

Exodus: What We Mean When We Say God
Part 12: God's Top Ten for the Abundant Life

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Exodus 19-20

God is not a Cosmic Fun Sucker

Sometimes, reading the commandments in the Bible makes us see God like somebody writing all those pool rules. We see Him like someone who is there to suck the fun out of everything.

But God's commandments aren't just pool rules, they're swimming lessons.

God wants us to have the abundant life in relationship with Him, so He teaches us what He values.

Sinai: God Defining the Relationship

Most of us can remember moments when we had to 'define the relationship' with someone. Either a friend who was going to just stay a friend, or a friend we wanted as something more. They are some of life's most important conversations.

The Sinai encounter is God defining the relationship with Israel.

In Exodus 19:4-6 Yahweh speaks of the following laws and precepts as part of a covenant. This covenant will enable Israel to participate in Yahweh's mission as His treasured possession, holy nation, and kingdom of priests.

A covenant is an identity changing relationship solidified by a commitment to pursue an ideal.

Marriage is the only modern covenant that is still around. When we get married, we take on a new identity—as husband or wife. Our lives are changed forever, no matter how it ends.

But we stay a husband or wife, even when we're a bad one. Because the standard for marriage, 'loving and cherishing' no matter what, is impossible. It's an ideal we are meant to *pursue*.

The relationship falls apart not when we mess up, but when we stop pursuing that ideal.

Israel is now God's people, and they keep their status as long as they pursue the ideals laid out in the Law. This is the abundant life God wants them to have in covenant relationship with Him.

Not Law, but Torah

Jesus inaugurated a new covenant, a new way to relate, with His death and resurrection. So, some of the specifics following the Ten Commandments, Christians don't follow anymore.

But that doesn't mean we can skip reading the law portions of the Bible.

A way to flip our thinking is not to think of it as 'law' but as the Hebrew word 'Torah'.¹ Torah means law, but it also means teaching or instruction. In fact, the Ten 'Commandments' are not called 'Commandments' in the Bible. They are called 'The Ten Words', or as I think of them now 'The Ten Teachings'.

We also read the law because Jesus did. He told us, in Matthew 5:17, "Do not think I have come to abolish the [Torah] or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."

And Jesus goes on to say: "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'you shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you, that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment." (Matt. 5:21-22)

Jesus isn't rewriting the Torah; the teaching is the same. Because in teaching ten we are told "You shall not covet." We are told with that to examine our intentions as well as our actions. Showing this is not just about prohibitions, it's about how God wants us to be in the world.

The Ten Teachings are God's Top Ten out of the 613 laws that will follow. Jesus affirms each of them in His ministry, altering slightly the practice of Sabbath.

Because God wants the abundant life for us, so He shows us what He values. He values His pre-eminence, His reputation, and our flourishing.

His Pre-eminence (Teachings 1 and 2)

Teaching one and two are about the pre-eminence of Yahweh over all things. Alan Hirsch writes:

"...in the Hebraic perspective, monotheism is not so much a statement about God as eternal being in essential oneness...but rather an existential claim that there is only one God, and he is Lord of every aspect of life..."²

What he's saying is this to say God is one is to say *all of life finds its meaning in one place*.

While we may not bow to idols, when we live with a different standard in the different arenas of life, we are worshipping other gods.

¹ I am indebted to Carmen Joy Imes, *Bearing God's Name*, pg. 38 for this distinction.

² Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, pg. 89

Jesus answers all self-help sections with two pieces of advice in a sentence: Love God and Love Your Neighbor. He clarifies it more:

“Seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”
(Matthew 6:33)

Which is to say, put the first thing first and everything else falls into place. Make God pre-eminent, first over all, and the rest will follow.

His Reputation (Teachings 2 and 3)

God also values his reputation.

The literal language of teaching three is “you must not *bear* (or carry) the name of Yahweh, your God, in vain.”³

And teaching two prohibits making images of Yahweh as well as other gods. Why? Because Yahweh has already made an image for Himself, humanity.⁴

We are responsible for God’s reputation.

Flourishing (Teachings 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10)

I’ve always wanted a property with my own fruit tree on it, ever since tasting a fresh peach off the tree in Vernon.

This is a prophetic metaphor for our flourishing. Describing the end of exile, and maybe a final vision of the world, Micah writes “Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree.” (4:4) In Amos, it’s that they will drink the wine of their own vineyards (9:14).

God’s vision for humanity is a world in which people can work and eat the fruit of their labor without fear of murder, theft, exploitation, or false accusation. All six of the final teachings show us God wants to set up a world where we can flourish. They teach us to value integrity, family and contented trust.

a. Integrity

Yahweh wants us to keep from bearing false witness and to maintain our sexual integrity because lies cost lives.

³ See Carmen Joy Imes, *Bearing*, 49.

⁴ Chris Wright, *Story of God Commentary: Exodus*, pg. 362

In 2002, President Bush stood before the world and said: “There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction.”⁵

A lie proven multiple times over that led to a war costing trillions of dollars and thousands of lives.

Lies cost lives. Human flourishing requires integrity and truthfulness. That’s a world the way God wants it.

b. Household

The only law without a prohibition is ‘honor your father and mother’. Some people make a big deal of the next sentence: so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

This is not a promise of long life if you love Mom and Dad. It’s about the whole nation flourishing in the promised land if elders are respected.⁶

Between three and four generations lived under a single roof. So, sin affecting three to four generations is an *immediate* thing. But this also meant that the household was the basic unit of society, if love, life, and business in the home was good—then it was good in society.

This doesn’t mean you need a spouse and kids to matter in the kingdom. Family is expanded to include all other believers in the New Testament (see Ephesians 2:19)

Again, the idea of *household* is key. That’s the basic unit of society. Some people are expanding their ‘households’ beyond the nuclear family to be more New Testament about this.⁷ Sometimes moving into multi-family housing, or just having a closer relationship with their tenants or whatever.

The point is the order of the household is the surest path to our flourishing.

c. Contented Trust

I was watching other churches in the pandemic and getting a little jealous of some of their tech and musicians.

And I felt this little voice, that still small one, say ‘Ricky, do not covet.’

If there’s a teaching we need to come back to talking about today, it’s this one: Do not covet.

As one author has said: “The [Ten Commandments] end where all sin begins.”⁸

⁵ See article on 8 most dangerous lies in history here: <https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2018/05/8-historys-destructive-lies/>

⁶ Chris Wright, *Exodus*, 362ff.

⁷ This idea comes from Andy Crouch on the “Practicing the Way” podcast. Available [here](#).

⁸ Wright paraphrasing Moyter in Wright, *Exodus*, 379.

The Sabbath is an invitation to rest from productivity and be content with what we have. When we see we have what we need, even while we rest, we can learn a contentment that protects us from covetousness.

Contented trust allows us to find flourishing in our current place in life, and opens us to generosity towards others.

Defining the Relationship 2.0

God is not a cosmic fun sucker. God is not out to make you repress yourself, He's out to give you the space to express yourself. Your true self. The self you were made to be—holding Him first, keeping His name, and flourishing under the sway of your own fruit trees.

We talk a lot about freedom these days. And all the while our soundtrack is Metallica's 'Don't Tread on Me.'

Liberty or death, what we so proudly hail
Once you provoke her, rattling of her tail
Never begins it, never but once engaged
Never surrenders, showing the fangs of rage.

But there's another song you could read. Another great freedom song you can turn to and meditate on. Psalm 119.

"I will walk in wide places, for I have sought out your precepts." (Psalm 119:45)

Liberty is death. Death to the sin-self, and life to the Christ-self. It is a life laid down to be picked up again. That's the widest place you can find, the greenest grass, the tallest trees. That's life, friends. The abundant life in relationship with Him, valuing what He values.

So, today, as we sing. I want you to imagine yourself there by that mountain. I want you to imagine God holding out this vision of the flourishing life. Hear His offer today, the offer of a covenant towards real freedom.

And ask yourself,

What corner of myself am I holding back? Why?

Because after all, on that cross, He brought you out of slavery like Yahweh did for Israel. He gave it all for you,

Will you give it all to Him?

Discussion Questions:

Open Up

What commandments or rules did you grow up with that felt like they were just there to 'suck the fun'? How has your perspective changed as you've grown older.

Dig In

Read Exodus 20 together then answer the following questions:

- a. What changes if you see these commandments not as prohibitions, but as hints towards what God values?
- b. Let the full force of number ten hit you. To not covet is a commandment in a list along with murder and adultery. How does it feel to meditate on that?
- c. What may have been surprising about the values revealed by God's commandments?
- d. What area of your life are you 'following another god' in by living by a different standard? What do you want to do about it?

Prayer

Pray fervently for the hunger to desire God above all things amongst your group. Pray for any areas you may feel you are falling short of God's standard. Pray for deeper trust that God wants your good.