

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 4 OCTOBER 2020

No 29

Prepared by Alan Harper

1 Being ready for worship

Today we continue our journey through Exodus. We encounter the Ten Commandments, and are invited to think about how they relate to the life of freedom which has been granted to us by God's grace, through Jesus Christ. It is good to revisit things that we think we've known all of our lives, and look at them with fresh eyes. So be still and recall that you are always in the presence of God, and when you are prepared to come before God in prayer, begin.

2 Prayer of Adoration

When we think about the Ten Commandments, we are reminded of the great majesty of God. This was well brought out in the memorable scenes of the film The Ten Commandments with Charlton Heston as Moses coming down from the mountain. Jesus, of course, taught us to address God as "Father", endowing us with the precious gift of intimacy, but – as the saying goes – familiarity can breed I have heard too many young youth workers addressing God in prayer as if he were their drinking mate. Sometimes it is good to be reminded of the grandeur, the power and the majesty of the God who permits us to call him our Father.

So a familiar hymn comes to mind. Rev Dr Walter Chalmers Smith (1824-1908) was a minister of the Free Church of Scotland. Son of a cabinet maker, he was raised in Aberdeen, then trained for the ministry at the University of Aberdeen followed by New College Edinburgh. He was ordained in 1850, and served at several locations in Scotland, as well as for a time at the Free Scots Church in London. In 1893/4, just prior to retirement, he served as the Moderator of the General Assembly. He was a hymnist, author and poet, a true man of letters upon whom were bestowed two honorary doctorates, one in Divinity (D.D.) and one in Law (LL.D.).

Smith wrote many hymns, but only one, Immortal, Invisible, God only wise is in common use today, although a Google search revealed that one of his books of hymns, Hymns of Christ and the Christian Life, can still be obtained, at least second-hand (but clearly not the original 1867 edition!). Immortal, Invisible, God only wise is a powerful hymn set to a Welsh melody, bespeaking the wonder of God. It is a most appropriate prayer of praise.¹

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, thy great Name we praise.

Unresting, unchanging, and silent as light,
Nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might;
Thy justice like mountains high soaring above
Thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all life thou givest—to both great and small;
In all life thou livest, the true life of all;
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
And wither and perish—but nought changeth thee.

1

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Chalmers_Smith#:~:text=Rev%20Dr%20Walter%20Chalmers%20Smith,the%20Free%20Church%20of%20Scotland. Accessed 22 September 2020; William J Petersen and Ardythe Petersen, *The Complete Book of Hymns. Inspiring stories about 500 hymns and praise songs* (Carol Stream, 2006), p. 381.

Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
Thine angels adore Thee, all veiling their sight;
But of all Thy rich graces this grace, Lord, impart
Take the veil from our faces, the vile from our heart.

All laud we would render; O help us to see
'Tis only the splendour of light hideth Thee,
And so let Thy glory, Almighty, impart,
Through Christ in His story, Thy Christ to the heart.²

Amen

3 **Prayer of Confession**

You may find this prayer helpful, or choose to pray your own more personal prayer, or to pray a combination of each. God is always ready to hear our confession.

Holy and gracious father,
in our deep moments,
in our silences,
in our darknesses,
in our lone times,
we know who we are.
We have sinned, and remain in our sinful ways.
For the hurts we have knowingly inflicted,
have mercy on us.
For the pain occasioned by our carelessness and inattention
have mercy on us.
For our paucity of love, but abundance of hatred,
have mercy on us.
For our self-centredness and self-importance,
have mercy on us.
For our willingness to turn a blind eye to evil,
have mercy on us.
For our neglect of our relationships,
have mercy on us.
For our failure to love you with our whole heart,
have mercy on us.
Forgive us our sins,
and grant us the grace to forgive those who sin against us.
For we ask it in the name of Jesus, who died for us.
Amen.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

God is a God of mercy; his grace is for all.
God's forgiveness knows no bounds.
God so loved the world that he sent his only Son,
that whoever believed in him might not perish, but have eternal life.
This Jesus died for us; he rose for us; and he pleads for us.
The gospel is this, that in the risen Christ, our sins are forgiven.

² Original words from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immortal,_Invisible,_God_Only_Wise accessed 22 September 2020. Most hymnals now print only five verses; *Together in Song* (number 143) gives all five verses but in modernised English.

5 Selected Lectionary Reading

Exodus 20:1-20 (Lectionary is only 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20)

The other Lectionary Readings

Psalm 19

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

6 Bible Reflection –

See below

7 Prayers for the world and Lord's Prayer

It is always good to pray for our local communities. For the recipients of these notes, there will be many, many such communities which, in all their diversity, nevertheless have in common the fact that they are the day-to-day centres of their citizens' lives. We depend on local councils for all kinds of services, and on local institutions for much of our social and community lives. One recipient of these notes is a local mayor, who will feel this perhaps more deeply than most of us, and is one of the self-sacrificing men and women who give generously to their communities, to the benefit of us all.

God our Father,

We bring before you today the communities in which we live.

We pray for all those who serve our communities in roles of leadership.

So we pray for local government councillors and for the mayors who lead them.

We recognise the many hours they invest in their work,

primarily for the satisfaction of serving others and improving community life.

Give them wisdom, resilience, perseverance and integrity.

We pray too for Indigenous leaders,

whose role can sometimes be very challenging,

and yet who represent an ageless people

whose societies predate modern communities by millennia.

Bless their work, we pray.

We pray for those who give their time to all forms of community service –

in service clubs such as Lions, Rotary and Apex,

through the works sponsored by churches,

through youth groups, sports clubs, meals on wheels, community transport,

through visiting the aged, the ill and the shut-in.

Be with all people who give their time and skills for the benefit of others.

We pray also for our local institutions.

We pray for our preschools, schools, colleges and universities;

for libraries, community theatres, clubs, churches and local charities.

May they be a blessing to our communities,

and may those who manage and work in them know the great benefit they bestow on all of us.

We pray for those who look after our health in our communities –

for ambulance paramedics, hospital staff, nurses, doctors, midwives,

physiotherapists and dentists and optometrists and home caregivers.

Bless their work.

May they be well supported by all of us,

and know how we value the great benefit they give us.

We pray for our local businesses,

so many of which have suffered because of drought, bushfires and now the pandemic.

May the times ahead be prosperous for their owners,

who have so often invested their lives and their life savings in these enterprises.

Every time a business closes, Father,
we are reminded of just how important our local businesses are to our communities.
So we ask your blessing upon them.
Finally, we pray for the many in our communities who keep us safe,
either as professionals or as volunteers.
We pray for police, for fire fighters and bushfire volunteers,
for rescue crews and other first responders,
who labour on in all conditions,
and often meet life at it most raw.
May they be encouraged, and may we appreciate all they do,
often courageously and at great personal risk.
Father, we bring our communities before you,
and pray that they may thrive,
and that they may be cohesive, vibrant and safe places to live,
in which individuals are supported,
but the good of the whole community is at the heart of our life together.

We conclude our prayer with the prayer that Jesus taught us to say:
Our father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come;
Your will be done
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil,
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen

8 **Conclusion**

Recall the words of Paul (Romans 8:38-39), which we read recently:
*I am convinced that neither death nor life,
neither angels nor demons,
neither the present of the future,
nor any powers,
neither height nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God
that is in Christ Jesus.*
So we finish with the assurance that the love of almighty God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be with us, and will remain with us always.
Amen.

BIBLE REFLECTION

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Everyone knows about the Ten Commandments. Or at least most people think they do. The Commandments have been credited with being the basis of Western civilisation, with being the bedrock of all our laws, with being the supreme moral compass of our society. These are big claims indeed, but, were you to ask the promoters of such ideas, many would struggle to be able to tell you what all ten of the commandments actually said.

Yet despite that, the Ten Commandments can be a highly emotive issue. In the late 1990s, an Alabama judge by the name of Roy Moore had the Ten Commandments carved in wood, and placed the carving prominently behind the bench in his courtroom. Later he became Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, and commissioned a stonemason to carve the Commandments into a block of granite, which was then installed in the court's rotunda. His actions led to several years of legal disputes which reached the US Supreme Court and saw Moore removed from office. Nevertheless many Christian organisations lined up behind Moore, while the American Civil Liberties Union and other champions of the constitutional separation of religion and state opposed his actions. It became quite a *cause celebre*, and Moore became a hero of the religious Right in America, although his career ended ignominiously with two election defeats and a number of serious allegations of professional and personal misconduct³. Thousands of years after their advent, the Ten Commandments can still generate deep controversy and emotion, although once again, it is doubtful whether some of Moore's proponents could actually have recalled all ten of the commandments.

Interestingly, Moore – probably unbeknown to himself – sought to enshrine his Protestant version of the Ten Commandments in his wooden, then granite, representations of them. Both the Jewish and the Catholic tradition have slightly different versions – *not*, I hasten to add, different in wording, but different in how the commands are actually numbered. For example, the words “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,” are regarded by Protestants as a kind of prologue to the actual commandments, whereas for Jewish people, this *is* the first commandment⁴.

It is also important to recognise that the Old Testament gives two complete versions of the Ten Commandments, one in today's reading from Exodus 20, and one in Deuteronomy 5:6-21. While the two versions are essentially the same in principle, there are significant differences. For example, in Exodus the rationale for observing the Sabbath is “For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it”; whereas in Deuteronomy the Sabbath is a commemoration of God's act in liberating the Jewish slaves from bondage in Egypt (5:15). In Deuteronomy, the prohibition of coveting one's neighbour's house extends also to his lands (Deuteronomy 5:21).

So, despite Justice Moore's attempts to do otherwise, the Ten Commandments are not completely “set in stone”..

Let's be clear: the Ten Commandments are indeed quite pivotal in the Old Testament and in the formation of the people of Israel. But serious contemplation of them will not be aided by hyperbolic claims or by politicisation of them. Today offers us the opportunity to think anew about the Ten Commandments and to try to reach an understanding of why, and in what way, they are important.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roy_Moore accessed 21 September 2020.

⁴ *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, 2000), s.v. “Ten Commandments”; Eric M Meyers and John Rogerson, “The world of Israel's ancestors,” in Bruce Chilton (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 92.

In the Exodus story, there is no suggestion that the people of Israel were without any law prior to the giving of the Ten Commandments. For example, in the account of the manna we looked at a couple of weeks ago, there is very specific reference to the keeping of the Sabbath (Exodus 16:23-6). In chapter 18, which the Lectionary omitted, we find Moses sitting all day long, deciding disputes between Israelites, making known to them “the statutes and instructions of God” (18:16). At the urging of his father-in-law, Jethro, Moses appoints judges to decide lesser cases so as to lessen his own load. This account makes two important points: first that there was a knowledge of God’s laws, and second that the law was not written down, but was held in Moses’ head.

Codification, or the writing down, of laws, has been a vital step in the progress of any society. As long as knowledge of the law is the sole preserve of one person, or a group of people, then those people hold unassailable power over those who are the subjects of the laws. If someone from that élite says you have broken a law, you can have no defence because you don’t know precisely what the law is. Only they know the law, and it can be administered at their whim. In the history of the ancient Near East, there were a number of law codes formulated to address this problem, and texts for a number of them have survived. By no means the earliest, but certainly the most famous (after the Ten Commandments anyway) is the law code of Hammurabi, a Babylonian king of the eighteenth century BC. Hammurabi claimed that the law code had been given to him by the Babylonian god of justice, Shamash. The code covered what we would now term civil, criminal and administrative law⁵. I have a very fond memory of standing in the Louvre in Paris, staring at the stele which enshrined one of the extant copies of Hammurabi’s law code, unable to read the cuneiform script, but aware that I was looking at one of the great documents of human civilisation. On the basis of written law like the code of Hammurabi rests our modern concept of the rule of law. The *law itself*, not the person who administers it, sets the standard and is the sole criterion for judgment.

In the Exodus account, the inscribing in stone of the Ten Commandments marked the signal moment in which the laws which had only been known to Moses and his trusted judges were codified and became the common property, and the common standard, of the whole community. It would be hard to overstate the importance of that development in the formation of the nation of Israel.

However there is a very significant difference between the other ancient Near Eastern law codes and the Ten Commandments. In every other law code, the provisions work to a formula. “If someone does such and such, then the punishment will be so and so.” For example, the sixth listed law from Hammurabi’s code (which was rather fond of capital punishment) provides, “If any one steal the property of a temple or of the court, he shall be put to death, and also the one who receives the stolen thing from him shall be put to death.”⁶ In the Books of the Law in the Old Testament, there are plenty of laws just like that⁷. But what makes the Ten Commandments unique is that they do *not* conform to that formula at all. They state clear and broad principles, and prescribe no punishments for non-compliance. Indeed the commandment to honour one’s parents comes with a promise, that compliance will be rewarded: “so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you” (20:12).⁸ This tells us that we are dealing here with a very different law code. As should the fact that, according to the biblical account, *only* the Ten Commandments were delivered directly by God to the people (20:1). All the many other laws were given using Moses as God’s medium, because the people were frightened that, if God spoke directly to them

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hammurabi> accessed 21 September 2020; Jean Bottéro *et al.*, *The Near East: the early civilizations*, RF Tannenbaum, trans. (New York, 1967), pp. 217ff.

⁶ A copy of the code in English translation can be found at <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/ancient/hamframe.asp> accessed 21 September 2020.

⁷ *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, *loc. cit.* Just as one famous example, see Leviticus 20:13.

⁸ Paul made particular reference to the promise in Ephesians 6:2.

again, they would die⁹.

So what does this unique code of laws require of the people of Israel? Commentators deal with the commandments in different ways, but I prefer to see them in three groups. The first is about a right relationship with God; the second (one commandment only) is about life's priorities; and the third is about respectful communal living. Let's take them one at a time.

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.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

So much could be (and has been) written about this set of commands. Here we can only make a few points. The first and most important is that God comes to this community, not as its overlord or its master, but as its liberator. It was God who had freed them from their slavery in Egypt. Their new life of freedom, and the new nation which they were forming, were the gifts of the liberating God. And the words are addressed directly to the people in the second person – “you”. That language bespeaks a deeply personal relationship between God and his people.

God's proclamation that he is a “jealous” God might be troubling were it to be equated with the dangers of human jealousy, but God's “jealousy” is directly related to the prohibition on worshipping other “gods” or objects. God is the only true god; no object invested with religious significance can ever truly be a god; and no other object of devotion – such as prosperity or power for example – is worthy of our worship. God's “jealousy” then is actually a call for purity and truth in worship. The prophet Micah said very succinctly that a correct relationship was to “walk humbly before your God” (Micah 6:8). This group of commandments are about getting a correct perspective on life. If our energies and our devotion are centred on the liberating God, then our lives are in order, but when we succumb to the allure of false gods of any type, things go badly awry. The modern world's ruthless pursuit of material wealth is a contemporary example. It has led to an impoverished culture of materialism, to huge disparities of wealth both within and between nations, to the profligate exploitation of resources and to devastating environmental degradation. God's jealousy is a clarion call that we are on the wrong pathway and worshipping the wrong god!

The second section in the commandments is the commandment about the Sabbath.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

It is hard for us to appreciate the fundamental significance of this provision. We are so used to thinking in weeks of seven days that we assume that it is part of the natural order. But that is certainly not the case. The weekly cycle of seven days is our direct inheritance from the Jews. It was unknown in other ancient civilisations, and it stood in stark contrast with what the Israelites had

⁹ See Exodus 20:18-19, 22.

experienced in Egypt. There, as slaves, they had toiled every day. The significance of the Sabbath command is enormous. First, it is a regular gift reflecting God's liberation of his people. They were no longer slaves, required to work day after day. They were free people, able to take the time for rest and be in charge of their own work. Second, it symbolises priorities. If material gain and the generation of wealth were to be at the heart of the community's values, then there could be no place for a regular day's rest. But that was not to be the case. The quality of people's lives mattered far more than the extra that might be gained from relentless work. Life was to be balanced. Third, the gift of the Sabbath extended not just to the Israelites, but to their children, their slaves, their animals and to resident aliens. The Israelites – while still owning slaves, granted – were not to become the ruthless masters that they had experienced themselves in Egypt. And fourth, observing the Sabbath embodied faith that God would continue to provide; that provision for the community was not dependent on human labour, but on the gifts of God, which would continue to flow even when labour regularly ceased.

In our own frantically busy, 24/7 society, there is much here that we would do well to heed.

The third group of commandments are the ones that most people can remember, or at least can recall some of. The characterisation of the Ten Commandments as a set of "Thou shalt not"s (to use the language of the King James Bible) is based on these prohibitions, although the first is a positive injunction, not a prohibition.

Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

I recall a school chaplain telling me once that he'd asked students what the world would be like if everyone obeyed the Ten Commandments. The prevailing answer he received was that it would be "boring". Perhaps it was just the provocative voice of youth talking, because I personally find it hard to imagine why anyone would encourage any of the forbidden behaviours. No civil society can exist if murder, theft or lying about others are condoned. While marriages can and so survive infidelity, the wound it inflicts on the underlying trust in the relationship can be very profound. It is sage and prudent that these matters be named and forbidden in a document such as the Ten Commandments as they sought to establish the basis for a good community.

The prohibition of covetousness is sometimes misunderstood as the outlawing of ambition. However the concern here is not the kind of hope which would inspire someone to work hard to build a more comfortable life for themselves, their family and their community. Covetousness is where the desire for something possessed by someone else becomes a driving force, distorting behaviour and dominating thinking. In other words, covetousness is an obsession with gaining what is not one's own. Not only is that unhealthy, because it distorts values and priorities; but covetousness turns the object of desire into a kind of idol, which is then worshiped by devoting thinking, energy and resources to its acquisition. Covetousness prejudices one's relationship with the "neighbour" who owns the object of desire, and may lead to cheating, theft or worse. Clearly that is not healthy behaviour either for the individual or the community.

So what do we have in the Ten Commandments? I want to conclude by pointing out two things that are frequently missed in polemic about "God's Law".

First, let's recall that these commandments do not exhibit the usual formula, "If someone does such and such, the punishment will be so and so". This is far from a law code of the usual, judicial kind. Indeed some of the commandments, in a judicial sense, are unenforceable. How do you even know that someone is coveting, for example, unless they actually do harm to their neighbour to fulfil their desire? And no punishments are prescribed. This is not a set of threats; the commandments are not about law and punishment. The Ten Commandments are a set of principles for living for the new nation that is forming under God. They are about having a right perspective – having the liberating and merciful God at the centre of the community's values and understanding. The Sabbath command says that the quality of human life is more important than materialism and endless striving for wealth, that God's faithfulness can be trusted. And the following commandments establish a positive code for healthy communal living. How precious this code is can be seen if we consider the malaise of our own society. One commentator cites Christopher Wright in this regard:

Wright notes that the values of modern society have reversed and inverted the commandments. Coveting is our priority, we expect sexual license, ignore extended family, and view God as irrelevant. The commandments provide for God, family, faithful sexuality, and property protection in that order.¹⁰

Second, and something which I rather think would surprise those like Justice Roy Moore who want to regard the Ten Commandments as about the justice of God, they are in fact not about justice but about grace. God has liberated Israel from their bondage in Egypt; they are free due to God's mercy. How, then, are they to respond? What does living as God's saved people look like? The commandments provide the answer to that question. God is not subjecting his people to a new servitude to a set of restrictive laws. Instead God is describing how they can live in true freedom.

That may sound counter-intuitive to our 21st century brains, which have been shaped by modern notions of the priority of the individual and the individual's rights over the well-being of the overall community. We see an extreme example of that in the United States of America, a society in which the "right" to own guns, even of the most powerful and sophisticated type, is persistently prioritised over the public good, despite endless shooting atrocities, which are written off simply as the "price of freedom". While this is a particularly worrying case, we are all aware of lesser tendencies in the same direction around us. Our society is very "me-focused". We all hear a great deal about "my rights", and a good deal less about the public good.

To see the world as revolving around "me and my rights" is to have dislodged God from his central place in the order of things. When we spend all our days worrying about ourselves, our interests, our advantage, our well-being, we have become ensnared in a kind of narcissistic trap. We are imprisoned by our warped perspective on life. The Ten Commandments rightly place God at the centre of all things, and when God is at the centre, we see the world in correct perspective. And in that true perspective, the rights and well-being of others matter. Families matter. The sanctity of human life matters. Fidelity in relationships matters. The security of property matters. All these things benefit everyone, "me" included. True freedom is not licence; true freedom is the security of all to live their lives free of fear and threat.

I wonder if it has occurred to you how similar this thinking that lies behind the Ten Commandments is to the thinking we explored in Romans over several weeks. In the first, longer portion of the letter, Paul explained the liberating grace of God that is in Jesus Christ; in the shorter portion which followed – introduced by the pivotal word "therefore" (Romans 12:1) – Paul told his readers what it looked like to live under the grace of God. Freedom was not licence, but love. While Paul chose very different words to explain the life of true freedom, the conclusions he came up with were in every principle those that lie behind the Ten Commandments.

¹⁰ Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy* (1994), p. 66, cited by James K Bruckner, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids, 2008), p. 181.

In Exodus chapter 20, the God who is revealed is not an angry, threatening God, issuing decrees about crime and punishment. God is revealed as the liberator, whose grace flows to his people. The Ten Commandments are part of that grace. They describe how the people of Israel can live to enjoy and preserve the freedom God has granted them. God does not decree a sanction should they stray from his injunctions. The true sanction would be that they would have surrendered their freedom, rejected God's grace and returned to a life of slavery. Is that not precisely the choice which Christians, who have been freed from slavery to sin by the Lord Jesus Christ, have? God is not standing over us with a big stick; but if we reject the way of living enjoined to us by Jesus, and embrace our selfish human conception of "freedom", we willingly reject the new life that has been granted to us by the loving grace of God.