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God's Law and God's Love | Ten Rules for Life
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(Discussion questions on page 8)

This winter I'd want to consider a single idea with you:

What does law have to do with love? What does law have to do with love?

By law, I mean universal, authoritative, rules, that apply to everyone, everywhere, across all time. I mean moral absolutes, regulations, strictures, that cannot be broken by anyone—commands that everyone must order their public *and* private lives by.

By love, I mean the good life. I mean flourishing. I mean being your authentic and happiest self. I mean treating people in a way that truly honors them and their freedom and their uniqueness.

What does law have to do with love? What do rules that apply to everyone have to do with modern impulses such as, "Just follow your heart." "Don't judge." "Love is love." "Be true to yourself."

For modern people—who prize life, liberty and happiness, who believe that anything getting in the way of the true self is oppressive—, for us, what does law have to do with love?

This question is important for Christians. For Scripture is a book about *both* God's love and God's law. Sometimes the entire Old Testament is called The Torah, meaning, God's Law.

But this question—the relationship between universal rules and individual happiness—became particularly interesting to me in 2018. Someone referred me to a New York Times article by David Brooks that was about a Canadian professor of Psychology, Jordan Peterson. I'd never heard of him. But in the article, I learned his YouTube page had something like 40 million views and that he's written a best-selling book all out keeping rules. It was titled, *12 Rules for Life*.

I immediately bought and read it. I could not understand why, at a time when so many people saw universal moral standards as restrictive, that a book about rules had sold 2 million copies in its first year on the shelves.

I'll leave you to form your own opinions about David Brooks' article and Jordan Peterson's book. But the deeper point I draw it this:

People—even modern people—want to be told what to do. Deep down, there is a lot of uncertainty in life. People are not quite sure how to order their lives to maximize happiness. And people are terrified of making the wrong decisions and underachieving. Maybe they call it advice, or wise guidance, but people are looking for truths to help them navigate a chaotic world. They want someone wise and worthy to tell them what to do—they want to feel the solidity of order and structure in an otherwise chaotic world.

Ever since noticing this paradox—that modern people who love liberty crave rules to guide them—I've approached God's Law in scripture differently. Rather than thinking of it as mere

prohibitions for sinners, I've explored it as divine instruction for living. God's Law is not the arbitrary restriction of a tyrant. It is the blueprint, the instruction manual, the exercise and diet plan, perfectly designed to bring into existence *You*. It's the wise counsel of a loving Father.

What's love got to do with law? Just this: One of the ways God loves confused and often unsure people, is by giving them His law. God's law is part of how we experience and enjoy God's love.

To explore this single idea this winter, we turn to the most famous part of God's Law: *The Ten Commandments*.

These ten rules were once commonplace in Christian discipleship and western culture. Some may remember they're embossed on the Supreme Court and Library of Congress buildings—or that they once made for a Hollywood blockbuster. Historically, they were at the core of Christian formation—required memorization for confirmands. They are not as well known—let alone lived—today.

Over the next months I want us not only to learn them, but to learn how to live them. We'll take one commandment each Sunday, starting next week.

But today, we begin with the big picture. How does the giving the Decalogue fit into the larger vision of what God is doing with his people and in the world? We'll do this by considering the situation where the law is given—Exodus, looking particularly at Exodus 19:1-6, and some of Exodus 20. I'll organize our observations around a few questions that get at the heart of this matter—the relationship between God's law and God's love.

The first question, *doesn't God's law threaten my freedom?*

I. Doesn't God's Law Threaten My Freedom? (Exod 19:4).

Western people in particular value freedom. And this means not just freedom from oppressive regimes. It includes freedom from oppressive systems or traditions—ideas or institutions, especially religious ones, that keep us from being our true selves.

How do we square this concern about individual liberty with a legal code given three-thousand years ago that claims to be still binding?

We revisit the context—the story within which the giving of the law happens. Because it's a story all about freedom.

The preamble to the Ten Commandments, Exodus 19, highlights Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt:

¹ On the third new moon after the people of Israel had **gone out of the land of Egypt**, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. ² They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, ³ while Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel:

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⁴ ‘You yourselves have seen **what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings** and brought you to myself. (Exod 19:1-4).

After 400 years of enslavement, with a mighty hand God had delivered Israel from who were at that time the world’s greatest power—Pharoh and his armies.

The giving of the law comes after the liberation of God’s people.

Now, modern people love this story about liberation from oppression. But we aren’t as sure about this giving of commands in the wilderness. Wouldn’t it be more loving if God simply told Israel to now celebrate their freedom. Enjoy it/s have a feast. Eat and drink and be merry. Maybe his first word to Moses on the mountain would be, “Go and tell the people, ‘Be true to yourselves.’”

But God doesn’t do this. Instead, he thunders from heaven and gives them commands that implicate how they see the world, who they worship, how they live.

Modern people might think that Israel’s has just gone from one tyrant, Pharaoh, to the next, Yahweh.

Doesn’t the giving of law threaten their newfound freedom?

This is where we need to continue to notice the narrative context of Exodus and what happens before the giving of the law is even over.

But in the course of Moses receiving the law—which unfolds from Exod 20-24—God keeps him on the mountain for forty days (Exod 24: 18) and the people grow weary. What follows is one of the saddest scenes in Scripture:

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, “Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” ² So Aaron said to them, “Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” ³ So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” ⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.” ⁶ And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play. (Exod 32:1-6).

Just months after seeing God deliver them from the most powerful nation in the world, the Israelites are dancing before a statue of a cow made from their own earrings and bracelets. It’s embarrassing. And it exposes the other side of the coin of human oppression: our issue with freedom is not merely about external outer threats; it is a matter of our own twisted hearts.

Israel had been liberated from the power of Pharaoh but were still imprisoned by the power of sin.

Do we not see this today. The freest people in the world are modern westerners. And yet we live in bondage to our passions—some of these are more polite than others. Maybe not golden cows, but things like youth, beauty, power, sex, money. If we really see the organization of our lives, are we not dancing before idols?

Seen between the oppression by Egypt and the surrender to a Golden calf, we realize that the Law of God is meant to liberate us from following forces within and without.

Freedom is not “doing whatever we want.” Freedom is enjoying doing what we should. The Ten Commandments do not threaten Israel’s freedom—they make it possible. They are given to show them the path out of the bondage of worshiping false gods and living self-serving lives.

What rules currently order and rule your life? Perhaps you subtly believe that your own gratification is the final law to obey? Does this make you free? Perhaps there is an ideology that has made you its acolyte without you realizing it? Having been freed from the shackles of old traditions or religious restrictions, do you find yourself dancing before a golden calf—a god of your own imagining and making? Have you rejected God’s law so you can be free, but find yourself following the opinions of your culture or the dictates of your feelings?

To be freed from the mastery of sin is to be mastered by God; to be mastered by God is to submit to His rule; to submit to his rule, is to keep his commands. Does the Law of God prohibit our freedom? Absolutely not. According to Exodus, the Law of God is our only hope for freedom.

A second and related question to ask is this: If I submit to God’s law, won’t it misshape my life? Won’t it turn me into a boring religious person? With all the things we are learning in modern science and the modern world, aren’t there better sets of ideas form my life according to? Will the law of God form, or disform me?

II. Does God’s Law Rightly Form Us—or does it stunt my growth? (Exod 19:5-6).

Laws and ideas are like the tent-poles that give shape and structure to the canvas covering so it can be a tent. We internalize them, and they dictate the shape and form of our lives.

If we are formed by the rat race of Washington, our lives take the shape of achievement. If we are formed by the hedonism of so much popular entertainment, our lives take the shape of earthly ease and happiness.

Does the law of God form us into a different shape? And if so, is it more compelling?

The commandments do anticipate formation—only it centers around the formation of God’s people.

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; ⁶ and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel. (Exod 19:5-6).

God says three things about how the law will form them: into God's "treasured possession among all the peoples," into "a kingdom of priests" and into "a holy nation." A few things to draw from this in terms of how the law forms us.

One: it tells us that when it comes to our formation, the most important question is not who we are, but **whose we are**. The giving of the law is in the context of what the Bible calls a *covenant*—God is defining his relationship with Israel. By agreeing to these laws, they deepen their relationship as his treasured possession. By coming under God's law, we are saying that God is our king—and thereby, we become his treasure.

I remember this first time I visited my old roommate from my days in North Carolina, Brad, after he'd had his first child. His career was going so well, he had a wonderful place to live in—but there was nothing like this little baby girl he now had. Whenever he'd call me, he'd want to tell me all about her. She was his "treasured possession." And as she grows up—that is the thing that will give her life solidity and strength—not finding herself, but by knowing who she comes from, who loves her.

A second thing: the law forms us by saying we are to **prioritize becoming holy**, not becoming happy: "if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant ... you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a **holy** nation. (Exod 19:5-6). In biblical psychology, happiness is a by-product of holiness. And this is because holiness is about bearing the image of God. The Lord says to us, "be holy, for I am holy" (Lev 19:2; 1 Peter 1:16). The Law of God reflects God's character—his holiness. By keeping it, we reflect that character—which happens to be what we are made for.

A third thing: the law of God anchors our love for others in our love for God. We see this is the ordering of the commandments themselves. The first four are all about loving God: no gods before him, no idols, no cursing his name, making time to worship him. The next six are all about loving others: it starts with honoring parents, then moves to how we act, speak and think towards our neighbors.

Plenty of rules today guide us toward respecting and caring for others. But they do not grasp why it is so important that this be rooted in love of God. The profundity of the Ten Commandments is that it shows us that how we love God will shape how we love the people God has made.

There are many people in this town who though they identify as Christians, are being formed by the rules of Washington and Northern VA: Here, the number one commandment might be, 'Work hard enough to be successful.' The second might be, 'Identify with the correct political tribe.' God's Law says that far more important than your work ethic and success is your relationship with God. And far more important than your political tribe is that you identify with the people of God—it is they, after all, who are his treasured possession.

One last question about how the law relates to love. How can I experience God's love by his law, when his law continues to remind me of his judgement—because I can't stop breaking it! Doesn't the law tell me I am a failure?

III. Doesn't the Law Mean I am a Failure.

Yes, the law does tell me I am a failure. Israel disastrously broke it before Moses even got down the mountain with it—the Golden Calf!

In a sense, the Old Testament as a whole is one long exposure of the failure of human beings to keep God's ways: from the Garden of Eden to the wilderness wanderings to days in the Promise Land—people cannot, not sin.

But in showing our failure, the law is really just showing us something true. The law is like the check-engine light—without it, we might not otherwise realize how bad the situation is.

So, the law is key to proper self-examination. It protects us from misdiagnoses. We really have a problem.

But the Law does not leave us there. It not only points out our problem; it prepares us for seeing the solution.

Notice the dominate theme of the rest of exodus: the building of the Tabernacle. Which is all about God making a way for people to find atonement—forgiveness—for sin.

We learn from the New Testament, that this sacrificial system foreshadowed Jesus, who would one day come to be the ultimate sacrifice for our sins.

So what might we say about how the law is loving even as it exposes our failure to keep it?

The law gets us honest: it reveals to us what it means to be human—we are made to be righteous like God, but we are not. And there is nothing we can do to ultimately fix ourselves.

The law turns our eyes to Christ: And so the law sets us looking for a savior. First, someone who would be able to keep the law. And second, someone who could save us from the judgement of breaking it.

Hence, when Jesus comes he says,

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to **fulfill** them. (Matt 5:17).

Jesus fulfills the law: by obeying it, he satisfied its vision for **holiness**. By dying on the Cross for our breaking it, he satisfies the law's requirement for **justice**.

Jesus transforms our relationship to the law, but he doesn't abolish the Law's moral purpose and vision. Many of the Ten Commandments Jesus expressly teaches—even deepens.

So yes, the law not only frees us and forms us, it reminds us we have failed. But in that failure, we find our life: in that failure we stop trying to play god and finally turn to Him. And then, in the arms of the grace of Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, keeping the law becomes a guide to how we love God and each other. The law becomes our friend, reminding us of the beauty of the Cross, and pointing the way to holiness.

I think the success of books like Peterson's *Twelve Rules* or others like it, lies in the fact that modern people are desperate for a wise leadership. We want to be shown the way we should go. We want to know how to order our lives so we don't waste them.

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The Ten Commandments are God's Ten Rules for Living. They point us to Christ, to Christ's people, and to a way of life we'll never be ashamed of giving our all to. Let us learn and live them!

Let's pray.

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Small Group Discussion Guide

Week of Sunday, January 11, 2026
Scripture passage: Exodus 19:1-6, 20:1-17

Passage overview

Exodus 20 and the preceding chapter, Exodus 19, describe one of the most dramatic and foundational moments in the Old Testament and all of the Bible: After bringing them out of Egypt, God brings Israel to Mount Sinai, establishes a covenant with them, and gives them the Ten Commandments. These chapters reveal God's holiness, Israel's identity, and the shape of a life that reflects God's character.

Exodus 19 — Preparing to Meet God

- God brings Israel to Sinai three months after leaving Egypt.
- God declares His covenant purpose: Israel is to be His “treasured possession,” “a kingdom of priests,” and “a holy nation” (19:4–6).
- The people consecrate themselves—washing, waiting, and preparing to encounter God's presence.
- God descends on the mountain in thunder, fire, smoke, and trembling—revealing His holiness and power.

Exodus 20 — The Ten Commandments

God speaks the Ten Commandments directly to the people. These commands shape life with God and neighbor.

- No other gods — exclusive loyalty to Yahweh.
- No idols — worship God as He truly is.
- Honor God's name — reverence in speech and life.
- Keep the Sabbath — rest that reflects trust in God.
- Honor parents — respect for God-given authority.
- No murder — protect life.
- No adultery — honor covenant faithfulness.
- No stealing — respect others' property.
- No false witness — uphold truth.
- No coveting — guard the heart from misplaced desire.

These commands can be summarized as Jesus later did: **Love God** and **Love your neighbor**.

Discussion Guide

1. Icebreaker (*5 minutes*): What's one "rule" you grew up with that shaped you?

2. Context recap: God has just delivered Israel from Egypt and now speaks directly to them at Sinai.

3. Read Exodus 19:1-6, and 20:1-17 aloud together (*5 minutes*).

4. Observe—What does this text say?

- What stands out to you as you read Exodus 20:1–21?
- What repeated words, commands, or patterns do you notice in the Ten Commandments?
- How are the commandments structured?
- What is the people's reaction to God's presence in vv.18–21?

5. Interpret—What does it mean?

- Why does chapter 20 begin with God identifying Himself as the One who brought Israel out of Egypt?
- Why does God give the commandments after rescuing Israel? (Grace precedes obedience.)
- Why is "no other gods" placed first, and how does it shape the rest?
- How do the first four commandments shape our relationship with God?
- How do the last six commandments shape our relationships with others and reflect God's design for human relationships?
- How does this chapter reveal God's character? (Holiness, justice, love)

6. Apply—How should we respond?

- Which commandment challenges you most right now, and why?
- Which one brings you the most hope or clarity?
- How does remembering God's rescue (v.2) motivate obedience rather than guilt?
- How does Jesus' summary of the Law (love God, love neighbor) help us understand the Ten Commandments today?

7. Closing Prayer (*5 minutes*)

Pray for:

- Hearts that love God above all and delight in his law.
- Integrity in relationships, freedom from idols and coveting
- Repentance for times that we have failed to uphold God's law
- Rest in knowledge of God's grace towards us in forgiveness through Jesus' sacrifice.