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C0630 – August 16, 2006 – Ex 20:4-11 – The Decalogue – Part 2

I. The First Three Commandments: Relationship Between the Israelites and God (vv 3-7)

A. The First Commandment: Idolatry (vv 3-6)

³ "You shall have no other gods before Me.

⁴ "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.

⁵ "You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me,

⁶ but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

Picking up in verse 4, this is forbidding the construction of an idol of wood, stone or precious metal after the likeness of anything in **heaven**. **heaven** can't be referring to the highest heaven where God dwells because later they are instructed to build a tabernacle after the model in heaven. The best sense is that **heaven above** here refers to the created **heavens**. The first heaven is our atmosphere where the clouds and birds are (Day 5). The second heaven is where the sun, moon, and stars dwell are (Day 4). Nor an idol in the likeness of anything on the **earth** (cattle, lions, etc...) (Day 6) or in the **water** (fish, crocodiles, etc...) (Day 5). God's point is "Don't make any idol after the things I made on days 4, 5, and 6 and then worship and serve them". God is the only person to be worshipped and served.

Nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated for the Church in some form. Idolatry is the first that is condemned for the Church. Paul warned against this in Romans 1 and gives a good example of what it looks like to violate this commandment.

Romans 1:21-25 For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. ²⁵ For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

1) Identifying YHWH with parts of creation and 2) making material objects and worshipping and serving them instead of YHWH.

“Why am I to worship YHWH only? Verse 5 says, **for I, YHWH your elohim, am a jealous God.** I have never heard anyone mention this attribute of God but it is clear that in the same way God is love and righteousness He is also jealous, not in a human way but in a divine way which is in harmony with the rest of His attributes. As the creator He has the right of jealousy regarding worship. This kind of jealousy is a part of His nature as Creator. He deserves and desires our complete devotion. The creature is to worship the Creator alone. Nothing in all creation deserves our devotion. When He made the universe He made no room for any other devotions.

As per the Christian, John the apostle summed up his first epistle with this command, “Little children, guard yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21). Idols do not have to be material objects. An idol may be anything that comes between or takes the place of God.

Ok, let’s review the three questions and answers. “Who am I to worship?” YHWH and YHWH alone. “How am I to worship?” Not through any created object but directly from the heart in spirit and in truth. “Why am I to worship Him only?” Because He is a jealous God.

What does God’s jealousy look like in the course of human history? **visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, ⁶ but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.** This verse has troubled many believers so I want to clarify and set the record straight. One interpretation is that God punishes the child for the parent’s sins. In other words, the child pays for the parents sins instead of the parent himself who

committed the sin(s). A reason often given for the transmission of punishment is that God is giving the parents time to repent. Immediately this seems to infer that God is unjust. Shouldn't God punish the one who sins rather than someone else? This interpretation became so popular among the Jews that a proverb expressing it had become entrenched in Jewish culture during the time of the Babylonian Exile. The proverb is found in Ezekiel 18:2; "The fathers eat the sour grapes, But the children's teeth are set on edge." This proverb meant that the people thought they were being punished for their parents' sins and not their own. Thus, they blamed God for punishing them unjustly. In this chapter, God refuted this proverb by saying, "the soul who sins will die" (Ezek 18:4). In other words, the parent pays for his sin and the child pays for his sin. They had been sent into exile for their own sins and not those of their parents. There is no transferal of punishment from parent to child. Ezekiel then raises the example of a righteous father who had a wicked son and a wicked son who had a righteous father and concluded that "The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself" (Ezek 18:20). Thus, God is not unjust as that generation charged. Each individual is held responsible before God for his own sin. Therefore, the interpretation of this phrase that God punishes the child for the fathers' sins is incorrect. Punishment for sin rests on the one who committed the sin(s).

A second interpretation of verses 5-6 is that the negative effects of the parents' sins extend to the third and fourth generation, which is a long time, but if a child turns from his parents' sinful ways and loves God and keeps His commandments then God's lovingkindness will extend to thousands, an infinitely long time. Thus, God's dealings are disproportionate. He restrains the effects of sin to three or four generations but He prolongs the effects of love to thousands of generations. This interpretation has abundant testimony in the history of Israel itself (e.g. Judg 2:10-15; 2 Kings 7:7-18). For example, God prolonged the nation's sovereignty for the sake of God's servant David, a man after God's own heart! Yet because each generation continued in the idolatry of the former generation the nation eventually declined and went into exile.¹ So, God shows His jealousy two ways in human history. First, by prolonging the effects of love to thousands of generations to those who love him and second, by restraining the effects of sin to three or four generations to those who hate Him.

PRINCIPLE: Often a single generation can change the entire course of a family for thousands of future generations. You may have had a parent or parents whose pattern of life was wicked and without doubt this has negative effects on you but you are responsible to turn from those wicked ways and do righteousness. God does not condone

the victim mentality (poor me and if it hadn't been for my parents...). You are responsible to change the course of your family. If you do then God's grace prolongs the effects of love to thousands of generations.

B. The Second Commandment: YHWH's Name (v 7)

This commandment answers two questions: "How should YHWH's name be used?" and "Why should YHWH's name be used this way?"

⁷ "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.

This commandment forbids the worthless, spurious or vain use of the name of YHWH. His name should not be used spuriously. That is, we shouldn't attach God's name to things when we don't intend to keep it. For example, swearing on God's name. The main point of this command was not to forbid profanity but to rather the vain use of YHWH's name when taking an oath yet intending not to keep it (Lev 19:12; Dt 10:20). Some Jews interpret this to mean that the name of YHWH should not be uttered (e.g. they often write the name G-d) but that is not the meaning of the text. It is simply the vain, spurious or worthless use of His name.

There are two reasons why YHWH's name should not be used vainly. First, because His name describes His character. To vainly use His name is to consider His character worthless. Second, because YHWH **will not leave unpunished** the one **who takes His name in vain**. It will go remembered and the individual will be punished for using His name vainly. There is a proper way to use the name of YHWH and it is in connection with worship and service. His name is to be used reverently. He is to be respected.

The NT parallel for the Church is found in

James 5:12 But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment.

Note the similar judgment for violating this commandment.

C. The Third Commandment: The Sabbath (vv 8-11)

This commandment is answering the question, “How should I spend my time?”

⁸ "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

⁹ "Six days you shall labor and do all your work,

¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you.

¹¹ "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

“How should I spend my time?” The answer is, six days you shall labor and do all your work and on the seventh day you shall not do your normal work. **Remember** makes clear that the Israelites were already aware of the **sabbath day**. It was first mentioned in Exod 16:23 with respect to gathering manna. They were to gather for six days but not on the seventh day which was called “sabbath”. This commandment forbids one from his normal work on the Sabbath. For example, if one was a farmer for six days of the week he was not supposed to farm on the **sabbath**. The reason given is because during creation week YHWH worked six days and rested on the seventh day (Gen 2:1-4). Verse 11 is a divine commentary on Gen 1:1-2:4. It answers the question, “How long was creation week?” It is clear that creation week was seven twenty-four hour days long and that it occurred ~4004BC. There is no necessity of trying to reconcile this with the billions of years of stellar evolution or the millions of years of chemical and biological evolution proposed by modern science. Christians often try to harmonize creation and evolution by some form of theistic evolution. Theistic evolution means God used evolution. There are several different ways Christians have tried to harmonize (Day-Age-Day Theory, Day Age Theory, Progressive Creationism, etc...) but none of them take a straightforward interpretation of Exod 20:11. Man is to work six days just as God worked six days and man is to rest on the seventh day because God rested on the seventh day. So, man and cattle. Notice the “cattle” are mentioned. Man and nature require a day of rest from labor and this was the purpose of the sabbath.

Even though the Sabbath was a day when you were not supposed to do your normal work, there were also things the Israelites were supposed to do on the Sabbath. One was not supposed to just sit still all day and do nothing. How could you do that anyway? *First*, the Sabbath was not a day of work but it was a day of worship. Thus, one was supposed to keep the day holy, set apart from all other days. *Second*, on this day he was to remember the Exodus from Egypt (Dt 5:14-15). *Third*, he was to study and meditate on

the word of God. In a nutshell, the day was to be devoted to the exercise of the spirit in worshipping God and not the exercise of the body in working nature.

When was the Sabbath? The Jewish day began in the evening because when God created the universe He said after each day, “And there was evening and morning, the xth day.” So, each day began with evening. The Sabbath was the seventh day of the week and it began on Friday at 6pm and ended on Saturday at 6pm. During this time one’s normal work was not supposed to be done but one was supposed to worship God.

There are no NT parallels to the sabbath. This is the one commandment of the ten that is not repeated in any form in the NT. Sunday is not the Christian sabbath. There is no Christian sabbath. Paul is very clear about this. There is no designated day of worship for the Church. The early church worshipped on Saturday night or Sunday morning, what was called the first day of the week because Christ was resurrected from the dead on that day. However, it is not a command to worship on that day. That was a practice of the early church and not a precept. Practices may or may not be followed but they cannot be imposed on anyone. Paul said,

Romans 14:5 One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.

In conclusion the first three commandments are the basis of the Israelites relationship to God.

1. You must not identify God with any part of creation nor make any idol (3-6).
2. You must not use the name YHWH in a spurious, worthless or vain way (7).
3. You must not do your normal work on the Sabbath (8-11).

ⁱ “It is a part of the purpose of the OT historical books to show that this act of rebellion was passed from one generation to another until ultimately the nation was sent into exile (2 Ki 25).” Sailhammer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 285.

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