

God Lays Down the Law!

In another dramatic display of power, God appeared before Israel on Mt. Sinai in the midst of fire and smoke, lightning and thunder, the unnerving blare of a trumpet, and a mountain that quaked like the trembling people that witnessed it all. Having gained the undivided attention of nearly two million souls, God proceeded to enlighten Israel on proper spiritual and moral conduct. In Exodus 20:1-17 God set forth the constitutional framework which would govern the nation of Israel for as long as they remained a people loyal to their God.

This framework is known as the Ten Commandments, or Decalogue. The first four cover Israel's duty to God and the final six their duty to their fellow man. The commandments declare that Israel:

1. Shall recognize that there is one, and only one, true God; and shall worship Him alone.
2. Shall not make any images of God.
3. Shall not use the Lord God's name in a vain manner
4. Shall set aside the seventh day, the Sabbath Day, as a holy day; a day to remember the Lord; and, as God rested on the seventh day from His labor in the six days of creation, Israel shall rest from their labors on that day also.
5. Shall honor father and mother.
6. Shall not commit murder.
7. Shall not commit adultery.
8. Shall not steal.
9. Shall not bear false testimony against another.
10. Shall not covet that which is not his own.

For the next fifteen centuries, until the coming of the Christ, the Son of God, these laws summarized how God's people were to conduct themselves before Him while they lived on the earth. They would in effect be a constitution to Israel, much as the American Constitution is to us. All ensuing laws given to Israel would be elaborations or extensions of these ten fundamental principles. If Israel would keep these laws faithfully, God would make them a "special treasure" to Himself and they would be "above all people" of the earth (Exodus 19:5).

God did not design the laws to make Israel miserable or to provide arbitrary codes for them to follow in order to gain a reward. Certainly He did promise to bless them if they should keep His laws, as Moses declared to Israel, "You shall keep His statutes... that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which the Lord your God is giving you for all time (Deuteronomy 4:40)." But, the laws did not represent painful sacrifices or arbitrary hoops for God's people to jump through. His laws represented those things that were good for man as determined by the One who created him. If Israel would honor God and treat his neighbor with respect, life would be good for them because that is the way God designed life to be.

The Ten Commandments are not laws that man must obey contrary to nature, but are principles that derive from God's nature, the one in whose image man is made. Consequently, these principles, while first revealed to

Israel, are valid for all of mankind. Jesus Christ, as the embodiment of the fullness of the godhead, is the fulfillment of the Law, and through Him the hope of redemption has been opened to all. Consequently, much of mankind has recognized the universal authority of these laws, as well as their inherent goodness. Those societies that recognize the integrity of these principles and base their laws upon them can do nothing but improve their well-being because they view the world as it really is.

William Blackstone (1723-1780), one of England's most influential and comprehensive expositors of English common law, wrote, "Thus when the supreme being formed the universe, and created matter out of nothing, he impressed certain principles upon that matter, from which it can never depart, and without which it would cease to be." He further observed that "man... must necessarily be subject to the laws of his creator, for he is a dependent being." If he were independent, man could, of course, write his own rules. But Blackstone concluded that "man depends absolutely on his maker for everything," therefore, "he should in all points conform to his maker's will." The Ten Commandments provide the ideal framework for all societies of the world because they embody the principles that reveal the nature and character of God.

The importance of the Decalogue in maintaining the health and well-being of any society cannot be overstated. J. B. Coffman writes, "Even today, [the Decalogue] is the most influential legislation on earth. The constitutions of forty-seven of the forty-eight contiguous states of the U.S.A. specifically recognize this code as the basic law of the land... and [it] is indelibly stamped upon the conscience of every believer in God." When God spoke to Israel from Mt. Sinai, He laid down the law, not only for Israel, but for the whole world.