

God's Moral Teaching

In the weeks ahead we will be considering the Moral Teaching of God and looking at each of the Ten Commandments. Before we do this however we do well to pause and consider the greatness of this gift of God. We must also examine the absolute need for grace in order to keep God's commands fully.

God's Commandments are a Gift!

Not everyone thinks of the commandments in this way. Laws and rules are more frequently thought of as an imposition that may be necessary but as a burden none-the-less. When was the last time you thanked God for his law? To illustrate how God's commands are a gift a parable may help.

A Parable

There once was an island in the middle of the sea. On this island there lived many children and every day they played and they danced and they sang. There was something about this island however that seemed, to many outsiders, a strange thing indeed. All around the island, about 200 yards out to sea there walls, tall walls. In fact they were tall enough that the children never ventured beyond them. If outsiders thought them strange, the children had long ago accepted them with little question. But one day reformers came to the island and questioned the children, *Who put up those walls!? Why don't you tear them down? You should be free to come and go as you please! Don't let anyone tell you what to do. Come out of your prison!* The children wondered at this argumentation. The walls had never caused them any harm. But this call to absolute freedom had great appeal. Why not try something new? So they tore the walls down...And now our story skips forward in time, only a two years or so. We find the children huddled in the center of the island. They are afraid to play, or sing, or dance. In fact they argue bitterly among themselves as to who was responsible for the increasingly frightful state of affairs: their island is getting smaller and smaller. The waves of the ocean are eroding their island on all sides. Fierce storms too lash against the island and sea monsters lurk just offshore. The walls you see were not prison walls at all. They were defending walls, walls that protected the boundaries that are so necessary for safety and life.

Perhaps it is best to comment on this parable by asking the question, "How do I experience God's commandments and moral laws? Are they prison walls or defending walls?" Sadly many today have declared them to be prison walls. Many of the commandments once honored and accepted, even if not perfectly kept, are now being set aside more and more.



Yet it must be said that in tearing down the boundaries God has given us we, like the children in the parable, experience the grave consequences of such choices: theft, murder, hatred contempt, suspicion, lies, corruption, marital infidelity, sexually transmitted diseases, abortion, teenage pregnancy, greed, envy and jealousy and countless other sorrows. All these are direct consequences of ignoring God's moral teachings and precepts. The boundaries and defending walls of God's commands, once torn down, permit the evil one unrestricted access as we are sadly aware.

God then, in giving his commandments acted in love. He did not give us the moral law to imprison us, to take away our fun or to make life more difficult. As a loving Father he instructs us in his law so that we find peace, greater happiness, justice, and the self control that is a hallmark of *the glorious freedom of the children of God* (Rom. 8:21). These laws give us

boundaries and limits, yes, but within these walls there is peace and security. Consider how very different our world would be if every person kept God's commandments fully! The sorrows listed above would disappear at once. It is clear then that the Ten Commandments are a great gift to us from God, one that we should receive with great joy: *The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever; the ordinances of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover by them is thy servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.* (Ps 18:7-11)

The Absolute need for Grace

Yet, if the Law of the Lord is so wonderful, why is there such a struggle to keep it? There are many ways to answer this question. Adam and Eve surely introduced a weakness in our human nature by the sin they committed. This is one answer. But God gives us another equally important answer. There is an absolute need for God's grace through faith to keep the commandments.

In a way, the entire Old Testament period was a lesson in the need for grace. God had instructed the people that if they kept his Law they would remain strong and have the blessings of the Land. *If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you this day, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it... But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you this day, that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess....I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants*

may live. (Dt. 30:16-20).

The choice that was placed before Israel had great implications, it was a matter of life and death. Note too the importance of faith and trust. God in effect asked Israel to trust him and understand that he spoke the truth to them. If they kept his Law they would prosper but if they listened to other voices and served other gods they would perish. The history of God's people told in the Old Testament recounts the great struggle to be faithful and to choose God's ways and live. But it is a tragic story for despite repeated warnings by God through the prophets, Israel did not keep faith and abide by God's laws. Thus they grew weak and their enemies overpowered them. The Northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians in 721 B.C. In 587 B.C. Babylon conquered the southern kingdom of Judah. God mercifully restored a faithful remnant of the people to the promised land but Israel would never again be a sovereign nation.

God Promises His Grace

Thus the Old Testament taught of the need for grace. The Law of the Old Testament was holy, spiritual and good (cf Rom 7:12-16). It showed what must be done *but it did not give the power or strength of the Spirit to do it*. In this sense it acted like a tutor who taught us that we must depend on God. Only God can empower us to fulfill the Law. The blessings that come from God's Law are his work and his gift to us, not a human achievement. Thus, as Israel discovered its absolute need for God's grace, God himself promised a day when, by his gift, the Law and the blessings of the Law would be experienced with the ability to keep it with a loving and trustful heart: *I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances* (Ezek 36:25-27

The New Law

God fulfilled his promise with the coming of the New Law. To say there is a "New Law" does not mean the Ten Commandments have been abolished. The New Law is the grace of the Holy Spirit

given to the faithful in Jesus Christ to not only know the Law but to keep it. Jesus announces this New Law in the Sermon on the Mount (Mat 5-7) with these words, *Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them.* (Mat 5:17). Jesus then teaches at great length using numerous examples how his followers would fulfill the law through the power of Holy Spirit, the very love of God, at work within them.



To fulfil the law means to "fill it full." In other words we are called to observe the law not just in its narrowest legal meaning, but in its fullest sense, as a language of love and trusting fidelity. Lovers do not ask, "What is the least I can do to please my beloved?" Lovers ask, "What more can I do to please?" Love is, by its nature extravagant. A young man who loves a young woman does not say to her, "Your birthday is coming and there is this silly custom that I am supposed to observe, I must buy you a gift. So, beloved one, What is the cheapest gift I can buy you to do what I am supposed to do and not lose your affection?" This is not the language of love! The young man, if he truly loves the young woman, will be delighted to celebrate her birthday and will, if possible buy her a gift that goes beyond minimal expectations.

This is how it is with the New Law. The Holy Spirit sets our hearts on fire with love for God and trust in his goodness. Thus when God's will or commandments are made known to us we are not angry or sorrowful, we are delighted and we instinctively seek to know all the implications of what God asks.

For example, see how Jesus treats the Fifth Commandment and shows what it means to fulfill it: *"You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to*

judgment.' But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Mt 5:21-24) Most of us can get through the day without killing someone. In a strict, legal sense we have "kept" the commandment. But Jesus calls us to the love that seeks to fulfill this commandment. Thus we must see that clinging to bitter anger, seeking revenge, using insulting or hurtful language and refusing to be reconciled to others are all ways that we fail in observing the full implications of what God teaches in this commandment.

It is evident that in one sense Jesus' understanding of the law is far more demanding than previous interpretations of it. Yet it is less burdensome because of the power of His love within us! Those who love undertake even supposedly burdensome tasks with joy. Again consider an example. Suppose there is a young man who seeks to win the affection of a young woman. Suppose further she asks his assistance in some major project she is trying to accomplish. He will be delighted she has asked even if it involves a significant amount of time and energy. Even if he has to cancel some of his own plans he will do so with joy. If even imperfect human love can lighten and transform burdens into joys how much more so will the love of God transform the weight of law into fulfilling joy.

This fundamentally is what is meant by the New Law. It is not that the Old Law has been abolished. Rather it is now appreciated from the standpoint of love, trust and faith. This love and trusting faith are a gift of God's grace at work in us. *God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"* (Gal 4:6) For this reason it is now possible to keep and fulfill the Law through grace. It is in this context that we will proceed in weeks ahead to examine the Moral teachings and Commandments of God. Trusting that God commands only in love and for our good, yielding to the joy that comes from love we seek to understand and embrace the full implications of each commandment.