

Lent III B  
March 4, 2018

Grace Church, Lexington  
Fr. James

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Exodus 20:1-17

Psalm 19:7-14

I Corinthians 1:18-25

John 2:13-22

## **YOU ARE MY GOD**

The so-called “belief in the existence of God,” as ancient and modern theological philosophers like to express the idea of “the first commensuration,” is miles away from what this fundamental verse of Jewish thought and Jewish existence demands from Jewish thought and Jewish life. Not the fact that there is a God, also not that there is only one God, but that this One, unique, true God, is to be my God, that He created and formed me, placed me where I am, and goes on creating and forming me, keeps me, watches over me, leads and guides me; not that my connection with Him should be through ten thousand intermediaries as a chance product of a universe that He brought into being aeons ago, but that every present breath that I draw and every coming moment of my existence is to be a direct gift of His Almightyness and Love, and that I have to live every present and future second of my life solely in His service—in a word, not the knowledge of the existence of God, but the acknowledgment of God, as my God, as the exclusive One in whose hands is the disposal of all my fate, and as the exclusive One guide of all

my acts, it is only with this, only with the acceptance of this Truth, that I can lay the foundation of a Jewish life. To the demand, “I the Lord (am to be) your God, “there is but one corresponding reply, “You *are* my God!” S.R. Hirsch from 1981, The Torah, A Modern Commentary, edited by W. Gunther Plaut, New York, 544, 545.

The Ten commandments! It is amazing to me how often Christians misunderstand the relationship of the Hebrew testament, what we egotistically call the old testament—as if it were no longer relevant to us—to the Christian testament—as we say, the new testament. So often we suppose the new testament supercedes the old, when as a matter of record it grows out of the first testament and cannot stand without it.

I love St. Paul's words about his own struggle in Romans 7. It makes him so human, so like me and so like you. “I do not understand my own actions,” he writes. “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” Illustration here—Irishman and the three beers? (Check on internet).

Notice that Paul is very clear that the law is spiritual, the laws is good. Oh, indeed it is good. It is more than good. It sets

the tone for the godly life. The ten commandments were not revolutionary in human history because the content was all new. The ten words were revolutionary because they defined a new thing, a new relationship in human experience. This covenant of the Jewish people with one God, *the* one God, the *only* true God created not just unity within a kinship-based community of people. The covenant wasn't necessary for that. You have natural ties of unity with your family. Rather it did something new in human history. It created a community based on common obligations rather than common interests. It is that which I wish to expand upon this morning, and I trust I have the ability to help it make sense.

Before Israel, people worshipped gods, idols, creation, wealth, kings...in order to secure their own well-being. A rain dance is created, a liturgy is made to influence the Great Spirit so that rain may come and crops may receive needed water. A son or daughter is sacrificed to appease the wrath of the God Moloch to allow the people to win battles, to live well, to dominate their

environment. The most common relation to our gods is so that the human person, the human community may be benefited. Strike any familiar themes? Guess what, that relationship to god is back in our generation as it is in every generation. For example, money is our god. Face it: money is more important to us as a god than is the Creator and Redeemer of the universe. I am likely to think about investments two or three times a week, and I am not alone. Some of you are *more* likely to do that. We are asked by God to give our lives in response to God's good gifts to us, and we spend more time in the financial pages than the Scriptures. And yet over one hundred households in this parish did not pledge one thin dime this past Fall. What do you conclude from that about money as god? Oh, I have to pay my mortgage payment, two car payments, my children will need an education, what about my retirement? Me, me, me, mine, mine, mine.

Before the Mosaic covenant, before the ten commandments relationship with god or gods was all like this. People prayed for their own interests. But with the coming of the tablets on Mt.

Sinai, all of that is changed. Here was a word based on love.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul.” “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,” that topic that plagues us to this day. This God did indeed provide something very basic in human longing—freedom. And then he covenants with this free people to be their God. And there is nothing in that covenant that suggests that God will grant their needs. Rather the entire ten commandments instructs them how to please God and to live within the acceptable bounds of God's people. You see the relationship with God is moved to an entirely different plane—one which does not rest on covetousness, or self-interest, but ethic and devotion. Amazing when you think about it. God is not present to serve *us*? Rather we are here to serve God, who has already provided us with every gift we need to serve God. It is, by the way, impossible to serve both God and money. Each of us must choose.

The Ten commandments are an interesting fact of religious

life in the Christian community. They are as widely misunderstood in our faith as I suspect they are in the Jewish faith. The Jews quickly promulgated 613 bits of advice on how to keep the commandments, and we Christians are just always aware of how far short we fall. Both communions have tried to interpret the ten words as legal words, commands, rather than a relational covenant. I think that is what is gripping Paul in Romans 7. He understands that the commandments are a spiritual teaching. He delights in that, but within himself, within his flesh there is always this struggle to live outside the covenant, to obey a covenant of sin or evil.

What is the answer? That is the wrong question. The question is, "Who is the answer?" And for Paul and you and me the answer can only be 'God.' The answer for Paul is the same as it was for Moses, and he says, "Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord." It is the Spirit of God working in us giving us the mind of Christ, the son of God who makes it possible for us to serve God. It is another of his gifts. But we have to receive, to act

on the gift.

In our epistle from I Corinthians, Paul is primarily addressing a divided church in Corinth. For background, some look to Paul for mentorship. Others to Peter or Apollos. Paul says, God forbid, it is only to Jesus we should look. And he broaches this message about the cross suggesting that the crucifixion of Jesus is the power of God. In the Roman world, and that is basically the whole known world, crucifixion is the sorriest way to end one's life imaginable. It is like the electric chair with chemical assistance, only perhaps worse. The Christian idea that the cross is the power of God is mere foolishness in the eyes of non-Christians. But in the experience of those who are day by day being redeemed it is indeed power and wisdom and strength. For to both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Paul is here writing to Christians. I doubt if they were too happy about Paul's letter up to this point. But now his words take

on a poetry and life that may well have danced for them. This Jesus who loved them and died for them, this Jesus whose execution has become a stumbling block for Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, this Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. This power and wisdom is reflected in them and in their salvation through and by Jesus.

Wright [562:13] suggests that Paul when he is preaching to non-Christians simply tells the story of God's son being executed for love of humankind. That is the good news, but in this letter he says it the other way round. "God's folly in redeeming the world through such weakness is wiser than human wisdom, more powerful than human strength. The Christian good news is all about God dying on a rubbish heap at the wrong end of the Empire. Its all about God babbling nonsense to a room full of philosophers. It all about the true God confronting the world of posturing, power and prestige, and overthrowing it in order to set up his own kingdom, a kingdom in which the weak and the foolish find themselves just as welcome as the strong and the wise, if not more

so.” Paul, you might say, was teasing these Christians into hearing him, and in so doing pleasing them, helping them see their own topsy turvy position in the world. At the bottom of the social pecking order, they were actually at the very top of God's loving order, part of God's defeat of the power structures of the world, part of the new establishment of God's Kingdom. Is it different for you where you live and work if you are seen as one who shares this Christian good news? Oh, I know churches have become part of the respected power structure. That is not what I am talking about, I'm talking about telling others of Jesus and what he means to you. I mentioned Jesus in an interview with students this week and a kind of blank 'what is this guy talking about' look passed over their faces, or so I imagined.

Is this picture of Paul's true to the picture we have of Jesus? From the Gospel we see Jesus taking a whip of cords and driving out the cattle and the sheep on sale for worshippers who have come from around the Mediteranean world. He spills the money changers tables with coins going everywhere. It is the picture of a

prophet gone mad to make a point—that God's house should not be a marketplace, a misplaced business venture. It has a very different purpose, this temple.

The Jews, very responsibly, I think, question Jesus by saying 'give us some reason for doing this!' And Jesus answers, as he often did in parables, with words that carry a double meaning—a double meaning that is not at all apparent. “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it. The Jews are confounded: this temple has taken 46 years in the building and it is not yet finished. What can you mean?

The disciples long after remember and realize that he was actually referring to himself as the temple. “Destroy *this* temple and in three days, resurrection! This act of driving out the goods for sale in the temple, perhaps more than any other single act condemned Jesus to a Roman cross. Jesus knew what he was provoking. In a sense he was playing with them—God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

The question is, will we see that this is true and begin to allow Jesus to reorder our lives along these same lines of a relational God, who won't rescue us from financial worries, or every disease or the fear of death or even persecution, but who goes right on loving us through thick and thin. For you see, Jesus' meaning will become for us life. Our meaning will also, for you are who you are because you are loved by Christ. Have you ever wondered what meaning you have for the world, what meaning there is in the world? That is your meaning for life. It is mine, as well. We are who we are because we are loved by Jesus Christ.

“To the demand in the Ten words, “I the Lord am to be your God, “there is but one corresponding reply, “You *are* my God!” *So be it.*