

Exodus Lesson 6 19-20-21-22-23

19:3–9. Moses went up to God. All the basic teachings of our Judeo-Christian heritage are contained in this passage: **A.** The basis of the Covenant is Israel's deliverance from bondage (this has already happened: v. 4): the people are the object of God's preferential love; God made them a people by bringing about that deliverance. **B.** If they keep the Covenant, they will become a very special kind of people. This offer will take effect the moment they take on their commitments, but Israel will develop towards its full maturity only to the extent that it listens to/obeys the will of God. **C.** What God is offering the people is specified in three complementary expressions—"My own possession", "holy nation", "kingdom of priests".

The first of these expressions means private property, personally acquired and carefully conserved. Of all the nations of the earth Israel is to be "God's property" because he has chosen it and he protects it with special care. This new status is something which will be stressed frequently (cf. Deut 7:6; 26:17–19; Ps 135:4; Mal 3:17).

By being God's possession Israel shares in his holiness, it is a "holy nation", that is, a people separated out from among the nations so as to keep a close relationship with God; in other passages we are told more—that this is the relationship of "a son of God" (cf. 4:22; Deut 14:1). This new way of being means that there is a moral demand on the members of the people to show by their lives what they are by God's election: "You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 19:2).

And the expression "kingdom of priests" does not mean that that they will be ruled by priests, or that the entire people will exercise the role of priest (which is in fact reserved to the tribe of Levi); rather, it reflects the fact that God gives Israel the privilege of being the nation chosen

especially to be in his service. Israel alone has been chosen to be a “kingdom for the Lord”, that is, to be the sphere where he dwells and is recognized as the only Sovereign. Israel’s acknowledgment of God is shown by the service the entire people renders to the Lord.

In the New Testament (1 Pet 2:5; Rev 1:6; 5:9–10) what happened here will be picked up again with the very same words, applying it to the new situation of the Christian in the Church, the new people of God and the true Israel (cf. Gal 3:29): every Christian shares in Christ’s priesthood through his incorporation into Christ and is “called to serve God by their activity in the world... This priesthood—though essentially distinct from the ministerial priesthood—gives them the capacity to take part in the worship of the Church and to help others in their journey to God, with their witness of his word and example, through prayer and works of atonement” (St Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ Is Passing By*, 120).

19:10–25. Go to the people and consecrate them. This description of the theophany on Sinai contains features of a solemn liturgy in order to highlight the majesty and transcendence of God. Verses 10–15 cover as it were the preparation for the great event, and vv. 16–20 the event itself.

Israel will never forget this religious experience, as we can see from the Psalms (cf. Ps 18:7–8; 29:3–4; 77:16–17; 97:2ff). In the New Testament, extraordinary divine manifestations will carry echoes of this theophany (cf. Mt 27:45; 51; Acts 2:2–4).¹

20:1–21. Then God delivered all these commandments. The term “Decalogue” comes from the Greek, meaning “ten words” (cf. the literal sense of Deut 4:13). It consists of the Ten Commandments or moral

¹ Gavigan, J., McCarthy, B., & McGovern, T., eds. (1999). [*The Pentateuch*](#) (pp. 320–324). Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers.

code, recorded here and in Deuteronomy 5:6–21. The fact that the Decalogue (and not any other legal code of the Pentateuch) is repeated practically verbatim in Exodus and Deuteronomy and has from ancient times been reproduced separately, as the Nash papyrus (2nd century bc) shows, indicates the importance the Decalogue always had among the people of Israel as a moral code.

The Ten Commandments are the core of Old Testament ethics and they retain their value in the New Testament. Jesus often reminds people about them (cf. Lk 18:20) and he fills them out (cf. Mt 5:17ff). The Fathers and Doctors of the Church have commented on them at length because, as St Thomas points out, all the precepts of the natural law are contained in the Decalogue. (*Summa theologiae*, 1–2, 100, 3). (Ibid. p. 325)

Going Deeper

Why are there different lists of Commandments?

The commandments tend to be divided up in two different ways: thus, Jews and many Christian confessions divide the first commandment into two—the precept to adore only one God (vv. 2–3) and that of not making images (vv. 3–6); whereas Catholics and Lutherans (following St Augustine) make these commandments one and divide into two the last commandments (not to covet one’s neighbor’s wife: the ninth; and not to covet his goods: the tenth).

There is nothing sacrosanct about these divisions (they are just academic); whichever way the commandments are divided, the fact that there are ten stands. In our commentary we follow St Augustine’s division and make reference to the teaching of the

Church, because the Ten Commandments contain the core of Christian morality.

20:3–6. You shall love God above all things. is the wording of the first commandment given in most catechisms (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2083) summarizing the teaching of Jesus (cf. Mk 12:28–31, which quotes the text of Deuteronomy 6:4–5). Belief in the existence of only one God is the backbone of the entire Bible message. The prophets will openly teach monotheism, holding that God is the sovereign Lord of the universe and of time; but this ban on other gods itself implies the sure conviction that there is only one true God. “You shall have no other Gods before [or, instead of] me”, implies a belief in one God, that is, monotheism.

20:4. You shall not make for yourself graven images. The ban on images was something that marked Israel as different from other peoples. The ban not only covered idols or images of other gods, but also representations of the Lord.

Prohibits representations of Yahweh in material form, in the image of any living creature (Deut 4:15–18). In view is the danger of fashioning an idol; the commandment does not prohibit such things as literary descriptions of God that make use of anthropomorphic or other figurative language. The coming of Jesus as the true “image” of God introduces a new aspect of worship that transcends this restriction of the Sinai covenant (Col 1:15). Since the Father has made himself visible in the Son (Jn 14:9), the believing Church can rightly depict his image in visible and artistic ways. Angels and saints can also be rendered in icons insofar as the image of Christ shines through them. The propriety of

sacred art and its link with the Incarnation was affirmed by the Second Council of Nicaea in 787a.d.² (See **Handout – Graven Images**)

20:7. You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain. Respect for God’s name is respect for God himself. Hence this prohibition on invoking the name of the Lord to gain credence for evil, be it at a trial (by committing perjury), or by swearing to do something evil, or by blasphemy (cf. Sir 23:7–12). In ancient times, Israel’s neighbors used the names of their gods in magical conjuration; in such a situation the invoking of the Lord’s name is idolatrous. In general, this commandment forbids any abuse, any disrespect, any irreverent use of the name of God. And, to put it positively, “The second commandment *prescribes respect for the Lord’s name*. Like the first commandment, it belongs to the virtue of religion and more particularly it governs our use of speech in sacred matters” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2142).

20:8–11. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. The fundamental object of this command was to segregate a portion of man’s time from his own uses and consecrate it to God as an acknowledgement that all his time belonged to God.³

Going Deeper - The Sabbath

The commandment includes three ideas: the Sabbath is a holy day, dedicated to the Lord; work is forbidden on it; one reason for it is to imitate God, who rested from creation on the seventh day.

² Hahn, S., & Mitch, C. (2012). [*Exodus: With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes*](#) (Second Catholic Edition, p. 42). Ignatius Press.

³ Power, E. (1953). [*Exodus*](#). In B. Orchard & E. F. Sutcliffe (Eds.), *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (p. 219). Thomas Nelson.

The Sabbath is a holy day, that is, different from ordinary days (cf. Lev 23:3) because it is dedicated to God. No special rites are prescribed but the word “remember” (different from “observe” in Deuteronomy 5:10) is a word with cultic/worship associations. Whatever the language or social origin of the Sabbath was, in the Bible it is always something holy (Exodus 16:22–30).

Sabbath rest implies that there is an obligation to work on the previous six days (v. 9). Work is the only justification for rest. The Hebrew word *shabbat* actually means “Sabbath” and “rest”. But on this day rest acquires worship aspect, for no special sacrifices or rites are prescribed for the Sabbath: the whole community, and even animals, are to render homage to God by ceasing from their labors. (Ibid. Gavigan p. 328)

Deuteronomy adds an additional outlook, maybe a different and more humanitarian reason, “You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.(Dt. 5:15) Thus the repose and religious observances on the Sabbath commemorate God’s deliverance of the Hebrews from the hard labors of the Egyptian captivity. The fact that there are two reasons do not make them mutually exclusive. (Ibid)

20:12. Honor your father and mother. The fourth is the first commandment to do with inter-personal relationships (the subject of the second “table” as ancient Christian writers used to term these commandments: cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2197). Like the sabbath precept, it is couched in a positive way; its direct reference is to

family members. The fact that it comes immediately after the precepts that refer to God shows its importance. Parents, in effect, represent God within the family circle.

20:13. You shall not kill. The fifth commandment directly forbids vengeful killing of one's enemy, that is, murder; so it protects the sacredness of human life. The prohibition on murder already comes across in the account of the death of Abel (cf. Gen 4:10) and the precepts given to Noah (cf. Gen 9:6): life is something that belongs to God alone.

Going Deeper – Application for Today

Revelation and the teaching of the Church tell us more about the scope of this precept: it is only in very specific circumstances (such as social or personal self-defense) that a person may be deprived of his or her life. Obviously, the killing of weaker members of society (abortion, direct euthanasia) is a particularly grave sin.

The encyclical *Evangelium vitae* spells out the Church's teaching on this commandment which "has absolute value when it refers to the *innocent person*. [...] Therefore, by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, and in communion with the Bishops of the Catholic Church, *I confirm that the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral*" (John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, 57).

Our Lord taught that the positive meaning of this commandment was the obligation to practice charity (cf. Mt 5:21–26): "In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord recalls the commandment, 'You shall not kill' (Mt 5:21), and adds to it the proscription of anger, hatred and vengeance. Going further, Christ asks his disciples to turn the other cheek, to love their enemies (cf. Mt 5:22–28). He

did not defend himself and told Peter to leave his sword in its sheath (cf. Mt 26:52)” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2262).

20:14. You shall not commit adultery. The sixth commandment is orientated to safeguarding the holiness of marriage. In the Old Testament there were very severe penalties for those who committed adultery (cf. Deut 22:23ff; Lev 20:10). As Revelation progresses, it will become clear that not only is adultery grave, because it damages the rights of the other spouse, but every sexual disorder degrades the dignity of the person and is an offence against God (cf., e.g., Prov 7:8–27; 23:27–28). Jesus Christ, by his life and teaching, showed the positive thrust of this precept (cf. Mt 5:27–32): “Jesus came to restore creation to the purity of its origins. In the Sermon on the Mount, he interprets God’s plan strictly: ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart’ (Mt 5:27–28). What God has joined together, let not man put asunder (cf. Mt 19:6). The tradition of the Church has understood the sixth commandment as encompassing the whole of human sexuality” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2336).

20:15. You shall not steal. This applies to the unjust appropriation of another’s possessions. The Church continues to remind us that every violation of the right to property is unjust (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2409); but this is particularly true if actions of that type lead to the enslavement of human beings, or to depriving them of their dignity, as happens in traffic in children, trade in human embryos, the taking of hostages, arbitrary arrest or imprisonment, racial segregation, concentration camps, etc. “The seventh commandment forbids acts or enterprises that for any reason—selfish or ideological, commercial or

totalitarian—lead to the *enslavement of human beings*, to their being bought, sold and exchanged like merchandise, in disregard for their personal dignity. It is a sin against the dignity of persons and their fundamental rights to reduce them by violence to their productive value or to a source of profit. St Paul directed a Christian master to treat his Christian slave ‘no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother ... both in the flesh and in the Lord’ (Philem 16)” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2414).

20:16. You shall not bear false witness. Giving false testimony in court can cause one’s neighbor irreparable damage because an innocent person may be found guilty. It also extends to prohibiting lying, defamation (cf. Sir 7:12–13), , slanderous gossip, calumny and the saying of anything that might detract from a neighbor’s dignity (cf. Jas 3:1–12). “This moral prescription flows from the vocation of the holy people to bear witness to their God who is the truth and wills the truth. Offences against the truth express by word or deed a refusal to commit oneself to moral uprightness: they are fundamental infidelities to God and, in this sense, they undermine the foundations of the covenant” (CCC 2464).

20:17. You shall not covet. The wording of this precept is different from that in Deuteronomy: there the distinction is made between coveting one’s neighbor’s wife and coveting his goods (cf. Deut 5:21). “St John distinguishes three kinds of covetousness or concupiscence: lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes and pride of life (cf. 1 Jn 2:16). In the Catholic catechetical tradition, the ninth commandment forbids carnal concupiscence; the tenth forbids coveting another’s goods” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2514).

20:20. Do not fear. Verse 20 is often translated using ‘fear’ twice. However the Hebrew is more precise. The first ‘fear’ is translated from

the word ‘*tirau*’ rendered ‘dread’. The second is from ‘*yirat*’ rendered ‘awe’ or profound respect.

20:22–23:19. The following collection of laws is usually described as the “Book of the Covenant” because of what is said in 24:7. Sometimes they are called the “Code of the Covenant”.

The laws collected here probably existed earlier in a similar or even identical wording, but by being inserted into the Book of the Covenant in the context of the events of Sinai they acquire extra weight and authority. They become as it were the “basic laws” of the people, ratified by God himself.

23:14–17. Three times in a year you shall keep a feast to me. This is one of the oldest cycles of religious feasts. (See **Handout – The Great Feasts** for further background)

In conclusion, The Ten Commandments planted a seed, and the ethical shade from that tree is still growing to give increased refreshment to the human race. The Torah gave birth to the Gospel, and we are still learning from the divine teaching contained in both of them. The perfect fulfillment of the law is seen in the life of Jesus Christ. “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:17–19).⁴

⁴ Ponessa, J., & Manhardt, L. W. (2007). [*Moses and the Torah*](#) (p. 69). Emmaus Road Publishing.