

## **Sermon: Sweeter than Honey, More Precious than Gold**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Oct 08, 2023)

It was Boxing Day 1989. Romania was in turmoil. The previous day, President Nicolae Ceausescu, unable to quell the tide of dissent in Bucharest, had been tried and executed. Thus ending the 24-year regime of one of the most brutal dictators in the former Soviet Union. Now no one was in charge. Western reporters flooded into the country from the south, searching for someone who could speak English, who could explain what was happening on the ground. Finally they found someone, and in one sentence she summed up not only Romania's predicament, but of the human condition: "We have freedom," she said, "but we don't know what to do with it."

We have freedom but we don't know what to do with it. We see the same dynamic playing out for the past three decades. Western liberal democracies likes to trumpet the value of democratic rules—rules by the people for the people. It is, in my humble opinion, still a much better option than dictatorship, that is ruling by a strong man for his personal gain.

However, we have also come to witness the chaos that often ensues in the transitional period and afterwards, especially when a country fails to build up a vibrant tradition of the rule of law, and a strong institution, ie. the court system, to apply the law. Absolute freedom is no freedom at all, as it leads only to chaos and anarchy. Law, as it turns out is absolutely necessary for human society to function, and the application of law, as it turns out, is good for all of us.

It is with that in mind, we turn to Exodus 20, the single most important moment in the history of Israel, that is the giving and the receiving of the Ten Commandments. We have been following the stories of Israel for the past few Sundays. We heard their cries for help in the land of slavery; we witnessed the mighty hands of God in plucking them out of Egypt; and we saw outstretched arms of the Lord in parting the Red Sea. We rejoiced when God provided the people with mana and quail from heaven; we were amazed when God further provided the people with water from the rock.

So now we come to the foothill of Mount Sinai, with the community of faith now consecrated and ready to receive the Law. "Then God spoke all these words...", starts chapter 20, verse 1. It is important to acknowledge that before God wrote the Law onto stone tablets, God spoke first. Through

the words of God, the cosmos was created. Through the words of God, life came to being, the words of God is life, and in so speaking, God breathed life into the Law.

Then God spoke all these words, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” It is a reminder to the Israelites, to all of us, that before the giving of the Law, God already gave grace—freedom from slavery, deliverance through the Red Sea, mana from heaven, quail from the sky, and water from the rock. Grace of God predates the Law, grace of God supersedes all else, always.

We are then given the Ten Commandments, neatly organized in two sections—with the first four dealing with our relationship with God (or how we ought to worship God), and the following six dealing with our relationship with one another.

Let us look briefly at the first commandment: **You shall have no other gods before me**, that is worshipping the right God. In the world that was the polytheistic Ancient Near East, people picked and chose which gods to worship, to their liking, in their own fancy. But the community of faith that gathers before Yahweh shall declare there is only one God, one creator, and no other choice.

Second, **you shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth**. It is a human tendency to worship something that is concrete, that is tangible. But in so far as worshipping the Lord God in the right way, no other created things can be used as a substitute. No icons, no carved images, no statues, no books nor building would suffice, would point us in the right way. Worshipping the Lord God in the right way can only be done in truth and in spirit.

Third, **you shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God**, that is worshipping God with the right attitude. The name of God is Holy! It is to be revered! Here, the Jewish tradition of substituting the name of God is helpful as a model. Whenever a God fearing Jew comes across in the Scripture the four-letter word YHWH, the self-revealed name of God, he or she would automatically replace it with ‘Adonai’ (that is the Lord), or with ‘Ha sham’ (that is the Name). It is a way of showing respect to the name of God, of not daring to chance even a minuscule possibility of misusing the name of God.

Fourth, **remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy**, that is worshipping God, not ourselves. Keeping the Sabbath is the sign of

covenant, marking precisely this occasion that God gave the Law to the people, and the community of faith received it gladly and fearfully. Rest on the Sabbath is a blessing that God bestows to us, so we can rest—not sleeping in to maintain your work/life balance, but to set it apart, to come to a deeper appreciation of what it means to rest in God.

If the first four commandments deal with how we relate to God, then the next six deal with how we relate to one another. **“Honor your father and your mother.”** It is the only commandment that comes with a promise, which stipulates, “so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” It should be noted of the communal aspect of this commandment, because the community of faith exists as an inter-connected households and families. So honouring one’s parents applies not only within one’s nuclear family, but to a much wider communities of kins—of uncles, aunts, grandparents and other elders, all deserving our respect and honour.

The next five are expressed as prohibitions: **you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, and you shall not covet.** These are basic and fundamental rules of life, rules that would be expanded in other parts of the Torah, with detailed instructions that not only protect life, but give life to the fullest.

I won’t go into details in each, but will say that the Westminster Shorter Catechism has an entire section on the Ten Commandments, with a reminder that each negative prohibition could be rephrased into a positive commandment.

So ‘thou shall not kill’ could be rephrased as

‘thou shall protect life and the dignity of life’;

‘thou shall not commit adultery’ could be read as

‘thou shall respect the sanctity of marriage  
for both you and your neighbours’;

‘thou shall not steal’ could be understood as

‘thou shall uphold the economic value of one’s neighbour’;

‘thou shall not bear false witness’ could be the equivalent as

‘thou shall always tell the truth in the court of law,  
as well as in the court of public opinion’;

and finally ‘thou shall not covet’ could be reinterpreted as

‘thou shall be content with what you have  
and work hard for what you don’t’.

Seen in this way, the Ten Commandments is a good set of law, Law that is given to us by God for our own good, for our own prosperity, and for our own life—life in the abundance.

Patricia Dutcher-Walls, professor of the Hebrew Scripture at Vancouver School of Theology once told this story, a metaphor really to help students understand why God gave us the Law. A ten-year-old boy was given a homework assignment by his school teacher. The boy was to produce a delicate wooden craft piece, by himself, without help from others. The difficulty was that in order to finish the piece properly, he would need to use a power saw to cut a particular corner. When the boy asked his dad for the saw, dad was naturally concerned. The boy was still too young to operate a power saw without guidance. So dad told the boy, step by step, how to use the saw properly and safely. He wrote down the instructions, and asked the boy to recite it, to make sure the boy understood everything. Then, still with a lot of hesitation, dad stepped back, and watch the boy turned on the switch and used the saw, hopefully as instructed. Still standing nearby, ready to jump in any moment should the boy get into trouble. Now, that is an image I find comforting and endearing.

I will leave with you the most endearing reinterpretation of the Ten Commandments, coming from the Lord Jesus Christ, who zeros in not on the words of the Law, but on the heart, the spirit: *‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is what our faith is all about, love. Love God, love others. Love is the key that opens our understand of the Law, and opens also the mystery of faith, and it is indeed just as the psalmist said in Psalm 19, *“The law of the Lord is perfect reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. **More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.**”*

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**