



Date: 3rd & 10th March 2024

Theme: **Laws of Love and Holiness**

Bible Readings: **Exodus 20:1-17**
& **Matthew 5:17-48**

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PREPARATION FOR GROUP LEADERS

Please remember to contact your group beforehand to remind them of the date and time. Please make yourself familiar with the material and passages.

PREPARATION FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS

Either reading your Bible at home, or borrowing a copy from the church, please read **Exodus 20: 1-17**. This is the set Old Testament reading this year for the Third Sunday in Lent. We shall also be looking at the commandments of the Jewish Law in the light of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus teaches the way of holiness. The focus is on **Matthew 5: 17-48**.

Reflect on the following questions:

What was the situation of the people to whom God addressed the Ten Commandments? Where had they been, and where were they going? (Exodus 20: 2)

How is God's character revealed in the passage as a whole?

Why do you think there is such a strong demand to keep the Sabbath?

How do you react overall to this record of the words God spoke directly to the people? What do the Ten Commandments mean to you?

STARTING THE SESSION: FINDING OUR ROOTS

Read together the record of the Commandments in **Exodus 20: 1-17**.

Thinking back to your childhood, were the Ten Commandments taught in school or Sunday school? Were you required to read, and perhaps memorize, them? What impact did they make on you?

Which of the Ten Commandments do you feel have the least influence in today's world?

In the society in which we live today, what is the basis of the law of the land? How important is it to you to live in a country where an elected Parliament has the authority to make and repeal laws?

Do you believe that there is a collection of God-given laws, against which the laws of any nation should be judged? What would be included in your list?

A PRAYER

Lord God,
we thank you for our group session together today.
Help us to understand something of what the Bible reveals about the rule of law in society at large, and within a community of faith committed to the way of love.
Open up for us the vision of holiness Jesus gives us in his teaching and his life.
In his name we pray. **Amen.**

READING THE SCRIPTURES

Read together the Bible passages: **Matthew 5:17-20 and Matthew 5:21-48**

Background Information: The Ten Commandments can be seen as the foundation charter for the life of a liberated people, brought out from slavery in Egypt by the powerful action of God, under the leadership of Moses. The five books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) spell out the detailed regulations that flow from the basic principles in that foundation charter. The five books (the Pentateuch) remain, as the Torah, the central texts of the Jewish faith.

Jesus himself was a Jew. In Matthew's Gospel, he makes it clear that the Law with all its commandments still stands (**Matt 5: 17-20**). Yet the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5 to 7) takes the call to holiness of life far beyond the observation of external regulations. In **Matthew 5:21-48**, Jesus repeatedly compares what was said 'of old' with the authoritative teaching he gives: 'but I say to you...'

The Gospels also tell us that observant Jews in the time of Jesus, aware of the weight of accumulated regulations with their exacting detail, were asking for a convincing summary of God's Law. Jesus was fully involved in that debate. When a scribe (a teacher of the law) asked him about the most important law, Jesus quoted scripture: 'love God' (Deuteronomy 6: 4-5) and 'love your neighbour' (Leviticus 19:18). When the scribe warmly agreed, Jesus told him he was 'not far from the kingdom of God' (Mark 12:34).

DIGGING DEEPER – Questions for group discussion

For the people of Israel in the wilderness, formerly slaves, the Commandments would reflect the new life they were to live as free people under God. *How do you think they would feel to now have the freedom to take responsibility for their own actions and community?*

For the people of God in the time of Jesus, under Roman occupation, how do you think Jesus' interpretation of the Law would impact their lives, in a world where many freedoms were denied them?

From the text we have been studying, what do you think Jesus came 'to fulfil'?

*It is sometimes said that the law can only concern itself with **actions**, while our **thoughts** lie outside its scope. Can you find examples where Jesus makes our inner thoughts and intentions the key concern of God's law? How important is it to try to live as God's holy people in thought, word and deed?*

Read again Matt 5:38-42 and Matt 5:9. *Does the Sermon on the Mount require Christians to be committed to a pacifist way of life? Does there remain a moral right to self-defence? What examples can you think of where pacifism or peace-making have given positive or radical solutions to the world?*

Look again at Matthew 5:43-47. *How easy is it to love and pray for our enemies? What can help us in doing this? If someone asked you for help or advice, finding it difficult to love or forgive an 'enemy', what wisdom or advice might you offer them?*

What do you make of the final verse of Matthew 5 – 'Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect'?

In his letters, Paul admits that he experiences a fierce inner battle between the 'law of God' and the 'law of sin' (Romans 7:21-23). Yet something enables him to cry out, 'Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!' (Romans 7:25). *What victory did Christ win? How can that victory change us?*

PRAYING TOGETHER

- May we acknowledge honestly the times when the way of holiness, the way of the Sermon on the Mount, has been beyond our reach. Admit this to God and ask forgiveness.
- When the holy law of God seems so hard and high, may we ask our risen and ascended Lord to fortify our wills by the powerful and gracious work of the Holy Spirit.
- As we conclude by saying **the Lord's Prayer** together, may we commit ourselves to encourage and support one another through these weeks of Lent, through to Passiontide and Easter.