

Exodus 20 – Part 3

In this lesson we turn to what has been called the second table of the law, or what we find to be more familiar legal and moral ground. Each of these words is actually two words in Hebrew, or in the case of false witness and coveting they begin with two words and then expand. This formula makes the commands easier to remember. We will look only briefly at each.

Thou shall not kill does not prohibit killing. Though some have translated this word as don't murder, rather than don't kill, a better translation would be don't kill wrongfully. This implies that there will be times when killing is sanctioned and perhaps even commanded. Killing simply for the sake of killing is prohibited.

Thou shall not commit adultery. This command is at the heart of maintaining the life and work of the family, which is also at the heart of maintaining the life and work of the community. For if families cannot remain intact, then it becomes more difficult for societies (especially ones centered around a communal life) to remain intact. It also insures clear paternity, and thus the appropriate transmission of name and property from one generation to the next.

Thou shall not steal. This command is necessary to the right ordering of any community. Stable communities need to know that what is mine is mine and what is yours is yours. Theft is both an injustice to and a sign of contempt for the owner of what is stolen. This is so because property is in some ways an extension of a person's self, and so to steal is like murder, because one takes part of another's self.

Thou shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. Like theft, to bear false witness against neighbor is to steal the reputation of another. It is to use speech in a manner that kills another in the eyes of the community. In addition, bearing false witness undermines the community, which can only be whole when the truth is spoken.

Thou shall not covet. The Hebrew word for covet means more than desiring something else. It implies a desiring that will lead to action to acquire something that one ought not to have. This was the word used in Genesis to describe Eve desiring the fruit, which led to her immediately taking it.

While spoken as prohibitions, each of these words implies that there is a good that ought not to be destroyed. Life is good. Marriage is good. Possessions are good (they provide for the sustaining of life). Truth is good. Appreciation for one's own possessions is good.

The chapter ends with two narrative sections. The first section reminds us that the people, while being able to hear God's words (as Kass implies) probably "didn't hear a thing." In other words, the text says that the people were so terrified that they "stood at a distance" from the mountain. This means that they did not hear these words from God. All they did was "see." Their fear also leads the people to ask Moses to be the one who delivers the words of God, to which Moses agrees. The second narrative concerns the creation of altars made of earth or of uncut stone, meaning made of God's creation without human adornment. The Altars then function as locations where the people can make burnt offerings to God (which will go "up") and where God's blessings will come down (vs. 24).

Reflections: Very little in this second table is unusual. Almost all civilizations have the same sorts of rules against murder, adultery, steal and lying. What makes these words different is that they are the words of God and not the result of political/cultural agreements. By being words from God, they cannot be so easily changed or discarded. The words carry weight. And even though the words will be delivered by Moses, they nonetheless carry with them the power to keep people from losing their way.

Questions:

1. What is your understanding of what it means to not kill wrongfully?
2. Where have you seen damage done by someone swearing falsely against their neighbor?
3. Why would it be important that God's altars are made of things of the earth?