

Ten Commandments – I brought you out of Egypt

Today starts a four week trip through the 10 commandments. But you'll notice that today, we didn't actually read any commandments. Instead, today's passage gives us a little Old Testament taste of gospel, before we get to the law.

The concept of law and gospel are important theological concerns for Christians. Much of Martin Luther's work dealt with the relationship between law and gospel. And he of course based his work heavily on Paul's writings on law, gospel, and Christian freedom.

Paul's letter to the Galatians captures that especially well and was a big influence for Luther.

As Christians, we are people of the gospel. Protestants, and maybe especially Lutherans, can sometimes get caught up in worry over what gets called works righteousness. Works righteousness is the belief that we can be redeemed, or made right with God by our own works.

The answer to that of course is no. It's Jesus who redeems us and makes us right with God.

But sometimes that gets carried to the point where the question gets asked about the commandments – do these pertain to us? Isn't this law? Are these just for Jewish people?

This passage is perfect for wrestling with the relationship between law and gospel.

First let's talk about law. In short, God's law does two things. First, it shows us how to order the world in a way that puts love of God and love of neighbor at the center. It's a guide.

Second, it shows us what the world should look like and therefore helps us see where we've gotten it wrong – it's a mirror. And in seeing, we are drawn to repentance...and grace.

There's often a mistaken belief that the Old Testament is law and the New Testament is gospel.

But this passage is as much gospel as anything in the New Testament. And it nicely shows the relationship between law and gospel.

To explore that, we're going to talk about the distinction between two word pairs...if/then and because/therefore.

If/then is how we often think about how things should be. If you follow the law, then life will be better. If you do things a certain way, then the outcome will be better.

Those things are not untrue. They're examples of how law helps order the world.

But then we go down a darker path...if you act this way, then I will love you. If you help me, then I'll help you. If you do this, then God will love you. If you are good, then you'll be saved.

Humans too easily assume that because we often think in if/then terms, God does too. But that's where God switches it up.

And that switch is gospel.

See, gospel is because/therefore.

God is going to give the commandments – that's where we'll start next week.

But first, God reminds the Israelites what God has already done for them.

God has set them free. God has defeated their enemy, Egypt. God gave them Moses to lead them out of Egypt and set them on the road to the promised land. God removed the obstacles between them and freedom.

It all starts with what God has done for them. God is the God who brings freedom and new life. That's pure gospel.

Once they are free, the therefore comes. Because I am the God who set you free, therefore here's how you should live.

But the therefore isn't some sort of way to pay God back. God isn't asking them to pay any debt incurred by God's work to bring them out of Egypt. Just like we can't pay God back for freedom or for salvation. Jesus set us free on the cross apart from anything we could do before or after.

Instead, the commandments tell how the Israelites are to build a new life in the freedom God gave them.

Now, there is an if/then here. God says, if you abide by these commandments, then I will make of you a priestly kingdom, a holy nation.

We Christians by the way are adopted into this. In the first letter from Peter, the church is also called a royal priesthood.

So what does that actually mean?

To answer that, let's go back to Abraham generations before this scene.

God made some promises to Abraham. I will give you a land; you will have many descendants and become a great nation; and I will bless you so that through you all the families of the earth will be blessed.

Now, centuries later, God has kept the promise that Abraham would have lots of descendants and become a great nation. Their population grew dramatically in Egypt. God promises to lead them back to the promised land.

God has blessed them with freedom.

The commandments that follow will teach them how to live as God's holy people. They teach the people how they can be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

And that's the same call to us. As law, the 10 commandments do help order our lives. And that is good for us. But what they mostly do is help us live out of the freedom God has given us for the sake of our neighbors.

The commandments are largely considered to be made up of two tables. The first – the first three commandments – are dedicated to our relationship with God. It's how we love God.

The rest fall into the second table and concern how we live with one another – how we love our neighbors.

The creators of this preaching series actually divided the second table into two weeks. They separated out the coveting commandments and gave them their own week. The idea behind that is that our commitment to fulfilling our own desires no matter what often leads us to break the other commandments.

So, God says, if you follow these commandments, then you will be living as my holy people.

They don't follow the commandments so that God will love them. But, while God's love for them can never be lost, their Status as holy nation – a priestly kingdom can.

If they are not living by those laws, they are simply rejecting their status as God's free and holy people. They are choosing to return to their enslaved status.

Did they do that? Yes...that's the whole message of the prophets and the exile. Throughout Israel's history, they were drawn off course by other gods. Their rulers got focused on their status as God's chosen nation, but forgot what that actually entailed. They forgot about loving God and loving neighbor. They forgot that their call was to bless all the people of the world.

And when they forgot – disaster did strike.

And of course the same thing happens to us. When we put our main allegiance in other gods – whether wealth, power, nationalism, an ideology, a person – we too go off course. We give up our status as that royal priesthood, called to bless the world. And life gets messy and chaotic.

But the commandments do something else. They are a foretaste of the world as it will be when God's reign is fully established.

This coming year will be our Matthew year. As usual in the Narrative lectionary, we'll start with Old Testament readings as our primary focus and then move into Matthew's gospel. Matthew's gospel contains Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus essentially goes deeper into the commandments. He looks to the heart. He preaches not just following the letter of the law, but being transformed so that love of God and love of neighbor is just simply what we do out of who we are as God's people.

In both the 10 commandments and Jesus' teachings hundreds of years later, we are drawn into a vision of the kingdom of God. It is the world God is creating in the covenant with Israel. It's the world God is recreating through Jesus Christ.

In the meantime, our call is the same as for Israel...to live as God's holy people so that through us, God's blessing will be shared with the world.

And like the Jewish people, we do so by remembering every single day what God has already done for us. God has set us free...free from sin, death, and evil.

We remember that we are made new each day and that nothing we do can lose God's love for us or negate God's saving work on our behalf. And we remember we are freed to joyfully love and serve God and God's world.