



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Lent 3

March 7, 2021

Obeying the Rules

Exodus 20:1–17

¹ *And God spoke all these words, saying,*

² *“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*

³ *“You shall have no other gods before me.*

⁴ *“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

⁷ *“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.*

⁸ *“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

¹² *“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.*

¹³ *“You shall not murder.*

¹⁴ *“You shall not commit adultery.*

¹⁵ *“You shall not steal.*

¹⁶ *“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

¹⁷ *“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.”*

Once upon a time in a land far away there lived a people who had been under the tyranny of an evil ruler for many, many years. He arrived one day out of nowhere, pretended to befriend them, and then, while he distracted them, his mighty forces came in and before they knew it he had stolen their land, stolen their homes, and stolen their



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pride. Now they rented homes which used to belong to them, worked land which used to be theirs, and paid tribute to a ruler whom they despised and who hated them. If it weren't for the fact that they provided him with a good living, he might have killed them all just for the fun of it.

This ill-tempered nastiness began to rub off on the citizens of that land. They hated their ruler, so there were always plots against him. Frequently there were public executions of those who had been found guilty of treason in trying to overthrow him. This only made people hate him more, to the point where his name became the strongest epithet a person could use. No one attended his rallies. No one listened to his speeches. No one celebrated his day of tribute.

Children hated their parents for allowing this man to rise to power and cheat them out of everything that was theirs. They called them stupid and wanted nothing to do with them. Sometimes they even killed them. Since no one had any self-respect, they began to delve into sexual perversions of all kinds. Since no one had enough of anything, people began to steal from each other. They accused each other of all sorts of things; even if they knew the accused parties to be innocent, they didn't care. All they wanted was whatever they could get. It didn't matter how they got it.

Laws were established by the evil ruler to try to maintain order. Troops were put in the streets to try to promote peace, and while this did help a little in controlling public violence, this people who had once been a happy people, a care-free, warm-hearted people, had become hard-hearted, worrisome, and just plain miserable.

One day, someone heard a commotion on the out-skirts of town. A crowd had begun to assemble there. Someone said, "The king's coming." "The king?" someone asked. "Who's that?" Looking out, they could see a mighty army approaching. There were soldiers as far as the eye could see. The people began to fear for their lives; they had no idea what to expect.

Suddenly, the evil ruler's troops rode past them on their way to confront this approaching army. There was a terrible battle. No one knew who the winner would be. But, when it was finally over, they could see that their evil ruler had been defeated. Some people cheered; others were worried – worried because they didn't know what this new ruler would be like. What if he were just the same as the one who had been defeated? What if he were *worse*? They all waited with myriad thoughts and feelings as the king rode into town.

"My people," he said. "Word has reached me that you were living under awful tyranny. I, your king, have come to free you. Your old laws are now past. You will live under a new code." As he was saying this, a notice was being posted in the town square. People hurried over to see what it said. It read:

You will honor the king above all else.
You will not commit treason.



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You will celebrate the king's day of tribute.
You will honor your elders.
You will not murder.
You will not engage in sexual perversion.
You will not steal.
You will not accuse one another falsely.
You will not be jealous of things that belong to others.
You will not be jealous of another's family.

Someone said, "Why this is nothing more than another list of rules. Rules – just like the laws you said you have come to free us from!"

"No, no!" said the king. "Don't think of them as rules. You will not follow this code because of rules. You will honor me above all else because I will treat better than anyone else. You will not commit treason because you will never find another king who loves you more or will take care of you the way I will. You will celebrate my day of tribute because you will come to love me as I love you. You will honor your elders because they will mediate my gifts to you. You will not murder because my respect for life will rub off on you. You will not engage in sexual perversions because you will not desire to hurt the ones you love. You will not steal because I will see to it that you have everything you need. You will not accuse one another falsely because you will see how hurtful that is. You will not be jealous of what belongs to your neighbor because your own house will be full. No, my friends, this is not a list of rules. Rather, this is my promise to you. You have been freed from your old law, freed to live a new way, a better way, and I promise to make this new way possible for you."

And so it was for the Children of Israel in today's Old Testament. They had lived under the tyranny of their Egyptian slave masters for hundreds of years. Generation after generation had come and gone and known nothing but slavery their whole lives. They lived under the rule of Pharaoh, following his laws, the laws of Egypt.

Their cries for deliverance did not fall on deaf ears. God heard their plea, and in His own perfect timing, He called Moses to be the one who would lead them to freedom. Having delivered them from the hands of the Egyptians, as our text says: ". . . out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery . . .," He then led them to Mount Sinai where today's Old Testament reading takes place. There, through His prophet, He tells them who it is that has freed them, and He introduces them to the new code which they will now live by. No longer would they have to live under the code of tyranny. Now they could live in freedom under a Law which would truly free them.

For this was not just another set of laws for them to follow. This was not just another list of rules to obey. Only God can write Commandments like these. Only God can say "you must" and yet "you will." Only God can make it possible for His subjects to



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obey His Commands. These are, after all, the most unusual commandments ever given. They are unusual because, contrary to the popular method of translation, they aren't presented in the usual command format. You see, in Hebrew, for a word to be a command it takes on a special form that tells us it's a command. This type of word is called an *imperative*. But, what we have in this list of Commandments are not imperatives; they're what are called *imperfects*, which tells the translator to translate not "thou shalt," as if to say "you must," but rather "you *will*."

So what was God telling His people by giving them Commands in this unusual way? Was He making them something less than Commands? No, because He calls them Commands later in our text. Was He just making suggestions for us? No, for He clearly expects us to obey them. By stating these Commandments in this way, God was telling His people: "This is what I expect, *and I am going to help you live up to it*. I'm going to *guarantee* your success in following My Commands." This actually makes them more than Commandments; it adds the sense of *promise* to them. If they were only another set of rules to obey, why would we need them? We're pretty good at coming up with our own rules. The devil has his own set of rules to follow. What good would there be in just adding another set of rules on top of everything else? Are God's rules easier to follow? No, they're harder. Are they more desirable? No, we try to get away with violating them whenever we can. So what makes them different than all the rest? They're different in that God has guaranteed their fulfillment.

Beloved, God never intended just to give us another set of rules. He never expected us to be able to live up to these Commandments on our own. We read throughout the Old Testament the sad story of how the Children of Israel, shortly after receiving the Ten Commandments, began to turn them into another set of rules. They soon forgot the promise that accompanied these Commands. Instead, they began to multiply the list of rules, adding more rules and sub-rules, to the point where they had hundreds and hundreds of rules. This is what the scribes and pharisees in Jesus' day were all about. Their religion had degenerated into a religion of rules. They prided themselves in how well they kept the Law and followed the rules. The trouble was they forgot the promise. They thought they could live up to the Law. They even fooled themselves by finding loop-holes in the Law. They had turned God's Law into something else. Or more accurately, they had cast His Law aside and replaced it with their own. Jesus tells His disciples in Matthew 5(:20) that the kind of righteousness these "teachers of the law" were living was not enough for them to enter the kingdom of heaven. In spite of their obedience to rules they had not fulfilled the Law.

How sad it is when we begin to think that we can be saved by obeying the rules, because, like the scribes and pharisees, we end up trying to fulfill a law that we have invented, rather than the Law of God, for the Law of God also carries a promise, a guarantee of fulfillment. God doesn't want us to depend on our fulfilling of the Law – He



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never expected that. Rather, what He really wants is for us to trust in Him, to trust in His guaranteed fulfillment. This is what separates our laws from God's Law. We can make laws until there is nothing left to write them on, but we can never make a law that is guaranteed to be fulfilled. Our government makes laws all the time, and yet we have to provide policemen to enforce the law, and even then only if the criminals are caught, tried, and convicted. We can punish law-breakers, but we can never guarantee obedience to the law. God can. He can because He doesn't depend on humans for the fulfillment of His Law. Rather, He depends on Himself for fulfillment of that Law. Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, fulfilled that Law for us – perfectly and completely. It had nothing to do with us and our works. It had everything to do with Christ and His work on our behalf.

Beloved, do you define a Christian by how well he lives up to the Law? Do you judge someone's Christianity by what a good person he is? If someone were to ask you for evidence of your salvation, what would you tell them? Would you point to all the good deeds you have done? Why is it that we seem so eager to talk about the good things we've done and yet we're so timid when it comes to talking about our faith in Jesus? Friends, Christianity doesn't rest on how many good deeds you do or how hard you try to live a good life. It doesn't depend on how much money you give to charity or how many church activities you're involved in. Your Christianity rests on your faith in the One who has fulfilled God's Law for you: Jesus Christ, our one and only Savior.

Christianity, after all, isn't about religion. Religion is about obeying rules and following laws. You can have all the religion you can stand and never be a Christian. Christianity is about having a relationship with Jesus Christ, a relationship which He began in you in your baptism, freeing you from the tyranny of Satan, a relationship which He maintains through His Word and Sacrament. Let's not make the mistake of turning our freedom into slavery, casting the true Law of God aside for the laws of men. Instead, let's revel in our Christian freedom, trusting solely in the One who has freed us from the bondage of sin so that the life we live, we may live to God – dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.