

The Second Commandment

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Introduction

In view of Paul's statement, "We know that the law is spiritual" (Rom 7:14), there is a recurring question whether fallen man could ever obey such a law. But in the second commandment of that law God states that there are "thousands who love me and obey my commandments" (Exod 20:6). Who would know better whether there are or are not than the One who wrote this statement with His own finger?

It should be clear at the outset that if we have a different concept of obedience than the One who requires it, we have the wrong concept of obedience. And by learning what God intends with regard to obedience, we also learn what He intends with regard to punishment for disobedience--prior to the final destruction of the wicked.

The second commandment provides a rich source of spiritual insight. Let us consider it briefly.

What Does the Second Commandment Say?

The text of the commandment in question is found in Exod 20:4-6.¹ It reads as follows:

- (4) "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. (5) You shall not bow down to them or worship them [*tā'āb'dēm*]; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing [*pōqēd*] the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, (6) but showing love to thousands who love me and keep my commandments." (Exod 20:4-6)

Three words deserve special comment. These are "worship" and "punishing," both of them in vs. 5, and also "keep" in vs. 6.

Worship

The word translated "worship" here is *tā'āb'dēm*, from the root **'bd* "work, serve." The same root occurs elsewhere within the same table of the law: "Six days you shall labor [*ta'ābōd*] and do all your work" (Exod 20:9).² It is appropriate to translate the Hebrew word *tā'āb'dēm* with the English word "worship" in vs. 5, as NIV has done, but in doing so we should realize where such a rendering fits within the semantic field available to the root on which it is built.

Notice that the word "worship" occurs in the first or imperative half of the second commandment, which extends to the middle of vs. 5.³

(4) "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. (5) You shall not bow down to them or worship them [*tā'āb'dēm*]; . . ." (Exod 20:4-5a)

Punishment

The word "punishing" (*pōqēd*) occurs in the second or explanatory half of the commandment:

". . . for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing [*pōqēd*] the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, (6) but showing love to thousands who love me and keep my commandments." (Exod 20:5b-6)

Over time a number of related meanings developed around the root **pqd*. Extending the period for such development as far forward as possible, consider the range of meanings that are currently available for this root in Modern Israeli Hebrew.

Table
The Root *PQD as It Has Developed
in Modern Hebrew

Hebrew	English Gloss
paqqād	chief-inspector (of police)
pāqûd	numbered, counted; soldier
p ^e qûdâ	command, order
pāqîd	clerk, official
p ^e qîdût	office work; office staff
p ^e qîdûtî	bureaucratic, clerical

Even if we did not know anything about the history of the language, we could infer from the above list of derived meanings that the semantic core that gave rise to them had something to do with the idea of rendering an account (chief-inspector; clerk, official; office work; bureaucratic, clerical) or being accounted for (soldier). A soldier is a person under orders from a superior officer. He must take in hand whatever task the officer puts before him. Thus, the underlying significance of **pqd* lies in the opposite direction from neglect. Again "punishing" is an appropriate way to translate the word in question once we understand the semantic context for doing so.⁴ In this case what is accounted for--the thing not to be neglected--is guilt. If guilt is not neglected, it is necessary to respond to it in some way. Punishment is an appropriate response to guilt. Thus, *pōqēd* is an appropriate word to use in the present passage.

Obedience

The third term mentioned above is *ûl'sōm'rê* ("who keep"), at the end of vs. 6, built on the root **šmr*. The range of meanings associated with this latter root all have to do with keeping watch over or retaining something over a period of time. In fact this word conveys an idea that is not so very different from that translated "punish" (above). In both cases a matter is given active and careful attention. Consider a number of examples.

David left his things with the keeper of [šōmēr] supplies, ran to the battle lines and greeted his brothers. (1 Sam 17:20)

Hilkiah and those the king had sent with him went to speak to the prophetess Huldah, who was the wife of Shallum son of Tokhath, the son of Hasrah, keeper of [šōmēr] the wardrobe. (2 Chr 34:22)

For Solomon *lišmôr* ("to keep") is the opposite of *l'hašlîk* "to throw away" ("a time to keep and a time to throw away" [Eccl 3:6]). The same root is used to describe God's constant watchcare over His children and also refers to the keeping of promises.

"If God will be with me and will watch over me [ûš^emārânî] on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear . . ." (Gen 28:20)

"He who scattered Israel will gather them
and will watch over [ûš^emārô] his flock like a
shepherd." (Jer 31:10)

"You have kept [šāmártā] your promise to your servant David my father; with your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it--as it is today." (1 Kgs 8:24)

The root *šmr frequently describes human obedience to divine commands ("You must keep [w^ešāmártā] this ordinance at the appointed time year after year" [Exod 13:10]). In other passages it occurs in parallel with a verb meaning to obey:

Hear, O Israel, and be careful [w^ešāmártā] to obey [la^ešôl] so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your fathers, promised you. (Deut 6:3)

Be careful [w^ešāmártā] to do [la^ešôl] everything they direct you to do. (Deut 17:10)

Thus, as indicated above, the idea of "keeping" in Exod 20:6 is very similar to the idea of "punishing" in vs. 5. In both cases a matter is kept from being neglected. God keeps our sins in mind (if we do) and acts on them by way of punishment, while we keep His commandments in mind and act on them by way of obedience.

What Does the Second Commandment Mean?

In the remainder of this paper I focus on the aspects of punishment and obedience within the second or explanatory half of the commandment.

Punishment

"for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, . . ." (Exod 20:5)

The Lord describes Himself as "a jealous God" (vs. 5), i.e., a God who claims all of our worship and will not accept divided loyalties. The reference here is to things He Himself has created ("anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below" [vs. 4]).

The God of the second commandment will not ignore any deviation from strict loyalty. He works with those who turn away from Him for multiplied generations before giving them up ("punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me" [vs. 5]). The intent of doing this is not merely to vent His jealous anger. The clearest expression of God's jealousy over us is not anger but concern. He does not meet hatred with hatred, but--just as Christ would teach us on another mountain so many years later--He pursues the children of those who have hated Him and their children's children "to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me" (vs. 5), not giving them up easily but attempting by whatever means to capture their attention and win them back. The clause of this commandment which is most open to misunderstanding is therefore the one which least deserves to be misunderstood.

(43) "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' (44) But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, (45) that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (46) If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? (47) And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? (48) Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matt 5:43-48)

The entire Sermon on the Mount is a commentary on the Ten Commandments. That part of the law to which the above paragraph relates most directly is the second commandment. In pursuing those who have rejected Him God is not striking them on the cheek but is offering His own again, opening Himself to yet more abuse (see Matt 5:39). The explanation clause of the second commandment, correctly understood, does not teach vengeance but rather shows God's unwillingness to give us up.

Here we have the Old Testament sequel to Christ's parable of the lost sheep ("will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?" [Matt 18:12]). The final clause of the commandment goes on to tell us about the ninety-nine who did not wander off.

Obedience

". . . but showing love to thousands who love me and keep my commandments." (Exod 20:6)

Three facts are prominent in this clause. First, God loves mankind ("but showing love to thousands"). Second, there are those who love God ("who love me"). And third, there are those who obey God ("and keep my commandments").

God loves mankind. Christians take almost for granted the idea that God loves His human children. John does not say, "God is great," in 1 John 4:8 (as in the corresponding Muslim

declaration, "Allah akbar!"), although He is great. Instead John says, "God is love." The first passage of Scripture where we find that idea explicitly stated is here, in the second commandment.

There are those who love God. The word "love" occurs twice in the present verse. It is not only the case that God loves us. There are those of God's children who love Him in return. Nor is such a response confined to an insignificant number of people ("showing love to thousands who love me" [Exod 20:6]).

The numbers used in the second commandment (3, 4, 1000) do not apply to comparable objects. The 3 and the 4 apply to generations ("of those who hate me," vs. 5), whereas the 1000 applies to individuals ("who love me," vs. 6). And yet it is clear that a contrast between the numbers is intended. Because God loves His children He wants to show them love rather than punish, although He will punish if and when it becomes necessary to do so. His love must not be mistaken for weakness. He keeps strict accounts. But He delights in mercy.

Granting that the Bible's first reference to God's love occurs in one of the Ten Commandments, it is not coincidental that it should occur within the second. In the second commandment, more clearly than in any other, God reveals Himself in relation to His people. He is "a jealous God" (vs. 4), claiming their worship and their affection for Himself alone. He loves them and there are "thousands" who love Him in return. The objects of inanimate nature--the things He has made--cannot possibly meet the emotional needs of His children in the same way that He can. If they worship the creature instead of the Creator, they are robbing themselves of a blessing that can be obtained only through experiencing and reflecting back God's own personal love for them.

There are those who obey God. Two questions arise at this point. What are the "commandments" that God refers to? And, when we learn what they are, what does it mean to obey them?

If Exod 20:6 is the first place in the Bible which speaks of God's love for mankind, does this mean that before descending on Mount Sinai He did not love us? No one would wish to say so, but this is the context in which we must ask if any of the principles underlying God's moral law--the transcript of His character--originated on Sinai. They did not. "I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed" (Mal 3:6). If they did not originate then, they were in existence before.

Nor, on the other hand, are the Ten Commandments merely a universal set of moral truisms that in some general sense could be said to have always existed. What the "thousands who obey" are obeying in vs. 6 are "commandments." There is an imperative element in God's requirements and His loyal people in every age have benefited from carrying them out. Whatever He said before coming down on Mount Sinai followed from the same principles that are illustrated in the written law code laid down on that later occasion. Otherwise it followed from different principles. What were they?

Discussion

God states in Exod 20:5 that He is "a jealous God." Was He not a jealous God before? Is it the case that before Sinai He did not care whether His people served Him or not? What change did the act of expressing Himself on Mount Sinai make in God's character?

Consider the fourth commandment. It is on the authority of His creatorship that God requires all mankind to rest on the seventh day (see Exod 20:11), which in English speaking countries is called Saturday. All those are exempt from such rest who do not owe their existence to God as their Creator. It is His creatures that He addressing in this commandment. Did God become the Creator of the world on Sinai at the time of the exodus? No, He became the Creator of the world thousands of years previously and the Sabbath was correspondingly instituted in Gen 2:1-3.

In the second table of the law we read, "You shall not murder" (Exod 20:13). Thus, God is the life Giver. Was He something other than a life Giver previously? "You shall not steal" (vs. 15). Did He change into a Respector of property while talking to Moses on the mountain? God said what He did to Moses because He wanted His people to know what He had always been like before--"from of old, from ancient times" (Micah 5:2).

And yet, especially because these things are true and based on what we know from the New Testament, was anyone truly able to obey God before Sinai (as the second commandment implies) or did they merely do what He said? There is a crucial distinction here. What was the quality of obedience referred to in Exod 20:6? Has God been truly obeyed by some people in every age of history or was the service He received a mere substitute?

Abraham lived during the period in question and Paul holds him up to us as a paradigm example of righteousness by faith: "Abraham believed God, and it is was credited to him as righteousness" (Rom 4:3). James also quotes this passage.

(21) Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? (22) You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. (23) And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. (Jas 2:21-23)

Abraham's abortive sacrifice of Isaac was a learning experience. He looked forward by faith to what Christ would eventually do, just as we look back by that same faith to what He has already done.⁵ And so Abraham provides one example of a child of God living before Sinai who enjoyed the blessings of righteousness by faith. He obeyed God (this is righteousness) in the knowledge that God would fulfill His promises (this is faith).

But the commandment does not say, "showing love to one who loves me and keeps my commandments"; it says, "showing love to thousands who love me and keep my commandments" (vs. 6). Was Abraham's faith and corresponding obedience unique or are there other examples? The author of Hebrews points out that Abel, Enoch, Noah, Isaac, Jacob, the parents of Moses, and all those who passed through the Red Sea (Heb 11:4-29, passim) exercised a faith similar to that of Abraham and in so doing pleased God.

(32) And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, (33) who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised, who shut the mouths of lions, (34) quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. (35) Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they

might gain a better resurrection. (36) Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. (37) They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated--(38) the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

(39) These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. (40) God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

Jesus says, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). There is a promise enfolded within this statement. He does not say, "If you love me, you will try to obey what I command." Obedience that is motivated by an overflowing love for the Savior is not a substitute for the real thing. It is genuinely and truly obedience in the fullest sense. It is precisely in loving Christ that we are enabled to obey Him. This point is made in the second commandment also ("showing love to thousands who love me and obey my commandments"). Here the great themes of love and obedience are brought together. Nor can we love God if we do not believe He exists (Heb 11:6). So faith, love, and obedience are all inseparably joined.

This fact is a rebuke to anyone who claims it is impossible to obey God's law. It is only impossible to obey God if it is impossible to love Him. But why should it be impossible to love someone who is "altogether lovely" (Song 5:16)? Indeed, He is not only lovely but ardent in His efforts to win over our affections. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). The polemic against obedience is generally preceded or followed by the word "gospel." But fallen man's ability to obey is fully identical with his ability to love. It is through the gospel that the Holy Spirit leads us to a new life of obedience in response to Christ's love. So how are these things antithetical to each other?

Conclusion

The world stands condemned before God not primarily because it has fallen into sin but because it chooses to remain where it fell. Every provision has been made to free us not only from guilt but also from sin, which leads to guilt. "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). God is fully aware of our fallen condition. He does not judge us for the condition in which we were born. We had no choice in that. He judges us for what we do with His gifts (see Matt 25:14-30). We are born into the world as God's enemies, but if we stay that way having learned what He is like we are culpable. If we refuse to be rescued, we are far more guilty than original sin could ever make us. The whole world stands condemned because the whole world could so readily be saved. If anyone is lost under such circumstances, he has no one to blame for the fact but himself.

Note: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

¹The Ten Commandments were discussed in an earlier series of papers: Hardy, "The Ten Commandments, Part 1: Non-Imperative Clauses," Historicism No. 6/Apr 86, pp. 59-70; "The Ten Commandments, Part 2: A New Testament Sequel," Historicism No. 9/Jan 87, pp. 45-66; "The Ten Commandments, Part 3: Christian Perfection," Historicism No. 11/Jul 87, pp. 28-62.

²In Syriac the same form (*teplôlî*) is used in both verses.

³For this distinction see Hardy, "Ten Commandments, Part 1," pp. 61-62.

⁴A form of the same word is used in Hos 4:14, quoted below:

"I will not punish [*lô' ʿepqôd*] your daughters
when they turn to prostitution,
nor your daughters-in-law
when they commit adultery,
because the men themselves consort with harlots
and sacrifice with temple prostitutes--
a people without understanding will come to ruin!
(Hos 4:14)

⁵Events that occur in a period of history other than the one we are living in are not the only ones which require faith. The two disciples Jesus accompanied to Emmaus did not realize that Jesus was sitting in front of them bodily until the Holy Spirit revealed the fact to them. It is only by the Holy Spirit that we are enabled to see things as they really are--in any age of history.