

Explore the Bible: Commanded

September 19, 2017

- The Explore the Bible lesson for Oct. 8 focuses on Exodus 20:1-17.

A portion of one verse leading up to the Ten Commandments text is one of my favorite phrases in the Bible: “Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God” (Exodus 19:17a). So much took place following the manna and quail, showing that God was establishing himself with the people. Now, at a critical point, they would be led out of their self-made safety to encounter God at the foot of Mount Sinai.

Up to this introduction of law, the people had very little to account to for the way they lived other than oral tradition. Here we see the main point of the lesson: *God gives a clear standard for holy living*. Peter later wrote, “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy because I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:15-16). Peter was referencing the Old Testament law.

God calls us to a higher standard of living, and we may call this “the pursuit of holiness.” God’s standard for us is the standard that he gives for us to follow, and he is the expert. Start by asking: *What does a life-long pursuit of God look like?* The fact is that once a person encounters God, one’s life must change.

The God of the Commandments

In the odd case that they had forgotten who he was (notice the “tongue in cheek”), God spoke to Israel in a way to remind them who he was and what he had done. It seems the narrator of the story wants us to know that all these words were spoken by God’s own breath and voice.

Yahweh is clarifying what the Bible reader will see often from here on out: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” In the story of Israel, he is the ultimate liberator who single-handedly secured their deliverance. When they would forget, he would introduce himself in this same way.

As Peter Enns notes, “The relationship between them has already been established. Now they are to learn what a redeemed life should look like” (Enns, *Exodus*, 412). Because God did what he did, he can now say what he will say. *Consider a real-life example of why someone would have the authority to command.*

In a church context we expect God to tell us how to live. Yet, Israel had lived under oppression, so they likely had a negative view of authoritarian command. They also had only been introduced to their God. In that world, one usually pacified the gods for personal benefit, not for holy living; one did not necessarily want to emulate a god.

Relating to God

Now the people must establish their allegiance to God. The commands are clear: No other gods, no idols, hallow his name, and keep the Sabbath. Following each of these would prove one’s allegiance and subjection to God. We may easily see the necessity of submission, a personal decision to lower one’s self under God.

God’s jealousy is worth discussing in light of these four commands. *How does this word help or not help us understand God?* A Jewish interpretation would call this “impassioned” instead of the human emotion of jealousy: “In its primitive meaning, (it) seems to have denoted ‘to become intensely red’ (Nahum Sarna, *Exodus*, 110). This is more than rage, but even more emphasizing “that God cannot be indifferent to his creatures and that he is deeply involved in human affairs” (Ibid, 110).

Simply put, God's passion for his people desires a response of passionate worship from his people. We should give back as he has given to us. Love returned for love, loyalty returned for loyalty, and so on. *How are we guilty of not giving back to God what he loving gives us?* When we do so, we establish other "gods" over us.

Relating to society

Rather than society, I would like to use the word "community." Whether in a faith community or housing community, these latter commands are about establishing relationships with those around us. This is seen also in the Sabbath command in verse 9 with reference to the "alien" who had no rights.

It is interesting that "honor" is the first word in this new set, showing that perhaps our role with people is to give and bring honor rather than shame. Ask your group, *what does giving honor to people look like?* In the context of parents, Nahum Sarna reminds us the law sees "the integrity of the family for the sake of the stability of society" as supremely important (Sarna, *Exodus*, 113).

Each command after is easily seen as not doing what would bring shame on one's self and others. The concept of shame was a significant offense that was usually not overcome, so God speaks to upholding honor. *How would upholding honor change our community?*

Conclusion

See Luke 10:25-37 as a final meditation as Jesus affirmed the ideal relationships between God and people, and *notice the similarities between these two texts.* Living a life-long pursuit of holiness is seen in this eclectic story preached by Jesus to drive the point home.

I learned from Andy Stanley one time that “excellence is going beyond expectations,” and that is exactly the kind of life we are called to. Israel was called beyond their understanding of pagan worship and selfish living. We are called beyond society’s standard to give honor to God and others.

Once you encounter God in his glory, you cannot help but be changed. The question is: *How will I change and continue to change?*

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