

Chapter 7

Pointing forward to a new way

Our daily news bulletins tell of more and more acts of lawlessness at home and abroad. There must be good things happening in the world, but the headlines always seem to focus on some individual, business or nation found to have broken the accepted rules of behaviour. Where have these rules and expectations come from?

Rules for the good life

We have seen how when Moses disappeared up the mountain he had been called by God to receive his commandments for living the best kind of life. It seems that over 600 were given verbally, some of them similar to edicts going back as far as the days of Abraham. The important stone tablets that Moses brought back were inscribed with the list of Ten Commandments, often called the 'ten words'. As God troubled to produce a second edition when the first set was ruined, we need to think more about them, for God said that they formed the basis of how the Israelites were to live as his people.¹

The first four of the Ten Commandments name the one God as their giver and describe the humble and reverent attitude his people should have towards him. They must worship him only, never misuse his name and keep one day in the week set apart for him. The next six commands spell out the expected behaviour towards other people in general, in particular giving honour to parents and respecting neighbours without coveting their wives or belongings.² Today we may find all ten words written as two lists at the front of some churches. For centuries they formed the basis of British (and some other) legal systems but our lawmakers no longer make all of them legally binding. This is not to say that they no longer matter. Love and obedience towards God will always affect our treatment of others.

Besides these ten, Moses was given hundreds more edicts and laws, recorded at intervals from the second half of Exodus through to

Deuteronomy. Broadly speaking, some were *public health laws* to be applied to a vast company of desert wanderers, living with limited water and poor sanitation. Long before bacteria or antibiotics were discovered, rules were given about the isolation of postpartum mothers, quarantine for specific infections, or exclusion of potential contaminants from the diet, for example in pork or shellfish. Many of these were forerunners of today's guidelines in preventive medicine.

Others were *social rules* to help people in such a large travelling community to care for each other by not putting their own interests first. Many of these rules stressed justice and the need for fair play between haves and have-nots. When harvesting, workers should leave grain at the edges of the fields and not strip off every grape from the vines so that the needy could have a share, an attitude still very relevant in our own times. There was some overlap between God's social and his *moral rules*. His standards were so very different from the immoral behaviour his people would eventually find among the conquered Canaanites. Already weak-willed, they were warned in advance against letting themselves be influenced by the idolatry and widespread corruption they would find, including fraudulent business deals, child abuse, rape, human sacrifice and trafficking, and more. Mention is made of these and many other evils that still go on across the world, although God's word warns so sternly against them.

The various *religious and ceremonial laws* given to Moses further specified ways for his people to honour and worship their holy God. A variety of ceremonies and sacrifices are outlined in *Leviticus*, blood sacrifices being essential for the forgiveness of sins.

The basis of the old agreement

Out of all the edicts brought back by Moses, God made the Ten Commandments the basis of his renewed agreement, or covenant, with Israel. If they put love of God first, they should then remember to keep the other rules as an expression of their love for him and for others. His covenant with them was that if they obeyed him, their lives would be satisfied and blessed but if they disobeyed, death and disaster would follow. The choice was theirs. 'Choose life', urged Moses.³

God's longing was for his people to be blessed, not cursed. As he set out these two alternatives, the Lord said that he had not loved and chosen them because they were a great people, for they were only a small people. No, he loved them because he loved them!⁴ He longed for their love in return, to be shown by willing obedience to his laws. These had not been given to show them who was boss, but were entirely inspired by his love and intended only for their good. Would they be able to keep their part of the bargain? Sadly, they had made a poor start in the worship of their golden calf.

A place set apart for God

In order to focus his people's minds on the need to reverence and put him first in their lives, God gave Moses a detailed plan for a mobile Tent of Meeting, or tabernacle, to be set apart for his worship, right in the middle of each new campsite. Its construction, furnishings and intended use, including the varied sacrifices to be offered there, are fully described in the four books from Exodus to Deuteronomy. Everything about it was to be carefully and beautifully put together and everything going on there done with great care and reverence. As worshippers went in, they would proceed to one of two areas, an outer court for non-Jews and an inner court for Jews and beyond them was a third area, housing the altar and accessible only to the priests. At the far end was God's personal dwelling place, the Most Holy Place, or Holy of Holies and there only the high priest could go in. The finished tent would stand at the very centre of their lives and its splendour should speak of the glory of God and the privilege it was that he should live among them.

The Ark of the Covenant, symbol of God's presence

As a reminder of the Israelites' covenant to honour and obey God and so receive his blessings, God's presence would be especially focused above the most important item in the tent, the Ark of the Covenant, kept separate in the Most Holy Place. This was a beautifully crafted box in which would be kept a few reminders of God's past and continuing love: the two stone tablets of the law given to Moses, a jar of the manna that had saved their lives in the wilderness, and

a remarkable rod, or staff, provided by Aaron. This rod had signalled the first of the ten plagues in Egypt and its miraculous budding and fruiting later stopped a rebellion, so confirming Aaron's role as priest and guardian of the care and concerns of the tabernacle.⁵ Covered in pure gold the lid of the Ark incorporated two golden cherubs placed face to face, their arched wings guarding the area sometimes known as the mercy seat, God's own special place. Significantly, immediately below this, inside the Ark lay the original stone tablets inscribed with the commandments, reminding them that God's presence was linked to their keeping the covenant made between him and them, although he would show mercy to those who repented of breaking it. It was at the mercy seat that he would meet and speak with their representative.⁶

The whole Ark was so special that it was normally kept behind a curtain and only the high priest was allowed into the Most Holy Place to go near and touch it. Aaron was the first to be set apart for this role and he would go in to meet with God to worship him, learn his will for his people, and carry out annual atonement for all their sins.

The Day of Atonement

Once a year an especially solemn day was kept by all the assembled people. On it the high priest, freshly bathed and cleanly dressed, approached the holy God. He was to offer blood sacrifices, first to atone for his own and his household's sins and then for those committed by the people during the past year. It is all described in detail in Leviticus 16 and was very labour-intensive, time-consuming and, to our eyes, messy. The different areas of the tabernacle were presented back to God after being sprinkled with the blood of the sacrifices. Blood was even applied to the sacred Ark as the people waited outside the tent. The high priest acted as the go-between, mediating with God by using the sacrificial blood to make atonement ('at-one-ment' with God) for their having sinfully disregarded his covenant. They were all guilty.

On behalf of the waiting people outside, the high priest also sacrificed one of a pair of goats as an extra offering for their sins. Then, with his hands on the head of the other goat, he confessed all the wicked things

the people had done that year. This ‘scapegoat’ was then taken into the wilderness and let loose, making doubly sure that the burden of sin was carried well away. With a final burnt offering for each family, the great day was over, and a year later the same ceremonies would have to be performed all over again.

The importance of keeping close to God

At times of crisis the Ark of the Covenant, symbol of God’s presence, was ceremonially carried before the people to remind them that he was leading the way. As told in Joshua 3-8 this happened when crossing the River Jordan as they finally entered the Promised Land, and again on the march round Jericho, the first Canaanite city to fall to them. Further invasion was held up by one man’s disobedience, a theft that needed to be exposed and punished. Afterwards Joshua gathered everyone together beside the Ark to renew their covenant with God at Mount Ebal and they then went on to victory. In this we, too, are reminded that when we fail to keep to God’s way our spiritual progress is held up until repentance for the wrongdoing has secured his forgiveness, confirming our desire to be faithful as he is faithful. He will then strengthen us for the next challenge.

After Joshua’s death and during the days of the judges the Ark was cared for by Aaron’s grandson in Bethel and there the Israelites used to go to seek wisdom from God.⁷ As told in 1 Samuel 3:1-7:2, the Ark was in the temple at Shiloh when the young prophet-to-be, Samuel, lay asleep there. God’s voice woke him with a message warning of trouble ahead, a prophecy fulfilled when the Israelites too casually took the sacred Ark into battle, almost treating it as an insurance policy. It was captured by the Philistines who in turn suffered badly for treating it disrespectfully so, frightened by God’s response to their offence, they put inside it a rather odd guilt offering and sent it back to the Israelites. Curiosity got the better of some of them and, breaking the ‘no touch’ rule, they lifted the lid, with lethal results.

Much sobered, the Israelites hurried the Ark away to a respectful, quiet home at Kiriath Jearim where it blessed that family for decades until King David decided that it was now safe to take it to Jerusalem.

With due ceremony and celebration, the historic token of God's presence entered the holy city and later came to rest once again in the Most Holy Place, by then in the glorious temple built by King Solomon. Three centuries later, after enemy vandals had damaged the temple, young King Josiah began to repair it, revived the worship and returned the Ark to its proper place. Sadly, only a few years later he was killed and in the last chapter of 2 Chronicles we read how the temple was destroyed and its valuables stolen by Babylonian invaders. From then on, the Old Testament makes no more mention of the Ark of the Covenant. It had been symbolic of the presence of God and although its loss did not mean that he was lost with it, such disrespectful handling came on the heels of the detestable things done by Josiah's successor. Not only was the Ark lost but the covenant was broken. Seventy years of desolation followed.

Essential difference between the old and new covenants

The Old Testament tells us how the old agreement between God and man was made, broken and only temporarily restored by keeping various ceremonial laws involving daily and annual sacrifices. A holy God must not be treated casually or carelessly, or his authority disregarded by those still claiming to be his people.

So what has all this to do with us today? The New Testament tells of the contrast that came with God's new covenant, when the crucified Jesus gave himself as the only atoning sacrifice never again to be needed. At his death, the curtain that had separated off the most holy part of the Jerusalem temple was ripped apart from top to bottom, allowing free access to God's holy presence. From then on, sin could be confessed and forgiven at any time, not in a special place, by a special person on a special day, once in the year. Jesus rose from his grave to return to his Father and now lives again, the highest of high priests, to be our everlasting mediator with God once and for all.

The book of Hebrews makes clear the great difference between the burdensome nature of sacrifices in the Old Testament and the freedom of spirit known to those who rely on that final offering made by Jesus.⁸ We shall think more about this later, but parts of the New Testament

will be better understood when we have read the Old Testament and grasped the significance of some of the ways it points to the Lord Jesus Christ, our sacrifice and mediator combined. God gave his people plenty of opportunities to live in harmony with him but they kept choosing to go their own way. Many still do.

Displeasing God by self-rule

In Moses' lifetime the people continued their ups and downs. Joshua, his godly successor, struggled to call the people to obedience when they reached the Promised Land. Most of the judges who followed him had even less success. The gradual occupation of Canaan was an outward victory but a spiritual defeat as, regardless of many warnings, God's people began to make forbidden marriages with the immoral people they had conquered, some taking on foreign gods with the foreign wives. Such disobedience limited God's blessing and the book of Judges ends on a dark note, for 'everyone did as he saw fit'.

After the judges came a series of prophets to remind God's people of their broken covenant with him. Prophets are not to be confused with fortune-tellers. True prophets have heard God's voice and announce his warnings about personal and national disobedience, along with the good news that the way to restored blessing is repentance and renewed obedience. Many godly prophets were killed by those who objected to their warnings. Some, like Samuel, had years of influential leadership.

Samuel's life story is told in the two Old Testament books that bear his name. After learning to respond to God's voice as a child, he urged the people to do so, too. Instead, they rebelliously asked Samuel to find them a king, wanting to be like the ungodly nations around them. The old prophet anointed the first two kings but foretold trouble ahead as a result. After disobedient King Saul, God-fearing King David and his wise son, King Solomon, the next generation tore the nation into two parts, Israel and Judah, each with a separate king. Eventually each kingdom broke faith by turning to idol worship, lost God's help and suffered enemy occupation or transportation to foreign lands. Samuel's prophecies came true.

Some of these stories not only preserve history but should also make us think seriously about the reasons for national success or failure and ask whether these could still apply today. For example, we read how 'Hezekiah...held fast to the Lord and did not cease to follow him... And the Lord was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook.'⁹ Quite the opposite had been Ahab, 'who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, urged on by Jezebel his wife. He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols...'¹⁰ He had chosen to be advised by false instead of true prophets who told him what he wanted to hear, thereby sending him straight to his death in battle. The whole unhappy story makes its own point.

Idolatry

We are left with a warning and a sad comment on the price of disobedience. Many kings of Israel and Judah in those distant times were at best half-hearted about keeping God's standards. Time and again the major barrier to their obedience was idolatry, putting something else ahead of faithfulness to God. If kings, supposedly in top jobs, needed to keep God's instructions in order to stay on their thrones, how much more do the rest of us with poorer resources need his wisdom to guide us through life. Today the worship of other gods is often expressed by putting first a love of power, money, fame or other forms of self-interest. Such idolatry steers lives away from dedication to the one who created us to be in his image, trying instead to fit in with the image of the surrounding culture.¹¹ However wealthy or poor a nation, this is a constant risk.

In that earlier era the intended harmony between God and mankind was not fully regained as his people became increasingly self-satisfied. Some still practised a few religious ceremonies from habit, but their hearts were disobedient and they set up lesser gods, forgetting God's anger over that first golden calf. Prophets repeatedly warned that such unfaithfulness would only end in trouble, but few people listened. God's standards had been given to them for their benefit, not his, because he loved them and wanted to guide them to have good and healthful lives, but he was regularly ignored. Their disobedience was punished by being taken into exile. As then, so now, it is dangerous to ignore or neglect God's commandments.

Up-to-date warnings

We can learn lessons from men and women of old but similar stories continue today. The neglect of spiritual education, including Bible knowledge, has produced a generation without clear moral standards. In August 2011, a series of riots took place across England. Violent crowds roamed round some towns and cities, bringing destruction wherever they went. Some simply joined in with the crowd, but all damaged other people's property and businesses, breaking the law and spoiling relationships within their communities. It only takes attention to daily news bulletins, or even a visit to a general practitioner's surgery, to see the impact of damaged relationships within families, communities and between nations.

Broken relationships

The book of Malachi comes right at the end of the Old Testament. His name means 'my messenger' and his last message from God was that someone would eventually come who would aim to restore broken families but if he failed to get a response, said the Lord Almighty, 'I will come and strike the land with a curse'. Under his loving rule God has evidently planned for united families to be the strength of a nation.

The truth of Malachi's warning is borne out in today's headlines. The media love to make a public show of reputations damaged and families divided by inappropriate sexual desire or excessive hunger for money and possessions. For others, the lowering of standards can be less dramatic but is often based on a rising desire to seek personal satisfaction above all else, including honour or wealth. Instead hope should be fixed on God.^{12, 13} People who had once stood tall can slowly crumble and fall, their past good standing lost.

In 2009, the British nation was shocked to learn of some surprising expenses claimed by certain Members of Parliament, not all arising from their parliamentary duties. Personal reputations were damaged, but so was the trust that many had placed in Parliament as a whole. Since then, crooked dealings have been exposed in other prominent

individuals and national institutions both in Britain and further afield. Like the effect of one bad apple in a bagful, corruption spreads once it starts and betrays trustful relationships. There is serious neglect of the moral biblical teaching that once was the norm in British schools.

There is an old popular song that refers to the 'white cliffs of Dover', the chalk walls so clearly visible to ships approaching the south coast of England. However, chalk does not wear well in wind and waves, and lumps of it suddenly break off without warning. People tempted to build a house on the cliff top by the lovely view, have had to move inland when, either suddenly or slowly, the once clearly marked cliff edge has fallen into the sea. Without urgent action, such owners will lose everything.

Like slow erosion by the waves of the sea, personal standards can be worn away, swiftly or slowly, by an incoming tide of popular opinion or winds of change that promote biased views opposed to God's standards. We need to keep refreshing our memories about the true standards, being warned about how easily we could let them slip.

For further thought

- Are you conscious that wanting your own way often upsets other people?
- Do you make an idol of whatever, or whoever, comes first in your life?
- Are you tempted to ask advice from those who will say what you want them to say?

References

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|-------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Deuteronomy 4:13-14 | 8. Hebrews 9:15, 24-26 |
| 2. Exodus 20:1-17 | 9. 2 Kings 18:5-7 |
| 3. Deuteronomy 30:15-20 | 10. 1 Kings 21:25-26 |
| 4. Deuteronomy 7:7-8 | 11. 1 John 2:15-17 |
| 5. Numbers 17:1-18:5 | 12. Jeremiah 45:5 |
| 6. Exodus 25:22 | 13. Romans 15:13 |
| 7. Judges 20:27-28 | |