

Followers of the Way

Not the end, but the fulfilment of the law

Steve Campbell 25-09-22

Mark 28-34

The Ten Commandments are part of our national consciousness, many people have heard of them but few know what they are. We had a funny encounter a few years ago in Spain. We went out for a meal hoping for a quiet, romantic evening when this other couple came in and struck up a conversation. The man asked what we did in Spain and when we told him we were working with the Church, he said, 'I don't believe in God, but I follow the Ten Commandments.'

I thought, 'This is going to be interesting!'

'You don't believe in God but you say you follow the Ten Commandments?'

'Well, what about the first Commandment?' I asked him. He looked a bit puzzled and said, 'Remind me what that was again.'

'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. 'You shall have no other gods before me. (Ex 20:2&3)

He pondered a moment then said, 'All of them except that one!'

The Ten Commandments have been the backbone of our legal system, though some people believe that since Jesus inaugurated the New Covenant in his blood the Old Testament Law, including the Ten Commandments, have become obsolete.

This is partly due to a misunderstanding of what Paul wrote in Romans 10:4 'For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.' They read this as if Christ has brought the law to an end. But a better translation is given in the Amplified Bible, 'For Christ is the end of the law [it leads to Him and its purpose is fulfilled in Him], for [granting] righteousness to everyone who believes [in Him as Saviour].'

Jesus himself said in the Sermon on the Mount, 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.' (Matt 5:17)

So in Jesus Christ, his life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension, all that's written in the Law and Prophets, in other words the whole Old Testament, has its fulfilment in him. Its goal, its ultimate purpose, is to point to Jesus the Messiah, the Christ, God's anointed one.

But that does not mean that the Law no longer has a purpose? It is not the *end* of the Law as we know it. Yet there are certain aspects of the Law that no longer apply.

For example, the laws pertaining to the sacrificial system are no longer needed as Jesus made the one, complete and all sufficient sacrifice of himself for the sins of the whole world. So no other sacrifice can be or ought to be made.

But the moral law, the system of guidelines for behaviour, summed up in the Ten Commandments is never obsolete. The fact that the Commandments were etched on stone, not written on parchment, shows their permanency.

So the Ten Commandments are as much for us today as they were for the Israelites at Mount Sinai. Many Church buildings have the Ten Commandments alongside the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer displayed on the wall behind the Holy Table. These represent in turn: our duty, our doctrine and our devotion.

I once had the privilege of hearing the Commandments recited by heart (relate story from Kilross School).

How do we *know*, then, that Jesus understood that the Ten Commandments were a permanent fixture and not outdated even in the New Covenant era?

We know because when asked about them he did not dismiss the Commandments but gave an answer that satisfied even the most strict of Jews and that has been a bedrock of the Christian faith ever since.

During his final week in Jerusalem, what we know as Holy Week, Jesus was asked many questions to try and trap him.

After he cleansed the temple the chief priests, teachers of the law and elders demanded to know by whose authority he was doing this. Jesus turned a question on them about John the Baptist to which they could not answer, so he refused to answer their question also.

Later on some Pharisees and Herodians, strange bed-fellows, asked him about paying taxes to Caesar, to which, on seeing the coin with the Emperor's image, gave his memorable answer, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.' (Mark 12:17)

Then it was the turn of the Sadducees who asked him a question about resurrection, which they didn't believe in. Jesus cut right through them with his answer, revealing both their misunderstanding of the nature of resurrection and their ignorance of Scripture.

It was at that moment that a teacher of the law, who would have been a Pharisee, asked Jesus what seemed to be a genuine question, not one designed to trap him. **v.28**
READ

Jesus answered, as any good observant Jew would, with the Shema, the Jewish Creed **vv.29&30 READ.**

This prayer in Deuteronomy 6:4&5 follows on from the restating of the Ten Commandments before Israel crosses the Jordan to the Promised Land. To this day it is recited twice daily by faithful Jews.

Jesus says that this is the most important Commandment then added from Leviticus 19:18, 'The second is this: "Love your neighbour as yourself." There is no commandment greater than these.'

This is known as Jesus' Summary of the Law and in these two Commandments he sums up all the Law and the Prophets. The moral law, the Ten Commandments, which we as Christians still abide by, are summarised thus:

1. Love the Lord your God, encapsulates the first four commandments covering no other gods, no graven image, God's name and his holy day.
2. Love your neighbour completes the remaining six: honouring parents; murder; adultery; stealing; lying and coveting.

Just as these Commandments were to guide the actions and behaviour of the Israelites in the Promised Land, so also they are to be the Rule of Life for every follower of Christ today.

But again we must be careful not to get the wrong idea and go down the route of legalism, thinking if you keep these Commandments then God will accept you.

No! The Commandments were not given to show us *how* you can be saved – the Israelites were already saved by the blood of the lamb at Passover and through the Red Sea.

The Commandments and law given at Mt Sinai showed how a saved people were to live before a Holy God.

Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. All are saved through him, Jews as well as Gentiles, by faith in his shed blood upon the cross and his mighty resurrection from the tomb.

This is God's rescue plan revealed in Jesus.

The Commandments never saved anybody, but are there to expose our sin and show us how to live a godly life as followers of Christ.

The response of the teacher of the law shows his question was genuine - 'Well said, teacher,' the man replied. 'You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.' (Mark 12:32&33)

And then notice Jesus' reaction to this man's answer – 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' (v.34) Jesus' harshest rebukes were reserved for the religious elite, the Sadducees and Pharisees.

This teacher was a Pharisee but Jesus was not averse to commending someone who displayed sincerity of heart. We're not told he became a believer, but he is very close. He is taking steps in the right direction. He has the right attitude towards God and his neighbour – love.

He only needs to acknowledge Jesus for who he is, Lord and Saviour, the only one who can restore his relationship with God the Father and bring him into the kingdom he has been waiting and hoping for.

I've always loved the story of this teacher of the law – so close to the kingdom.

We know God's plan of salvation is through Jesus alone. But I wonder in our daily encounters with people, how many are not far from the kingdom of God?

And do we in our conversations, in our witnessing, in our living before them, bring them any nearer to the kingdom?