

Imago Dei, Part 7: Making Love Legal
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I. The Law Versus Grace

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 3:4-11

According to Jewish tradition, there are 613 commandments or *mitzvot* in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). In the 12th Century, the famous rabbi Maimonides made a list of them, observing that they fall into two categories: positive commandments and negative ones. Positive commandments concern things we are commanded to *do*. Negative ones concern the things we are *not* to do.

Of the 613 commandments, 365 are positive commandments, a number that corresponds to days of the solar year. The remaining 248 are negative commandments, which according to Jewish tradition, corresponds to the number of bones and main organs in the human body.

There are 206 bones in the body. Just how many of our organs could be considered “main” ones is open to interpretation. Needless to say, the rabbis weren’t surgeons. The point they were making with these correspondences is that the purpose of the commandments was to maintain harmony between heaven and earth. The larger point being made is that the commandments were never meant to restrict human life. Even the restrictions were meant to create fullness of life.

In modern times, there are only 171 of the original 613 commandments that can actually be observed, 26 of which can only be followed in the land of Israel. So for those of us in Omaha, that leaves only 145 commandments to follow. Lucky us!

If you are like me and have a poor memory – especially when it comes to following commandments – you may take comfort in knowing that in the Torah God is said to have created a “cheat sheet” of sorts. God narrowed all the commandments down to just 10, from which the rest of the commandments flow.

Last week we observed that the Ten Commandments, or Decalogue, are the most famous set of laws ever promulgated in human history. They play a fundamental role in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and they stand at the bedrock of Western Civilization itself.

So here's an interesting question: How many of the Ten Commandments can you actually name? Before moving on with this reflection, take a moment now to fill in the blanks below:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Did you remember all ten? And are you sure the commandments you've listed are all correct? If you want to compare your list to the actual commandments, you can find them at the end of this reflection.

I'm guessing that if this were a graded exercise, at least some of you would have received a perfect score in terms of *remembering* all ten commandments. If you are one of these folks, congratulations! But now let's all of us consider what our score would be if it were based not only on perfectly *remembering* the commandments, but on your *observance* of them.

If you regularly slip up on observing the Sabbath, honoring your father and your mother, and taking God's name in vain, you're already at a C Minus before you've gotten to any of the others. If you post inflammatory news stories on Facebook or via email without fact-checking before doing so, you're now down to a D Minus.

Imagine yourself standing before the judgment seat of God with your Commandments report card in your hand and God is only allowing those who scored "above average" (B) or higher through the Pearly Gates. Sorry, God doesn't grade on a curve! And remember, the Ten Commandments are just the "cheat sheet." If your score is low on the "cheat sheet," imagine how many laws you'd be found breaking if God went through the list of the 145 commandments we could still follow in our day?

Perhaps by now you are beginning to understand where the apostle Paul is coming from when he referred to Israelite Law as "the ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone." (2 Cor 3:7) If God is like Jack Nicholson, looking for just a "few good men" (and women) with whom to enjoy Eternity, most of us would be erased from the Book of Life altogether.

But what if God is less like Jack Nicholson and more like the God made known to the apostle Paul? What would the scene before God's judgment seat look like then?

Imagine yourself standing there before God, head bowed lamenting your miserable report card, ready to be denied entrance into God's eternal Realm. You understand perfectly well why God wouldn't want someone like you bringing down the average. For, with the benefit of hindsight, you now see clearly how something that seemed so innocuous as, for instance, breaking the Sabbath actually caused you and others more harm than you realized. Without a regular day off to "play and pray," you were more tired, mentally exhausted, and far less creative than you would have been. You see how many times you made poorer decisions that affected both you and those you love, or you couldn't see the creative way through a problem and spun your wheels for a lot longer than necessary.

You also see how maintaining this simple act of obedience would have drawn you far closer to God than you had been, allowing God greater entry into your life, your loves, and your happiness. As it happened, many other gods had snuck into your life without your realizing it, and each demand your loyalty. The gods of consumerism, status, and wealth never seemed bad or harmful, at first. They promised promotions at work, greater status in the community, finer and better "stuff" to fill your house with, and grander houses themselves. But now you look back and see that relationships with family and friends had been degraded or even sacrificed in order to win their rewards. You've been like Esau, selling your birthright for a bowl of soup.

And this is just the view that opens before you when you consider just a single one of God's commandments that weren't followed. While you had assumed that God's commandments were arbitrary artifacts left over from a primitive age of human history, now you realize that God's commandments are never arbitrary. They have always been there for your blessing and benefit and you feel now like the world's biggest chump. You prepare to receive God's word of judgment.

Suddenly, though, you become aware of someone standing beside you. He's holding a report card, too. His report card clearly displays an "A++." He turns to you and says, "I cannot tell you what kind of Realm lies behind that door, but I can say for certain that what lies beyond this door is *God's Realm*, and belongs to no other. The only ones who step through this door are those who desire to live in God's Realm in whatever form God has created it to be. They live by God's rules, not their own." Then he asks you, "Do you desire entrance into such a Realm?"

You answer, "Yes, I want more than anything else to live wherever God is, wherever that may be."

The person standing next to you then steps forward, opens the door, and asks, “Then why are you still loitering here?”

You respond, “Listen, we’ve only just met. You don’t know how badly I’ve messed up at meeting even God’s most basic requirements for holiness. Look at my report card.”

The person chuckles and says, “Only just met? I’ve been with you all your life. Indeed, I’ve known you since before you were born. So how long must I keep holding the door open for you before you come inside?”

Your heart leaps. This all seems far too good to be true. Yet surely someone with an “A++” report card knows what he’s talking about! Eagerly, you take a step forward and suddenly you find yourself back on earth, where you are right now.

Perhaps now you can finally put two and two together and understand something you’ve heard in sermons once or twice (or ten or twelve times if you’re a regular!). Namely, that according to Jesus, you don’t have to wait until you are dead to step through the door and enter God’s Realm. Says Jesus, “The Kingdom of Heaven *is already here*. Change your whole way of thinking and believe the Good News.” (Matthew 4:7 // Mark 1:15)

We may not live in the fullest version of God’s Kingdom in this life, but we live in the version God has created for us now. The door is being held open for you. And beyond this door, you’ll eventually find another, and another beyond that. Will you step through the one before you and move a little deeper into the Realm? It is not past behavior that keeps you from progressing further into God’s Realm. It is lack of desire to let go of your old self and be transformed again and again into a more perfect image of the divine.

This is what Paul is getting at when he claims that there is a “ministry of Spirit” whose glory far surpasses the ministry of Law. If your relationship with God is based on how well you follow God’s commandments, you have about as much of a chance of living in God’s Presence as the Mars Rover has of landing on your roof today. A ministry of Spirit is about repentance, and the forgiveness of sins. It’s about receiving God’s amazing Grace, and re-orienting your life around it.

II. Grace and the Law

Scripture: Exodus 19:1-8

I used to believe that the Old Testament was all about this deathly ministry of the Law, in which we had to earn God’s favor by following endless lists of commandments. In Exodus 20 and the chapters that follow, we find the Ten Commandments being given to Israel at Mount Sinai, followed by a long list of commands that essentially explicate what it means to live by the Ten

Commandments in concrete situations. I thought, “There it is! The beginning of the ‘ministry of death’ where Israel would forever strive to live by these commandments in order for God to love them and would never earn it no matter how hard they tried.”

But when I read the preceding chapter, I realized that the Law had a far different purpose than I had imagined.

From Sinai God instructs Moses, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.” (Exodus 19:3-6)

Do you see what is happening here? These laws and commandments aren’t being given to Israel in order to set a bar they need to pass over in order to earn God’s love and grace. God’s love and grace have already been given – in overflowing measure – before they ever arrived at Sinai. God liberated a nation of slaves from bondage, delivered them into the wilderness, kept them fed, and promised them a land flowing with milk and honey. All this had nothing to do with Israel’s love for God, but with God’s love for Israel. If following the rules was so necessary to enjoy a relationship with God, then why had God acted so dramatically to liberate Israel before Israel was ever given any rules to follow?

The laws given in the next chapter are ONLY given if Israel voluntarily consents to take their relationship with God to a deeper level by living out a special calling to become a light to the nations.

When I read these chapters, and many other chapters like them from the Hebrew Scriptures, I realized that nothing about GOD changed when Jesus came. God has always been the God who seeks relationship, who prefers relationship, in fact, over perfection, and therefore is slow to anger and quick to forgive. This God has always been *generous*. This God has always loved us beyond our wildest imagination.

What changed with Jesus was not God but *us*. Those of us who had yet to know God’s grace, love, and forgiveness personally – *we’re* the ones who changed. In other words, Jesus didn’t open a door that had previously been closed to humanity. Jesus revealed most fully a door that has been open for us since the beginning of time.

III. (Dis)organized Religion

Scripture: Isaiah 42:6-10

In the 6th Century BCE, eight centuries after the Ten Commandments and their corresponding laws had been given in the wilderness, a prophet writing in the tradition of Isaiah delivers a new “word of the Lord” to the people:

“I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them. Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the end of the earth!”

What were the former things that had come to pass, and the new things about to be declared? Well, much had changed since Israelite society was first formed in the wilderness of Sinai and been given the commandments. Israel had lived through the rise of kingship and the spread of Israel’s power to the northern and southern reaches; they had lived through a split in the kingdom between North and South; they had seen the Kingdom of the North utterly decimated and exiled by the Assyrians, and now the southern Kingdom was living in exile in Babylonia.

In Babylonia, the people realized that while the Ten Commandments were still fully relevant for their lives, the hundreds of particular laws accompanying the Ten Commandments had largely become obsolete. Times had changed, so they were writing new ones.

If these new laws they were writing were meant to earn God’s love, you might find it a bit suspect that the very people who were striving to pass God’s test were re-writing God’s rules! But those who still held to the true faith in Yahweh knew that the laws were created in order to stay true to grace and love that God had already given. In the course of Israelite history, three major law codes were created at three different times in order to achieve a singular purpose: to organize themselves in new ways to fulfill their calling to be a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon and set the captives free.

When Jesus came, six centuries later, he was once again asking the question of how the captives could be freed and the blind be made to see. He was inviting the community of the faithful to once again become dis-organized in order to become re-organized around God’s amazing grace in their day.

To me, part of the wonder of the Tri-Faith Initiative is that God seems to be calling upon all three of the Abrahamic faiths to do in our day what Jesus did in his, and what the Jews before him did three times before Jesus came. The Holy Spirit has brought our three communities together. For those of you who know the history of relationship between the three faiths, you know that this could only come about as the result of yet another of God’s amazingly grace-filled acts.

God did it not because we are any more righteous or praise-worthy than other Christians, Jews, and Muslims. We can all wave our failed report cards as “proudly” as anyone else. No, God has done this because of God’s goodness, not our own. Now we are called upon to dis-organize ourselves around our old ways of relating to each other and the world in order to re-organize around how God’s love is being made manifest in our day.

Perhaps as we move forward, learning from each other and building strong bonds of relationship, we will become not only a light for our communities, but further Isaiah’s vision to become a light to the nations.