

Exodus 20 – Part 1

In this lesson we will examine Exodus 20:1-7. We are dividing the chapter into multiple lessons because the content is not only central to life and worship of the people of God but is filled with significant meaning and nuance that ought not to be missed.

First, we begin with God speaking in verse 1. What ought not to be missed in this verse is that God is delivering these words to all the people. These words are not addressed only to Moses to write on stone tablets (not mentioned in this chapter) but are addressed in intelligible speech to the people of God. Also, they are given as “words” and not “commandments.” This is made clear in Jewish tradition where they are referred to as the Ten Words...because God spoke them to the people.

Second, in verse two we have God redefining God’s identity to the people. God does not identify God’s self as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but as the God who brought the people out of Egypt. This new identity also offers the people a stark contrast between their old lives and their new lives. Their old lives were lives of slavery and bondage to a “human god-king.” Their new lives are to be lived in the freedom of a God who liberates them for abundant life. This contrast, and the choice between the two ways of life, will become an ongoing struggle for the people of Israel.

Third, in verse three we have the first law or command: you shall have no other gods before me. The language of this command is the language of marriage. It speaks of an exclusive commitment of the people to God. It is not a nascent monotheism, only a commitment to an exclusive relationship. This exclusivity is not simply because God is possessive but because God is the only god who can offer life to God’s beloved. All the other gods are not only incapable of so doing but are more often the gods of death than the gods of life.

Fourth, in verses 4-6 we listen as God prohibits the creation of idols. To fully appreciate this command, we need to return to the creation stories of Genesis (chapters 1-2). In these chapters we read that it is God who creates, and it is God who stands outside of time and physical space. What this intends to convey is that there is a stark contrast between creator and creature/creation. The people of God are to be careful to avoid conflating these two. In other words, creature/creation is not divine. This concept is also at the heart of Genesis 3, in which Adam and Eve believe that they are capable, as creatures, of ignoring the creator and appropriately ordering their own lives. In a sense they made themselves into idols/gods and the result was shame, blame, fear, and death. This command also reminds the people that there are generational consequences (remember Cain and Abel?) to the choice to worship creature/creation rather than God.

Fifth, in verse 7 we are reminded not to wrongfully use God’s name. This warning carries with it two important concerns. First to wrongfully use the Lord’s name implies that the user of the name is attempting to make God into his/her own possession, meaning using the name to control God and God’s actions. Second, misusing the name in vain assumes that one knows the heart and mind of God and can claim that God approves of whatever the user is doing. In a sense, God is on my side.

Reflections: One of the interesting aspects of these words is that they are given to the entire people, but the people are addressed in the first person singular. In other words, everyone hears the words as if they are addressed individually to each hearer. What this means is that there is no room for individuals to evade responsibility for choosing/not choosing to listen to God. None of us can say, “Well that command is for those people, but not for me.” This collective yet individual address is critical for our life as individuals and community.

Questions:

1. How do you understand these words as both collective and individual?
2. What creature/creations seem to demand our worship?
3. How have you used God’s name wrongfully and why is it such a temptation to do so?