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God Is: Our Lawgiver

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TEXT: Exodus 20:1-17 (ESV)

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.

“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.

“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and 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.

“Honor your father and your mother, 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 neighbor.

“You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.”

Dear friends,

Pastor and author Mark Dever tells the following story in his book, *The Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. He writes,

I remember sitting in a doctrinal seminar and making an observation about God from the Bible. Bill, another student in the class responded politely but firmly that he liked to think of God rather differently. He liked to think of God as being wise, but not meddling, compassionate but never overpowering, ever so resourceful but never interrupting. "This," Bill said, "is how I like to think of God." My reply was perhaps somewhat sharper than it should have been. "Thank you, Bill," I said, "for telling us so much about yourself. But we are concerned to know what God is really like, not your own desires." The seminar attendees went silent for a moment as they took in my breach of politeness, but they were also taking in my point.

This story by Mark Dever raises an important question for each one of us: what do you think God is like, and is your answer to that question based upon your study of the Bible or upon your own personal wants and imagination? As someone once said, "God created man in his own image and man returned the favor." We are prone to do that, and it's dangerous to our spiritual health.

That's why we have been doing this summer series, "God Is." We're discovering who God is according to what he has revealed to us in scripture. Scripture is our foundation and authority for really getting to know God. So in today's text, we learn something important about who God is once again. Our context for our passage is that God had set the Israelites free from slavery in Egypt, and now he's going to lead them to the land he promised to give to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He led them out to a mountain, called Mount Sinai, in the wilderness early on in this trip. And he conducted some important business with the people. God made another covenant with them. Now, remember God's covenant to Abraham. That covenant was unconditional. On God's part, he promised to do some things for Abraham and his descendants: give them land and many descendants, and make them a blessing to the nations. Well, this covenant at Mount Sinai is different, for it involves some human obligation this time. He gave them laws to follow that we find in Exodus and in Leviticus. They're organizational laws, ritual laws, sacrificial laws, priestly laws. And in the midst of these

covenant laws are the verses we've come to know as the "Ten Commandments." I'm going to cover them briefly, what they mean for God's people.

There are two sections of the Ten Commandments. The first section is about being in relationship with God. God told them they were to fear and love and trust him above anything else. They were not to make idols for him, to him, for worship because he's transcendent. They were to use his name properly, never diminishing him with their use of it, with swearing or cursing, but only use it to call upon him in prayer and praise. They were to give him charge of their time: six days of the week, they were to work, but on the seventh day they would rest and devote the day to the Lord.

Then there's the second part of the Ten Commandments, and these had to do with how his people were to relate to one another as a community, as they traveled to the promised land and as they settled into their new homes once they got to the Promised Land. As God's people, they were to love their neighbor as themselves by honoring their parents all the days of their lives, and valuing their neighbor's life, not hurting it or destroying it, but helping to preserve it. They weren't to commit adultery, but be faithful to their spouses in every way. They were not to steal from one another or cheat one another out of money or property, but instead help one another to improve and protect what was theirs. God's people were not to lie or slander their neighbor, but instead speak well of her and defend her and charitably explain her actions. And finally, God's people were not to covet each other's possessions or spouses, wishing and scheming to make them their own. Instead, they were to help keep what was their own.

Well there they are God's laws, the Ten Commandments – very clear, aren't they, on what God desires and expects of his own people? And God said he expected his people to obey them; not just know them or acknowledge them, but to obey them. Now it's important to ask why God gave his people these commandments, and it's most important to understand that God didn't give the commandments to save his people – these governments were given after he had saved them. Listen to his words again: "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." And on he went with the ten commandments. This covenant required some obligation, you see, on Israel's part. God is saying,

Because I did this, rescued you and made you my people, therefore, this is how I want you to live as my own. Because you are my people. I want you obey these

commandments every day in order that you may not only survive as my community and please me, but also thrive as a community, as you love me with all your heart, soul, strength in mind and your neighbor as yourself. These are for your good. In keeping them, by the way, you'll attract others to me. As they see your love for me and one another, they'll say, "Look at these people. What a good and wise God these Israelites must have. Let's join them in worshipping this God."

So these Ten Commandments were meant, first of all, to be a guide to love by; to protect the people from themselves and their own self-centered ways, which always would lead to destruction and trouble. They're given to convict them when necessary, drive them to see their need to repent and return to God for forgiveness. The prophets will use them later on as they preach repentance to a disobedient Israel. And these commandments also had an evangelistic purpose: would help them to shine before others, and thus attract them to worship Israel's wise and good God.

So what word would you say we learned today about our God? Here it is: God is a lawgiver. God is a lawgiver. So, what does that mean for Christians? Do the commandments still apply to us today, are they to still be followed? After all, some might reason, the Gospel tells us we're saved by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. So should I still live by these commandments and value them? And the answer to that is: absolutely yes – because they are given by God. God has not changed. These commandments still apply to those of us who are saved by grace, your faith in Jesus. After all, Jesus himself said in his Sermon on the Mount, "I came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it." And that he did. He obeyed it perfectly. When asked about God's laws, he didn't negate them, but affirmed the great commandment: to love God with heart, soul, strength, and mind, and neighbor as self, (which is a summary of the Ten Commandments). We love God by trusting him, serving him, and obeying him. These commandments still serve very well as a guide for loving God and neighbor and self. They are for our own good. I love what Martin Luther wrote about this. He said:

This much is certain: anyone who knows the Ten Commandments perfectly knows the entire scriptures. In all affairs and circumstances, he can counsel, help, comfort, judge, and make decisions in both spiritual and temporal matters. He's qualified to sit in judgment upon all doctrines, estates, persons, laws, and everything else in the world.

Pastor and author Jim Bjorge writes in his book, *Lord of the Mountain*,

I like to think of Mt. Sinai, (the Ten Commandments), as a huge road marker that encourages me to detour the danger spots. It's something like the gate I placed in the top of our basement stairs when our son was a small boy. Prior to the installation of the gate, he had ridden his tricycle down those stairs and ended up with several stitches in his chin. Since I desired his well-being, the gate was a protective measure.

That's the Ten Commandments: a protective measure. Some have referred to them as guardrails or signposts along the way to protect us, and these commandments still serve to convict us of our sinfulness and our need for forgiveness and they drive us back to our savior again and again. Someone once said about the commandments, "Not only do I break the commandments, but the Ten Commandments break me." How true. And importantly, most importantly, they help us to fulfill our evangelistic mission as Christians, to bring others to Jesus Christ. We can use them to help people wake up, first of all, to see their need for a savior – that they're sinners – but also we have been called to let our light shine before others so that they may see our good works and give glory to our father in Heaven, as Jesus said; which is the ultimate purpose and goal of a believer's life: to shine for the sake of the gospel of God and bring others to Christ in order that they may be saved. So, obeying the commandments help Christ followers to bring others to Christ, they're evangelistic.

Now, some of you might be wondering, as you hear these things about the commandments, "Well, that's well and good. But what about when I break these commandments? Because I do that regularly, even though I don't want to? How can I be restored into a relationship with God who hates sin? Do I just try harder?" Well, as I said earlier in the message, God provided another set of laws for the Commandments in a ritual sacrificial system to atone for breaking his commandments under what we call the old covenant. We find these laws in the Book of Exodus and in the Book of Leviticus. Not only did God instruct the people to build this big tent for him, called a tabernacle, so that he could dwell among him, but it was also built so these people could approach him in worship and offer sacrifices – sacrifices for atonement and forgiveness for breaking his commandments. Later on, a temple would be built in Jerusalem for this purpose. Now, these atonement offerings involve the sacrifice of animals (like goats and sheep) and the sprinkling of blood upon the altar and upon the people for their forgiveness of sins and the restoring of their relationship with God. But this was only a temporary fix. It was a foreshadowing only of the ultimate atoning sacrifice for sin, the death of God's own son, Jesus Christ, on another important

mountain for us as Christians, Mount Calvary. God's son, you see "tabernacled" among us in the flesh. He perfectly obeyed the commandments, then died on the cross on that mount as the perfect sacrifice for humanity's sins and rose again so that our sins might be atoned for and forgiven. And we would be restored into an eternal relationship with our holy and gracious God. The old covenant system of sacrifice was replaced by Jesus with a new covenant. He pointed it out in his words to his disciples when he served them the Lord's Supper the night before he was crucified: "This is the blood of the covenant, my blood of the covenant, shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins." His sacrifices once, for all.

So the good news is that commandment-breakers like us who trust in Jesus and what he did for us have this rich, gracious inheritance of forgiveness and a new and eternal life with God. And so when we break the commandments, because we do, in Christ, we're still saints and sinners, as Luther said, and they show us our sin and our need for forgiveness and a new start. We can then humbly yet confidently approach God's throne of grace, asking for his forgiveness, for his cleansing and renewal through the Holy Spirit. We can ask this in the name of Christ, our atoning sacrifice. And then the scripture promises that God, who is faithful and just, will forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. And then we continue on in obedience, walking in the power of the Holy Spirit, who helps us to strive to follow these good and wise commands of our God.

So here's our application: God is our lawgiver. He's a good lawgiver who loves us. So don't ignore these commandments or retire them in your spiritual life, but instead learn them, memorize them, study them, read about them, and Luther's large catechism or small catechism. Meditate upon these commandments every day, thank God for them and pray for the Holy Spirit to help you to obey them, because there are blessings to be experienced in keeping his commands. As the Psalmist testifies at the beginning of the Book of Psalms, "Blessed is one whose delight is in the law of the Lord. And on his law, he meditates day and night. It's like a tree planted by streams of water and yields its fruit in season and its leaf does not wither." Isaac Watts, the father of English hymnody, penned this prayer, which became a well-known hymn for the church. The hymn asks God to help us to live out his commands, and if we do stray from them, as we often do, that he would bring us back and help us to know and do his will. So I'm going to use his words for our closing prayer today. Let's pray.

Oh, that you, Lord, would guide my ways to keep your statutes still,
Oh, that you, God, would grant me grace to know and do you will.
Order my footsteps by your word and make my heart sincere,
Let sin have no dominion, Lord, but keep my conscience clear.
Assist my soul, too apt to stray, a stricter watch to keep,
And should I e'er forget your way, restore your wandering sheep.
Make me to walk in your commands – tis a delightful road,
Ne'er let my head or heart or hands offend against you, God.

Amen.