

"UNDERSTANDING THE LAW"

Exodus 20: 1-7

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"Do We Need The Law?"

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by

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In the year 1290 BC one of the greatest men of all time, Moses, led the little nation of Israel out of Egypt. At the beginning of their escape experience they were emergency oriented, held together because of the common unmistakable danger of the Egyptian soldiers. However, once the Israelites were out of the range of the Egyptians they then faced another challenge, not as obvious, but in the end more important because of its long range impact, and that was the task of discovering a way to live together on a day by day basis.

The question is this: How will they order their lives and survive as a people? There are two obvious possibilities:

(1) Moses can continue as absolute leader where all decisions will be by decree from the leader downward. This is the totalitarian solution, and throughout human history many societies have experimented with this social pattern. Its success is founded upon the unquestioned speed and decisiveness that in time of immediate external danger may be of relative value. The problem of totalitarianism is its difficulty in providing for normal day to day living patterns when the emergency is less concrete. For this reason, totalitarian systems have found it necessary to maintain an emergency atmosphere in order to justify government by decree.

(2) The other solution is apparently the opposite possibility - and that is anarchy. In anarchy the solidarity of the community is discarded in favor of individual separateness. Each part of the whole in this option searches for an identity and way of life without a binding reference to the whole.

Both of these options are bad solutions for man because they both result in a degraded view of the unique human being. Totalitarian rule by decree is a proud vertical tower of power relationships where the rights and dignity of those at the lower part are completely dependent upon the will of the leadership and the bureaucrats to whom it loans its own absolute authority. The relationships are vertical and the worth of each individual is intrinsically related to the power he is able to borrow from the towering social pyramid above him.

Anarchy is no better! The tower has been replaced by a thousand smaller but

equally terrifying vertical structures. As people splinter away from one unifying whole the results are jungle-like territories of forceful leaders who are surrounded by their own followers who in a similar way as in the autocratic society borrow power and inflict its terror on those who are weaker or unallied.

Moses is faced with both options; it is precisely at this critical moment while his people are camped at the very mountain where their leader had first seen the burning bush many years before that he climbs the same Mt. Sinai and on that place he discovers a better way. He ascends Mt. Sinai the absolute leader, highest figure of a great vertical tower, but he descends the mountain with tablets of stone that will make Moses a man on level ground with his followers, horizontally related to all other men, Jews and foreigners alike. On Sinai Moses received the law and this is what the law does. It is a sign given by God of the worth and dignity of all men.

Have you ever thought of the law in this way? The first three commandments establish one authentic vertical relationship and that is of man toward God.

"And God spoke all these words, saying, 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.'" Ex 20:1-7

This one singular affection sets the people of Moses free from Moses. He is not above the law. Though his face shines with a strange light when he returns from Mt. Sinai the splendor is fading (note Paul's discussion: 2 Corinthians 3:7-11). The glory belongs to God and the ten commandments have granted a new sort of worth to man, the privilege of equality, of individual worth, and non-revokable rights - this is the theme of the second half of the law.

"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maid-servant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it. Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you. You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.'" Ex 20:8-17

Exodus 20: 8-17

Note that the protection of inalienable rights are granted not only to those who hold power but the circle expands to include women, slaves, and foreigners.

There we have the law of Moses; the end to totalitarianism because the law is above Moses and the end to anarchy because it is the law for all, the law above me. Think of the ten commandments in four ways:

(1) The law is a boundary. This understanding of the law has both a negative and positive implication. Positively put the law insists that each man deserves by God's decree living space and other men regardless of their power have no right to cancel or pre-empt that meaningful living space. This is what the law means when it denies the permission to bear false witness, to kill, to commit adultery... In each case one individual closes in upon the life of someone else, but the law affirms the positive right of man to rest from work on the Sabbath, to have his wife and family, to own his own possessions, to live at peace. The law is a boundary that surrounds these symbols of human existence. The negative implication is also clear. My right to existence does not extend into the life space of my neighbor; and when I cross over that boundary I am guilty of transgression of the law of God. If we are serious about peace both at the local as well as international levels we must honor the boundaries. No man or country can be driven to the wall, cornered and threatened; and if he is placed in such a position then before long in one great spasm of anxiety he will make his break for survival and freedom.

(2) The law is a plumb line held against the structures we build and the way we live. This is the judgement theme implied in the ten commandments. "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house..." is a direct challenge to our selfishness and points up without any compromise our guilt. The prophets make their case from this judgement theme and it is significant that the first of the great prophets is Nathan who holds the plumb line of the law against the most towering figure of the whole of the Old Testament, David himself. Nathan shouts out the hard word of the law to David when he says to the King: "Thou art the man". The greatness of the law is that it allows no escape because of privilege or power. Therefore the image of the plumb line held against us is essential, otherwise the law becomes a "paper tiger".

(3) The law is a mirror too. The ten commandments form a brief yet profound portrait of what true humanity is. What it means to be a man is shown in the law so that as I look in this incredible mirror I see a human face. The law shows man set free from all idolatries, it shows a man at peace, rightly related to his parents, it shows a man aware of the rights of other men. This is true humanism.

(4) The law is an indelible mark. Moses brings down from the mountain no ordinary document but tablets of stone with the covenant engraved permanently. It is interesting that the Hebrew word for covenant is literally "to cut". This is the law, cut into stone so that it can never be distorted by a Philadelphia lawyer or a king. All of this means that the law stays. We do not really break it; it breaks us. Just as a man does not break the law of gravity when he steps off the Tokyo Tower; so it is with the law of Moses. We bear false witness toward our business associates and the result is broken confidence, broken relationships. Sooner or later our gossip catches up with us and people seal us off, etc. What happened is that the indelible fact about the law took effect, perhaps slowly but inexorably. This then is the law.

The paradox of the law is the love-hate feelings that we all have toward it. On the one side we resent its limitation upon our freedom and the guilt that it produces in our consciousness. Yet on the other side the law insures our individual worth and protects our equality and our freedom from both the singular tower of totalitarianism and the thousands of gangster towers that are the result of anarchy. It is our destiny to live within this dialectical tension and to search for a genuine resolution of it. For this reason the law of Moses is the greatest messianic passage in the whole of the Old Testament.