

Behind the First Tablet of the Law  
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Our God is our Friend and our Redeemer. We are going to be looking at the Ten Commandments over the next two Sundays and we are going to divide our approach *conventionally* between the two tablets of the Law. The first tablets deal with relationship between God and man and the second tablet deals with man and man—this division is commonly depicted by a stone slate with two halves, or panels.

Now the first thing to observe is that the Decalogue was “spoken to” God’s people at Sinai—the plan was to proceed to the Promised Land—but due to a lack of faith (and fearfulness) the people balked at entering and taking possession of the Land (through conquest and explosion of the Canaanites), resulting in the wilderness wanderings (forty years, or, until after the cowardly generation had passed away—only Joshua and Caleb would get to see it). So, God has worked a mighty deliverance and executed judgment on the nation (Egypt) which had oppressed God’s people—even to forcing regime change through violence, Pharaoh, his generals and army perished, drowning in the Red Sea. This punishment was acutely apt because of the Egyptian policy (population control!) mandating the murder of all male Hebrew babies *through drowning in the Nile*. Additionally, the first born son of Pharaoh, the heir apparent had also been taken away in the last, the tenth plague, the Passing Over of the angel of death—due to Pharaoh’s intransigence. By these judgments, and through these deliverances, God redeems” His people, showing his great love for them. **God so loved His people** that He heard their cries, attended to their distress and rescued them from bondage to the Egyptians. He was their friend in need indeed.

**God was befriending Israel**, clearly, actively, blatantly, positively and irrefutably. *He was recruiting their love in response, calling them into a living, reciprocal relationship (a design feature of man from Creation). He showed whose side He was on, standing up to and humiliating their oppressors and tormenters so as to free them to enter into worship of Him, free, and with one another. Let My people go that they may hold a feast unto Me in the wilderness.* (Exodus 5:1) **And Pharaoh answered, “And ‘who is the Lord,’ that I should obey His voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go.”** Well, God and Pharaoh were about to get closely acquainted. This retort of Pharaoh should remind us of Pilate’s rejoinder, **“What is truth?”** Indicating that he was as much a stranger to truth, as Pharaoh was a stranger to God! Of course they both behaved wretchedly. **I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God.** (Exodus 6:6-7) *Now that is friendly!*

When I began hunting, I was coached by an experienced hunter. He was showing me deer sign as we hunted a buck. There were bunches of fresh hemlock dropped on the ground along the buck’s route. My guide grinned, “Love notes.” “What did you say?” “Love notes, you see these broken twigs? They mark the buck’s path . . . and then he strews the path with enticements . . . like flowers, like gifts to his girlfriend . . . it’s kind of human-like. He has invited her to party with him, you know, to mate with him. Look for

me . . . choose me. So their romance is heating up. And then there are scrapes and scent spots . . . all aimed at the same end. A consummation of their friendship.” He shrugged, “It’s all about relationship, all the way down to bucks and does.” He left it up to me to make application of his folksy wisdom to human love and marriage, I suppose. But today, I want to apply this analogy to God and Israel—God was favoring, wooing, seeking to attract Israel to Himself. He dropped blessing and deliverances along the path to Himself.

The history of “this exit” from Egypt is covered in the first fifteen chapters of Exodus. The truth *that God so loved His people* precedes the far greater deliverance, a rescue of the entire world from our captivity to sin, demonstrating that **God so loved the world** and that through the gift of His Beloved Son. Now, both the deliverance from slavery in Egypt and the incarnation, the coming of the Son of God in the flesh, involved intersections with history, with a specific point in time—at that moment in time God intervened and acted upon our behalf. He did for us what we could not do for ourselves! And both of these great redemptive acts is grounded in the love of God the Father which extends beyond the foundations of the earth, to eternity. ***His love is timeless, and it is infinite.*** God loved us in Adam and Eve, and has continued to love their descendants from the dawn of Creation on. Just as material existence had a beginning, so does history, and time and love, too . . . our existence as material beings came about through the creative power of God. Through His shaping, designing and creative power, we, who had existed previously in the mind of God, came into being—and the details of that are revealed to us in Genesis through the human instrumentality of Moses . . . then the prophets, then John the Baptist, Jesus and His disciples until it is entrusted to the apostles and teachers.

It is Moses who informs us that God **spoke these words** of the Decalogue into being. He didn’t make it up; he transcribed it rather than create and composed it. The people heard *the voice* of God at Sinai, and while the words were initially spoken to them, His people, they were to be spoken to the entire world—through them ***a nation of priests***. The local and the particular had a vast scope from their utterance on! *There was an agenda in the giving of the Law which would later be revealed to the Church.* And there are certain universal principles involved. It is a universal truth, for instance, ***that God gives first, loves first*** (I John 4:19)—*God gives before He asks for anything back.* God is the initiator.

Here’s another principle: ***the Redeemer is also the Lawgiver*** . . . and the redeemed, the recipients of that grace, that love, and the subjects of that law are to be joyful, and grateful people. God opens His heart and invites in return us to open our hearts to him. This love is the foundation upon which the Law, the Decalogue is based. Love is the force behind, the activating agent in our relationship to God—our unfolding, developing, or emerging friendship with God.

At this point I want to point out that these patterns worked out in the Old Testament are like a foretaste of things to come, like an overture to the symphony of salvation!—meaning that the redemption of Israel is prelude to, antecedent to the *redemption of lost sinners initiated by a loving God who sent his Son* to make atonement for our sins, to obtain forgiveness of our sins, to reconcile us to our Father God, and to restore a usurped kingdom, or a lost world to its rightful King and Maker. God so loved the world

(he took initiative), he loved us first and he wants us to joyfully and gladly open our hearts to him in glorious homecoming. This magnificent parallel can be celebrated on all levels—from the most general to the most particular. Jesus' carping critics said, **Look, this man welcomes sinners . . .** yes, yes, He does do that *and thank God He does! Jesus is friendly.*

The very brief narrative (Exod. 15:22-16:3) describes how the people migrated from the Red Sea, after their miraculous deliverance from Pharaoh, his chariots and officers—the whole imperial army demolished with a single stroke—redemption indeed! An act of love (#1). Three days they journey, coming to the wilderness of Shur. **When the people came to Marah, they found they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter, therefore it was named Sarah. And the people grumbled against Moses.** (vv.23-24) They were thirsty! ***They are about a month and a half into their liberated life!*** So God *sweetened the waters*. Another act of love (#2). The grumbling was a problem because God expected joy and gratitude for all he had done to show his love—and the people didn't love him back. They only seemed to love to complain!

Nevertheless, God decided to do to His Chosen People what He had done in Eden to Adam and Eve: lovingly, he put them to a test. *It, this testing<sup>1</sup>, is in the nature of friendship—love is tested in relationships in both large and small ways.* How would anyone know if a love were true, or not, if it were not so?! (Remember God says, **To see if they will obey . . . to see if they will choose to walk in my ways and heed my voice.** He didn't say the test was set for them to fail!) For Adam and Eve, it was the prohibition of eating from the tree **of the knowledge of good and evil.**

For God's people here, in Shur, the test, with four components, was: **If you will diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in His eyes, and give ear to His commandments and keep all His statutes—including this one!**

*I believe that this is the first commandment given to God's people after they were sprung from Egypt.*

**—I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, your healer.** (vv.25-26) This immunity, too, is an act of love (#3). It carries a conditional promise: *you listen up, do what I ask of you, and you will be disease free. Because? Because I love you and I am your healer.* This promise speaks to the very nature of God! The same God who sweetened the waters (meeting their thirst) is the One who keeps them healthy. Remember the tufts of hemlock, strewn beside the path? God's acts of love are, however, divine enticements, His wooing.

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<sup>1</sup> In days gone by, knights competed in jousting matches—to keep up their martial skills and adroitness. They tested their mettle against each other and it drew crowds. Sometimes the participating knights would wear their ladies' favors, a token of cloth, or ribbon and compete for top place to honor her with their victory. This was more common than slaying dragons and rescuing damsels in distress, in all probability. But heroic quests, or military success were considered tests of manhood, loyalty, fealty to the crown and so on. Knights didn't enter the "lists," so to speak, to fail but to prove themselves, their loves!

At this moment, still a month and a half into liberation, **the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai.** (Exod. 16:1) Now, unfortunately, the scope of their grumbling broadened, it is now against **Moses and Aaron because they are hungry.**

*This is the second basic need that has arisen.*

*God befriends them by meeting it!*

**Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full in the land of Egypt, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.** (v.3) These people sound neither joyous nor grateful!

The Lord is set to institute His second test: the “manna test.” **I am about to rain bread from heaven for you,** ( act of love #4). It is a test of obedience (related to the hearing of His voice and the performance of His commandments and statutes!). **The people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not.** (Will they joyfully and gratefully submit to His rule?) **On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.** (v.5) Jesus has his “manna” moments with the feeding of the 3,000 and the 5,000. His “test” is to see if those he fed would focus on the bread, or on the giver of the bread . . . on the benefits, or on God, their supreme benefactor, their heavenly friend? It is beyond obvious to point out that God is the ultimate source of all food, but unless we consider the things of heaven that might not occur to us! It didn’t occur to the hungry pilgrims. **Do you still not understand?** (Matt. 15:9-11)

There is, at hand, a fascinating parallel here with three passages (relating to God’s provision of food!) in Genesis. Genesis 1:29, God’s loving provision for man: **Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food,** and with Gen. 2:9 and out of the ground God caused to spring up every tree that is pleasant to sight and good for food. (This is a miracle of supply—from the earth. It contrasts with the manna from heaven, but both are miraculous!) **The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and Gen. 2:16 And the Lord God commanded the man saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for on the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.** There we see both a condition and a consequence. This is the “tree test” designed to prove to God that we are *joyously and gladly willing to do what we are told as well as to depend upon his supply.* It’s his garden and his creation and his food—are we willing to “play by his rules?”

Both of these tests, the manna and the tree, are about “food.” Our need for food, and water and his loving supply of food and water—both essential for creaturely existence. God’s original watering system consisted of the mist (Gen. 2:6) and four rivers (spring-fed, for there was, as yet, no rain) (See Gen. 2:10-14). Apart from the primal waters, which were under and above **the expanse** (Gen.1:7), there appears to be no explanation of the creation of water per se; it was associated with **the face of the deep, the face of the waters.** (Gen. 1:1). Furthermore, **the waters** are present on earth, Gen. 1:10 tells us that God **gathered the waters** to form **the Seas.** Rain first appears in the judgment of the world in Noah’s day!

The tree test is simple, singular. The manna test is more complex. It is in fact more complicated because of **the grumbling** (15:24; 16:2, 7 and 8). The grumbling is interactive: between the people and Moses, then Moses and Aaron, with God taking notice, responds with manna **bread from heaven for you. So Moses and Aaron said to all the people of Israel, “At evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt** (translation “Stop blaming us—this is God’s doing!”) **and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your grumbling against the Lord. For what are we that you should grumble against us?”** (vv. 6-7)

**. . . And as soon as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the people of God, they looked to the wilderness, and, behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. And the Lord said to Moses, “I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, “At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.”** (vv.10-12)

The provision of food, meat in the evening and bread in the morning were demonstrations of divine identity: **“I am the Lord and I brought you out of Egypt!”** and, secondly, **I am the Lord your God.** Yes, demonstrations of identity, claims to responsibility and to ownership . . . are friendly acts of pro-active love (both #4 and #5)

All this true but we are only circling the issue of “the test.”

**Gather as much as you can eat . . . an omer according to the number that each of you has in his tent . . . Let no one leave any over till the morning.** (vv. 16,19 **But they did not listen to Moses.** (v.20) **On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, but they found none. And the Lord said to Moses, “How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and my laws?” See the Lord has given you the Sabbath; therefore on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Remain each of you in his place, let no one go out of his place on the seventh day.” So the people rested on the seventh day.** (vv.27-30)

This is revelation and disclosure! The revelation of God’s will and the disclosure of his person, his character, his love and friendship. This “revelation” of God’s friendship lays the foundation for the Law!

And it teaches us that God is the personal ideal of perfection.

Some of you may wonder at this point, why are we going through all these interactions *prior to the giving of the law*? And I answer, it is because it was in a setting of give and take, of testing and proving that the people of Israel were introduced to their redeeming God. ***The Decalogue did not come out of nowhere . . . out of the blue!*** Several more acts of love preceded the giving of the Law from Sinai: Water from the rock at Rephidim (act of love #6), the repulsion of Amalekites (act of love #7)—which result in spoils that required division and appropriation (act of love #8). *This incident is reminiscent of the “spoiling of Egypt” which occurred when Israel was emancipated!* Some commentators take this victory to mean that there was a lot of turmoil and quarreling over the division of the spoils. While that may certainly explain some of the

disputing, I take Exodus 18, more widely, as being chiefly about the administration of justice in Israel through the dissemination of God's Word.

The history of Israel's dealings (Exod. 15-18) with God implies some widespread familiarity with his ways, some intimate interactions!—which the Decalogue subsequently codifies. The Ten Words are like a collage, or a pictorial representation of the love between God and man. The principle that justice is served by **constant referral to God's Word**, to His **words**, and the administrative nuts and bolts of how that is done (Exod. 18), through “just, godly men who have **deep convictions, a fear of God love of truth and hatred of evil**,” who are appointed to guide people to a deeper knowledge of God—so that God's will might be done: that **justice may pour down like mighty waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream**. So what we are learning, hopefully, is that God opens his heart to us first, just as he loves us first . . . and it is in response to his initiative that he asks us to respond with love *as joyful and grateful subjects* of his realm, his kingdom, in his creation. We note also that God has the basics covered: water and food, work and rest, worship and relationship—God never intended for us to be alone, never intended for us to live autonomously. What he longs to hear is a declaration of dependence upon him, he is our friend and Creation is where friendship happens.

I would make two important observations about the Decalogue. The first is to the negative nature of many of the prohibitions. This is less onerous when we note that the Law must prohibit because we are sinful—we are forbidden to do what we are inclined to do. We know we ought to do the opposite of what forbidden! And, here's the second observation, it would appear that religion, a living and active relationship with God is the animating principle of morality. But morality is only a part of the whole of religion; religion is both wider and deeper (and higher). ***The pure and undefiled service of God is worked out—in the service of mankind.*** So the first tablet prepares us to move on the second tablet. Love of God is the foundation of all human duty.

At the center of reality is enthroned a living, loving person, a King who can say, “Me” and “Mine.” *We may tend the Creation, but we do so under supervision!* There is no rabble of god-lings to cope with there . . . there is no stoney, impersonal something or other . . . no hypothetical unknowableness . . . not something abstract, shadowy, ephemeral will of the wisp! But a God we may cherish, have affection for, worship, trust, serve and surrender to, and aspire towards a deeper, better, fuller relationship . . . a most precious being, a being if we were to lose would make us desolate and yet who, if possessed, makes us most blessed. I will skim through the first four commandments in closing.

Obedience to the first command is the precondition of  
all peace and blessedness. God seeks friendship.

The second condemns all images of divinity . . . glory cannot be shown forth. In fact an image both degrades God and damages man . . . and by being anchored in the seen, and sensed, violates the spiritual nature of the Godhead.

The third commandment is a charge to honor God, and not to dishonor his name through perjury, or profane swearing . . . for his name declares his character and worth. Our speech about God should always reflect our truthful thoughts about God. The

name of God is neither jargon, nor slang. Instead our words about God should extol him and exalt his beauty, our words “present” as well as represent God.

The fourth commandment is the completion of the first tablet and it relates to the gift of the Sabbath.

The first three commandments rest on Deliverance and Redemption, but this command appears with universal principles from the Creation order. We were made creatures needing rest . . . a seventh day rest. Either we rest or we dissipate and dwindle. Of course, the greater deliverance which we have through the sacrifice of the Son points to a higher creation . . . and deliverance from a sorer bondage. We are redeemed on a spiritual plane which is above the mundane, above the socio-political, economic and cultural limitations of our time and place.

**Amen**