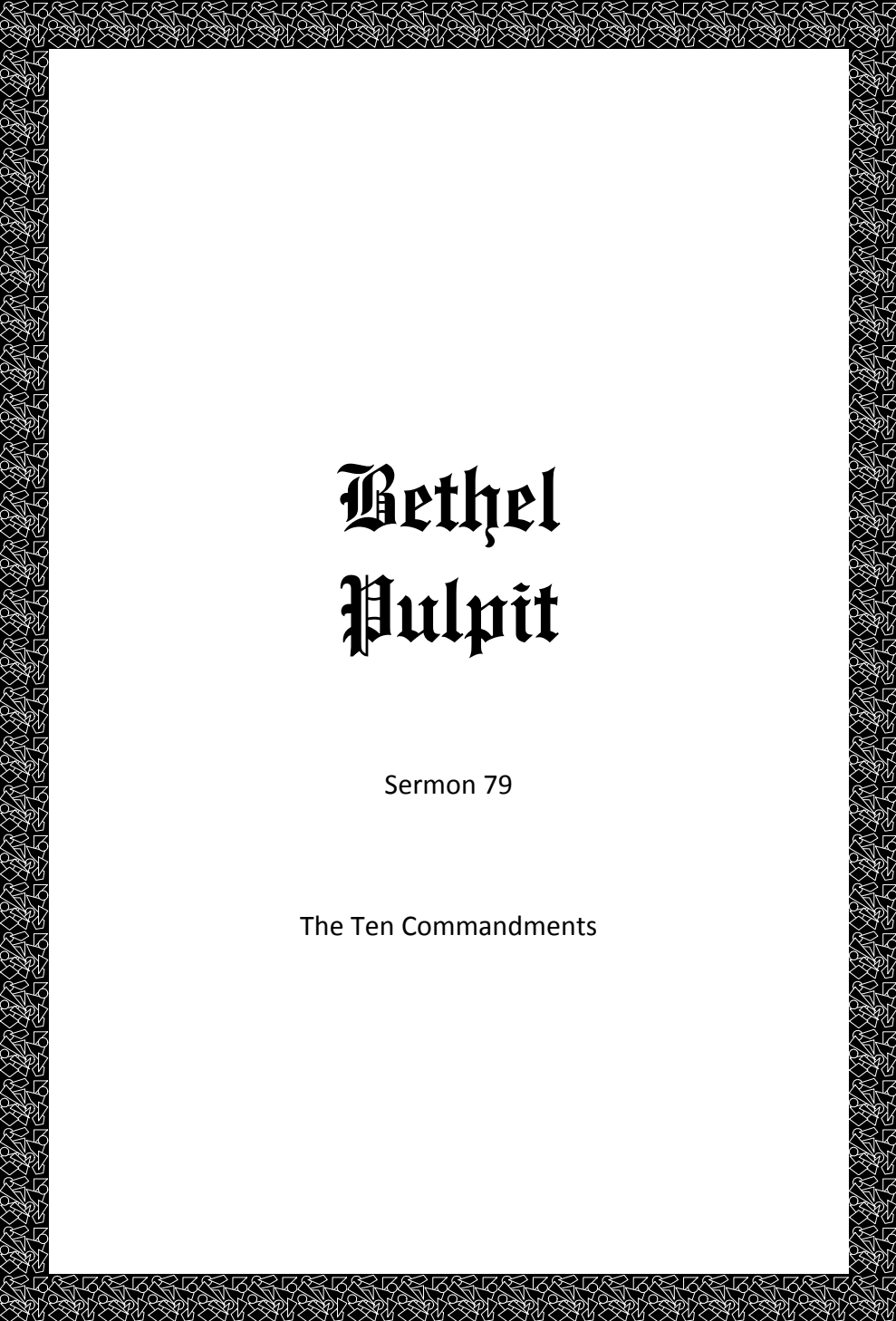




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 79

The Ten Commandments

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 10th November, 1991**

Text: Exodus 20. 1-17.

I have been very conscious that this most important part of the Word of God is never read in our services here at Bethel, this part usually known as the ten commandments. I realise that there are some places, for instance the Dutch churches, where regularly, Sabbath by Sabbath, the holy law of God, the ten commandments are read. Also there was a time when in every one of our national churches, the ten commandments were on display at the front of the church. If I am not mistaken, that is the law of our land, that they must be. In so many places now, you will find they are hidden away in some obscure corner. I also think I am right in saying this, that according to the law of the land, in our national church, whenever the Lord's supper is administered, or as it is often called, the communion service, then the whole of the ten commandments must be read. So it was laid on me (it almost came as a kind of rebuke, a kind of shock) that perhaps some of you have never heard them read from this pulpit. In my mind, I did not particularly associate it with Remembrance Day, but when today came, realising it is Remembrance Day, again there seemed to be a very close, intimate connection. The Old Testament ends almost with this as the last word: "Remember ye the law of Moses My servant."

There was a time in the history of England when more or less everyone knew the ten commandments and could repeat them. When I was at school, we had to know our multiplication tables off by heart, and were tested on them, and we had to know the ten commandments off by heart, and were tested on them. There was a time in England when more or less everyone accepted the ten commandments. I do not say they obeyed them or kept them, because they did not, but you could say more or less everyone accepted the ten commandments. People thought they were good, that they should be obeyed; religious people and irreligious people, church goers and non church goers. Generally, people knew what the ten commandments taught, and they respected them. They were glad for them to be taught in the schools.

The sad thing is that nowadays you find so many religious leaders even saying that the ten commandments are no longer relevant, that they have nothing to do with us today, that they just belonged to the Jewish nation, they were just a part of divine revelation then, and now we have progressed beyond them. How far the blasphemy of religious leaders can go in our country before God intervenes in wrath, I do not know, but the great point in popular religion seems to be that nowadays there are no absolute standards. They say you cannot speak like Moses did here. They do not say like *God* did here. You cannot speak like Moses did here and lay down absolutes. Everything is relative, and sin is made to be relative, even if people speak about such a thing as sin at all.

I think one thing has been very evident, and this can be said without any fear of contradiction: that in the history of Europe, whenever there have been nations who have honoured the Lord in seeking that the laws of the land should be according to the ten commandments, then that nation has prospered and that nation has been honoured by God. There have been times when it has been the desire of political leaders in our country that all our laws should be in complete agreement with the ten commandments. How solemn it is today when you find such a great number of those who call themselves evangelicals who do not even try to keep the fourth commandment, to “remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy”!

Well, it is Remembrance Day. It would be a wonderful mercy if our country once again was to remember the holy law of God and the God who gave it. At times like this, we need to remember the Lord’s wonderful mercies and favours to our land, yet our awful rebellion, disobedience and departure.

Well then, this part of God’s holy Word is so vital, the holy law of God, here summarised in what are usually known as the ten commandments. Now in the old days at school when the ten commandments were taught, they were not taught beginning like this, the first commandment: “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.” We did not have to learn them like that. This is how we had to learn them: “And God spake all these words” That is the beginning of the ten commandments. That is the introduction to the holy law of God. That is vital. “And God spake all these words.” You see, the great thing is the

knowledge of God. How solemn that the god who is worshipped in so many places today is certainly not the God of Scripture!

When God spoke all these words, the first, the primary purpose was that He might give to ancient Israel and to all mankind down the ages a revelation of who He is. “God spake all these words, saying, I am the Lord thy God.” And so there is a revelation of who God is. I suppose nowadays most people would say God is a God of love, and that is true, and it is a glorious truth and a blessed truth, and we think of the love of God to guilty sinners, and the love of God in giving His dear Son. But the God who is a God of love is holy and righteous and just. So here there is this revelation that God is a holy, holy, holy God. In no way can He excuse sin and in no way can He tolerate sin. God is a God of righteousness. I think you will find that the old divines like Luther contended that if you were to pick out one theme and only one theme from the whole of Scripture, it would be this: the righteousness of God. And here, as God gives this holy law, He gives this revelation of Himself, that He is a holy God, that He is a righteous God, that He loves righteousness, that He hates unrighteousness. God here reveals Himself as a just God, a God of justice. God here reveals Himself in all His spotless purity.

That is the foundation here. “God spake all these words.” God here to mankind is revealing His character, that He is holy, that He is righteous, that He is just, that He is pure, and all these ten commandments are a revelation of the essential character of God.

Now in this passage, God very simply, very clearly tells us what He requires of all His creatures. He is our Creator, and as a good and righteous Creator He has a perfect right to tell us what His requirements are, what His will is, what we are to do, what we are not to do. We are not our own; God has created us. Each one of us is completely, entirely, absolutely responsible to God as our Creator. Our responsibility is very simple. In a word, our responsibility is to walk in obedience to the law of God. Has God told us this is His will for us for our lives? Has God given us these commandments, and is it evident that these commandments are good, honourable, true, and also that they are for our good? Then it is our responsibility to walk in obedience to these commandments. We are accountable to God, to walk in absolute obedience to these commandments.

Now God has an absolute, righteous claim, and in insisting on His claim, God does us no unkindness. There is not one of these commandments which is for our harm, our hurt. All these commandments are for our good, and God commands that we are to walk in them. Solemnly true it is that through the Adam fall in our first parents, we have no ability to obey these commandments, to yield this perfect standard that God demands. But because we have lost the ability to obey, that does not for a moment mean that our almighty God has lost the ability to command. In essence He gave the ten commandments to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This is just a fuller development. God made Himself known. He created them and gave them a beautiful world, a beautiful earth, a beautiful garden. He did everything for their good. He told them what they must do. He said, “Do this, and thou shalt live,” and they had the ability to do it. He said, “Do this, and thou shalt live; do it not, and thou shalt surely die.” So He created man under law; good laws, righteous laws, true laws. And God had a right to do this. So man was under law, under the covenant of works, and here in Exodus 20 on Sinai in great power and glory, God, almighty God, more fully develops that man is under law, that man is under the covenant of works. God demands a perfect obedience in thought and word and deed.

Now obviously it would be impossible to give an exposition of all the ten commandments this morning. But God demands absolute loyalty and obedience and service to Himself and love to Him and to no other, uninterrupted. His name must ever be honoured. Using His name profanely is abhorrent in His sight. How we need to watch the careless spirit of the age in which God’s name is not revered, in which God’s name is used lightly! God in His absolute sovereignty having given mankind six days for themselves, claims one day for His own, and He has never abolished it. “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” There was a time when in England generally this commandment was honoured. What awful laxity now – not just the letter of it, but the spirit of it! (Of course, God in His holy Word and God’s people have always made that one point that there is freedom on things of necessity and mercy; I think that was the old expression: that “works of necessity and mercy” God never forbade.)

But then all these things: respect for authority, respect for parental authority and all other authority, the forbidding to kill, forbidding to

commit adultery, all manner of uncleanness, immorality, in thought, word, deed. And stealing, not just being a robber, but stealing time, employees from the employer; telling lies, bearing false witness.

When the Lord Jesus came, He said, “Think not that I am come not to destroy the law . . . I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.” And the Lord Jesus, to use this expression advisedly, put another dimension on the law. He takes the case of a man saying to Him, “But I would not think of killing anyone.” He said, “Do you feel hatred or enmity in your heart to anyone? If you do, you have broken the sixth commandment.” He speaks to another one, who says, “I never think of committing adultery.” He said, “Do you have those evil, lustful thoughts rising up in your heart? Then you are guilty of breaking the seventh commandment.” In a word it is summarised like this: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.” It is an absolute standard. It is a holy God in heaven looking down on earth and saying, “Be ye perfect even as I am perfect.”

Now the next thing concerning the ten commandments and the holy law of God and the covenant of works is this, that those who disobey will be punished. God accompanies the ten commandments, His holy law, with solemn threats, solemn promises of divine wrath, divine punishment upon all those who break that law, who come short of the standard. The Word of God declares that “he who offends in one point is guilty of all.” So there is the awful curse of the law. There is the awful threatening of the law, that if the law is disobeyed, if the law is broken, it must demand its penalty. The law either is fulfilled or the law breaker must be punished. So when the holy law was given on Mount Sinai, there was the thunder and the lightning and the noise of the trumpet and Mount Sinai smoked, and the people trembled – that revelation of God in His awful character. I use the word *awful* of course in its ancient and proper and true meaning, full of awe. God in His awful character, His holiness, justice, purity, and what He demands from all His creatures, every one of them, and then the awful threatenings and promise of punishment and divine wrath. Well, of course, the question arises, “Who then can be saved?”

The next point that is so vital is: what was the purpose of God in giving His holy law? God never gave the law that by it guilty sinners

might be saved by obedience to it. God, when He gave the law of works, the ten commandments on Mount Sinai, knew that no sinner ever would completely, absolutely obey that law, that none ever could and that none ever would. So why, then, did He give that law? Well, of course there are many answers to that question. First of all, He gave it as a revelation of His own character. Secondly, He gave it for the good of Israel as a nation and for any nation as a nation. But the special reason for God giving His law so clearly was this, that sinful man through the law might realise his lost, ruined state in the sight of this holy God who gave the law. God never gave the law of works on Sinai in the hope that men would be able to fulfil it and that they might reach heaven at last. “By the law is the knowledge of sin.” God gave that holy law that sinners might realise who God is, what God is, that they might realise who they are and what they are, and that despairing of any hope in themselves or in the law, they might be brought to seek mercy in the Lord Jesus. O that this point might be fully understood, that there can be no salvation for any sinner through obedience to the law! Doesn’t the apostle open it up in the opening chapters of Romans, that the whole world is brought in guilty before God as law breakers? But there this holy law of God still stands, and it must still be read, it must still be preached. “For by the law is the knowledge of sin.” The law cannot save. The law cannot show any mercy. The law must demand complete obedience, or the law must exact its penalty.

So that is the covenant of works, made between God and Adam, confirmed at Sinai, and that covenant is broken. There is no hope, no salvation, no heaven through it. But the holy law has to be read, to be preached, that sinners might by the Holy Spirit know their lost condition and that they might seek mercy in the Lord Jesus. “By the law is the knowledge of sin.” So the apostle says, “I through the law am dead to the law.” What does he mean? Well, the holy law of God entered into his heart and killed him in this sense: it slew any hope he ever had of reaching heaven through what he could do and through obedience to the holy law of God. So he says, “I through the law am dead to the law.”

The holy law of God in the ten commandments sets out God’s boundaries, a boundary wall here and a boundary wall there, and we are forbidden to cross those boundaries. When we ask the Lord to forgive us our trespasses, trespassing really means going beyond the boundaries. That is what we have done. We have trespassed against God. Now the

purpose of God in giving the law of works, the ten commandments, apart from the revelation of His holy character and His just demands as Creator, is that the law might be your schoolmaster to bring you to Christ, that you might be justified by faith; seeing you cannot meet God's requirements, yet acknowledging your responsibility. You cannot claim any lack of responsibility. We are responsible under God's holy law; we are accountable.

Down the ages, God has used His holy law to show sinners His holiness, their unholiness, and their need of mercy in the Lord Jesus. A few years ago in our open Sabbath school meetings, I went through the holy law of God, the ten commandments, one by one. One of our young people used to go home condemned in heart, condemned on one thing, and then condemned on another, till she had to seek a refuge in the Lord Jesus.

Those of you who know and love the interesting life of John Kershaw are sure to remember that remarkable case of John Roby. John Roby was an eminent man, a well-known and talented author. He was the head of a firm of bankers, Fenton and Roby, which continued until within living memory. John Roby, an eminent man in the town of Rochdale, was a moral man but a worldly man, and a staunch churchman. One day, he and his wife were away on holiday and heard there was a beautiful new church, and decided to worship there. As he sat there, he was attracted by the beautiful lettering of the ten commandments at the front of the church. As he looked at them and admired the beauty, the holy law of God began to enter into his heart. It brought complete condemnation; it made him tremble. It made him ill. As soon as possible, he returned from his holiday. His wife and family did not know what was the matter with him. He felt he was a law breaker. They said that he had not done anything wrong, but he said, "No, I am guilty. I have broken the holy law of God." If you want to read the remarkable story, read the end of it. One day he heard a voice saying,, "Go, and open your mind to John Kershaw. He will speak words of comfort to you." He went to talk to him and hear him, and after some time was so blessed that John Kershaw thought he would be an eminent minister of the cross. Shortly afterwards, he had to sail from Liverpool to Scotland, and the ship was wrecked, and he with many others was drowned. I mention this as a marked illustration of the power of the holy law of God when applied, when used by the Holy Ghost.

You say, “What hope for a sinner?” Well, the whole work of the Lord Jesus as the Saviour is in relationship to the holy law of God and the demands of the holy law of God. There are three texts which seem to be especially on my mind. The first is this: “When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law.” God’s people were under the law, under the curse of the law, being brought to know that they have broken that law, deserving the punishment of that law, not able to get out of that state under the law. Now the Lord Jesus came and He was made under the law. He was the Law-giver as God, but as Man He was made under the law. The whole of His life He lived in obedience to the law of works, although He was the Creator, the Law-giver. He perfectly, in thought, word and deed, obeyed every precept of the ten commandments, the holy law of God. This is the wonder of it. You read through the Epistle to the Romans. This is mercy, this is free grace, this is the gospel, this is the covenant of grace. That perfect obedience of the Lord Jesus to the ten commandments, the holy law of God, is taken and reckoned to the account of God’s people just as if they themselves had obeyed the law in thought, word and deed.

But then what about the punishment they deserve? Well, Christ, as made under the law, fulfilled it; He “is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.” Then at Calvary, He bore the curse of the law. He bore its wrath and in bearing it, He for ever bore it away. There are two expressions the old divines used to use: one was that Christ at Calvary stood “in the law-place of His people.” The other is that Christ is His people’s “law-fulfilling righteousness.”

That brings me to the second text on my spirit: “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ.”

And the third text: “What the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.” What the law could not do because it was weak through the flesh, Christ did. Let us be clear, the law is not weak: the law is strong – strong to

condemn, strong to command, strong to punish. But the law is weak through the flesh. i suppose it is something like this. You might have a most skilful piano teacher; he might be the best in England. But if the little boy he is teaching has faulty, injured fingers, no use in his fingers, some fingers missing, he will never learn to play. The weakness is not in the teacher: it is in the boy. The law is not weak in itself, but it is in the flesh, because we have not the power to obey. But what the law could not do in the flesh, Christ did. So we see that wonderful work of the Lord Jesus in relationship to the ten commandments, the law of works, fulfilling that law perfectly with that perfect obedience being reckoned to His people's account. That is imputed righteousness. And then Christ at Calvary enduring the curse of the law until at length He cried, "It is finished," and so magnified the law and made it honourable. Experimentally, God's people in measure must know both sides; that is, to be shown by the Holy Ghost that by nature we are law-breakers, we are guilty, unholy, we are rebels, we cannot obey the law, we have not obeyed the law. Then, realising our lost, ruined condition, law-condemned, to be led by the Holy Spirit to flee for refuge to the dear Lord Jesus, the almighty Saviour, who has taken the place of His people, fulfilled the law for them, borne its punishment, its wrath against sin, and to flee to Christ as our law-fulfilling righteousness.

In conclusion, there is that little story about William Gadsby and the cripple boy. Gadsby on one occasion was very burdened. He had some fine young men who used to sit at the front of the chapel. He thought it would be a wonderful thing if the Lord blessed them and brought them into the church, and he aimed his preaching at them. One day he was asked to visit a dying cripple boy. When he got there, he could hear an Arminian Methodist preacher in prayer. It was all law, and obedience to the law. When Gadsby was shown into the room, the boy greeted him with such love and affection. Gadsby said, "I do not think I have ever seen you before." The boy said, "No, sir. I crept into the gallery steps where nobody could see me, and hid there, and I crept away during the last hymn." He told him such a tale of how he had been condemned under the broken law, the covenant of works, the ten commandments. At length, happening to pass Gadsby's chapel, he crept into the gallery steps and Gadsby preached from, "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth." On his first hearing of the gospel, he was

blessed with the full assurance of faith and gospel liberty. Gadsby thought, “And there was I preaching to these young men on the front row, and the Holy Ghost was at work on the gallery steps with a little boy I did not even know was there!” That is it: “Self-condemned and abhorred, how can I approach the Lord?” Nothing in self, condemned by the holy law of God, but then complete salvation in the glorious Christ who is “the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.”