

Exodus 20 Is the Moral law binding on Christians?

Introduction

Exodus 20:1-2 makes it clear that the Ten Commandments were not merely a good idea from Moses, or a flash of genius from this Israelite leader. They came directly from the God of Israel who had brought these people out of Egypt. This moral law was not just a foundation for their society, but also for the other nations of the world. Even before it was given, there appears to be the assumption in the Bible that the activities prohibited in this law code were somehow known in the consciences of the human race as unacceptable behaviour. As a result those who committed these sins were responsible for their consequences. One issue that needs to be addressed before we look at these commandments over a number of weeks is the claim in various guises that Christians are not bound to live by the principles promoted in the Ten Commandments. For some proponents of these views there is the simplistic notion that if we are saved by God's grace alone in Christ that we are free to live as we like, and we are not constrained by any set of laws in the Scriptures. Two of the misquoted texts for this view include: Romans 10:4 *Christ is the end of the law so that there might be righteousness for everyone who believes* and John 15:17, where Jesus says: *This is my command: Love each other*. Paul in Romans 10:4 was speaking about Jesus being the focus or goal of the whole Jewish law as a means of salvation. After His death on the cross attempting to obey the totality of the Jewish laws lost its point, as salvation was available as a free gift. However, we are saved *to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do* (Ephesians 2:10). In other words we seek to live a life pleasing to God in response to His love to us in Jesus, not in order to earn His favour. This is what Jesus was commending in John 15:17.

1. Jewish misunderstandings of the Moral Law

The Jews had been exiled from their homeland in a series of disasters, culminating with the final group leaving for Babylon (Iraq) after the sacking of Jerusalem in 587/6BC. The Northern Kingdom Israel had been overrun by the Assyrian Empire nearly 150 years earlier. It was out of this disaster that in exile groups of committed believers began to ask themselves how can I honour God in such a way that we can return to the land and rebuild a nation that has come close to disappearing off the map. Out of such gatherings the people we know as Pharisees emerged. They knew their Old Testament Bibles very well, but wanted to put in place boundaries for living that prevented believers from easily breaking God's laws for their lives. In effect they decided to observe a stricter interpretation of biblical teaching in the way they lived. This meant in practice that they prepared a list of guidelines to help them prioritise choices in life. Each subsequent generation added more and more rules and the handfuls became hundreds and then thousands of laws to observe in the course of everyday life. In time, not least by Jesus' day, things had got seriously out of hand and none of the Pharisees knew how to get things back on track. For the few thousand Pharisees who kept all these rules it became an end in itself, something of which you could be justifiably proud –if that wasn't a sin in itself! Paul (called Saul prior to his conversion) was a classic example of this approach to life, as he explained in his letter to the church at Philippi. *If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.⁷ But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to*

the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ (Philippians 3:3b-8). Paul had kept all the rules with a rigid self-discipline, but this enthusiastic theology student at Jerusalem University was not fulfilled through his accomplishments. One day as he watched the stoning of the greatest Evangelist the Christian Church possessed to that point in its history, the serenity and joy on the face of Stephen in the minutes before he died, forever changed the young man holding the coats of those carrying out this brutal murder (Acts 7:54-60). Stephen had something Saul was missing – a short time later on the road to Damascus this brutal and misguided young man gained an extraordinary revelation through an encounter with the Lord and Saviour whom Stephen had served so faithfully (Acts 9:3-5). Saul, now called Paul, did not stop living his self-disciplined life –he was horrified at such a thought, as he explained in Romans 6:1-4: **What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.** Jesus was happy with the standard Jewish answer to the question: *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* This was revealed in his debate with a religious lawyer in Luke 10. Jesus invited the man to answer his own question. *He answered: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'* ²⁸ *You have answered correctly, Jesus replied. Do this and you will live* (Luke 10:27-28). These words were quotations of two Old Testament verses from Deuteronomy 6:5 and then Leviticus 19:18b. They are also a summary of the Ten Commandments. The issue for Jesus though, was the way the Pharisees and their followers sought to obey these commandments. They had built up such a collection of rules to follow that they had become, in practice, as important if not more so than the Ten Commandments themselves. He drew attention to a good example of this problem in Mark 7:5-13: *So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands? ⁶ He replied, Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.'⁷ They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.'⁸You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men. ⁹ And he said to them: You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! ¹⁰ For Moses said, 'Honour your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'¹¹ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), ¹² then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother.'¹³ Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.* Matthew chapter twenty-three lists more examples that caused concern to Jesus. Jesus did not doubt their sincerity, most of the time, but He was concerned that they were missing the point God wanted them to grasp. The challenge for us as Christians is twofold. For some believers there is a careless attitude to God's Word and its guidelines for our lives. If that is an issue this morning then please stop and ask the Lord to enable you to live your life more closely related to His plans and purposes for you. He has given us the Ten Commandments as secure boundaries to direct our paths not to restrict our freedom –just as any good parent will with their children. For other believers there can be the opposite problem in that we take very seriously God's boundaries for living, but with the best of intentions we make the guidelines stricter and sometimes more numerous than God has done and police them with great zeal! In my teenage years our family went to the South of England for a holiday one year and on the Sunday morning we attended an Evangelical church of a tradition different to our own. This denomination (or at least that local congregation) annually had two covenant services, the first focussed on affirmations of what they believed; the second service, at which we were

present, addressed around seventy-five things that people affirmed they would not do, from a prepared statement. I cannot recall disagreeing with any of the prohibitions read out, but wondered how long the list might grow over time? In our Baptist tradition we have, I hope fairly consistently, held firmly to a high view of Scripture and its guidelines for our lives, but been most reluctant to draw up lists of ‘dos and don’ts’ regarding personal lifestyle choices. Some times the Bible gives explicit advice –*you shall not murder* (Exodus 20:13), for example- more often it gives us principles to follow and on that basis to make wise choices. God wants us to heed His limited number of commandments, but most of the time wishes us to grow in maturity as we apply them to the wide variety of circumstances we will experience in our daily lives.

2. Jesus’ attitude to the Moral Law

A person who lives only by a list of rules is like a student at school or college who learns information solely for a test or examination. What they are doing might be very good, but it falls short of the greater value such knowledge could be in their lives if they could grasp a bigger vision for the application of the knowledge received. Did Jesus come to abolish the Ten Commandments or remove any requirement for His disciples to observe them? In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus sought to address this issue with His closest followers. Listen to these words from Matthew 5:17-20: *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.* ¹⁸ *I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.* ¹⁹ *Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.* ²⁰ *For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.* It is important to notice that Jesus made no attempt to apply the civil or ceremonial or other forms of Old Testament law to the lives of His followers in the new era which He was inaugurating, which came to fruition at the Day of Pentecost, and from then until His return in glory at the end of the age. These other forms of law related to Israel, a whole nation in covenant with God, in a specific geographical location. However, the kingdom of God as Jesus explained it transcends national boundaries, and is a message for all nations and ethnic groups, in addition to His continuing purposes for the Jewish people who seek to honour His name (see Romans 9: 6-8). Jesus was much harder on the Pharisees than the Sadducees because they were so much closer to living God’s way and most of them genuinely wanted to honour God in daily life. In Matthew 23, a chapter that records some of Jesus’ strongest attacks on the Pharisees, He began that message with these extraordinary words: *Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ²The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³ So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practise what they preach* (Matthew 23:1-3). By contrast Jesus told His disciples: *If you love me keep My commandments* (John 14:15 NKJV or *if you love Me, you will obey what I command* NIV). In fact at the commissioning of Peter in Matthew 16:19 (and the other disciples Matthew 18:18) Jesus declared: *I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall [already] have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall [already] have been loosed in heaven* (New American Standard Version). Unfortunately most of the English language versions fail to communicate that what the followers of Jesus would declare to people in the future, has already been carried out in heaven. The tense of the verbs used in this verse imply decisions taken in the past which have an ongoing impact into the future, that is decisions taken by God in heaven come to pass on earth at a later time as His kingdom grows when His people step out in faith and act in the light of His promises. Binding and loosing were familiar terms to Jews of that era to refer to

things that were prohibited (bound) or encouraged (loosed). In effect the message Peter and the first followers of Jesus were to proclaim was a return to the way God wanted His people to relate to Him rather than through the newer rules of the Pharisees. The Moral Law of God had not changed over the years of human history. What use, therefore is the Moral law to us in the context of proclaiming a gospel of grace? The first use of the law is for the wider society to accept the importance of moral boundaries for our lives. Imagine driving down any public road with each driver left to decide their own rules rather than follow the Highway Code. It would be a nerve-shredding trip. Eighteenth century England was largely a lawless place. There was no police force and all kinds of criminals were on the lookout for victims to assault. As a result the majority of people, especially in urban areas, only made absolutely essential journeys. In 1753 Sir Horace Mann complained bitterly: 'one is forced to travel, even at noon, as if one were going to battle.' Ladies were escorted to their card parties by young men armed with clubs [Brian Edwards, *The Ten Commandments for Today*, p. 11]. What a contrast with the experience we have in living in this law-abiding city of Dundee! The second use of the law is to show us we are sinners, that we can never keep the law perfectly and thereby 'earn' our place in heaven. Unless a person sees a need of Jesus for salvation, they will never seriously ask 'what must I do to be saved?' The problem with so many people today is that the word 'sin' is entirely absent from their vocabulary and not recognising the problem are unable to receive God's intended cure for it. The third use of the moral law is for Christians to have a guide to regulate our lives as we seek to follow our Lord and Saviour. Thank God for the law, both in the wider society, as well as in God's Word, where it is consistent with the principles for conduct taught in Scripture. Anarchy would not be beneficial for anyone!

3. A Practical look at the Moral law

(a) The Law and Love In the 1960s heterodox Anglican Bishop John Robinson promoted 'a radical ethic of the situation with nothing prescribed except love' [J.A.T. Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 116]. It sounds great who would disagree with a person acting on the basis of love? Yet there is a fundamental problem. If a proponent of 'free love' wanted to engage in intimate activity with a married person, it is unlikely that the spouse of their proposed partner would view such activity as a demonstration of love! Euthanasia is seen in this way by many of its strongest supporters, but the more such arguments are considered in detail the less attractive they become. Imagine you were standing outside a supermarket without any cash or means of payment on your person and a homeless person came up to you begging for food saying that they hadn't eaten that day. Would taking a pack of sandwiches from the supermarket without payment for the homeless person stand up in court as a loving act when you were facing a charge of shoplifting! Of course not, because it was an act of theft, taking something that belonged to another person or company. The moral decline of the last fifty years, in particular, in our land, shows how bankrupt and empty are the situation ethics that were hailed as the way forward half a century ago by liberal theologians. Jesus was the most loving person who ever lived yet He was very happy to say these words with reference to His father in heaven. *The world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me* (John 14:31). Jesus said: *You are my friends if you do what I command* (John 15:14). In the sovereign purposes of God for His people He has this expectation for His spiritual children. In the words of Paul in Romans 8:29: *For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers*. In our contemporary language the great apostle was saying that God the Father has a future vision of heaven in which Jesus is the focus of praise and adoration by the people saved through His sacrifice on the cross. The title 'firstborn' is a special honour title

used in the Old Testament of both the nation of Israel and Jesus, and in the New Testament of Jesus [Exodus 4:22; Hosea 11:1; Matthew 2:15; Hebrews 5:5]. And, that is not all, believers in God's new heaven and earth will in their attitudes and aspirations be like Jesus. We recognise a child reflecting their biological parents in their mannerisms and speech; in heaven because we have such a love for God, we will sound like Jesus and obeying Him will be our greatest delight. Jesus in His defence of the Ten Commandments not only affirmed their outward observance, as in the Old Testament, but extended them to cover our words and our attitudes. To use words that suggested we wanted someone dead was to be guilty of breaking the sixth commandment (Matthew 5:21-22); to think with pleasure of committing a sexual act, for example, with a person married to someone else is to be reckoned as guilty of breaking the seventh commandment, said Jesus (Matthew 5:27-30). Jesus wants us to grasp that we can never be good enough to keep God's Ten Commandments in thought and word and action. It would be a miracle to keep any one of them for a whole lifetime, let alone all ten. To grasp this is to grasp the necessity of Jesus' demonstration of love for us in dying as our substitute and sin-bearer on the cross. John the apostle wrote these words to a group of unknown Christians: *This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him.¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.¹² No-one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and His love is made complete in us* (I John 4:9-12). Christ-like love is practical love which our Lord illustrated by washing the feet of His disciples (John 13:1-17), the task of a Gentile slave in that culture. Paul, likewise, asked Christians in Southern Turkey, to live like their master: *You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather, serve one another in love* (Galatians 5:13).

(b) **The Law and Grace** Does keeping the moral law save us? If we have grasped it correctly as Jesus explained it in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), then we will acknowledge that this is impossible. No-one can be that good –and for a lifetime! Paul explained it this way in Galatians 2:19-21: *For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!* Salvation is either God's free gift or a reward merited by our own efforts. Paul had a serious battle with some other Jewish followers of Jesus who taught that by carrying out a variety of ceremonies, including for male children the act of circumcision that a person could earn enough merit with God to be saved. This distortion of the gospel resulted in Paul's passionate language in the Letter to the Galatians urging them to return to the gospel of free grace. Later that year (AD48) this issue was debated at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) in which the apostle Paul played a leading part in ensuring that the future Christian Church would remain faithful to the gospel entrusted to us by Jesus. It is difficult to imagine what Church life would look like today, had the biblical truth not prevailed at the most crucial assembly in the history of Christianity. However, over the centuries there have often been people at either extreme of the errors that arise from misunderstanding the nature of god's grace and the applicability of the moral law. On the one hand, a percentage of Christians and Churches who operate with actual lists of rules and regulations, in addition to the Bible, run the serious risk of legalism, similar in principle to that which Paul battled against for much of his ministry. On the other hand are others who talk much of being 'under grace not law' and interpret this to mean they can live as they like because God has saved them. Paul passionately rejected such notions in Romans 6:1-14, suggesting that people proclaiming such a view had completely misunderstood Christian discipleship to which we have been called in Christ. Romans 6:1-2 declares: *What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase? ² By no*

means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Someone who has grasped how amazing grace is will want to live a holy life and be pleasing to Him. Therefore, Hebrews 12:14 reminds us: *Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no-one will see the Lord.* God's moral law and grace are complementary, not in opposition to one another in the life of the believer.

(c) **The Law and the Gospel** How is God's moral law relevant to people who have yet to trust Jesus? In the familiar story of Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-23) the story begins with a most promising question: *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* (Mark 10:17) This is the kind of question we would love to be asked in our school or workplace or family circle in some cases, by a person seriously wanting to know the answer. Now each person is different, but our Lord did not quickly ask the man to repeat a simple prayer for salvation and pronounce him converted. Instead He asked him if he had kept the last six of the Ten Commandments. Jesus had no doubt this man had not kept the first four that relate to our attitude to God, but graciously and gently enquired about the ones concerning our relationships with other people. It turned out that this enquirer was not ready to give God first place in his life, only a place. He thought he was being generous by making the overtures he had to God through Jesus. But he did not realise how serious was the problem of sin. Until he grasped the nature of the problem he would not accept his need of Jesus' solution. The great Norwegian Christian leader of the last century, Ole Hallesby, once said: 'We can never persuade anyone to believe in the gospel before we, by the grace of God, have persuaded them to believe in the law of God'. Until you and I have grasped the sheer impossibility of being good enough to earn God's salvation we will never be humble enough to acknowledge our need of the free grace of God. Anglican hymnwriter and Devon vicar, Augustus Toplady (1740-1778) expressed it this way in one of his better known hymns:

A debtor to mercy alone, of covenant mercy I sing;
Nor fear, with Your righteousness on, my person and offering to bring.
The terrors of law and of God with me can have nothing to do;
My Saviour's obedience and blood hide all my transgressions from view.

The work which His goodness began, the arm of His strength will complete;
His promise is Yea and Amen, and never was forfeited yet.
Things future, nor things that are now, nor all things below or above,
Can make Him His purpose forgo, or sever my soul from His love.

Eternity will not erase, my name from the palms of His hands;
In marks of indelible grace, impressed on His heart it remains.
Yes, I to the end shall endure, as sure as the promise is given;
More happy, but not more secure, the glorified spirits in Heaven. Amen