

Trinity Baptist Church  
Sunday 30th August 2020 : Andy Banks  
4. God's Timeless Instructions  
Ex 19:1-6; 20:1-17

Props: None needed

**Intro:**

Good morning. The last few weeks have been tough for many of us, *very* tough for some of us. Some may have suffered in the confusion over exam results. Some may be anxious about returning to school. Some are coping with bereavements. The news from Cornerstone is deeply painful. Others may be worried about job security. For still others, each step towards re-engaging with normal life after lockdown is fraught with fear. And many are feeling the burden of loneliness.

In tough times, what are the rocks of our faith that will bear the weight of our troubles? We're continuing our summer mini-series, exploring how God sustained the Israelites through their tough interim normal in the wilderness between slavery and the Promised land. What can we learn from how God sustained them that can help us maintain hope in him today, including through our own interim normal?

We began with a look at God's unchanging character: I AM WHO I AM. Then, his continual presence and guidance, and his provision along the way. This week, we're looking at the comfort – yes the *comfort* – that comes from his timeless instructions.

**Discussion: What rules are essential?**

But before we do that, I want to ask you to think of a game, with rules, that you like to play. It can be an indoor game like Monopoly, Chess or Scrabble. Or it can be an outdoor game like football, badminton or bowls. *Now*, I want you to make up a *new* rule or some new rules for that game that might make it even more fun. So, for scrabble you might permit yourself a hand of 10 letters, instead of 7. Or for football, you could say that a team has to get out of their own half within two minutes or the other team gets the ball. Share your new rules with one another – or write them down if you live alone. Maybe you could even play the games with the new rules later and see if they work. But for now, pause the video and have a chat or a think about whether your new rules will make the game(s) better or worse.

**[Discussion: Invent new rules]**

It can be fun inventing new rules, can't it? But are there *some* rules that you *can't* change without changing the game completely? Could it still be bowls if you are allowed to throw the balls as well as roll them? Would chess be chess if the king could move like the queen? Would it still be football if you could pick up the ball and run with it? And what would happen if there were *no* rules at all? Would it still be fun to play? Pause the video again and have another quick chat or think about which rules are *essential* for the game(s) you like, and which rules can be changed.

**[Discussion: Which rules are essential]**

**Talk1**

Rules are good. They bring the stability and structure that allow the true freedom to enjoy games. The same is true of other things. For instance, scientific investigation is only worthwhile because the world operates by predictable rules experiments are carried out under defined rules. Likewise, music without the rules just sounds like a horrible noise. And even a burger bar like McDonalds, we feel confident going there because we know what we can expect no matter where it is. Things around the edges of all these things can change, so long as the core rules remain in place.

And the same is true for life, even in our interim normal. Schools are having to invent new rules because of Covid, but the core of the experience of going to school will remain the same. Teachers will still support and help you to achieve the best you can achieve and to be the happiest you can be. The core doesn't change.

As a church, we're busy inventing some new rules to make our services as safe as possible during this pandemic. But the core of who we are, and who we are called to be, remains the same. We will still come together to worship God, to learn from his Word, to pray together and encourage one another. We'll just do it a bit differently.

And what God *asks* of us, at its core, won't change either. He's still primarily concerned with the growth of our characters to become like Jesus. He still wants us to love him and love our neighbour as ourselves. He still wants us to live by the good, freedom-bringing rules that he has laid down for us. And some of the most important of those rules, he gave to the *Israelites* in the *wilderness*. Including the 10 Commandments, which are just as important today as they ever were. I wonder how many of the ten you can name without looking them up? Before we sing again, why not pause the video once more and have a go?

**[Song]**

## **Talk 2**

So how many of the 10 Commandments could you name? We're going to read them, but there's a really important context that we need to read first – which many people forget. So we're going to start in Exodus 19:3, when Moses first went up Mount Sinai to meet with God. By the way, children, you may wish to complete some of the activities posted on our website, while I continue to talk.

### **[Read Exodus 19:3-6]**

*3Then Moses went up to God. The LORD called out to him from the mountain. He said, "Here is what I want you to say to my people, who belong to Jacob's family. Tell the Israelites, 4'You have seen for yourselves what I did to Egypt. You saw how I carried you on the wings of eagles and brought you to myself. 5Now obey me completely. Keep my covenant. If you do, then out of all the nations you will be my special treasure. The whole earth is mine. 6But you will be a kingdom of priests to serve me. You will be my holy nation.' That is what you must tell the Israelites."*

### **[Read Exodus 20:1-17]**

*1Here are all the words God spoke. He said,  
2"I am the LORD your God. I brought you out of Egypt. That is the land where you were slaves.  
3"Do not put any other gods in place of me.  
4"Do not make for yourself statues of gods that look like anything in the sky or anything on the earth or in the waters. 5Do not bow down to them or worship them. I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God. I cause*

*the sins of the parents to affect their children. I will cause the sins of those who hate me to affect even their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. 6But for all time to come I show love to all those who love me and keep my commandments.*

*7“Do not misuse the name of the LORD your God. The LORD will find guilty anyone who misuses his name.*

*8“Remember to keep the Sabbath day holy. 9Do all your work in six days. 10But the seventh day is a sabbath to honour the LORD your God. Do not do any work on that day. The same command applies to your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and your animals. It also applies to any outsiders who live in your towns. 11In six days the LORD made the heavens, the earth, the sea and everything in them. But he rested on the seventh day. So the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

*12“Honor your father and mother. Then you will live a long time in the land the LORD your God is giving you.*

*13“Do not murder.*

*14“Do not commit adultery.*

*15“Do not steal.*

*16“Do not be a false witness against your neighbour.*

*17“Do not want to have anything your neighbour owns. Do not want to have your neighbour’s house, wife, male or female servant, ox or donkey.”*

## **[Pray]**

So what can we learn from God’s timeless instructions for the Israelites here?

### 1) Commandments set in the context of relationship

Firstly, we learn that the *Commandments were set in the context of relationship with God*. And God initiated that relationship when he rescued them out of slavery in Egypt, so as to begin to fulfil his promise to their ancestors to give them a land of their own. God freed them with a mighty hand and carried them – that is he protected and guided them – to meet with him at Sinai. And he gave them a new identity – or rather he made explicit the identity that they already had through his promise to Abraham: “you will be a kingdom of priests to serve me. You will be my holy nation” (Ex 19:6). The whole earth belonged to God, but he chose the Israelites to be his special treasure. These were actually *the most important words* God ever spoke to Israel.

The rules that followed were not given to *make* them God’s people; they were given because they were *already* his people. They could not do anything to *earn* God’s favour; they already had it. Though, if they rejected his covenant and refused to keep his commands they could, at least temporarily, *lose* his favour. Until they repented and turned back to him and his way.

So, the commandments are set in the context of a relationship with God that already existed. And the same is true for us. The Bible says that we were slaves, too – slaves to sin. But God rescued *us* with a mighty hand, by taking the punishment that our sin deserved on himself on the cross. Other than to accept his rescue, we can do nothing to earn God’s favour. We already have his favour, demonstrated unquestionably in the fact that he sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sin. We are now his special treasure, his kingdom of priests to serve him, his holy nation. But we can, at least temporarily, lose his favour if we reject his covenant and refuse to obey his commands – or refuse to repent of the ways in which we fail to keep them. So, keep short accounts with God. And remember, nothing is hidden from him; he sees it all. Nevertheless, because he took

the initiative to make us his people, we can be confident that, as soon as we truly repent and turn back to his way, he will forgive us and restore us to himself. That is the great news of the gospel. With deep-seated sin or addiction, we may still have work to do, often with others, to learn to overcome our temptations. But God longs to restore us to himself and to our identity as his people.

## 2) Commandments summarised for the community

Secondly, we find that God helpfully summarises his commandments for the community of his people. The 10 Commandments were by no means the *only* rules that the Israelites were given to follow. But they were a good summary of the rules. What are the benefits of having such a summary? Well, for a start, it makes it much easier to remember them, and thereby to follow them. And the truth is, if the Israelites had focussed on keeping just these 10 Commandments, they would mostly have lived as God wanted them to live. And the sacrificial system he introduced would cover for the rest.

And the same is true today. If we live by these 10 Commandments, coupled with the two that Jesus declared the most important of all – “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind ... and ... love your neighbour as yourself” (Matt 22:37-39) – if we live by these commands only, we will basically fulfil how God wants us to live. Focus on what really matters and the peripheral stuff will fall into place, too. Though, of course, Jesus raised the bar for what keeping these commandments really means: not just our actions, but the thoughts of our hearts. Idols can be wealth or ideologies as much as physical statues; lust is adultery; hate is murder, etc. Hence, Paul urges us to “be transformed by the renewing of your *mind*” (Rom 12:2). Given the height of the bar that Jesus sets, we really can only say when we see others’ failures, “there but for the grace of God go I!” And repent afresh before him. And thank him for his grace.

## 3) Commandments show that character matters more to God than achievements

Thirdly, these commandments show that character matters more to God than achievements. There are no commands among this list that tell the Israelites they must achieve this or that for God. Rather, this summary of what God commanded had everything to do with their *attitude* towards God, the world, themselves and their neighbours – the things that went into forming their characters. God was to be honoured as God, with no rivals; they were not to exploit the world’s resources or their own bodies by overworking them; and they were to respect and honour their fellow human beings. In an interim world, where life can seem all over the place, to focus on developing our *character* towards godliness can actually bring a liberating sense of normality and peace.

## 4) Commandments supply continuity

And so, we come to the last main lesson I want to draw from this passage today: in an ever-changing world, these Commandments supply much-needed continuity. For they do not change. That means that what God requires of us, and how *he* measures success or failure, does not change either. That truth can give us an anchor in stormy seas. And a focus that is far beyond, and greater than, the little details that might concern us or feel uncomfortable about life at present. We know how to please him. One day we will meet God face to face – either through death and resurrection, or when Jesus recreates the world. And on that day, *if* we hold fast to Christ, the *great* news is that Jesus will complete the work he began in us (Phil 1:6). Covid-19 will be a distant memory – if we will remember it at all. But the character we invested in will last into eternity.

So, God's commandments are set in the context of relationship; they are helpfully summarised for the community; they show that character matters more to God than achievements; and they supply much needed continuity in a changing world.

But there is one more vital question to ask ourselves: how well are we keeping these commandments? Does anything have a higher place in our lives than God, or have we come to effectively worship anything alongside him? Do we misuse his name by acknowledging Jesus with our lips, but denying him by our lifestyle? Do we truly honour our father and mother? Is there hate or unforgiveness inside us? Do we lust over people to whom we are not married? Do we take for ourselves what isn't ours – like time for which our employers pay us, for instance? Do we talk others down to promote ourselves? Do we covet the possessions of others?

And the sharp among you will notice that I've missed one out. That's because, in our 24/7 world of busyness and demand for results, I believe one of the *greatest* temptations for Christians is to ignore God's clear command to set aside a day for rest – regardless of what day of the week that is. Instead, we convince ourselves that we are indispensable. We tell ourselves, it's just this once, and we can manage it. And maybe we can on the odd occasion – maybe there are even times when violating the sabbath principle is essential. But ignoring this command frequently is one of the greatest contributors to mental breakdown. And, speaking from personal experience, it is one of the greatest contributing factors to violating God's other commands. If I miss just one sabbath, or fill it with too many things that are not restful, I find temptation far harder to resist in the week that follows. In the busyness of re-adjusting to a new or interim normal, let's resolve to make sabbath-keeping an essential part of how we redesign our lives. Amen?