

Commandments for Harmony

Exodus 20:1-7

Many of you have probably heard in the news that the country of Greece is struggling financially in ways that make our recession look like nothing. The Greek government is on the verge of bankruptcy and has been seeking a financial bailout from the European Union and the International Monetary Fund.

There are various explanations as to why the Greek government is in this situation. What you hear most of the time from the commercial media here is that the Greek government is in debt because the Greek people are lazy, that they retire in their fifties and live off of the government dole.

While the pension benefits from Greece's version of Social Security do figure into the problem, the biggest factor which has drawn the government into bankruptcy is that the Greek government had to bail out its failing banks, just as we bailed out our banks, to avoid a complete financial collapse.

While our country had the financial strength to weather that kind of a blow, Greece did not. They had to borrow the money to bail out their banks, just like we did. They did so by offering government bonds, which is what we also do. It's essentially borrowing money from investors and agreeing to pay it back with interest.

But they have had a hard time paying those bonds because the Greek economy has suffered so much in this process. Now investors are worried that the Greek government won't be able to pay back those bonds.

The government has asked for a financial bailout to try and pay back the bonds while they wait to get their economy started again. The current package being considered is almost \$150 billion. That kind of money would relieve a lot of pressure being put on the Greek people right now.

But they won't see any of that money unless the Greek government agrees to abide by certain rules. Those rules have not been made public yet, but certain conditions have leaked out. First, investors who hold Greek bonds will take a 20 percent loss on their investment.

That may sound harsh, but most economists thought they'd have to take a 50% loss in order to make those bonds viable. This affects you and me because some of those investors are American banks who are trying to invest our funds to make more money for us.

That's why Wall St. took a plunge when it looked like this deal wasn't going to go through. Secondly, the government passed a property tax bill, which was imposed on top of earlier deep cuts in government spending.

They will also lay off 20% of government employees, reduce the remaining public employee salaries by 20%, and reduce pensions by a total of 14%. This kind of belt tightening is the price of getting the bailout.

These are the rules they will have to follow after being saved from disaster by neighboring nations. This situation illustrates a situation that has occurred countless times in history: a group of people find themselves in an oppressive situation, they are saved by another group of people, and then the group who saves them imposes rules on them as part of the deal.

Sometimes those rules serve to enrich the people who saved them. Other times those rules are simply meant to keep that group of people from falling into another disastrous situation.

That's the kind of situation we have when we look at the text of the Ten Commandments. These commandments are part of a list of rules imposed on the people of Israel by their God.

The total number of commandments they were required to follow was somewhere in the area of 613. These are ten of them, but they form a core of all the commandments. In some ways they are a summary of all the commandments, although there many other issues that are dealt with by other laws.

But these laws didn't just drop out of heaven one day. Moses didn't just stumble upon them as he was going to the gas station. God gives these law to Moses after God had led the people of Israel out of the horrible, dehumanizing experience of slavery in Egypt.

They were unable to leave Egypt on their own. God empowered Moses to stand up to the Pharaoh, and God enabled the Israelites to move out despite being pursued furiously by the Egyptian army.

After God saved them from that terrible suffering, God led them to a mountain in a Sinai Peninsula called Mt. Sinai. God commanded Moses to go to the top of the mountain, and God descended from heaven to meet Moses at the mountaintop.

The result of that mountaintop experience between Moses and God is this list of laws that they people most follow now that they have been saved. It's like the conditions of God's bailout of Israel.

As you read some of these laws, one thing that you might notice is that most of them don't seem all that unique. These kinds of laws are pretty common everywhere in the world.

Every country in the world outlaws murder. In some places those laws may not be equally enforced. And there are certainly a number of legal questions about what actually constitutes murder. But everyone thinks murder is wrong. Everyone punishes murderers severely, at least in theory.

Every society in the world considers it wrong to cheat on your spouse. Some societies may not punish it by law. Some societies may not think of it as such a big deal. But everyone pretty much agrees that it's wrong.

Every society thinks it's wrong to steal. They may look down on some forms of stealing more than others. But stealing is universally thought of as wrong.

The same thing goes for honoring one's elders. Every culture teaches that younger folks should show honor and respect for their elders. It may not look like it sometimes, given the kinds of cuts being proposed for Medicare and Social Security. But elders are universally respected around the globe.

My point is that most of these Ten Commandments are not all that unique. But what makes them unique for us is that they are rooted in the experience of Israel being saved by God from slavery.

In other words, after God saves this nation, God gives them a set of laws to help them live with each other and live in relationship with the God who gave them the proverbial bailout, the God who saved their necks.

So this isn't a set of burdens that are imposed on people by a God who doesn't want to see anyone have any fun. I think that's one of the misconceptions we have about God's laws.

We have a tendency to forget that these laws are given by God to help people live well after being saved from disaster. They are a gift from God, even the ones which sound pretty straightforward. They remind us of the kind of relationship we have with God.

Part of the reason why we tend to forget this is because unlike the Jewish people, we Christians do not read these as laws to be followed. While they are God's laws given to God's people in the Old Testament, some New Testament authors say that the death of Jesus has changed our relationship with God as it relates to these laws.

Jesus' followers did not all agree on whether or not Christians should think of these commandments that we know so well as law. **Slide.** I know this can be kind of confusing, so I want you to see how the NT authors dealt with this question.

In Matthew Jesus says that his followers should follow every single letter of the law. So in Matthew these are regarded as commandments that every Christian should follow. So, for example, if we were looking at things like this today, we Christians would have observed Rosh Hashanah, this week, the Jewish New Year festival.

God commands us to observe that festival just like God requires us to observe the Sabbath and honor our father and mother. But we didn't do that. We didn't follow the law. We skipped Rosh Hashanah.

So why didn't we celebrate Rosh Hashanah if it's a commandment of God? We didn't because in other books Jesus' followers seem to tell us something different. **Slide.** In Ephesians the author tells us that God thought the world was too divided between Jew and gentile.

God's salvation is for the entire world, not just for the Jewish people. And God thought that the thing which seemed to get in between the Jews and the gentiles was the law, which, of course, God gave us in the first place.

So in sending Jesus to die, God decided to get rid of the law. And in doing so, God no longer sees the world in terms of Jews and gentiles, but as one people who God wants to save through Jesus.

Jim Clark

The book of Hebrews says something similar. It says that when Jesus came and died he was taken up to heaven. And when that happened God abolished the agreement that God had made with Moses and with Israel, the one we read about this morning.

Hebrews says that God made a new agreement with the world through Jesus. And the laws we read this morning aren't any part of that agreement. In fact the author of Hebrews is trying to keep his readers from going back and following those laws again.

So then the next question that has to be on everyone's minds is this: If the New Testament tells us that God abolished these laws that God gave to Moses, why are we bothering to read them and talk about them on Sunday morning?

And if we don't have these laws anymore, if they don't show us the difference between right and wrong, how do we know right from wrong? Again, the New Testament has more than one way to answer those questions.

Slide. In Galatians 5 and in other places, Paul says that those who have faith in Jesus will receive his Spirit, and his Spirit will lead us to do what is right. That's how we'll know right from wrong if we don't follow the commandments.

Slide. In Ephesians the author says that he has received a special set of revelations from the risen Christ, which he passed on to people. Those revelations aren't spelled out for us, but it sounds as though God uses the church to teach people right from wrong now that we don't rely on commandments to show us the difference.

Slide. In the Gospel of John, Jesus himself seems to replace the law with his special teaching, which only he can give because he is God's divine son. In chapter 3 Jesus speaks to someone who is an expert in the laws that God gave to Moses. Look at what he says.

All these passages say the same kind of thing, they just say it a little differently: God's greatest revelation of God's self to us prior to Jesus, the law given to Moses, has been replaced with a new revelation in Jesus.

Jesus not only died to save us, but he made it possible for us to have greater access to God's knowledge, knowledge that wasn't accessible before. Whether it's through the Holy Spirit or through the things we learn here at church, what God has shown us about right and wrong through the person of Jesus is greater than the commandments God gave to Moses.

If that's the case, then when we read the Ten Commandments, or any other commandments, we have to hear them differently in the light of Jesus. I remember being at a clergy meeting one time with pastors from other kinds of churches when this question came up.

One pastor said that in the church he serves they consider the Ten Commandments to be commandments, not the Ten Suggestions. I decided against asking him what he does with the passages that say God abolished those commandments.

But is there a way to read these commandments as being part of scripture without hearing them as commandments? I think there is. If we take Jesus and other voices in the New Testament seriously, then the most important of these commandments are the commandments to love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

That's what the Ten Commandments really help us to understand – how to do that. So when you're tempted to steal something that isn't yours, you don't avoid that temptation because God has put a law in place that forbids it.

You resist the urge to steal because doing so would not be loving your neighbor as yourself. You would want someone to love you enough not steal from you, and stealing would show a complete disregard for someone else.

When you're tempted to cheat on your spouse, you don't resist that urge because God has commanded you not to cheat. You resist because cheating would show a complete lack of regard for your spouse, and you wouldn't want him or her to treat you with that same lack of respect.

When it's Sunday morning and you're tired and you don't feel like fighting with the kids to get to church on time, you don't get up and get going anyway just because God demands that you do so.

You get going because you want to show God the same respect that God showed you in sending Jesus to save us, to bail us out, to lead us out of the kind of life we might have chosen to live had we not been shown so much grace.

I want to conclude with a story by Rev. Dr. John Buchanan, a former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church USA and the publisher of a magazine called *The Christian Century*. Dr. Buchanan says:

“The best lesson I ever learned in keeping a Sabbath was taught, not by a professor or a spiritual leader, but, of all things, by a foreman in the Inland Steel plant in East Chicago. His name was Mike Paddock, of Eastern European extraction, about 5'4”.

Mike's wife, Edna, was the treasurer of the tiny congregation I was serving at the time as a student minister. Mike also raised chickens and kept a huge garden. He was the head usher of the little church. If truth be told, the only usher on most Sundays.

Edna wrote my salary check twice a month and Mike would deliver it, along with two dozen eggs or so, a shopping bag full of tomatoes and honey dew melons, and sometimes a loaf or two of bread he picked up at the store on the way into town.

Mike and Edna had no children. We were it for them, I guess, and our children became their surrogate grandchildren. I recall the occasion, around Christmas one time, when in addition to the eggs and melons and bread and salary check, Mike awkwardly brought out two tiny dresses he had stopped to purchase at the little shop in town for our children

Mike's "Sabbath Keeping Seminar," I recall, occurred one time on a Saturday morning when he saw my car at the church and stopped to deliver the check and eggs and melons. His opening was typically straight, simple, blunt and absolutely relevant. "What are you doing here on Saturday morning?"

"Well, Mr. Paddock," I stammered, "I'm here being available to the congregation. I'm pretty much gone all week, at school every day, so Saturday I'm here in case anyone needs me."

"Let me tell you something," Mike said. "Nobody needs you today. If they do they'll call you. Nobody wants to see you today. They're busy. They'll see you plenty tomorrow. So go home: cut your grass, wash your car, play with your little girls. Get outa here."

Mike knew his pastor was failing to keep his Sabbath, and in doing so was failing to be there for his kids. John was neglecting to give God due respect by setting a time to rest and reflect on what God was doing in his life. In doing so, he seemed to be forgetting the fact that God had saved him, forgetting that his life was to be lived in view of that fact.

The Ten Commandments help us to understand what it means to love God and love one another. They are not suggestions, but they are not commandments to us either. They help us define what we mean when we go around telling people that our God is loving and just.

We may struggle to keep them. But they are not the object of the game for us as Christians. They help us to love God and love others. And those are the greatest two commandments of all.