

And God spoke all these words:

²“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

³“You shall have no other gods before me.

⁴“You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

⁸“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

¹²“Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³“You shall not murder.

¹⁴“You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵“You shall not steal.

¹⁶“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

¹⁷“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

(Exodus 20:1-17 NIV2011)

Set Free to Live

I don’t know about you, but I find lists quite useful. It helps organize my thoughts. It helps prioritize the day. It keeps me from forgetting to do that one thing that keeps skipping my brain. Even if you don’t write your list down on a sheet of paper, you probably make a mental list to check over everything. Lists can help with life. Lists are nice. They’re nice because then you get to scratch something off. You get to cross it off the list. You get to look at something and see: I did it! It’s done. Sense of accomplishment and feeling of relaxation ensues. We like that. If it’s not coming from lists, we get that feeling from seeing the nice pile of laundry and empty wash basket. Or, it’s the empty sink, clean counters, and dishes put away. It’s looking back and seeing the freshly mown grass or shoveled sidewalk.

The thing is, the lists are never-ending. There’s always the next list to make. There always seems to be things you need to add to the list. Some things never get off the list and won’t magically do themselves. There’s always more laundry, more dishes, grass grows, and, until maybe June, a snow storm is possible. And still, the list itself is not bad.

We see a list in Exodus 20. It's very likely a familiar list to you. If you took Catechism classes, you very likely memorized this list along with Martin Luther's explanations. If you didn't, you may recognize them from courtrooms or various pictures. It's a good list. It's God's-given. It's God-spoken. It's God's word.

The people of Israel receive this at Mount Sinai. To say that it had been an interesting last couple of months would be an understatement. Slavery in Egypt is still fresh on their minds maybe keeping some up at night or waking others up in cold-sweats thinking about it. The Ten Plagues that God brings on the Egyptians may have been a regular topic of conversation. Seeing the Red Sea split so they could cross on dry ground and watching Pharaoh's army drown; probably won't forget that one. And now, three months after leaving Egypt, here they are at Mt. Sinai. Moses leads the people out of the camp and they stand at the foot of the mountain. Thunder booms and lightning flashes. Mountain quakes and smoke billows. Trumpet sounds grow louder and louder and a voice speaks: **I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery** (v.2).

Here is the one who has done all of this for Israel. He is the Lord who brought Egypt to its knees. He is the Lord who brought them out from underneath Pharaoh's heavy hand. He's the Lord who set them free. He brought them out from slavery to bring them into a relationship with him. Out of all the people on this earth, the Lord chose them. They are His and He is their God. Now they are in His presence and reveals Himself to them. And because the Lord loves His people He speaks these words.

While these words are very similar to the general moral code, they are more. These words are not a repressive code to burden his people with penalties and threats. These are God's principles for His people to live a life that is pleasing to the Lord and beneficial to people in general.

Think about how loving that is. It can be so very frustrating when we cannot figure out what someone wants. It's so defeating and leaves you at a loss simply because you don't know what to have or where to go for lunch! It's absolutely draining when you don't know what they want from you. God doesn't leave his people guessing. Here it is!

What he did for Israel, God does for you, the new Israel. By nature slaves to sin and death, under Satan's power, you have been redeemed by the blood of His Son. Jesus has set you free slavery to sin. He's crushed Satan's head so he holds no power over you. He has brought you out of the land of death into a new life with him. He's washed you with the water and word of baptism to bring you into a relationship with God. He already done all the work! Now what are we supposed to do? Well, God tells you. You've been set free from sin and set free to live! Here's the list. Here's how to operate in this relationship. It's God's-given. It's God-spoken. It's God's Word.

The thing is, my sinful nature likes lists too. Yours does as well. Although that sinful nature was drowned in baptism, it can swim. So it sees this list and likes to think: I can do that. So we find

ourselves using it as a checklist that we can cross off the ones we can accomplish. We like to use it to show ourselves how we aren't doing a too terrible of a job of being a human towards others. Oh, we recognize we aren't perfect. But then again, no one is. Our sinful natures like this because it makes me feel good. It builds me up to wonder, "How much do I really need God? I mean, you need him for the big things and serious stuff like when people get sick or things get really bad. But this day-to-day business, I've got this."

But then your conscience starts to bother you. You can bury the conscience under a lot of rocks of lies you tell yourself; but it's hard to really kill it. We try and tell ourselves that since I've done so many good things, I shouldn't feel bad or even I have a right to do a few bad things. But you know better. So you try harder. You try to be better. But like most lists there's always more. The expectations you put on yourself and the judgmental stares from other people never go away. Now you look at this list in a different way. It feels more like God has enslaved you again. He's making life way too difficult for you. So why should I have to do this? It's no longer doing what you want it to—making yourself feel better about you and your life—so who says I should live this way?

Remember who is speaking these words. God says it himself: he is a jealous God. Not jealous as in the self-centered human way of thinking. But he's jealous in that he will not share his glory and honor with anyone or anything. For the Lord, being jealous is a determined enthusiasm and zeal for righteousness and holiness. It's not petty jealousy where he is suffering from lack of attention given to rivals. He has none. It's the simple fact that nothing and no one is above him, whether in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. And God warns, **"I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me"** (v.5).

God is not punishing the children for the sins of the parents. Each is individually accountable for their actions. At the same time, this is a warning: when you do not live according to God's will, it doesn't only affect you. The generations that follow tend to follow in the sins of their ancestors. Children tend to follow the example of mom and dad. So the children will be punished for the same sins as the parents because they learned from mom and dad *that* sin wasn't that bad and so they do not turn from it. *That* sin you cover up with *this* excuse and don't really repent from it. You can stay in *that* sin and God will ignore it as long as you are a pretty good person. But if you are still in our sins, then you are lost.

So, think about those commandments. Think about your life. What you do, how you act, how you treat God's Law directly affects other people's relationships with God. What does your life tell your coworker about having a relationship with God? Your spouse? Your friends? Parents, what are you teaching your children by how you are living and the decisions you make? What message are you impressing and implanting into their minds not only with what you are doing but also not doing? It doesn't just affect you. We are responsible for our own actions. At the

same time, how you treat God's message directly affects other people; especially your children and your grandchildren.

God is serious. There's no middle ground. Either someone loves God and will follow his commands or hates him and uses God's Word the way they want. He doesn't ignore that. He punishes it.

So now go back to the list and we see this isn't something that we can twist and turn to our own agenda's. This is God's Word. And in that clear mirror of the law we see how in the flesh we do not submit to God's Law. By nature, we cannot fulfill this Law to please God and stay in a relationship with him. In fact, by nature, neither can we nor want to. God does not give us this list to see that we have something that we can accomplish. This is not a way for you to earn some good credit with God. These aren't instructions for how to become God's people. No, the Law can never accomplish that for you. The Law will always drive us to despair because we cannot do enough, "How could God ever forgive me!" Or, it will lead to defiance, "God, you can't tell me what to do!"

And God knows this. So He sends one with zeal for the Lord's house and the Lord's will consumes him. It burns in him so much that he's flipping tables, tossing money, and making whips to uphold God's will. There's Jesus, with whom God is well-pleased, who takes the place of those who by nature hate God. He lives perfectly in that relationship with God because he knows the Law is good. It's not a burden for him. Oh, the temptation was great. Like us he felt those chains of sin try to enslave him. But he would not fall. He goes to the cross the sinless Son of God in a perfect relationship with God only to throw it all away for you. He who had no sin, becomes sin for us. And so God must punish his own Son, because that's what a jealous just God must do with sin. It cannot be ignored. It must be paid for in full. And in Jesus it is. Jesus says himself: "It is finished. This temple, my body was destroyed in death and three days later the tomb is empty. I live. The punishment I receive gives you peace with God. You are no longer God's enemy. You are His blood-bought child. He's going to give you his mercy and love! He will not punish you as sins deserve. You are forgiven."

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for you brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus. Heaven is yours! You have been freed from sin not to go back into it. Repent, confess your sin, and turn to live the life Jesus won for you. You have been set free for service to your neighbor. You have been set free to live in this relationship with God. Now we can see this list as it is meant to be. It shows us daily that we are sinners and our daily need for a Savior. Then there is the Gospel of a God who has set you free from slavery in His Son Jesus. Now we are free to really live because the work is finished. You are already in God's good graces. He's removed the need to try and impress or earn God's favor. It's already yours. You've been set free for your neighbor so they too might come to know Jesus' work for them. How do we do that? Here's a list to guide you along the way. You are now free to live. Amen.