

Instructions
Exodus 19:1-8, 20:1-2
Matthew 22:34-40

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Exodus 19:1-8, 20:1-2

On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.” So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. The people all answered as one: “Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.” Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord.

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;

Matthew 22:34-40

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘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.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

My wife Lisa and I bought a new bookcase last month for her sewing room. We bought it from Ikea, so the bookcase did not come to us fully assembled and ready to put books on. No, it came in a flat-pack box about seven feet long by eighteen inches by six inches. We opened the box, and found a stack of boards with holes in seemingly random places, a small bag of metal pegs and little wooden dowels, and one large piece of paper.

That piece of paper had a list of the parts that were supposed to be in the box, drawings to show us what each part looked like, and step by step instructions, with diagrams showing how to put these parts together to reproduce the attractive and functional bookcase we saw in the store.

With an extra pair of hands on occasion, Lisa put it together with minimal fuss, muss, and bother. Comedians like to make fun of Ikea instructions, but they were really quite helpful.

Given that we know what a bookcase is supposed to look like, I'm sure that we could have figured it out without the instructions. The instructions, though, made the difference between a potential nightmare of putting things together and taking them back apart and putting them together a different way, and doing it right the first time. With a more complicated piece of furniture, the instructions might have made the difference between ruined furniture and a nice piece.

The Hebrew people have just come out of Egypt.

In Egypt, they were slaves. Their community was suppressed, and they lived their lives by whatever rules the Egyptians saw fit. They were their masters' property. They did whatever work their masters ordered, in whatever way that their master ordered. They worked seven days a week, whatever hours their masters demanded. Working this way, they built entire cities for the Egyptians.¹

Life as slaves was physically demanding, but mentally simple. The Hebrews had few choices in how they lived their lives: they did what their masters told them, when and how their masters told them to do it, or they got beaten or killed. This gave them no real idea how to live their lives as free people, or how to run a society, or even how to be in a community with each other when they were not being oppressed by an outside force like the Egyptians.

God performs a bunch of miracles and brings the Hebrew people out of Egypt. They walk through the sea on dry ground, you know the story. Then they are in wilderness, with no

¹ Exodus 1:11.

one else around. God has promised to lead them to their own land, where they could live in plenty without anyone oppressing them.

But the Hebrew people were not born knowing what a good life looked like. Life is not like the bookcase, where Lisa knew before she started what she wanted it to look like.

Being free of slavery was a great thing, but it did not magically tell the Hebrew people how to live their lives in ways that work. Ways that let them be healthy and happy and live together in relative peace, without killing each other. A kind of tribal brutality would achieve peace, I suppose, or at least order, if the only rule amounted to, “Don’t make anyone angry who’s more powerful than you are,” but that is no way to live.

It’s important to understand here, God loves this ragtag bunch of late Bronze Age desert-dwellers. God wants them to be healthy and happy and successful, and to thrive as a people.

So, God gives the Hebrew people instructions. These instructions tell them how to live good lives, lives where they are in a good relationship with God and good relationships with the people around them. They don’t have to guess what kind of basic social agreements will work, because God, who made them and made the world, is telling them what will work best. If everyone in their society followed these instructions, they might have some social problems, but those problems would be a lot smaller and easier to deal with than otherwise.

Because God knows that these instructions will not help the Hebrew people as much if only some people follow them, God does not make them suggestions. God makes them commandments, and orders all of God’s people to follow these commandments.

“Dearly beloved, we have gathered here today / To get through this thing called life.”²

Like the Hebrews, we were not born knowing what a good life looks like. A newborn baby has no idea who God is, much less how to be in a good relationship with God. She has no idea how to be in good relationships with other people. She has to learn how to do that. Parents and other teachers, teaching children how to do that is a large part of what we do.

In our world today, there are all kinds of ideas about how we should live. These ideas keep creeping into our consciousness, because they’re repeated so often. Movie and television heroes are cool, seemingly uncaring about anyone else, until the writer finds the exception that fuels the plot. So-called reality TV celebrates and praises people lying and cheating and treating each other in all sorts of horrible ways. This behavior is seemingly justified by the claim, “I’m not here to make friends. I’m here to win”³ whatever prize is held out by the show producers. Those producers, by their own description, “don’t solve problems. [They] make them to point cameras at them.”⁴

These reality TV “ethics,” if you can call them that, have crept into politics and into how this nation is governed. Behavior is called “justified” if it achieves a competitive advantage, not because it is ethical or honest. Deliberate lies are told again and again, trying to make people believe that they are facts. This tactic, famously pioneered by Herr Joseph Goebbels, often succeeds.

If we hear about the Ten Commandments at all, they are either presented as a relic of an earlier time, or they are used as a weapon by one side in a culture war, a side who apparently believe that they, and they alone, are without sin.

² Prince, “Let’s Go Crazy,” *Purple Rain*, 1984.

³ Any number of “Survivor” and Big Brother contestants. The most famous example may be Richard Hatch, in *Survivor* season 1 (2000).

⁴ Rachel, on the show *UnREAL*, episode 1 (2017).

We can no longer rely on the culture out there, if we ever could, to teach our children, and to remind us, what it is to be a good person and to live a good life.

We need instructions, and, thank God, God loves us enough to give us those instructions. Like the instructions for the bookcase, they come directly from the manufacturer. They are both commandments from God, and instructions for the best way to live our lives.

I have known atheists who brought their kids to worship every week. Not for the theology, not for what the preacher had to say about God, but for the morality. Even not believing in God, they chose to rely on the church to teach their children how to live among other people. Because these instructions work.

You'll notice that God didn't start with what Jesus said, to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself, and that was the whole of the law. When Milo was a little kid, we had a lot more specific rules in our house, because "Be responsible," was not a concept that even bright little kids really understand. We had to have specific rules about when snacks could be eaten, detailed rules about how many stuffed animals could come with us on a trip, rules with defined landmarks about exactly how close to the road in front of the house Milo was allowed to play. There were a lot more things that required specific verbal permission than we have now, because Milo is older and more mature. Any of you who have raised kids, I'm sure your experience is similar.

Just like dealing with kids, God had to start with more details before the Hebrew people were mature enough to see the big picture.

God starts by pointing out who God is and pointing out the relationship that God already has with these people. “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” These rules do not come from some Johnny-come-lately, or from someone who has done nothing for these people. They come from the same God who made Heaven and Earth, and who did miracles to get the people out of slavery in Egypt. They come to us from the same God who loved the whole cosmos so much that Jesus Christ came down here, was born, lived, died, and was resurrected for us.

Just like we love our children enough that we do not abandon them to figure out the world on their own, God loves us enough not to do that to us. God has given us instructions for living in the world that God created. They were never intended to be weapons in a culture war. They are loving instructions from a parent who wants to see us have good lives.

Over the next two weeks, we will discuss these instructions in more detail, and how they tell us we should live our lives. Your homework for next week is to get out your Bible and read the Ten Commandments. You’ll find them in Exodus, chapter twenty, the first seventeen verses.

Thanks be to God!

AMEN