

It Always Was Grace, Right From The Start **Exodus 20:1-20, Psalm 19, Matthew 22:37-40**

Ex 19 On the first day of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on that very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. And Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ “

A priestly kingdom and a holy nation. Wow! What a job! Next comes how they were to do that. But before I read the Ten Commandments, take a minute to **see if you can name them, in order**. Don’t worry, I’m not going to ask for scores. Go!

If you had trouble with that, don’t worry. Everyone agrees that there are ten, but there are several different ways of numbering them. Here’s Exodus 20.

Ex 20 And God spoke all these words: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. **(1)** You shall have no other gods before me. **(2)** You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.

[You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.]

“**(3)** You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. **(4)** Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour 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, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.]

“**(5)** Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

“**(6)** You shall not murder. **(7)** You shall not commit adultery. **(8)** You shall not steal. **(9)** You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

“**(10)** You shall not covet your neighbour’s house. You shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.”

When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.”

Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.”

Let us pray.

May these spoken words
illuminate your written word
and point us to your Living Word,

our saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.

In the beginning, God spoke the words of life. Here, God speaks the words of living.

As we heard in the prologue, it starts with grace. **It always was grace, right from the start.** The order of exodus and then Sinai is important – first salvation (and that’s a much broader sense of salvation that redeeming us from the consequence of sin) and afterwards, “this is how to live in grace”.

Let’s take a scan across these famous Ten Words and see how they help us to live in grace, then we’ll look at Jesus’ summary and I’ve got a handy-dandy take home for you as well.

I am YHWH ... who brought you out ... who carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself – a God who sees and cares and acts. This is all built on grace.

Interesting that God reveals his character not as a set of philosophical prepositions, but as *morals*. Not because he’s a nasty task master, sitting on a cloud waiting to zap us with a thunderbolt if we step out of line, but because he knows us and cares about us. God wants us to live well and knows that left to our own devices, we’ll make a mess of it.

It’s like a game of football, or chess. **[ask what games people play]** If you tried to play without rules it would just be a mess - everyone playing however they think best. The rules aren’t there to stop people having fun, but to make the game work.

And so it is with God’s instructions for how to make this game of Life work. The Jesus who came to bring us life in all its fullness is the same God who spoke to Moses on Sinai. God’s commands aren’t to stop us having fun, but to help us live life well. **It always was grace, right from the start.** As we heard in Ps 19, “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul, it is sweeter than honey from the comb.” And this isn’t distant, irrelevant philosophy, but the nitty gritty of living with the annoying other inhabitants of planet earth.

Other societies had law codes, but the one in the Bible is unique in many ways. These overarching principles and the detailed expansion of the next few chapters show no distinction for status. Not one law if you steal a king’s sheep and another if you steal a poor man’s sheep. All are equal before God. That’s very unusual. Also, a lot of concern with looking after vulnerable.

However, as with everything that is written in a different language to a different culture at a different time, it needs translating into our language, culture and time. It has been well-said that the Holy Spirit speaks only local dialects. So when we read commands about not casting bronze images, we can’t sit back in our nicely upholstered chairs and think, “This doesn’t apply to me. I don’t have a bronze furnace in my back yard.” We take the laws, look at the principles behind them, and re-apply them in our own context. Let’s dig into them now.

First three – how we relate to God

You shall have no other gods before me. This makes it sound like the gods are in a queue and there must be none in front of God. Better is none *besides*, ie exclusive. Hebrew phrase is “before (my face)” = moving a second wife into the home. Intolerable.

Don’t make images is related to one before. “Don’t worship other gods,” says God, “*and so don’t make images*, ‘cos if you do you’ll be tempted to worship them. You’ll start thinking that I’m like whatever image you make, and you’ll make me smaller and smaller until I’m not worth worshipping.”

It’s like a cliff edge. The definitely deadly bit is stepping off the edge, but why even go *near* the edge? The view is just as good from ten feet back. Don’t put yourself in danger. Don’t make an idol and say, “Oh, it’s only for decoration. Everyone has one. It’s fashionable.” Don’t put temptation in your way.

For us, we might say, if I have a problem with gambling, I shouldn't even *look* at the on-line betting sites, shouldn't even *walk past* the betting shop. If my problem is making snarky remarks about that really irritating person at work, I shouldn't sit at my desk rehearsing insults but tell myself, "Oh, but I won't *say* them." Don't put temptation in your way.

Jesus talked about this in Matthew 5. You have heard it said ... But I say to you, don't *even* ..." It's a Jewish practice called putting a hedge around the law – like a fence ten feet from the cliff edge. You *can* dance on the edge of the cliff, but it's really not a good idea.

What about the bit after this command, about God being jealous and the sin of the parents extending to the third and fourth generation? For starters, 'zealous' is probably a better translation because in current English 'jealous' has very negative overtones. We're not talking about envy or irrational suspicion, but rightly exclusive love.

Third and fourth generation. This isn't God being mean to your great grandchildren. It only applies to 'those who hate God'. It's warning that godless parents tend to raise godless children who will raise godless children and so on. But note the expansive promise of favour – a thousand generations! We're only 130 or so generations from Moses now, so that's a thousand generations is a heck of a lot of favour! Remember, **it always was grace, right from the start.**

Misusing God's name – From the news: *On June 1, 2020, then US President Donald Trump delivered an address threatening military action on the nation. He then walked to the nearby St John's Episcopal Church having had peaceful protesters, including some of the church's own clergy, forcefully removed with tear gas. Trump then posed for a photo holding a Bible.*

That, in my opinion, is taking the Lord's name in vain.

First three – how we relate to God. Next two – how we relate to each other

Sabbath day rest – even for slaves who are not of your faith – what a contrast with Egypt. And this Sabbath was part of Israel's role as a light to the nations, a priestly people. They were to be distinctive as God's children, set apart, holy.

How do we do that today? 'Holy' has a bit of a bad rap, 'Holier than thou.' But holiness isn't thinking ourselves better than others; it's about being distinctive, set apart for God's use. Being the one who doesn't join in the scandal-mongering, the one who doesn't drink and drive, the one who shows God's grace, because **it always was grace, right from the start.**

A story. An athlete had been picked to represent his country at the Olympics: The men's 100m, a prestigious event, and he was tipped to win. But, at the last minute, while the Olympics were actually underway, he dropped out and swapped to 400m. Why? Because the heats for his event were on a Sunday and Sunday was a day of rest. This happened at the 1924 Olympics and was, of course, Eric Liddel, of *Chariots of Fire* fame. He won gold.

Is such strict Sunday observance necessary for Xians? For him it was. He put his feet where his faith was. As with other disputable matters: Each one of us should be fully convinced in our own mind. (Rom 14:5) The question is, **how will I live a distinctive life?**

Number 5. Honour yer Pa and yer Ma. This is **not** instruction for little kiddies to be good. Much as I love the carol in general, I've always hated the line 'Christian children all must be, mild, obedient good as he.' YUK! As if Jesus came to make children have nice table manners.

The Ten Commandments were spoken principally to adult men, whose parents would have been old. It's a command to look after the vulnerable, even when they're not economically useful. Respect human dignity. We are each made in God's image even if we're infirm, living with dementia or, like me, got a bit of a gammy knee. This is practical grace, because **it always was grace, right from the start.**

Those two commands make for a just and caring society. The next three focus on how we maintain that.

Short and sweet. **Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal.** And it is 'do not murder' rather than 'do not kill'. The Hebrew word is about getting into a shouting match with someone over something then waiting down a dark alley and beating them to a pulp. It's a different word from 'kill' as in war or 'put to death' as in execution. Not that I'm saying either of those are good things, but I'm just noting that Hebrew had different words and God chose the one that means 'don't beat someone to a pulp because you are angry with them'. Hence Jesus' comments that *even getting that angry* is as bad as the act.

The final two govern what's going on in our heads. Misdeeds that can only be known by God. As we say in the confession, 'we have sinned against you in *thought*, word and deed'. It's very unusual for a law code to govern minds as well as actions. It's like you might hear a stropky teen say "There's no law against thinking, is there?" Well, yes actually, if it's wrong thinking. As Jesus said in Matt 12, "Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks" and, we might add, "the hands act."

Do not lie in court (bear false testimony) is particularly pertinent in a culture where a witness might swear in the name of God to tell the truth, and where many crimes carried the death penalty, thus linking to commandments 3 and 6.

The last one, **coveting**, is the least famous. It probably should be the most. In our culture coveting is the norm. The whole of the advertising industry is based on it. But look how expansive this commandment is. I'm guessing the people back then had a bit of a problem with coveting too!

Look at the very end of our reading. Moses said to the people, "**Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the awe of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.**" These are God's Guide for a Good Life. **It always was grace, right from the start.**

These are guiderails for our benefit, to keep us on track, to stop us falling over the cliff edge. They're made to bring us life and blessing. They're not supposed to be tub-thumping *Thou Shalt Nots* as if the Kingdom of God were a matter of eating and drinking, or tithing our salt and pepper. **It always was grace, right from the start.**

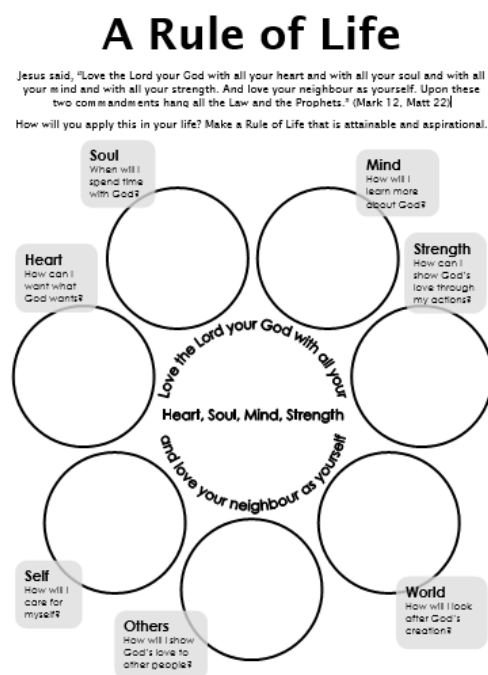
Jesus helpfully summarised the Law. "Love God with everything you are and love your neighbour as yourself." He was quoting from the famous Jewish prayer, the Shema (Deut 6:4), and adding Lev 19:18. That's great and all, looks fab on a mug, but what does it mean, practically? (Someone asked Jesus this exact question in Luke 10 and prompted the story of the Good Samaritan, so we know it's a good question.)

How can we take the principles of **God's Guide for a Good Life**, and apply them to ourselves, translate them into our dialect? I suggest a **Rule of Life**. Here's a handy-dandy gizmo to help us think about how we put Jesus' summary of the law into practice.

A Rule of Life is often associated with people in religious orders, but we all have a rule of life, whether we write it down or not. It's our idea of the kind of person we are. "I'm someone who recycles." "I care about my fitness." "I'm a good listener."

It's not like a New Year's Resolution, where you try to screw up a massive feat of will-power to go to the gym every day only to fail and give up by Jan 5th. A Rule of Life is **more about being than doing** (although how we are will always overflow into action).

It can be helpful, every now and then, to review our Rule of Life and see if it matches up with what we'd like it to be. And if it doesn't, ask God what tweaks we can make,



because **doing** becomes being, just as much as **being** becomes doing. Let's look at this quickly before I finish.

Loving God with our **whole heart**. 'Heart' in Jesus' culture was not the seat of emotions, but of will, of decision-making. We retain this sense in 'having a change of heart'. This means changing one's opinion, decision or viewpoint. So **Heart - How can I want what God wants?**

Soul - When will I spend time with God? How we spend out time denotes our priorities.

Mind - How will I learn more about God? Of course, knowing *about* God is not the same as knowing God, but what football fan can't name the players of their favourite team?

Strength - How can I show God's love through my actions? How will my deeds be distinctive?

And loving our neighbour as ourselves. To start with: **How will I care for myself?** You are made in God's image just as much as the next person and are worthy of care and compassion. Being God's child doesn't mean beating yourself up for not being perfect. God thinks you are worthy of love, and God is not wrong.

How will I show God's love to other people? As we receive God's grace and mercy, how will that overflow to those around us?

How will I look after God's creation? This was the very first job given to humanity. Take care of the world I have made.

Use the questions as prompts to think about how we can incorporate Jesus' summary of the law in our everyday lives. Let's make our goals attainable, but also aspirational - neither depressingly burdensome nor forgettably vague. But remember, above all, this is **God's Guide for a Good Life**.

It always was grace, right from the start. And it still is. Amen.