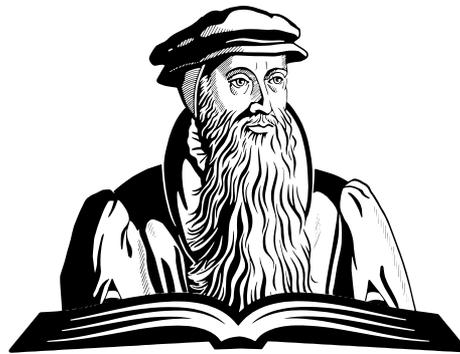

VIDEO LECTURE MODULE: TEN COMMANDMENTS

LECTURE 7: THE LAW AT MT. SINAI

Lecture Presenter: Rev. A.T. Vergunst



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module

TEN COMMANDMENTS

18 LECTURES

REV. A.T. VERGUNST

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Lecture 7

THE LAW AT MT. SINAI

Unforgettable and deeply moving was the scene at Mt. Sinai when God proclaimed His eternal Law to the people of Israel. Young and old, including all the leaders of Israel, stood trembling and drew back in holy awe. Never before and never since has God spoken like He did at Mt. Sinai. Only the voice of God as it will be heard upon Jesus's return on the clouds of heaven and earth will match this majesty of God.

But why did God choose to display Himself to His redeemed people Israel in this moving manner? He never has done anything without a purpose and certainly His purpose then must have significance for us today.

TRANSCRIPT LECTURE 7

Welcome again, dear friends. Today's lecture is on the law at Mount Sinai, and the best way to capture the setting of it is to listen first to what Moses describes in Exodus 19, particularly in verses 16 and 18 when he describes the incredible scene that the Lord displayed on the top of the mount. 'There were in that morning thunders and lightnings,' he writes, 'a thick cloud surrounded the mountain top. The voice of the trumpet became exceedingly loud so that the people in the camp trembled.' And as the people stood there at the very edge of the mountain, the whole mountain is in smoke because the Lord descended in fire. And in that context, they stand there looking at this incredible, majestic display.

The voice of God speaks, "I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." The lawgiver speaks the words that He later literally carved into stones. And even though we have together searched out the lawgiver's character and have seen that He is love, devotional, sincere, [and] pure, it is noteworthy that God comes on this mountain to give His law in a majestic display that is so awe-inspiring that even Moses said, "I exceedingly fear and quake," as Hebrews 12:21 informs us. It seems to be so opposite of what God's nature is: loving or love, rather. It seems so opposite [to] the nature and the life and the gentleness of Jesus, Who fulfilled the law. Why then did God deliver His command to love Him above all and our neighbor as ourselves in such a fear-inspiring and ear-deafening manner? That's the question that in this lecture we need to think about together.

So, let us first consider the setting in the first observation of how the 10 Commandments are given, and second let's think a little deeper about the reasons why God proclaimed the 10 Commandments in this manner. So, what is the setting in which the Lord brought the 10 Commandments? Well literally, friends, no event has been so majestic as the giving of the law of God on Mount Sinai. God never spake before as He did then, and we will never hear His voice in that majestic power until the day that Jesus returns in the clouds of heaven. Moses himself

recalled 40 years later in Deuteronomy that it was a unique event. He says, “For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of fire, as we have, and lived?” (Deuteronomy 5:26).

So, let’s consider the context of this majestic event. The setting is first of all a gracious setting, secondly a covenantal setting, and thirdly a solemn setting. Let’s begin with the first one, a gracious setting. It seems to be a rather startling observation. Gracious? Yes, the 10 Commandments are framed in the context of grace. Exodus 20 is preceded by Exodus 1 through 19, and in those chapters we have the history of God’s gracious redemption of Israel out of the land of Egypt. Back in Exodus 4, God speaks to Moses through the burning bush, and He says, “Israel is my son, even my firstborn” (verse 22). ‘It’s my adopted son.’ That’s only grace. That’s based on no other thing but grace. Moses reminded Israel of that repeatedly, particularly 40 years later in Deuteronomy 7. He says, ‘Don’t forget. “The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because you were more in number than any people; for you were the fewest of all people” (verse 7). I picked you up only out of grace.’

In Exodus 19, as you noticed as you read the chapter, He compares Himself to that eagle carrying her fledglings. So, God says, “you have seen how I bare you as on eagle’s wings, and brought you unto myself” (verse 4). That’s a graciousness: I brought you unto myself. It was important, therefore, that Israel would never forget this gracious setting. And therefore, God begins the 10 Commandments with this beautiful preamble. The introduction speaks about His omnipotent grace whereby He delivered them, “I am the LORD thy God, that brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (verse 2).

Now that’s not only important for Israel to hear. It’s important for us to hear today who have been saved by God’s delivering grace from our spiritual bondage. Also, we are to remember that it’s grace, grace alone as John Newton so beautifully captured in his well-known song, ‘Amazing grace that saved a wretch like me.’ So, friends, for us it is extremely important when we look at the 10 Commandments that we never divorce them from this gracious setting. The 10 Commandments are not a restatement of the covenant of works. It is not like God spoke to Adam and Eve, “Do this, and you shall live.” No, God says, ‘It’s because you live and because I redeemed you, therefore keep my commandments so that the relationship, the life we have together, may flourish, may deepen, may endure as well.

So, secondly, it was a covenantal setting. All what the Lord has done with Israel was covenantal. Exodus 2 ends with the words, when God hears the Israelites groaning in the Egyptian bondage, and then it says, “God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God had respect unto them” (verses 24-25). Later on, Moses recalls this again in Deuteronomy 7:8 after all that took place in Egypt. He says it was ‘because,’ he wrote, ‘he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers. Therefore God brought you out of Egypt.’ [It’s a] covenantal setting. [A] covenant is a special and a personal relationship in which two parties bind themselves together with promises, vows, to one another.

Think of your marriage covenant. Each party makes a solemn promise and accepts the responsibilities and the conditions that belong to the relationship, or to the covenant. God has always dealt with mankind in a covenantal way. With Adam and Eve, as we have seen, it was the covenant of works. Based on their obedience, would the relationship flourish and deepen. So is God’s relationship with Israel based on a covenantal grace relationship. When God in Exodus 19:5-6 approached Israel, notice that He seeks their consent to the covenant which He [had] already initiated with them. Listen to these words, “Now therefore, if you will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.” And all the people readily respond, “All that the LORD has spoken we shall do” (verse 8). They meant it sincerely, until three days later when they realized how this holy God is so far removed from them.

There’s something very unique about this covenant, this grace covenant between God and His people Israel. It’s unequal. The holy God is in covenant with unholy people. That’s the riches of the gospel. The people felt instantly how impossible this relationship is. It’s not on equal footing. We felt this in Exodus 20:18 [where] we read, ‘Seeing the thunder and lightning and hearing the noise of the trumpet, they stood back and they trembled exceedingly and asked Moses that the Lord would no more speak with them but with him instead.’ Immediately, God answered this and revealed to Moses the first elementary revelation of the tabernacle in a very crude altar that Moses was commanded to make.

Now, the third thing about the covenant [is that] it is one-sided. It is one-sided in the establishment as well as in the execution. God initiated the covenant. God sovereignly defines the rules of the relationship in this covenant. God proves to be the faithful party in this covenant. Israel's history is a continued story of spiritual adultery and unfaithfulness, but God never broke His covenant with Israel. It's so one-sided.

And so, the third thing about this covenant [is that] it's grace-based instead of works-based. That doesn't mean that God doesn't require obedience, of course, but the obedience of us is not the basis of the covenant. God promised on His own grace to be their covenant God forever, even until today. Romans 11:28 says that the Jews remained the beloved for the fathers' sakes.

So, friends, to wrap this up let us keep in mind that when we look at Exodus 19 and 20, the Lord did not initiate His covenant relationship with Israel. He only formally confirmed it or enshrined it in the 10 Commandments. The preamble we already looked at reflects that, as well as the repeated statement throughout the 10 Commandments, "the Lord thy God." In the version of Deuteronomy 5, you notice that is repeated nine times. God stresses it, "I am the LORD your God." [It's a] relationship.

Now, let's ponder for a moment that it all means to us. We are no more [at] Mount Horeb. We are no Israelites or Jews. [Most of us] are [of Gentile] origin. What significance does all this have for us, the New Testament people of God? Is God really speaking to us in the same way as He spoke to His people gathered at Mount Sinai? The answer is emphatically, "Yes." Already in Deuteronomy 5 (this is 40 years later with mostly a new generation of people standing at the audience of Moses; many weren't even born when God came on Mount Sinai), Moses said, "The Lord made this covenant not with your fathers but with us, here alive this day" (verse 3).

So, fast-forward to the apostles Paul and Peter, who draw the line of God's covenant from Abraham to the New Testament church in some sweeping statements. [In] Galatians 3:29 what does Paul call the Galatians? Gentiles of origin. [There's] not any Jewish blood in them. He calls them "Abraham's seed." Hear this, verse 29 of chapter 3, "And if ye be Christ's, then you're Abraham's seed, and you're heirs according to the promise," according to the covenant. So, whether you're a Jew or a Greek, bond or free, male or female, if in Christ, we are Abraham's seed. In chapter 4:28, he repeats it again, except then he calls the Galatian believers born of heathen parents, "Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise."

[In] Romans 11, the apostle Paul uses a different picture. He compares Israel of old to the root, the stem, and the New Testament church, the Gentile believers, are like branches grafted into that stem. The New Testament church didn't replace the Old Testament church. The New Testament church is the expansion of the Old Testament church as God predicted in many prophecies, even Psalms in the Old Testament already. And, all this is all in line with what the apostle Peter preached on the day of Pentecost.

Filled and moved by the Holy Spirit, Peter takes the line of the Old Testament prophets, and he extends it forward to the worldwide church today in these words, "For the promise is unto you," standing in front of him, "and to your children," and perhaps many of them standing there too, "and to all that are afar off," to whom they have to still go to preach, "even as many as the LORD our God shall call" (Acts 2:39). And you notice he draws a line from Abraham onward to the New Testament church. Therefore, friends, within the New Testament church, the same Jehovah God is at work [Who] was at work in the Old Testament church, gathering His elect, from that church then [and] from the worldwide church today.

And, that means that each time and you and I today hear the preamble of the 10 Commandments, we ought to remind ourselves, as Israel [was] to remind themselves, of what God did. They were delivered out of the Egyptian bondage; we have been delivered out of the spiritual bondage. Once we were dead in trespasses and sin in the bondage to sin and Satan, and Paul exhorted the [redeemed] never to forget where they once were, like Ephesians 2:11-13, where he writes, "Wherefore remember," recall it, don't forget, "that ye," at that time, "in times past were Gentiles in the flesh ... that at that time, you were without Christ. You were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel. You were strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: but now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ." The Jews' and Gentiles' churches merge together as one.

Now, can you yourself make the inevitable conclusion if it is the same covenant, if we participate in a similar deliverance, [an] even greater deliverance, [then] the moral law must also have the same place in the life of God's redeemed as it had for Israel. Today it is not and never will be the way to life anymore, but it still is the way of life,

to preserve, to nurture, to deepen the relationship with God. And that, briefly, brings me to the last observation, which was a very solemn setting, that day on Mount Sinai [that] came with the most extraordinary revelation God has ever made.

Psalms 68:17 states about that day, "The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels: the Lord is among them, as in Sinai, in the holy place." Chief among all these angels was God Himself. He presented Himself clearly in the most awe-inspiring majesty the world had ever seen until that day. No part of Scripture, friends, has ever been uttered so much more impressively than the Mount Sinai 10 Commandments. Never did people ever hear the voice of God speak out of the midst of fire as Israel has heard then, as Moses says in Deuteronomy 4:33. "God talked with you face to face in the mount, out of the midst of fire," he says in Deuteronomy 5:4. And no other part of Scripture has ever been written like the 10 Commandments, with His own finger. God later on wrote it in the tables of stone and gave them to Moses.

So then, let us conclude with this question, 'What is now the reason God proclaimed the 10 commandments in such great majesty?' There are three reasons. First, think for a moment with me. If God was and is this God of love, and if the laws are the reflection of His most holy and lovely nature, why did He make Himself feel so unapproachable when He displayed Himself in this fire, in this incredible glory and majesty that made everybody fear and quake? The death penalty would be even on animals that innocently trespassed that boundary mark. Why would God state this lovely law in such negative tones? "Thou shalt not. Thou shalt not." There are three reasons.

First, God is now dealing with sinners. Even though redeemed from Egypt and even though in covenant with Him, the people who are standing there in front of Him on Mount Sinai are sinners. They have a distorted view of God. They have a distorted view of themselves, still. Their thoughts of God [are] way too low. Their thoughts of themselves [are] way too high. Therefore, God needs to display Himself in this very glorious majesty. Later on, God needed to charge Israel when He has a controversy with them. He says this: "Thou thought [that] I was altogether like as you" (Psalm 50:21). 'You put me on the same level, but so I am not.'

And therefore, God indeed may display Himself, friends, that the familiarity in which He comes near to us and dwells among us does not lead to a contempt of the great majesty and glory that we ought to display to Him. Hebrews 12 reiterates that, 'God is a consuming fire. Let us therefore come before him with reverence and godly fear' (verses 29 and 28). Therefore, Jesus teaches us in the disciples' prayer the first petition, "Our Father which art in heaven," the distance [and] the closeness, "our Father."

So, the second reason that God is so majestic in this address is that He is addressing His people in a very dangerous, tempting, broken world. Many forces are standing around Israel here that are seeking to destroy the beauty of their spiritual marriage, and therefore God needed to expound the law in such a forceful manner, just like a parent speaking to a young child who has no idea about the dangers around them, who doesn't see what is so dangerous. And so as a parent, we say, "Don't go across the fence. Don't go through that gate. Don't go with strangers. Don't accept their gifts." Now, that is not negative, but that is forceful because of the condition of the child. And so, God also as a caring parent, phrases the 10 Commandments in that manner.

And the third reason for this impressive presentation of God's high standard is as we already saw: to use the law as a schoolmaster to bring them to Jesus Christ. Instantly, the people seeing this and hearing God speak feel [that] this is not safe, to listen and to speak and to be near to God. It says, "When the people saw it, they removed, they stood afar off. And they pleaded with Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die" (Exodus 20:18-19). That was not a negative response. That was a good response.

In Deuteronomy 18, the Lord revealed to Moses this; the Lord said, "It is well spoken" (verse 17), that which they have spoken back then in Mount Sinai. And He promises them to raise up a prophet from among their brethren like unto them (verse 18). And we see Jesus Christ later, approachable, gentle, not lifting up His voice loudly [and] scaring them, but alluring them, drawing them. You see, that's what they felt the need for, and that's why God also in this presentation displayed Himself in that majesty, to make them feel the need for the Mediator.

Friends, having come now to the foot of the Mount Sinai, it's time for us to begin to listen to the 10 Commandments one after the other. And in the series of lectures that are coming now, I hope to take you to each of the commandments in one lecture, to look, to listen, to ponder 'What is the will of Jehovah so that the relationship between Him and His people will remain beautiful, glorious, lovely, close, satisfying, enjoyable?'

And what those specifics of the will of God are, we will look at in our next lectures.

So, may God bless all we have learned so far and multiply it manifold. Thank you.