

Exodus 20:1-2: 'No Other Gods'

Choices

I remember the day vividly.

We have been living in Perth for 18 months and had been starved of a decent computer shop that gave the sort of variety I had been used to in Sydney.

But now I was back visiting Sydney.

I had set aside an afternoon to go on an excursion to one of my favourite computer haunts.

I'd shed my uninterested family and I arrived at the store in keen anticipation.

It was exactly as I remembered it...

Aisle after aisle of hardware choices.

Aisle after aisle of software choices.

Things I'd read about.

Things I'd coveted.

Things I'd never be able to afford.

Things I didn't need.

Things on sale.

Choice after choice.

And as I wandered through this fools heaven a strange thing began to happen.

I was overcome with the variety of choices.

And before long I began to feel very odd indeed.

And soon after this I decided I had to leave.

And so I walked through the checkout counters with nothing in my hands.

Twenty minutes after walking into the store I got into my car and drove home.

Our world is a world that is often like my computer store, isn't it?

It is a world full of a multitude of choices.

A world where choices overwhelm us.

Choices about careers.

Choices about where we will live and with whom we should live.

Choices about what we drive, what we do with our time, where we spend our money.

Choices about toothpaste and toilet cleaner, about soap and softdrink.

In this world of choices there are some choices we can afford to not make.

However, there are some choices that we **MUST** make.

And today I want to talk about the one essential choice we must make — the choice of the god whom we will worship.

Today we are going to talk about the first commandment of the 10 commandments.

However, before we do this, I think that it is important that we spend some time talking about the place of the 10 commandments in the life of Christian people.

The first part of tonight's talk will therefore focus on this issue.

After we have dealt with it, we will return to the first commandment.

Christians and OT Law

What the OT teaches us

Before we get started in talking about OT law I just need to get some terminology straightened out.

In the next few minutes I'm going to be talking about the world 'Law' as it is used in the Old Testament.

When I use that term, I generally mean all the laws in the Old Testament.

All of these laws are sort of summarised in the 10 commandments, so I also mean the 10 commandments when I talk about the OT law.

Okay, having said this, let's get on to what the OT teaches us about God's law. I think its teachings can be boiled down to 3 points.

- The Law is...

Point 1 is the fundamental one.

Point 1 is that the law in the OT is for God's covenant people.

God does not give his law to everyone on earth.

He gives it to the people he has redeemed.

He gives it to his covenant people.

This is the impact of Exodus 20:1

God says...

Jam the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery You shall have no other gods before me.

Law presupposes relationship.

Law springs out of relationship.

Law is a response to relationship.

- Law = ...

Point 2 is that law = 'instruction' or 'guidance'.

When we think of law we think of the laws of the land.

We think of police and governments and penalties.

This is not what is meant by the OT word for law.

It means 'guidance' or 'instruction'.

So, what we have in the 10 commandments is not so much God's law, but God's guidance in life.

It is God's instruction as to how to live as his people.

The 10 commandments are therefore not God's complete will.

Nor are the 10 commandments plus all the other laws you can find in the OT.

The laws we find in the Bible are examples of what God thinks on certain issues.

These laws spring from his character.

They are representative guidelines.

But they are not the total sum of God's will.

Jesus makes this clear in the New Testament when he talks about some of the 10 commandments.

For example, in Matthew 5:21 Jesus says:

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not commit murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'

But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.

Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca' is answerable to the Sanhedrin.

But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Jesus is clear that the commandment about killing is only part of God's instruction.

Physical killing arises out of a much deeper problem.

And God is concerned with the deeper problem as well.

- Law...

The third point that arises from the Old Testament is that law cannot be kept because of human sinfulness.

The Old Testament is crystal clear.

The stories of the OT tell us that even the most noble saints cannot consistently keep God's laws.

Even the most noble saints are sinful.

Even the most noble saints break God's commandments.

And in a number of places the Old Testament specifically states that humans are unable to keep God's law.

Listen to Psalm 14:2-3

The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of humans to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God

All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt;

There is no one who does good, not even one.

Some NT perspectives

- Because the Law cannot be kept it...

This brings us to the New Testament.

Now I need to say at this point that the NT has much to say about the OT law and what I'm going to say is only the briefest of summaries.

However, I have 3 points.

The first point is that the NT agrees with the OT — the law cannot be kept by humans because of their sinfulness.

But the NT goes on to say that this inability to keep the law drives us to Christ. We know the law represents God's will.

And we know we cannot keep even the 10 commandments, let alone the other things Jesus says are implied by those laws.

In other words, the presence of the law shows us how sinful we really are. And this drives us to go to God for another solution.

The law tells us we cannot save ourselves and drives us to go to God for another solution to our sinfulness.

In Galatians 3, Paul says that the law is therefore sort of like a tutor leading us to Christ.

Listen to him in Galatians 3 :23ff.

But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed.

So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.

Listen to that last verse again.

So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.

- Jesus...

This brings us to our second point.

The second point we learn from the NT is that Jesus keeps, fulfils, and replaces the law.

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Listen to some passages from the NT that make this clear.

Or in Romans 10:3 Paul says:

Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes

In Matthew 5:17 Jesus says:

'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.'

- Jesus...

This brings us to Point 3 from the NT.

Point 3 is that Jesus enables us to forgiven for our sinfulness.

Listen to Paul in Acts 13:38-39:

I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.

Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.

Or again, in Colossians 2:13-14:

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Christians and OT Law

So, let's see what we can do now to summarise a Christian attitude to OT law.

Again, I've got a series of points.

. The law has not...

Point 1 is that the law has passed away.

Jesus speaks about this in Matthew 5:1 7ff and makes himself very clear.

Listen to what he has to say:

“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. 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. Whoever 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 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.

• The Law is...

Point 2 is that the law is fulfilled in Christ.

Jesus is the one who has lived a perfect life of obedience before God in our place.

He alone of all humans has fulfilled the law.

If we believe in Jesus then he is our righteousness.

He is our justification.

He is our redemption.

His righteousness is ours.

Listen to Paul spell this out in 2 Corinthians 5:21

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God

- We are not...

Point 3 is builds on the previous two points.

Jesus has fulfilled the law.

And although the law has not passed away we are not 'under the law'.

That is, the keeping the law does not determine how things are going between us and God.

We are right with God on the basis of what Jesus has done.

HE is our righteousness.

We no longer determine our status before God on the basis of law keeping.

Therefore, we are no longer under the mastery of the law.

It is not the means of entering relationship with God.

And it is not the means of maintaining our relationship with God.

Listen to Paul in Romans 6:14:

For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

And again in Galatians 3:25:

Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

But a fundamental question remains, doesn't it?

If the law does not pass away...

And if Jesus fulfils the law...

And if the law is no longer our master...

Then what place does the Old Testament law have for us as Christians?

What place does the 10 commandments have for us as Christians?

What should we do with such commandments?

- Two illustrations:

Let me explain how I think it happens by using two illustrations.

The first illustration imagines that the law is like a parent with a child. Imagine a parent teaching a child about going to bed wisely.

When the child is two the parent tells the child that lights out is at 7:00 pm but that when they get to four the lights will be out at 7:30 pm.

At four the lights get put out at 7:30 pm.

This goes on until the child reaches an appropriate age at which the parent says, 'Look, your old enough to make up your mind as to when the light goes out. I've taught you good principles. Now you can determine the best time.'

The parent may remind the son or daughter not to be foolish and not to stay up all night.

But the parent does not place them under childish rules anymore.

The rules were good and wholesome but the child is now an adult.

The rules it had as a child were good in giving guidance and instruction.

However, the child now has a bigger picture of things and can make decisions on the basis of an adult understanding.

Our situation as Christians is that we have not only heard of God's great deliverance in Egypt.

We have also seen and experience God's great deliverance from sin through Jesus.

We therefore have a greatly increased knowledge of God and his purposes and his love.

We are adult children.

However, the law is nevertheless helpful for us.

It provides very helpful instruction about the sorts of things God wants from his redeemed people.

But we are adults now and know much more about God through Jesus.

For example, we know that the 10 commandments are only a small expression of what it means to love God and love your neighbour.

We have seen Jesus and how he loves his neighbour.

We have been loved by Jesus on the cross.

We know much more about God's love than the Old Testament people did.

My second illustration likens the Old Testament to a Professor Emeritus at a university.

Let me explain.

Most of you know about professors at university.

It is them and their colleagues that are, in the long run, responsible for passing or failing you at university.

However, many universities around the world have professors called 'professor emeritus'.

A professor emeritus is generally a person who has been a professor at the university during their working life.

They are recognised as a world authority on their particular discipline and because of this the university gives them a room, a computer, and access to the university's resources in return for them being available to the students and staff at the university.

Now, imagine you are a young PhD student and you find yourself studying in the area in which a professor emeritus has worked all his life.

Who is the first person you will go to for advice?

Who is the person you will want to get to know and spend time with?

Who is the person you will want to have extended discussions with in the cafeteria?

It is the professor emeritus.

This professor has no power to pass or fail you.

But this professor will be the source of great and good information and guidance and instruction.

Well, the OT law is like a professor emeritus.

The OT law no longer has the power to pass or fail us.

But the OT law is an expert in telling us what things God likes and doesn't like.

The OT law is a place where we will want to spend much time.

For it tells us about God and his will.

It doesn't tell us everything.

There are new things to be found in Jesus.

However, it tells us heaps and heaps of good and useful things.

- Application

You can see what I'm saying, can't you?

I'm urging you and I'm urging myself to study God's Old Testament law.

It will give us great information about God.

It will tell us what things please the God who has redeemed us.

It will tell us about how we should live as redeemed people.

But don't just stay in the OT.

Go to the NT as well.

For God has much more to say in the NT.

He has lots of things to say that build on the OT.

Be students of both testaments.

Both are Scripture and both are useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in

righteousness.

Okay, let's take a break there and see if there are any questions.

'You shall have no other gods'

Context

[Note: some of this sermon is indebted to JI Packer in *I want to be a Christian*, page 200ff]

Okay, let's have a look at the first commandment.

The first thing to remember is the context.

This law about Israel having no other god is set in the context of God's rescue of Israel.

God is not a stranger to the people he speaks to in Exodus.

He has established a relationship with Israel.

And all relationships have claims.

He has loved his people and he expects them to respond by loving him.

This is the context — personal relationships — are relationship between the God of all the earth and his people.

What makes a god?

The second thing we need to do with this passage is to think about what makes a god.

In my view this passage doesn't say anything much about the existence or not of other gods.

Nor does it say anything about the reality of other gods.

We have to go elsewhere in the OT for these things.

What this passage DOES do is assume that there will be things in the world that we give the status of gods.

So, what is a god?

A ballpark definition is that a god is something or someone to which we give our loyalty.

Something or someone we love and serve.

Something or someone we allow to control us.

Other gods

In the ancient world there were many such gods.

The Israelites could choose from a pantheon of gods — Canaanite fertility gods, nature gods, gods of war and gods of peace.

In our world there are equally many gods from which we can choose.

The great gods of sex, shekels, and stomach.

Or pleasure, possessions, and position.

Or the firm and the family.

A god is anything we allow to run our life.

Anything or anyone we live our life for.

Anything or anyone we cannot live life without.

Anything or anyone who claims our most fundamental loyalty.

These are our gods.

And they are legion.

Concentrating on the one God

And in this commandment God comes to us and says a definite and clear 'No!'.

He calls us to choose from the legion of prospective gods and to make our creator and

saviour our exclusive god.

He is to be preferred over any other object of devotion.

He is to be the sole lord of our hearts, our motivations, and our actions.

He is to be our chief desire.

The love of our life.

The one we love with all our heart and all our soul and all our strength and all our mind.

God demands a total concentration of our purpose and will.

In everything we do there is just one sole aim — pleasing and glorifying our God and saviour.

He has our resolute and wholehearted allegiance.

So, what does this mean in practice.

What does it mean in day to day living to have no other gods but the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ?

Each of us are busy people.

Each of us have a host of things we must think and do each day.

This command says that each of them, no matter how trivial, no matter how important, are to be approached as ventures of living service to the God who redeemed us.

Each is an opportunity to enthrone the king we adore.

Whether it be ...

- studying, or
- working, or
- living with our parents, or
- living with our children, or

- spending our money, or
- watching television, or
- not watching television, or
- setting our timetables, or
- talking to our friends, or
- deciding whether to get angry or not.

Having God as your exclusive god is not just an intellectual assent to the idea. It is a wholehearted and diligent choice that is reflected in every action.