost 7000 times in the OT and translated with LORD in small caps. So God actually wants his people to know his name and address him by it. It's a name that reenforces the special covenant relationship we have with him.
 - So what this commandment forbids is the misuse of this sacred name. **Taking it in vain means to treat God's name flippantly as if it were insignificant.** And in biblical times, a person's name stood to represent you as a whole. So when you're dealing with God – the One of greatest worth in all of creation – to treat his name carelessly as if it were worthless would be profanity in the truest sense of the word.

- ❖ Now for the longest time I assumed the third commandment was about not using God's name as a part of a curse word or as an exclamation when you're surprised. **I thought it was about our speech. And it still is – but it's concerned with our behavior as well.** You see, the word for "taking the name" could also be translated as "bearing or carrying the name of God". So it could read, "*You shall not bear the name of the LORD your God in vain.*" In Israel's case, there was no question of whether they'll bear the LORD's name among the nations – but how will they bear it? What kind of witness will they give?

- ❖ So this commandment is not just about our speech but our witness. Just because we don't curse and we're careful not to carelessly throw around God's name, that doesn't mean we've perfectly kept this command. We have to ask ourselves what kind of impression of God do we give to the people in our lives who don't worship the LORD our God? **By our speech and behavior, would they recognize God as a being of great value and worth?**
 - Maybe they're not ready to trust in him yet, but do they at least acknowledge that the God we worship is a God of love and justice? **By virtue of our witness, do they see him as a God who takes sin seriously, who does not turn a blind eye to evil or injustice, but who also offers true forgiveness at great cost to himself?**

- ❖ I think of the recent exposé in the *Houston Chronicle* on a widespread negligence (or cover up) of sexual abuse allegations against children in bible-believing, gospel-preaching churches like ours. I fear that collectively the church has taken the name of the LORD in vain. **We've carried his name in vain in the way we have handled allegations of any sort of sin that would bring shame.** We tell ourselves that we're trying to protect God's name from shame, but we're really just trying to protect our own.
 - **What will truly honor God's name and demonstrate its significance is for the Church to protect the weak and help the helpless – all in the name of the LORD.** And then let's show the world that God and his people are committed to justice and righteousness and that we have the greatest news in all the world.

- ❖ **I'm talking about news of how the Son of God was willing to bear the shame of his people – shamefully dying on the cross for our sins – so that anyone who trust in him can receive his grace.** Grace to victims of sexual abuse in the form of healing, and even grace to the perpetrators in the form of forgiveness. They shouldn't be restored to the ministry because they're no longer qualified, but in the gospel, forgiveness is available to the chief of sinners.
 - This is why the third commandment is a blessing. It's intended to preserve this glorious name and good news of the LORD, which is good news for all who believe.

The Blessing of the Fourth Commandment

- ❖ Lastly, let's consider the fourth commandment about the Sabbath. I wish I had a whole sermon to unpack this one, but I'll just make a few observations here. The fourth commandments says in v8, "*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.*"
 - Now when it says "remember the Sabbath", it's not just about recalling it. **There's an implied expectation for demonstrable action.** It's like a husband remembering his wedding anniversary. It's not enough for him to think about it in his head. There's an implied expectation for some kind of demonstrable action. Flowers maybe? Dinner?
- ❖ That's why it says to remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. That means treating it as holy – as set apart, as different than the other days. In vv9-10, it says God's people can keep the Sabbath holy by working on the other six days but refraining from work on the seventh day of the week (Saturday). And there's also a social dimension to this commandment, in that you're supposed to give any servants or animals in your household a rest on the Sabbath.
 - And in v11, the reason for the Sabbath is rooted in the pattern of creation where God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh. **So in keeping the Sabbath holy, we're not just following God's command but following God's lead.** And what proves that this 6+1 rhythm of life is established in the created order and not just instituted in the Law – is what we saw back in chapter 16 when resting on the Sabbath from collecting manna was understood even before the Law was given.
- ❖ Now as many of you know, the Israelites were extremely cautious not to violate this command. So they tried to narrowly define what constituted "work", and they created additional rules and regulations to prevent anyone from potentially violating the Sabbath.
 - **So by the time of Jesus, the Pharisees imposed a practice of the Sabbath that was a burden on the people.** They completely lost sight of how the fourth commandment was meant to be a blessing. Jesus had to correct them and remind them that "*The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath.*" (Mk 2:27)
 - **The command to remember the Sabbath and to rest from your labor on it was given for our good.** As Creator, God knows we were made in his image, and so we have this 6+1 rhythm built in, so that we flourish the most when we respect that rhythm of life. If we disregard a Sabbath rest, overworking and overexerting ourselves, we not only reject the way in which we're designed to flourish – we communicate that we don't trust God or need him.

- ❖ This is why keeping the Sabbath holy was so important for Israel and was such a blessing for those who remembered it. But of course, the big question is whether or not the fourth commandment is still applicable for the NT people of God. **Is the Sabbath still required for Christians?** That's a sticky subject that could take an entire sermon (or series) to explain. But I'll give you my take and the biblical reasons behind it.
- ❖ **I'm comfortable speaking of the Sabbath as a sign of the Mosaic covenant much like the way circumcision was a sign of the covenant made with Abraham** (cf. Ex 31:13; Ezk 20:12). As a sign, the Sabbath pointed backwards to the rest God accomplished for Israel in the Exodus, and at the same time, it pointed forward to a future rest to come that Christ would secure in a greater Exodus.
 - **So with the coming of Christ, these old covenant signs like circumcision and the Sabbath were fulfilled.** That's why Paul can speak of the Sabbath as one of the many things that were merely shadows pointing to the substance which is Christ. Listen to **Colossians 2:16-17**, "¹⁶Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ¹⁷These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ." (cf. Rom 14:5)
- ❖ So the Sabbath was a shadow of a reality fulfilled in Christ. The substance belongs to Christ. **That's why I can't go so far as to say the Sabbath regulation is still in effect today.** Some would call Sunday the Christian Sabbath and would insist that the whole day should be dedicated to worship and rest, and believers shouldn't work or employ others to work.
 - **I wouldn't go that far because the NT never specifies a particular day of the week to rest from our labor.** Keep in mind that Sunday – the day the early Christians chose to corporately gather for worship – was still a work day in ancient times. Christians couldn't just take Sundays off from work. They likely had to worship very early on the first day of the week before their work day began.
- ❖ So I would respectfully disagree with those who believe that a Christian Sabbath on Sundays is required for believers as a matter of law. I would leave it as a matter of Christian conscience (we'll have a series on the conscience this summer). But having said that, I can't ignore how in v11 the Sabbath is rooted in the creation order, so I sympathize with those who argue that Christians today are too dismissive of the principles underlying the observance of a Sabbath. **We should still respect this 6+1 Sabbath rhythm and set apart time in the busyness of our week to rest and worship with the people of God.**
- ❖ **For all Christians, this means prioritizing the weekly assembly of God's people around the preaching of the Word and practice of the ordinances.** That's the closest parallel we have to OT Sabbath observance. But we don't apply the same degree of strictness.
 - So we recognize that, for some believers, their work requires them to occasionally work on Sundays. We don't treat them as law breakers. **But if your career choices make it particularly difficult to rest from your labor and regularly assemble to worship with the people of God, then you might be in danger of violating – not the fourth commandment – but the first.** You might be putting career before God.

- ❖ So whether you're working or still in school or you're retired or a homemaker raising children – ask yourself this: What will a 6+1 Sabbath rhythm look like for you? Do you take regular, intentional, weekly rests from your labor?
 - If that's not a practice in your life, then consider adopting it. **Not because you feel burdened by the heavy demands of the law. But because you recognize that a Sabbath rest is a blessing.** Because you realize God made you with a 6+1 rhythm in your soul and that your joy and productivity flourishes when you respect that rhythm.
 - Friends, I hope you're starting to see how the law is an extension of God's grace to you. It has been given to you to bless you!