

The 10 Commandments Exodus 20.1-17

How seriously do you take the 10 commandments? Are they really applicable for today? Do you know what they are? What about the one about graven images? What about the Sabbath? Are they so culturally conditioned that we should just reduce the ten to eight?

To find out how to read the ten commandments today, it's good to look back at how they would have been understood when they were first written

Suzerainty covenants between vassal and overlord were in vogue in the ancient near east from 1500-700bc.

The book of Exodus shows how God communicated with his people in the pattern that they would have known from these international covenants.

The pattern followed was

- names, titles and attributes of the great king are set out historical prologue -past relations of the parties are described with an emphasis on the benevolence of the king to the vassal (I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt)

- obligations of the vassal (10 commandments are summary of this)
- oath that the covenant document be read annually to the people
- list of witnesses
- curses and blessings

A covenant was not merely a legal bond. The key is the relationship. The Sinai covenant is not legalistic for it was made with an already chosen, redeemed and adopted people. The covenant is not conditional on the fulfilment of the law - but the enjoyment of its blessings are.

At the time, Israelite law was different from that of the surrounding nations because

- i) The Law was God's Law - His gift
- ii) One Law for all classes
- iii) high view of human life - mutilation as a punishment curtailed

What a privilege not to belong to any other nation but to be God's own people, to have God as your only overlord and these commands were part of that privilege. The 10 commandments are not just rules for personal behaviour - they are part of the deal of belonging to God, being his nation. It is true of course that they sometimes ask us to do things which

interfere with our natural inclinations. But that does not mean that God is a kill-joy. When I learned to drive a car, the instructor often said - no, don't do it like that because there are many things which seem alright and seem like the natural way of doing it - but do not really work. He was not deliberately making life more difficult when he insisted that I signal before moving off or stop riding the clutch... but showing me how to make the best out of driving. The 10 commandments were seen like that as directions on how to successfully be people who belong to God, how to make being God's people work.

- purpose of human life (where car is going) The worship of God alone
- between individuals (good conduct on the road) honour parents, no murder, no adultery, no stealing, no false witness
- inside individuals (keeping the engine in good order) It can't be wrong because it doesn't do anyone else any harm" What is the good of teaching people how to steer so as to avoid collisions if they are such old bangers that they cannot be steered at all reliably. to do an emergency stop if the breaks fail. Keeping the Sabbath, not coveting what is not ours

When we consider them like that, we have the key to reinterpreting the commandments which are difficult

for today. The key is that they should still be for us directions on how to make being God's people work - but instead of being God's people as a nation in the desert being God's people in a secular society.

To come back to those tricky two commandments which seem particularly difficult to keep today. We can see how important it would have been not to make visual images of God in the same way as the nations around did and squeezing God into a shape that was too small for him, making him into a mere lucky charm. We still need to beware of this and not just through religious art - if we associate God with a church or a cross or a particular prayer we have squeezed him into a shape which is too small.

We can also see how the Sabbath functioned as a day of rest in which God's people had time to be together, to rest together and worship together. We can recognise how we still need that today - and how where Sunday has been eroded our worship, our families and fellowship in the church has suffered. So let us take seriously the challenge of the commandments - not as ideals, but as commands to be obeyed, directions which will show us how to be God's own people in this millenium.

1. No other Gods
2. No graven images
3. Don't take the name of God in vain
4. Remember the Sabbath Day
5. Honour parents

6. No murder
7. No adultery
8. No stealing
9. No false witness
10. No coveting