

# “PRESSING ON”

a sermon on Exodus 20:1-20, Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:33-43  
October 8, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller  
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Once the Israelites were free from bondage in Egypt, the Book of Exodus records that their focus became their “formation” as a people. And that process began – and was *grounded* – in their receipt of the tables of the Law - the ten commandments, or the “Decalogue,” as scholars generally refer to them – from the Greek words “deca” (ten) and “logos” (word). So literally, “the ten words.”

The Decalogue was clearly *formative* for Israel. I think it is fair to say that it was also always a *controversial* statement. I think it is *also* fair to say that it remained so in the early Christian Church, and essentially has continued to do so all through Christian history.

In just about *every* era since its inception, the Decalogue has been at once a source of guidance, and also a source of division and debate.

*Initially*, the biggest problem Israel had with the Law was the *first few* commandments, establishing Yahweh not only as “the god of Israel,” but as the *only* God of Israel, and forbidding them to worship other gods, or to make “graven images” of *any* god – *including* Yahweh.

For Jesus, clearly, the way in which Israel had developed laws on top of laws and restriction after restriction – particularly with respect to Sabbath keeping – was very problematic, and a significant source of the division between himself and Israel’s leaders – most especially its priests and Pharisees.

In *Paul’s* day, the debate over the Law was *within* the Christian community, as they struggled to understand the implications of God’s grace in Jesus Christ on “the Christian life.” “Law” and “Grace” were viewed increasingly as “opposing forces.”

Paul had made it clear that he believed the “Christian era” was the era of “Grace,” bringing to an end the era of “the Law.” It was essentially his way of understanding how what Jesus was talking about in our Gospel lesson this morning could be true – that God’s “gift” of the Law, and His “choice” of the people of Israel to be “His people” could now blossom into a message of Good News for

*Gentiles* – salvation by Grace, through Faith, no longer requiring adherence to the Law.

In this morning's reading from Philippians, Paul wants to make it clear that, as he put it himself, "if anyone [had] reason to be confident in the flesh;" that is, in the *old* way – the right following and faithful fulfillment of the law, it was him. And yet he had come to believe that all of that old "era" was just preparation for what God had in mind, and what came to pass in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ – and he "counted it all as loss."

But that still left the question of how Christians are supposed to *behave* in this new era, of how we are to "formed" as a "community," or indeed even *if* we are to be so formed.

Among the earliest Christians, there was *considerable* division and debate about that – as evidenced in Paul's letters and other writings. "What then," Paul wrote in his letter to the Roman Christians, "Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?"

Paul most certainly wrote words like those because that is *exactly* what some were saying about the Christian life – that because of God's Grace in Jesus Christ, how we live no longer matters. We are just waiting for God's return, to "take us away" to live in the true light. But for Paul, it did *indeed* matter, first and foremost as an evidence of our "obedience" *in response* to the Gift of Grace, and as a demonstration of our commitment to God and Jesus Christ, and then increasingly as time went on, because Christians had to learn how to *live together* as a faith community.

But what I really want to talk about this morning is the debate about the Law as it played out *later* in Christian history.

I assume you are aware that this year we are celebrating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the event that is generally accepted as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in Europe. It was on October 31<sup>st</sup> of the year 1517 that Martin Luther is supposed to have nailed 95 theses for debate on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany.

That document begins with these words:

*Out of love for the truth and from desire to elucidate it, the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology, and ordinary lecturer*

*therein at Wittenberg, intends to defend the following statements and to dispute on them in that place. Therefore he asks that those who cannot be present and dispute with him orally shall do so in their absence by letter. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.*

The theses never mention the Decalogue by name, although they contain a couple of references to “canon law,” the law of the *Church* – much of which existed as the Church’s attempt to “flesh out” the Christian life in the era of grace.

*Most* of the theses had to do with Luther’s challenge to the church’s *control* of the “means of grace;” that is, the ways in which the faithful were required to rely on priests, and an elaborate system of confession, and the paying of indulgences, and all the rest, in order to *receive* God’s free gift of Grace.

But the *result* of Luther’s challenges, once he was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church, was a renewed debate about the role of Law in the Church and Christian life. And that debate was a significant part of what eventually distinguished Luther’s theology and John Calvin’s, and the church bodies that developed around those theologies (Lutheran, and Reformed).

To solve the problem, Calvin first distinguished between ceremonial law (requirements like observing the Passover, or circumcising baby boys – which he believed have been fulfilled and replaced in the Christian era) and the *moral* law, which is still in “force and effect.” Here’s what Calvin had to say about the Law in his chief writing, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (and understand that I am just giving you bits of what is a quite lengthy passage):

That the whole matter may be made clearer, let us take a succinct view of the office and use of the Moral Law. Now this office and use seems to me to consist of three parts. First, by exhibiting the righteousness of God – in other words, the righteousness which alone is acceptable to God – it admonishes every one of his own unrighteousness . . . convicts, and finally condemns him. This is necessary, in order that man, who is blind and intoxicated with self-love, may be brought at once to know and to confess his weakness and impurity . . .

The second office of the Law is, by means of its fearful denunciations and the consequent dread of punishment, to curb those who, unless forced, have no regard for rectitude and justice. Such persons are curbed not because their mind is inwardly moved and affected, but because, as if a bridle were laid upon them, they refrain their hands from external acts, and internally check the depravity which would otherwise petulantly burst forth. . .

The third use of the Law (being also the principal use, and more closely connected with its proper end) has respect to believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already flourishes and reigns. For although the Law is written and engraven on their hearts by the finger of God, that is, although they are so influenced and actuated by the Spirit, that they desire to obey God, there are two ways in which they still profit in the Law. For it is the best instrument for enabling them daily to learn with greater truth and certainty what that will of the Lord is which they aspire to follow, and to confirm them in this knowledge . . .

For Luther, as one theologian has put it, “even though gospel and law are both considered part of the one Word of God, the chief task of the theologian is to refine one’s ability to distinguish law from gospel, letter from spirit, works from faith.” Luther could therefore affirm Calvin’s first and second uses of the law – generally called the “theological use,” in convicting us of our sin by demonstrating the ways in which we have “fallen short” of God’s expectations on our lives, and the “civil use,” as the necessary means of restraining evil by establishing a system of enforcement and even punishment for offenses that hold people accountable *regardless* of their “beliefs,” and keep bad behavior in check.

But for Luther, the law’s usefulness stopped there, whereas for Calvin the “principle use” of the law was neither of those two, but rather, the third use, generally called the “positive use,” by which believers continue to be *guided*, and *instructed* in goodness, because none of us, in this earthly life, ever completely and fully, to use Paul’s phrase from Philippians “attains the resurrection from the dead,” and lives *perfectly*.

While I’m sorry that it has resulted in division within the Protestant community over the years, I am grateful for our tradition, and its emphasis on Calvin’s “third use,” because of how it *balances* Law and Grace. In the *context* of a healthy understanding and awareness of our fallenness, and our *reliance* on god’s grace, it teaches us nevertheless not to just “write off” the Decalogue as nothing more than “checklist of “prohibitions,” as though it is the case that *so long as* we don’t steal, or lie, or murder, or commit adultery, *it doesn’t really matter how we live*.

Calvin taught that each prohibition is really an admonition to “reorder” or lives positively. Yes, “do not kill.” But do not kill, *because* God is the giver of life. Life is *good*, and in our life decisions and daily living, we should constantly be working to *build up* and *nurture* life, not tear down and destroy.

Do not commit adultery. Got it. But *more* than that. Do not commit adultery *because* God has put us in relationships, and *affirms* them as the way we are meant to live. So we should be constantly working to *strengthen* those relationships, and make them better – both by honoring their boundaries, and also by appreciating their richness and depth.

And the same for all the others. Guidance for living, that in the “era of Grace” still speak, still guide, and are still a course of strength to help us face life’s challenges, and disappointments, our human failings, our divisions, and life’s circumstances as we encounter them.

May God strengthen us all in our attempts to “press on,” as Paul put it – living faithfully, to the glory of God, and trusting in God’s mercy and grace. Amen.