

“The Law Is Good”

Exodus 20: 1-17, Lent 3-B March 4, 2018

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Savior, Christ Jesus.

We’re living in a time when the Word of God is not in favor with many in the world, our country, and even our community. The authority of Scripture is being attacked on many sides. It’s not unusual to see television shows and social media postings belittling God’s Word and those who trust in Him. Yet, we turn to the inspired Word of God delivered to us by prophets, apostles, and evangelists.

Today’s Old Testament lesson begins with the children of Israel gathered around Mount Sinai. God had descended upon the mountain in fire. The mountain trembled, and God called Moses to come and meet with Him. God gave him the words that we heard in today’s lesson: ***“And God spoke all these words, saying, ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me’”*** (vv 1–3).

God cared for His people. He had a deep desire to protect them from things hurtful to soul and body. Therefore, He gave the Ten Commandments to guide them as His people within this covenant. They would live as His people, and He would bless them. In each of the first three commandments, God spoke of the people’s relationship with Himself. Commandments 4–10 would govern their relationship with their fellow man. The Commandments were summarized later by Moses, ***“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might”*** (Deut 6:5). We recall that Jesus, in addition to this summary, also referred to Leviticus 19:18, ***“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*** This moral Law, as well as the ceremonial law, would guide the Israelites as they entered the new land that God was giving them. Certainly,

God Gave the Law for the Good of His People.

In His mercy, God had brought His chosen people out of their many years of slavery and was bringing them to a good land where they could live and prosper as His own. As they traveled, God was establishing a new relationship with them. Gathered at Sinai, in His mercy He came to them and said, ***““You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom***

of priests and a holy nation.” These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.’ So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do.’ And Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord” (Ex 19:4–8).

The Law had a role in their lives. God wanted them to turn away from the things that were worshiped by the people they would encounter in their new communities. As He gave the Law, God declared that He was a “jealous God.” That may sound strange to us, but it meant that God wanted His people solely for Himself. There are no other true gods. Anything else was an invention by man guided by Satan. The triune God is the sole being Who could rescue them from sin; so He urged them:

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments” (vv 4–6).

Worshiping other created beings and images would sever the covenant relationship that God had established and would cause their loss. God aimed to shield His children from this sinful environment. He established the moral law as a curb or, if you would, a wall—a restraint to hold back the influence of Satan and the world so that outward discipline might be maintained against the wild, disobedient people they would encounter.

Like the children of Israel, we know it’s wrong to hurt or harm our neighbor in his body. We know we should befriend those in need. We know we should respect our parents, elders, and those placed over us as authorities. We know we ought not take our neighbor’s property; rather we ought to help him improve and protect his property.

This knowledge of the Law did not prevent the Israelites from sinning against God. Soon after they received the Law, they fell into sin again. They disobeyed God’s will for them. His Law condemned them! They were in the same condition as the rest of the world: sinful from the time of conception.

What does the Word of God’s Law say to us? The Law accuses! It condemns.

We've broken all the Commandments repeatedly! The Law serves as a mirror to show us what we look like and it isn't pretty! Try as hard as we might, we can't fulfill the Law's righteous demands. We can't satisfy it; we can't make payment for our sins. Only God can make it right, as we confess, "In this life we cannot satisfy the Law, because the sinful nature does not stop bringing forth «evil inclination and desire», even though the Spirit in us resists them" (Ap V 25).

Parents want to keep their children safe because they love them. To help their children stay safe and avoid danger, parents set down rules such as: "Don't touch the stove, you'll get burned." "Don't play with fire." "Look both ways before you cross the street." "Wear your helmet when you ride your bike." "Buckle your seat belt." "Don't text while you're driving." Our heavenly Father also loves us as his children and wants us to be safe. God knows that sin is all around us. He knows that temptations are everywhere. God gave the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:1–17) to guide us and keep us safe in our relationship with him and our fellow man.

Children often don't follow each of the rules their loving parents have established. We, too, don't follow every rule God has given us in the Ten Commandments. Our sinful nature makes it impossible to do so.

St. Paul writes: **"For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me"** (Rom 7:18–20). There's no doubt about it; we're sinful. The Law of God tells us what we should do, how we can please God and care for our fellow man, but the sin in us rises up and does the evil! We're in a mess! The Law declares us sinners, sinners who are powerless to save ourselves from the just penalty of the Law. Or, as Jesus said, "There is only one who is good" (Mt 19:17). We need help!

Without Christ, there is no hope!

We are powerless to do what's right. Instead, we follow Satan's temptation and fall again into sin. But this doesn't have to be because Jesus Christ, God's one and only Son, came and took our place. He obeyed the Law for us and took its punishment. St. Paul declares this: **"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law,**

weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom 8:1–4). By the gift of faith (from the Holy Spirit, Eph 2:4–8) we believe in Christ and perceive His gifts. In Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are strengthened in our desire to obey the Law . . . and we should strive to obey it.

The Law was not abolished by Christ. It has an ongoing relevance in the world. Jesus said, **“until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished”** (Mt 5:18). The Law still applies; the Law still has power to curb our lusts to sin. It still has power to accuse our guilty consciences; **“if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin”** (Rom 7:7).

The Law also has the power to teach those who are born of water and the Spirit, that is those who desire to follow the Lord’s precepts; it has the power to teach us godliness. As St. Paul said to Timothy, it provides a **“training in righteousness”** (2 Tim 3:16) in the kinds of works that are called good.

For us Christians, the Law no longer condemns, for Christ came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. Christ has kept the Ten Commandments for us, and we get the credit. Christ has suffered the penalty of death and damnation for us, for our not keeping the Ten Commandments, and again we get the credit. And Christ enables us, with the power of the Holy Spirit, to begin to keep the Ten Commandments, not to be saved, but because we are saved. He has fulfilled all righteousness for us.

In Christ and by the Spirit, we want to live God-pleasing lives, as Paul writes: **“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them”** (Eph 2:10).

Because of Christ, we walk in God’s commands, and He rejoices over us. He deals with us in mercy, showing His steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love Him and keep His commandments. AMEN.

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Original manuscript by The Reverend Thomas P. Zimmerman