

Exodus 20

I don't know whether you saw Ian Hislop's excellent television documentary "When bankers were good" this week? It is still available on iplayer so don't miss it. Hislop examined the world of seriously loaded Victorian financiers. And demonstrated something which is in stark contrast to modern financial sector workers. In Victorian England the bankers had a massive social conscience.

Interestingly the St Paul's Institute, associated with St Paul's Cathedral, finally published its report "Value and Values" on the ethical state of city financiers today. It revealed a body of people living with contradictions. Like the rest of the country they tend to believe that the most highly paid are being paid too much, and that there is too big a gap between rich and poor. But their number one motivation for their work by far is the money, and they are deeply resistant to outside interference, especially from the church. As the Church Times put it in its headline

We shan't listen to advice, say bankers.

Hislop and the St Paul's Institute together have put their finger on something important. For most of my life it has been fashionable to use "Victorian" as a term of abuse. It conjures up pompous, restrictive, moralistic fools desperately trying to stop everyone having fun and mired in hypocrisy.

We don't realise that we are the victims of a mass propaganda campaign. It was led by Lytton Strachey, who, in 1918 published his ground-breaking book *Eminent Victorians*. It was a sustained character assassination of various heroes of the Victorian era with a very clear purpose in mind. Strachey belonged to the Bloomsbury Set who were systematically trying to overthrow their moral heritage – especially sexually. To do that he set out to make the Victorians look ridiculous. His lead was followed by numerous others until by the second half of the twentieth century the word "Victorian" was almost a synonym for "bad".

Yet Victorian England saw the establishment of thousands of schools and hospitals. Almost all the great charitable institutions from the NSPCC to the RSPCA were founded by Victorians. It not only saw a massive explosion of wealth in this country, but also an even greater avalanche of philanthropy. To be sure there was plenty to mock and criticise as there is in any age, but it was not a dark age of repression and hypocrisy – it was much more close to a golden age of compassion and philanthropy. And overwhelmingly that philanthropic drive was fuelled and guided by Christianity. To those who say that philanthropy is a natural instinct among the rich and that Christianity was only an incidental shaper of it in the 19th century, I say read the St Paul's Institute report. The present day ethical vacuum compared to our Victorian forebears is shocking.

And I am left thinking perhaps... just perhaps our culture will seek again the fountain from which so much life and vibrancy and good flowed into our culture. And the fiasco surrounding the response of St Pauls Cathedral to the Occupy protest highlighted something else. If we don't speak clearly and act clearly as believers then we will be irrelevant.

What is true for us was true for Israel over three thousand years ago. We have been following the story of the Exodus – how God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. But last week we saw that they are saved for a purpose. They were saved to be royal priests to the world. To live as human beings were supposed to live – ruling over and looking after the world properly as vice-regents of God. And to be priests – enjoying a unique relationship with God, and mediating God's presence and his values to the world around.

And that required obedience. We jumped over it last week but look at the beginning of chapter 19:5



Exo 19:5-6

“if you obey me fully and keep my covenant...”

Obedience is an intrinsic element of their mandate to the world. Hence the very next chapter is the ten commandments – the ten great foundational statements about how we should live.

We could stay in the ten commandments for at least the next ten weeks and that would be massively nourishing, but we are surveying the whole book of Exodus in his series so we cannot do more than glance at this great chapter.

By way of introduction we should notice that the ten commandments are not called laws. In Exodus 20:1 they are called “words”. There are plenty of rules described as laws elsewhere but these are not laws. They serve more as a kind of foundational document like a constitution. Fundamental principles upon which individual laws are based. To try to capture that this morning I want to call this chapter a charter.

1. The charter for freedom

Everything stems from God’s prior act of salvation

Exo 19:4

Exo 20:2

- We are not obedient to make ourselves savable, we are obedient because God first saved us.
- There is a wider sense in which these principles are applicable to society in general but that is not their first purpose. Their first purpose is to enable God’s people to live truly fulfilled, truly human, truly God-glorifying lives.

They are fences for freedom

“you shall not” sounds restrictive but actually defining the limits of liberty

cf Gen 2 “you may eat of any tree in the garden but not the tree of knowledge of good and evil”

- To preserve our freedom we need rules
 - Driving on the left

2. A relational charter

There have, of course, been numerous efforts to write an atheist, or humanist ten commandments. Most of them end up being pretty banal but there is a commandment that often takes centre stage. In Anthony Grayling’s humanist bible it forms an addendum at the end.

“Add to these ten injunctions, this: O friends, let us always be true to ourselves”

He is quoting from Shakespeare’s Hamlet where Polonius addresses his son Laertes with a series of aphorisms ending with
above all to thine own self be true

But Shakespeare’s intention was to mock Polonius – he is an old fool and a sinister one at that. If we only look inside ourselves for guidance we will become horribly confused. Because we are such a mixture of glory and shame – what part of ourselves are we to be true to?

At the heart of the ten commandments is a call to be true to God.



Exodus 20:3

Literally “you shall have no other gods *to my face*.” In your minds eye there must not be the true God and then the gods of money, sex, and power, and whatever else all jostling for attention – let the eyes of your heart fix their clear unimpeded attention on the living God.

There we find something – indeed someone – to be true to outside of ourselves. The only God who is infinitely perfect, infinitely wonderful and infinitely attractive. You see why I call it a relational charter. It is a charter to pursue a relationship with the living God, not to live the reflexive, closed in, isolated, confused life of the person who is only “true to themselves”.

And that right relationship with God will issue in a right relationship with human beings who are made in his image. The last six of the ten commandments are all about relationships with people. About their dignity – their life - do not murder, their wellbeing - let even slaves rest, their reputation - do no bear false witness Daily Mirror journalists, their possessions – do not steal, their role in society – honour father and mother, do not commit adultery. We are to treasure human beings as of infinite value.

Atheistic philosophies have always dehumanised people – from the extreme forms of Pol Pot’s Cambodia or Stalin’s Russia, to the more subtle degradation of people that pure free market capitalism is increasingly demonstrating.

God says treasure me more than anything else in eternity and treasure human beings made in my image more than anything else on earth and you will be my treasured possession, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

3. A charter fulfilled only in us

There is something disconcerting in the ten commandments which is meant to leave us with a deep question. There was the beginnings of that question in the first commandment.



Exo 20:3

How can have my sole attention? That kind of undivided love of God is an impossible thing isn’t it?

The middle commandments move into easier territory – we can most of us manage not to murder. But then the last commandment hits us again with the depths of the demand.



Exo 20:17

You shall not covet. What no longing glances in the estate agent’s window? No second glance at the top shelf in the newsagent? No daydreams about banker’s salaries?

Jesus didn’t help matters.

Matthew 5:21–22 (NIV)

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Anger, dismissing a person as an idiot, they are breaches of the prohibition on murder. All the ten commandments are actually about deep issues of the heart. And an honest look at our hearts is condemning isn’t it.

The Apostle Paul described the paradoxical nature of these commandments.

Romans 7:7–8 (NIV)

For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”⁸ But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting.

Because these commandments don’t transform our hearts in some ways they leave us in a worse place than we were in the first place. Now we see clearly how far short of God’s commands we are.

Thank God for Jesus! Jesus does something absolutely foundational for us if we are to be people of the charter. He died on the cross to pay for every single one of our failures. Without Jesus those ten commandments always served as much as a charge list in the courts of heaven as a much as a mandate for life. Satan could before God and say “they are condemned by your own words.” But since Jesus God has had a reply. “No they are not. I paid for that charge list in the death of my son.”

And thank God for his Holy Spirit. Because since that first Christian Pentecost God’s Holy Spirit has been changing hearts so that now Christians find themselves in their innermost being loving God, calling him Father, enjoying him more than all the treasures of this world. To be sure there are still struggles and failures but now when Christians read “you shall have no other gods before me” they find themselves saying “do you know I think God is changing me in that way. I find myself saying more and more:

Psalm 73:25 (NIV)

²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

If you are a Christian here then you can read the ten commandments as no Israelite in Moses’ day could. You can read it as a FULLY forgiven person because of Jesus. You can read it as INTERNALLY CHANGED person because of the Holy Spirit. It really is your charter for freedom.

So I want to say to you this morning that this place will be full of people who one way or another are not enjoying that freedom. If you are not a Christian yet then I say to you can’t you see the way humanity is going as it abandons this royal charter? Do you want to be sucked down in this vortex? Hear God’s royal commission to you. Accept the forgiveness of Jesus. Seek the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. Set out on this extraordinary, dignified, glorious journey that so many millions have walked before – follow Christ.

And if you are a Christian this morning. I want to say to you you need to live out these ten commandments, and the world around desperately needs you to live them. As a pastor I want to say to you, with deep compassion in my heart, I spend too much time dealing with your misery. And do you know every time I could read these ten commandments and I would hear you are some point say – No I won’t do that. You say I can’t do it. I say God has given you the resources. He has given you unlimited forgiveness in Jesus so you need not wallow in condemnation. He has given you a new heart by his Holy Spirit. He has given you his church to help you. If you do not live by these things you are denying your faith and storing up for yourself untold misery.

But if you do, not only will you find joy, peace, happiness, liberty, hope. But also we might actually find that our nation once again holds God’s commandments in honour.

Exodus 19:4–6 (NIV)

⁴ ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ 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, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.”

Amen – let it be so.