

Third Sunday in Lent

Sermon Text – Exodus 20:1-17

Theme: “*Children of the Gospel*”

Grace, peace and mercy to you from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The Ten Commandments will always be a central part of who we are as Christians, shaping and framing the way we live our lives according to God’s will. But like the bones of our bodies, they should be hidden from the view of others. In fact like our bones, if others are seeing first of all God’s law in us, it probably means we are broken. There will always be a place for the Ten Commandments, but they should be wrapped up inside God’s gospel which is the first thing others should see as we live our Christian lives.

Heavenly Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

The Ten Commandments → trying harder!

So often today we look at the Ten Commandments as a set of rules by which we are to live our lives in order that God will be pleased with us. He gave us these rules and so we must obey them if we are to be good Christians. The problem is, no matter how hard we try to keep them, we will always fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). One of the people in our Wednesday Bible study summed it up very well when she said, “its no use trying harder, because the harder you try, the more you see your sin.” And that exactly right. The law works as a mirror that reflects our sinful nature back to us.

That doesn’t sound very appealing – and it shouldn’t. But that’s the problem faced by people of the law. Too often Christians are told they need to obey the law to be faithful and to bear a good witness to God. This is reflected in attitudes that stop people from coming to church because they haven’t yet sorted out a particular problem or sin. “Pastor I should come to church more often, but I still struggle with a gambling addiction (or some other perceived problem)”. For such people, the law has done its work. It has revealed their sinful nature and that they have a problem which separates them from God. The blessed truth is that church is exactly where sinful people should come.

But part of the problem is that people don’t appreciate just ill they really are. Apart from God, we are not merely sick, we are spiritually dead. And just as it would be impossible for a dead person to bring themselves back to life, so it is impossible for a sinful person to make themselves clean once more. The old person must be laid to rest and a new person be born again as a child of God.

It is for this reason that trying really, really hard to keep all of God’s commandments will lead to frustration and more pain and hurt. From the outside, it might look as though the struggling person is living a real good life. They would probably be the perfect neighbours who always look after their property, are kind to one another, wash the car and help other people. Everything looks perfect, right up to the point in time when something snaps. All the effort of trying to be perfect becomes too much and the sinful nature is revealed once more.

It would be interesting to understand the real reason most people who don’t come to church stay away. I suspect a major reason would be the perception of hypocrisy. The stereotype Christian is the goody two shoes who lives a perfect life of blissful wowserism. But no matter how good someone tries to be, they will always slip up – and then the critics will point out the hypocrisy and that Christians are no better than anyone else.

Trying really hard to keep the Ten Commandments in order to be right with God will only ever lead to our sinful nature being shown more and more to us every time we look honestly into the mirror God holds up for us.

Being led from slavery

If no matter how hard we try, we are bound to the slavery of sin, we need someone to lead us from slavery to freedom. In verse two of the Old Testament reading, God introduces the Ten Commandments by saying, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”. So it was God working through Moses who freed his people from the physical slavery they had endured for so long.

Now to enable his chosen people, the Israelites to live in his presence, God gave them the gift of his commandments. As he gave Adam and Eve the one restriction to enable them to live in his presence in the Garden of Eden, so God gives the Israelites the restrictions that will enable them to live in peace with himself and with one another. How often do we focus on the Ten Commandments as a series of “Thou shalt not”, instead of a blessing that allows sinful people to live in God’s presence? We look at the Ten Commandments as a burden instead of a gift!

God had led his people from slavery to the Egyptians to freedom. The problem is that God’s people then became enslaved to their sinfulness which they saw through the Ten Commandments. Once more God’s people were enslaved and needed to be led from slavery to freedom.

We are called to be children of the gospel

Enslaved to the Law, God’s people need someone to keep the Law perfectly so we can be right with God. There’s simply no other way for us to be at peace with ourselves and more importantly with God. This is the same for each and every individual person. No matter how good anyone may be, we *all* fall short of God’s glory. Not one person is capable of living a life that is perfectly pleasing to God. The more we try, the more we see our own shortcomings.

But just as God didn’t leave his people to die at the hands of the Egyptians, nor has he left us to die in slavery at the hands of our own sins. He sent his Son, Jesus to die in our place. And through the gift of baptism, we are given the means by which God adopts us as his children. The old sinful person is drowned. The person who was dead because of sin is no more and the new person is born again, of water and the Spirit. The Holy Spirit has called and gathered all of you to be God’s children of the gospel.

No longer does the Law define who you are. Jesus’ death on the cross means you don’t have to satisfy the Ten Commandments to be right with God. God loves you now, exactly as you are now. Not because of the good things, and certainly not because of the bad things you do or don’t do. God loves you now because when he sees you, he sees Jesus who kept his commandments perfectly. This is what it means to be covered over by Jesus’ righteousness. This is what it means that you have been made right with God.

And so if the Ten Commandments have been kept by Jesus and we don’t have to keep them to be right with God, does this mean there is no place for them? No, of course not! But it does mean the Law works in a different way for you now. The law reveals to God’s will for you. You don’t need to try and work out what God wants you to do with your life. The life you are living is not about whatever you think God might be preparing you *for*. God isn’t preparing you for anything – he’s *already* prepared you – for whatever it is you’re doing now!

So the Ten Commandments reveal how God wants you to live out your daily lives by doing the things you already are doing. But as you do them, do you put your trust in God alone? Do you honour God’s name by calling on him to help you, give him thanks, or share his blessings with others? Do you honour and obey your parents or those who have authority over you? Do you steal from others, or do you actually help them to keep what belongs to them? And so on. This is how the Ten Commandments guide you as you serve God and other people.

And when you fail in any of these areas, ask God to forgive you. That’s what being children of the Gospel means. You are *always* living in God’s presence and God continually invites you to turn back to him and ask him to forgive you when you do the wrong thing. Even better, he invites you to share the good times as well as the bad times.

The Ten Commandments give us the framework of our Christian lives, but they are only the skeleton. Let the Gospel of God’s love be which others see first and foremost. Reach out with God’s hands of love to those around you, not because you want to be right with God, but because he has already made you right with him.

Amen.