

"The Role of Law"

Exodus 20:1-20

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In the church of my youth, the Ten Commandments were read each week as part of the worship service. We wouldn't recite them in unison, in part, I'm convinced, because the minister wanted to be the one to remind us weekly what those commandments demanded. And the minister of my youth seemed to relish in particular, the Thou Shalt Nots. And with each one, my mind would race—thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife nor his man-servant nor his maid-servant, his ox nor his ass nor anything that is thy neighbor's.

That weekly exercise was meant to remind us how far we had fallen. And while bearing false witness and stealing were obvious enough and easy to avoid, the minister would reinforce the prohibition against covetousness by including things like your neighbor's brand new color television set. No one was immune from falling short and angering God, and therefore standing in need of repentance.

The end result of that was that the commandments took on a heavy tone. God was watching and full of wrath. Like Santa, he knew if I'd been naughty or nice. Sadly, I think this is the way most people understand Christianity as a result. It's a list of rules to be obeyed, or else.

So what do we do with the Ten Commandments in a day and age where people lie and misrepresent the truth all the time? What do we make of "thou shall not kill" when we've almost become immune to the killing and violence that is an every day reality in today's world? Even most people of faith, I dare say, shrug the commandments off as we rationalize our behavior and choices.

But perhaps that's simply the way my minister was conveying them? Perhaps they were not intended to be heavy handed at all but were rather meant to convey something altogether different.

Well ordered societies, well ordered lives need rules. They need a sense of order and a general set of understandings as to the limits on human behavior. They need a moral grounding that spells out what is forbidden so as to know what is permissible.

Remember that "An eye for an eye" was a corrective, after all. It was not meant to justify vengeance, but to put limits on what vengeance would look like. If my ox gored your ox, you had a right to take my ox, but not to kill me. The punishment had to fit the crime. In other words, if you have been wronged, if a huge injustice has been committed against you, you have a right to justice, but that justice needs to be measured so as not to exceed some predetermined limits, and despite your anger and rage.

One of the best lines I've ever heard about capital punishment was when New York Governor Mario Cuomo was asked the hypothetical question, "If your wife were murdered would you support capital punishment for her killer?" Cuomo responded by saying, "No, I'd want to kill him myself, and I would want the state to intervene on my behalf and prevent me from doing that."

We need laws for the good and decent ordering of society. When God gave us the law, it provided God's people with an ethic of conduct. It gave us a road map, a basic outline on how to live and treat one

another, from one's father and mother to one's neighbor and her property. It wasn't overly specific but was broad and sweeping.

But make no mistake about it, the law was given by God so that we would know, in no uncertain terms, what God expectations are for us. Like any household, there are rules and customs, things you do and things that under no circumstances you don't know. And often those things are not written down because they don't have to be. They are values shared and lived, explained and understood within the household and family. "Under this roof, within this household, this is how we will conduct ourselves. This is who we are and how we will live."

Without basic laws, chaos soon emerges. And sadly, it is not difficult for any of us to picture what lawlessness looks like. We've seen it time and again when things break down and people act out. In many cases, ironically, things get out of hand because the law was not followed. And so deep within us is this sense of right and wrong, that when justice is denied, people frequently revolt and chaos ensues.

This past week we were once again horrified when we awakened to the news of yet another mass shooting in this country, this time the largest killing spree in modern history. We really have to ask ourselves if we can call ourselves, with any legitimacy, the home of the brave when there are millions of us walking around armed and afraid.

And yet again, this heinous act was carried out not by a Syrian refugee, not by a Muslim, not by a young black man who'd been harassed and pulled over by the police some fifty times, but by another deranged white man with far too easy access to too many guns. It was carried out by a man who deliberately and intentionally open fired on an unsuspecting crowd enjoying an outdoor concert in Las Vegas.

Predictably, it was immediately greeted with calls for stronger gun control laws. And just as predictably, those calls were met with claims that people were simply playing politics with a tragedy. "Now is not the time to discuss gun control legislation." Well, when will it be the time? When will something that the overwhelming majority of people favor, namely stronger gun control laws and regulations, be acted upon?

And I've heard the arguments. But here's the thing, real sportsmen don't hunt with machine guns and assault rifles like the ones used to mow down those people in Las Vegas. Most law-abiding hunters favor stronger gun control measures and more intense background checks. Most reasonable people don't think it should be legal to get around these things by going to a gun show to purchase a weapon. And it should be harder for mentally ill people to obtain guns not easier, as was recently made the case. Laws are needed for the protection of society.

"But gun control laws won't work, there are already too many guns in the hands of too many people."

Let's try, shall we? Let's make owning a gun as difficult as it is in some states for a woman to get an abortion, or for you to purchase over the counter Sudafed. Let's make getting your hands on a gun more difficult and see what happens. It has worked in other places, Australia, for example. Let's try it here.

We need basic laws.

I mentioned that the Ten Commandments were read every Sunday in the church of my childhood. And they were read before the prayer of confession. We never prayed a unison prayer of confession, as I'm sure that would have been considered a rather Papish thing to do. Besides, Jesus taught us how to pray by giving us one—the Lord's Prayer, and that was the only prayer we ever recited together. So the

minister would read the Ten Commandments, reminding us how bad we were, and would then offer a prayer of confession on our behalf.

And in a way that seems logical. The Commandments are God expectations of us and we have fallen short. But that gets it completely backwards. What that approach fails to take into consideration is the context in which those commandments were given. Hear it again in case you missed it.

I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,
[therefore] you shall have no other gods before me...

Did you hear the good news in that? God had already delivered God's people when the law was given. It wasn't a matter of the people living perfectly, according to God's standards and then being rewarded with deliverance and freedom for their adherence to the law. In fact, it's just the opposite.

In our deliverance and freedom, God gave us the Commandments as goals to which we should aspire. They are both God's expectations but also God's desires for us. This is a thoroughly Reformed concept, by the way. Out of gratitude to God for what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ—for the gift of God's unconditional love and grace, we now strive to honor God by the way we live our lives and treat others.

And it is reflected in our order of worship. In your bulletin are three headings: The Approach to God, The Word of God and The Response to God. Under the Approach to God we come into God's presence and confess our sins, acknowledging our need for forgiveness. Under The Word of God, we hear a sermon where the good news of God's love and grace is proclaimed. And under The Response to God, we begin to express our gratitude to God for those gifts. We present our offerings, we pray for the sick and for our world. In short, in gratitude to God we begin to live out our faith.

And so rather than seeing the law as a burden or as something heavy handed and designed to make people feel guilty, there is another way to understand it. What loving parent doesn't sit their children down early on and explain the rules of life to them? What responsible parent doesn't teach them right from wrong, good from bad, and that how to treat others—and that how we treat others reveals a great deal as to our character and true nature.

That's not being demanding and threatening. Teaching your children to say please and thank you, to wash their hands and brush their teeth, to look both ways before crossing the street, is not being overbearing and harsh. It's an act of love to teach them those things. It's for their own good and wellbeing.

And think about those commandments—there are ten of them, and if we obeyed them or even came close—if more people at least tried and came close to obeying them, their lives would be better off and far less complicated. What's the old saying, "If everyone simply did the right thing the world would be a far better place."

The good news is that God's love and goodness are there from the very beginning. What it meant for God's people, was that because they were free and no longer held as captives, they were also free not to have other gods or to have to put their faith in meaningless idols. They were free to establish themselves and to organize their community around the principles of love. God's people were free to order their communal life in such a way that they were not going to take advantage of one another by lying, and cheating and stealing. Neither would they murder because if you really honor your neighbor you will not kill your neighbor.

While I certainly didn't understand the law this way when I was young, the way I didn't always appreciate or honor, frankly, my parent's rules, I have come to understand it differently. I have come to see the law, however, and our need to be governed and ordered by core and guiding principles, as something inspired in love, taught out of love and for our wellbeing, and then lived in gratitude for the one whose love is so great, no other gods are needed.

Amen.