

SERMON: "BIBLE BASICS - LAW"
TEXT: OLD TESTAMENT
NEW TESTAMENT

EXODUS 20:1-11 & MICAH 6:6-8
MATTHEW 22:34-40

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INTRODUCTION

We ended last week's sermon on the bible basic that is the exodus, the defining story of the Old Testament, with a quiz. You remember the question? How do the Ten Commandments begin? And the answer? We just read it.

Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Do they begin with commandment #1? No, they do not begin with our 'to do' list or our "do not do" list. They begin with what God has done, with the liberation that is the exodus ... with God's initiating and amazing grace

These opening words are more than an introduction ... They are a foundation. That is the foundation of our faithfulness, what the God of Exodus and Easter has done. Each commandment could be read and should be understood with that introduction, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, THEREFORE ..."

My mentor, Allen, talked about the Ten Commandments as "structures of grace" That, I think is a great way to talk about the place and purpose of God's law summarized here in Exodus 20 and summarized again by Jesus when asked which is the greatest commandment. He answered with the two-fold "love your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and 'love your neighbor as yourself. On these hang all the law and prophets'

I like the way Jesus says that ... all the law and prophets 'hang' on these. Like this is the nail that holds up the frame and the picture. Allen's language of structures of grace fits that 'building on the basics' idea as well

This sermon series on bible basics is going to miss some stuff, important stuff. We are not really going to spend too much time on the prophets. They are those whom God sent and sends to bring people back to those basics – love God and love neighbor (think the summary you hear each week from Micah: do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God)

Another thing we are going to skip over are all the fine print type laws. We don't want to be like the Pharisees whom Jesus criticized for 'tithing dill and mint but neglected the weightier matters of the law.'

AN INTERNAL MEMO

You've heard me talk about my parents and sing their praises.

Here's a less faltering take. You remember some of your parents' rules
Some of them made so much sense, you've adapted them to your life
and how you raise your kids – the important lessons.

Other stuff they may have said, some of their other rules ... not so much

My parents had three boys. As young men we'd often take our shirts off
when we were outside in the sun, especially when cutting the grass.

But here's my dad's rule. You don't walk out the door with your shirt off
You wear your shirt and then take it off outside. I can see some logic there,
Guess he didn't want his boys featured on an episode of 'Cops.'

But can I go outside to cut the grass with my shirt off and then come back in to shower?

It seemed silly to me to have to walk out with my shirt on just to take it off.

We're not going over any "shirt on out the door" rules in this series

In talking about the law we are also going to skip over a lot of the rules unique to
a new nation, a nation of former slaves casting off the rules of their oppressor
and being given a new framework. You find a lot of these laws in Leviticus

Those laws were written for the religious leaders, the Levites, hence the name

Many of those laws are about how to lead worship, how to make a sacrifice

Again, we want to major in the majors and minor in the minors

So our focus is on the heart of the law, the Ten Commandments

Understanding who they were written for and how we are to use them

The Ten Commandments were given to a people, God's people,

This law is intended first for Israel as God's people

These were written for them, for that nation. We pick them up
as written for us ... And by us, I mean the Church.

The Ten Commandments are an internal document addressed to religious people

The first four are about how we relate to God and apply to people of faith.

The final six are about how we relate to others (these might apply in a secular sense)

But please, let's stop acting as if God wrote them on stone tablets and
handed two tablets to Moses and another two to Thomas Jefferson

This law is God talking first to temple and synagogue folks, then to church folks

The question then is how are we going to use them in talking to and amongst ourselves

I'd suggest the answer is not to insist the commandments be posted in schools

A better answer is to ask how we might follow the law as a structure of grace

We do so by seeing the law as a follow up to grace. Grace always comes first!

CALVIN'S THIRD USE OF THE LAW

Martin Luther talked about the law and its purpose in two ways

One is as a deterrent. He used the term bridle, like for a horse.

In this way the law keeps us out of trouble, like a fence or "Do Not Enter" sign

Two is as a hammer that breaks through our supposed goodness to reveal our sin

In this way the law helps us to see how much we need the gift that is God's grace

John Calvin, to whom we trace our theological roots, suggests a third use

which to him (and to generations of Reformed Christians after him ... that's us)

is the primary use. That is as a guide, instructions ... structures of grace

The law does more than keep us out of trouble, a list of no no's

It does more than remind us of our sin

The law encourages us to be faithful ... to grow in grace

That, I believe, is the purpose of the law ... structure, instruction, guidance

How about we think of the law not so much with words but with gestures

or expressions. The first use of the law might be like an outstretched hand

so as to say 'stop.' The second use is one my parents used with me

and my brothers and I've used it too – the over the glasses look.

Both of these can be quite helpful. They have their time and place.

But that third use, I believe, is the most helpful of the three uses.

I'd suggest a gesture for that use of the law as our guide ...

How about the law like an extended arm reaching out and

calling us forward as if to say, "Come on, I'll show you the way."

That is language Jesus uses in referring to himself as "the way, the truth and the life"

By way he doesn't just mean the way to God or to heaven – not just a destination

Jesus is the way and he shows us the way using the law (especially his summary

of it) as both destination and as directions along the way. This is the way

as in this is how we are to live ... this is how you do it

The law of God is a guide, even guardrails, as the image on the screen suggests

That is how we are to use the law – like following the GPS. It is not meant to be

used as a rulebook where we might act like we have been appointed as officials

and provided with whistles to blow and flags to throw at others

It's like sports in that sense – nobody buys a ticket to watch the officials

I don't think following Jesus who is the way is about God's people using our hands

to throw flags. I think our arms and hands work better in the other direction

an extended arm reaching out and then motioning as to invite people

the way you extend your arm and draw it in to invite someone into your home

SUMMARY

In reading up about the Ten Commandments and how to preach them,
I came across some good advice, preacher to preachers,
from Al Winn and an article in the Journal for Preachers.

Preached in the proper order, the law is not merely a series of intolerable prohibitions or impossible demands. It is never a way to get to heaven, to justify ourselves, a ground for boasting. It is not even the hammer that cracks open our self-righteousness or the mirror that confronts us with our sinfulness. It is Torah, instruction. We really do not know how to respond to the grace of God. Left to our own devices we could wander into all sorts of weird and inappropriate responses. It is a further act of God's grace, having graced us already, to say: "This is the way; walk in it."

The church I served in Georgia has two parking lots on either side of the church
Two driveways, one into each parking lot. One of those was too close
to the stoplight on a busy four-lane road – It made for a dangerous turn

We did a capital campaign, added a new central driveway, closed the dangerous one
The new driveway connected the two parking lots. That was good, unifying even.
I really liked Larry's idea for the new driveway. Any of you remember the Burma
Shave signs along the highway? There would be several, one after the other
They would be spaced along the road. Get your attention.

Larry appreciated the benediction from Micah. Like many members there
and many members here, he had it memorized – do justice, love mercy,
and walk humbly with God. He suggested we paint that along the driveway
like those Burma shave signs – a reminder for the road.

Thinking about God's law as a guide, that image works for me
Next time I'm on the road I'm going to envision those words from Micah
painted along the way one after the other. Given how many road trips
I have taken I'll try to picture those at every state line and over every river

Do justice ...
love mercy ...
walk humbly with God