

SERIES: Ten Stupid Things People Do to Mess Up Their Lives

SERMON: **The God of the Ten Commandments: Our Awesome Friend**

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 19; 20:18-20

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Dostoevsky, the existential literary genius, was absolutely right when he wrote, “Without God, everything is permitted.”ⁱ If there were no God, there could be no moral absolutes and therefore we could do anything we wanted. Dostoevsky, of course, was an atheist and what *he* meant by his statement is that *since* there is no God, everything *is* permitted. We, of course, do not accept his premise, and therefore we do not accept his conclusion. There is a God, and He has given us His moral law. So everything is not permitted.

For the past three months we have been studying the moral law of God in the form of the Ten Commandments which reveal what God permits and doesn't permit. Maybe you're breathing a sigh of relief that we're done, because you feel pretty well battered and bruised by the realization you don't measure up to the basic moral law of God. I suspect the average person in this congregation has been nailed by at least half of the commandments, and some have confessed to me that they have broken all ten, at least in their broader interpretation.

Well, don't breathe too easily, because we're not quite through with the series. I'm not going to make up any additional commandments (i.e. beyond the 11th, “thou shalt not park in the circle drive”); rather I want us to explore some of the context surrounding the giving of the Commandments. Today I want to speak to you on the subject, “The God of the Ten Commandments: Our Awesome Friend.” Who is this God who gave us His basic moral law in such a succinct and profound form? What is He like?

Let's read our Scripture text—all of Exodus 19 and a few verses from Exodus 20. I will be reading what immediately precedes and follows the giving of the Ten Commandments. This is a fairly extensive portion of Scripture and I think you will profit more if you will follow with me in your Bibles.

In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on the very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.

So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the

words the LORD had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, "We will do everything the LORD has said." So Moses brought their answer back to the LORD.

The LORD said to Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you." Then Moses told the LORD what the people had said.

And the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and be ready by the third day, because on that day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, 'Be careful that you do not go up the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. He shall surely be stoned or shot with arrows; not a hand is to be laid on him.

Whether man or animal, he shall not be permitted to live.' Only when the ram's horn sounds a long blast may they go up to the mountain."

After Moses had gone down the mountain to the people, he consecrated them, and they washed their clothes. Then he said to the people, "Prepare yourselves for the third day. Abstain from sexual relations."

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up and the LORD said to him, "Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish. Even the priests, who approach the LORD, must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them."

Moses said to the LORD, "The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, because you yourself warned us, 'Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy.'"

The LORD replied, "Go down and bring Aaron up with you. But the priests and the people must not force their way through to come up to the LORD, or he will break out against them."

So Moses went down to the people and told them."

The Ten Commandments are then delivered by God in 20:1-17. Let's pick up the reading in verse 18:

When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."

Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning."

What was God's purpose in bringing His people to this desolate, uninhabited mountainous desert and having them stay there for almost a year—eleven months and five days to be exact? The answer, I think, is this:

God's principal purpose at Sinai was to communicate His nature and character to His people.

This is an important point, for many people, if they think of it at all, think of Israel's Sinai experience exclusively in terms of the Ten Commandments. But surely a much shorter stay would have sufficed if that was all God was after. As it was, the Israelites were there nearly a year before God allowed them to move toward their ultimate destination—the Promised Land.

You see, the Ten Commandments were only a small part of what God revealed at Sinai. He gave Israel an entire legal system, consisting of 613 laws, 365 negative ones and 248 affirmative ones. This system governed every conceivable area of their lives, from religious to political to social to marital to economic. You name it and the Law addressed it. Next Lord's Day I want to examine "The Rest of the Law." I want to try to answer the question, "What is the relevance of the rest of the Law to us today?"

But there must be more to this meeting on the mountain than either the giving of the Ten Commandments or the revelation of the whole Mosaic Law. Otherwise, why the dramatic preparation of the people or the spectacular natural phenomena on the mountain that we just read about? I strongly believe God's primary purpose in this meeting on the mountain was to reveal His own nature and character. The Laws were just a means to the end of teaching the Israelites about Himself, a way of spelling out how a people who belong to a God like Yahweh should live.

You see, every religion known to man (up to this point) was a religion of idolatry. The first objects of idolatrous worship were probably the sun, the moon, and the other heavenly bodies; later the Deity was alleged to reside in men or even beasts. Of these, images were made and worshiped. Romans 1:22-23 describes this sad state of affairs of pagan man: "Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles."

To deal with this cesspool of idolatry into which mankind had fallen, God began with a single person—Abraham—leading him into a strange land, isolating him from surrounding peoples, and teaching him about who God really is. When Abraham’s descendants showed signs of compromise and assimilation with the surrounding idolaters, God used a famine to force them to migrate to Egypt, where they were once again relatively isolated from idolatrous influences by locating in the land of Goshen, the Nile delta.

We know little about Israel’s 400 years in Egypt except that prosperity turned to adversity and they spent the last century or so there as slaves. In the midst of their bondage God intervened, and through the great plagues on Egypt showed that He was stronger than the gods of Egypt. He led them across the Sea of Reeds and then drowned Pharaoh and his entire army in the sea.

But still the people demonstrated during the first weeks of their wanderings through the desert that they did not yet know God as they should. At every obstacle they grumbled and rebelled against God and against His chosen leader Moses. They desperately needed to learn that this God who had redeemed them was not only greater than the gods of Egypt—He was the almighty, majestic, awesome Sovereign of the entire universe. At Sinai they would begin to learn that. The divine characteristics I have just mentioned are what theologians call “attributes of transcendence.”

He has attributes of transcendence. The term transcendence means simply “that which transcends, that which is noticeably beyond the ordinary, that which rises above and beyond the limits.” Michael Jordan transcended everyone else in basketball; Tiger Woods transcends in the game of golf. Luciano Pavarotti transcended in operatic performance. These are, of course, finite uses of the term. Only God truly transcends everyone and everything; that is, certain of His characteristics set Him off as absolutely distinct from His creatures. Among His attributes of transcendence are the fact that God is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, all-powerful, all-knowing, and everywhere present. There is no one else in the universe having these characteristics.

How does Exodus 19 convey the truth of God’s transcendence? Well, consider first the geographical setting that God chose for this 11-month seminar? It says in verse 2: “After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.” Bible scholars have long identified this place as Gebel Mousa (the Mountain of Moses), one of the most remote and rugged mountain areas on planet earth.

I have always loved the desert and remote mountains. If I could spend a month in the badlands of southern Utah I would be ecstatic. And to visit Sinai itself was a dream I never expected to come true. But then the Lord allowed me to do just that—twice in the past five years. Climbing to the top of that incredible place gave me just a taste of what Moses and the children of Israel experienced. I want to share just a few pictures to indicate just how startling the landscape is. It should also reveal why God had to give them water from a rock if they were to survive. (By the way, I’m aware of Bob Cornuke’s contention that the real Mt. Sinai is Jabal al Lawz in Saudi Arabia, hundreds of miles east of the traditional location. Even if he is correct, which I doubt,

that wouldn't change my point, for that mountain is equally remote and desolate).

The very remoteness of the site communicated to the Israelites that the One with whom they were dealing was awesome and untouchable. You'll recall that only Moses was allowed up on the top of the mountain. Seven different times in the entire story, which covers a number of chapters, he goes up on the mountain to talk to God. No one else is allowed to go up, with two brief exceptions. Aaron went part way up on one occasion, and the elders of Israel were invited part way up on another occasion. The rest were not even allowed to touch the foot of the mountain. "Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death."

Furthermore, I see God's transcendence revealed by the fact that the people are required to wash their clothes and to abstain from sexual relations while Moses is on the mountain talking with God. This does not imply that these things are evil, but rather teaches through symbols that God's people need spiritual cleansing and must be undistracted whenever God is speaking to them.

God's transcendence is still further confirmed by the physical signs that accompany Him. In verse 16 we read of thunder, lightning, a thick cloud, and a very loud trumpet blast, which apparently was angelic in origin. Then we read of smoke and fire, and whole mountain trembles violently. The heavenly trumpet gets louder and louder. There is sufficient evidence here to establish that God was intent upon convincing Israel that He is not one to be trifled with. He is above them, beyond them, and over them; He is the transcendent Sovereign over all the earth.

But I also believe God has another set of attributes which are at least hinted at in this passage, and that we call "attributes of immanence," which rather than setting God apart from His creatures, connect Him to them.

He has attributes of immanence. Immanence is a theological term denoting nearly the opposite of transcendence. (By the way, there are three different words that are often confused: eminence, imminence, and immanence. "Eminence" is a word which speaks of importance, as in referring to a monarch as "His eminence." "Imminence" is a word which means "pending," as in "imminent disaster." The term we are using is "immanence.") Whereas transcendence speaks of God's separateness, immanence speaks of His approachability. In place of farness it speaks of nearness. In place of raw power it speaks of care and concern. In addition to awesome sovereign it speaks of a compassionate Friend. And that's why I used the term "awesome friend" in my title today—it puts together His transcendence and His immanence.

Interestingly while there is no counterpart to God's attributes of transcendence in us, we can share to some extent in His attributes of immanence; in fact, we are commanded to. We are to be loving, patient, faithful, and merciful—all attributes of immanence.

Now the Old Testament makes it clear that God is both transcendent and immanent. For example, in Jer. 23:23 the Lord Himself declares, "Am I only a God nearby, and not a God far away?" In Isaiah 40, a chapter entirely devoted to the transcendence and immanence of God, we find these words beginning in verse 10: "See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and his arm rules for him, (that's transcendence), but then we read, "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He

gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young” (that's immanence).

Do we find any reference to immanence in Exodus 19 as Israel is gathered around the mountain of God? I think so. The mere fact that Israel has made it this far from Egypt is an indication of God's immanence. He has protected them from the heat, cold, hunger, thirst, and from their enemies. God Himself reminds them in verse 4: “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.” This commitment to the welfare of His creatures is not what one would expect from a God who is only transcendent.

Another indication of immanence is that God is preparing to communicate with His people, and in communicating with them he is demonstrating that He considers them worthy of hearing from Him. In revealing His will so thoroughly in the Mosaic Law He is treating them as partners in a great covenant. And then there is a fascinating incident in Exodus 24:9-11 where God invites the elders of Israel to come part way up the mountain, to enjoy His presence, and to eat and drink with Him.

The question I would like to ask, after looking at the evidence of both God's transcendence and His immanence in our chapter, is this:

Which of these sets of attributes—transcendence or immanence—was predominant in God's dealings with Israel? That is not an easy question to answer since we have not examined the whole OT, but my own opinion is that God's transcendence is more heavily emphasized. Certainly that's true here in the Sinai story. And as you read through the later chapters of Exodus you find transcendence also in the detailed specifications that God gave to Israel to build a house of worship.

The very architecture of that tabernacle (and of the temple after it), screams out the transcendence of God. The fact that only priests could go into the Holy Place, and that only the High Priest could go into the Holy of Holies (and then only once a year), were constant reminders to the people that God was not their good ol' buddy; He was, in fact, unapproachable for most people. When they came to worship they had to come with elaborate offerings and sacrifices, and any neglect of the rules and regulations was met with instant death.

So while the immanence of God—His nearness, His approachability, His communicativeness, His concern—are definitely present in His dealings with Israel, there seems to be more emphasis upon His transcendence—His majesty, His power, His awesomeness. But this raises a further question:

How does New Testament teaching about God's nature and character compare with what Israel learned at Sinai?

Let me start with this proposition: Despite what some liberal scholars have suggested, there is no dichotomy between the God of the OT and the God of the NT.

He is the same God and His basic moral law remains unchanged. It is simply not true that the God of Israel was a God of wrath while the God of the Church is a God of love. Every single one of God's many attributes (and lists of those characteristics have ranged from as few as 18 to over 100) is revealed in both Testaments. Also His basic moral law remains unchanged. Every one of the Ten Commandments except the 4th is reiterated in some form in the NT and is fully applicable today, and even the 4th Commandment is found in principle in the NT, namely that one day in seven should be set aside for rest and worship.

Nevertheless, I think it's fairly obvious that . . .

God's immanence is emphasized more than His transcendence in the NT. The greatest evidence for this is the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus was God come in the flesh, in fact in the form of a baby. He explained God to us, according to John 1:18; that is, He revealed the very nature and character of God in human form that could be seen and handled. "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him," adds Colossians 1:19. And the entire book of Hebrews majors on the fact that God is no longer dealing with His people at arm's length or through intermediaries but rather directly.

Turn with me to Hebrews 12:18-24, where we will begin reading about Sinai from a NT perspective:

You (NT believers) have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.' The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, 'I am trembling with fear.'

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

The point seems to be that the awesomeness and remoteness of the Sinai experience is a direct contrast to the approachableness of God under the Gospel. Elsewhere in Hebrews we read that because of Jesus our High Priest, we can now come boldly before the throne of grace, with confidence, to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. That was not true for the Israelites. They had to come timidly and through sacrifice and through an intermediary, a priest.

If I am correct that God's immanence is now more heavily emphasized than His transcendence, compared to the OT, . . .

Why and to what extent is this true? Isn't this an argument against my assertion that God has not changed? I think not. It's God's people who have changed. Israel represents the people of God in infancy and childhood. Coming out of idolatrous paganism they had to be

treated as a father might treat a small child, more often with threats than explanations, with commands taking precedence over suggestions. The Church, on the other hand, represents the people of God approaching maturity. To us God offers more principles than precepts, more reason than rules.

So far this sermon has been fairly theological. But now I want to get very practical. How does this shift of emphasis from transcendence to immanence impact our worship?

We must not engage in wholesale borrowing of Old Testament worship practices.

OT worship was dominated by the transcendence of God while our worship should be dominated by the immanence of God. But this is often not the case. Consider church architecture. Many church buildings are designed like the tabernacle of Israel. The sanctuary (itself an OT term) is oblong with a kind of holy of holies at one end. Only the pastor and a few select people are allowed beyond the railing. The altar commands the central place in the sanctuary, as in the tabernacle, with the pulpit off to one side. In the typical European cathedral the analogies to OT architecture are even more striking.

Consider too, how borrowing from the OT emphasis on transcendence can influence our style of worship. Some Christians follow a specified elaborate liturgy, focusing upon the Eucharist, that seems to be following an OT pattern based on the regular sacrifices at the altar, rather than the simple worship of the NT church, focused on singing, prayer, preaching, and the Lord's Supper.ⁱⁱ

We can and should celebrate and enjoy the immanence of God. If God is with us, if He is our Friend, if He is accessible, and if He is approachable, that ought to impact how we worship. Consider the issue of church architecture. I don't think God cares that much about what kind of building we worship in, but I suggest to you that a church building is not a tabernacle or temple. As a matter of fact, the early church had no dedicated buildings that we know of. They generally met in homes. But if we are going to have church buildings, I believe there are far more appropriate designs than the cathedral, designs which convey the fact that we are a family, that the Word of God is central rather than the altar, and that the pastor is a teacher instead of a priest (since there is only one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, 1 Tim. 2:5).

As to style, our worship does not have to be somber; it can be joyful. It does not have to be planned to the hilt; it can be spontaneous. It does not have to be elaborate; it can be simple. It does not have to be mediated; it can be participatory. It does not demand that we sing only majestic hymns with a thundering organ; it's OK to sing worship songs with a guitar.

In other words, we have far more freedom in worship today than Israel enjoyed at Sinai. However, having said that, . . .

We must not allow our familiarity to breed contempt. There is never an excuse for flippancy or carelessness in worship. We are still dealing with Almighty God. Awe and respect are due Him at all times. In Jer. 23:23 God asks, "Am I only a God nearby and not a God far away? Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see Him? Do not I fill heaven and earth?" In this passage God is fighting the lying prophets of his day who told the people not to

take God too seriously. There are many speaking the same message today by the style of worship they have adopted. We must take Him seriously, always!

A good argument could be made today that many have lost any concept of the transcendence of God. I wonder if we have not become too casual even in our dress. Some people actually dress down to come to church—wearing their grungiest clothes of the week. Does that mean white shirt, tie and suit coat are essential? No, but by the same token, I don't think we should wear to church what wouldn't be allowed at work even on casual Fridays.

I believe others show a measure of contempt for God through carelessness and inconsistency in their worship habits, coming to worship only when it's convenient or failing to come with prepared hearts or on time. Each of these can be an affront to our Holy Awesome Friend.

Are there consequences to our failure to keep in balance the transcendence and immanence of God? Look again at the passage in Hebrews 12 which we used earlier to contrast the experience of Israel at Mt. Sinai with our experience at Mt. Zion, the church of the living God. The writer continues,

See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks (namely God). If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens. . . ."

Therefore, . . . let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:25-29).

The application to believers is: worship God acceptably with reverence and awe. He is a great and mighty God, as well as our Friend.

Conclusion: But there is also an application for unbelievers found in Hebrews: "For if the message spoken by angels (referring to the law of Moses) was binding and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?" (Heb. 2:2-3) Almighty God became a man in the person of Jesus Christ; He lived a perfect life of obedience to God's laws, but then died on a cross, becoming a sacrifice for our sins. No further sacrifice is needed, for Jesus satisfied God's wrath toward sin and offers us the free gift of salvation. Don't ignore His offer and don't presume upon His grace. Respond today and God will become your Awesome Friend.

i. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Modern Library, 1937), 629.

ii. On the other hand, some churches may borrow too little from the OT. Some use no musical instruments in their churches, arguing that musical instruments are never mentioned in the NT—only in the OT. But I see no hint in the NT that musical instruments are banned. If a church wants to sing *a cappella*, they certainly have the right to do so, but it is not required.