

Dear friends in our Savior,

“I can’t believe that you won’t let me go to that party! All my friends are going. I’m the only one who won’t be there. If you really did love me, you’d let me go. It’s obvious that you don’t love me and just enjoy watching me suffer!” How many of us have heard those words or similar from our children about the rules that we set? Maybe those words came from our lips when we were that age. It’s hard to understand fully the benefit of rules when you are the one who has to abide by them. But you have a completely different perspective as a parent. You know about all the bad things that can happen and aren’t naïve enough to think they can’t happen to your child. There can be lots of trouble. The reality is that it is love that gives rules, for the good of our children and because we care.

Yet how often don’t we turn around and take the same attitude toward God and the law that he sets before us. Like a teenager, we can easily accuse God of being tyrannical and view his laws as harsh and repressive. We have the opportunity today to study the account of God giving the 10 commandments to his people at Mount Sinai. Yet it is not as a repressive dictator that God gives these laws to his people, but rather as a loving Lord who cares for them. We have the chance to see how serious God is—not just serious about punishing those who would disobey but also about wanting to bless the people he has chosen to be his very own through them. We want to take a look at our text today under the thought: **For Our Own Good.**

**Exodus 20:1-17** *And God spoke all these words: <sup>2</sup> “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. <sup>3</sup> “You shall have no other gods before me. <sup>4</sup> “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, <sup>6</sup> but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. <sup>7</sup> “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. <sup>8</sup> “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor and do all your work, <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. <sup>12</sup> “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. <sup>13</sup> “You shall not murder. <sup>14</sup> “You shall not commit adultery. <sup>15</sup> “You shall not steal. <sup>16</sup> “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. <sup>17</sup> “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”*

The scene at Sinai as God gave these laws to Israel was somewhat foreboding. Moses tells us in the previous chapter that there was thunder and lightning as God spoke to the people. A very thick cloud covered the mountain and smoke billowed from it as from a furnace. The mountain trembled violently and a trumpet continued to blast growing louder and louder. Yet God had not come to scare his people. In fact, his purpose was exactly the opposite. He had come to establish a covenant with them. He had chosen Israel to be his own people. He had rescued them from the slavery and oppression of Egypt and was bringing them to the promised, fertile land of Canaan. The covenant, or agreement, that God laid before his people was simple: If they obeyed his commands and kept the covenant he was establishing with them, they would be his treasured people, holy nation and kingdom of priests and he would be their God. But God didn’t leave them in a vacuum for what they were to obey and how they were to live to be pleasing to him and keep the covenant. He gave them his law. In Leviticus, you have the entire law that God gave to his people. Here he gave them just the 10 commandments. These were a basic summary of how they could live in a way that would express their thanks to God for all that he did for them. By following these laws, Israel could show love and gratitude for the grace and mercy that they received from God and God would be able to bring upon the Israelites the blessings he wanted to shower upon them.

It’s easy to think of these as repressive laws that are burdensome, restrictive, constricting and full of threats and punishment. People in our day still use these types of words to describe God’s law. When his law speaks against what the desires of flesh want to do, people cry out against them and more importantly against God. Many view God to be an unloving, controlling dictator whose only desire is to control every aspect of their life. But God did not give these laws to be controlling. Even though all of God’s law was backed by the power and authority of God—and he displayed that this day with the thunder, lightning, smoke, cloud and trumpet blast, yet listen to the words of grace with which God began speaking to his people: “*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*” We might say that God was saying to them, “Remember who I am: I am the LORD, your God.” This name for God was his covenant name that pointed to him as Savior and Redeemer. God is encouraging the people to remember what he had done for them. He had delivered them from the slavery and great oppression of the Egyptians and he had done that in marvelous style. Whether it was the 10 plagues he sent or the

parting of the Red Sea or the destruction of Pharaoh's entire army, God had shown great grace and love to these people. If he really didn't care for them, he would have left them to suffer in Egypt or let them be captured or killed at the Red Sea. But God didn't do that. He rescued them and freed them from slavery. He wanted to show love to them. He wanted to bless them. He gave these laws for the good of his people so that he could show love to them.

The first of these commandments really governs the rest of them. God's desire is to be number one in the lives of his people. They are to have no other gods which they worship. God describes himself as a jealous God. In other words, he wants our fear, trust and love exclusively. He doesn't want his honor, glory or obedience to go to anyone else but him. He demands exclusive devotion, faithfulness and strict obedience to his commands. We best show our devotion to God by following the rest of what he says. We show our devotion to him by keeping his name holy and not using it or acting in a way that would bring down his reputation. We show our love to him by hearing his word and not passing up the opportunities we have to hear it and worship him. We express our gratitude to him by honoring our parents and others that God has placed in authority over us and respecting their direction for us. We give testimony to God's priority in our life by not hurting or harming the life or body of anyone else the Lord has made. We give him thanks by honoring his gift of marriage and not expressing our sexual desires outside of marriage but loving and respecting the spouse God provided for us. We please God by being content with the material things he has blessed us with and not stealing from others. We honor God by taking the words and actions of others in the kindest possible way and not using our tongue or speech to tear them down or ruin their reputation. We honor God also in our thoughts by not coveting—desiring those things God would not have us to have.

God is very serious about us keeping these commands. These are not the 10 suggestions. They are 10 commandments. God shows us how serious he is about us keeping these commandments by threatening tremendous punishment to anyone who disobeys. We are often tempted to make light of these threats and take God's punishment lightly. We often don't see immediate consequences for our sins and we are lulled into thinking that these threats aren't real. But God is serious and means exactly what he says. There are no bending of the lines, no exceptions to the rules. The options are strict obedience or punishment.

This is what makes people so angry and frustrated with God when it comes to his law. We can't keep these, no matter how hard we try. Even if we could say that we have never murdered anyone, our thoughts haven't always been so kind to us. And even if it isn't murder that we have thought about, Jesus tells us that anyone who hates his brother is a murderer. To that, we have to say, "Guilty." It's the same with all of these. When all you know of God is that he threatens punishment to those who disobey and you can't keep them, you want to scream out, "Why do you demand of me what I cannot do?" This is what makes Lent so important. These laws that God lays before us leave us with no place else to turn except to fall before our God and beg for mercy. Lent directs us to God's answer to our pleas for mercy: Jesus. His law serves our good by reminding us of the deep need that we have for a Savior. His law is for our good because it helps us to see the depths of love that God has shown to us. It helps us to marvel at the supreme sacrifice that Jesus made for us. In Jesus, we see just how serious God is about his law—so serious that he was willing to sacrifice his own Son to provide justice for his people.

This is the slavery from which God saved us—not the physical slavery that Israel faced, but the spiritual slavery that we faced to sin and the devil. When we were powerless to do anything to please God, God reached out and made us his own. He chose us to be his people and saw to it that we came to know and believe in the sacrifice that Jesus made on Calvary. He released us from the devil's power and the grip that sin had on us and made us his special people, people who are guaranteed for eternal life. And just as God was serious about punishing those who disobey his commands, he is just as serious about blessing those who follow him and obey what he commands.

You are so valuable to God that he gave his son for you. He called you to be his treasured people. He wants to bless you and didn't leave you in a vacuum for how you can live to please him and give him thanks. He blesses us by remaining our God as we serve him. But there are other blessings that come too. Just think of the practical side of obeying these commands. You don't have to face the guilt of getting caught saying negative things about your neighbor behind his back. You don't have to live with the anxiety of facing your parent or superiors when you have done something wrong. You don't face the troubles in marriage when you respect and honor your spouse. You don't have to be embarrassed to look at people you might have wronged. Think of the blessings to our society when these laws are followed. Life would be much smoother if more people would follow them: not committing adultery, speaking evil or bad about others or stealing from them or murdering them.

Ultimately, following God's commandments keeps us on track to spending our eternity with God. Following God's commands doesn't bring salvation to us or cause salvation for us. But remaining in God's word and following his will keeps us connected to God. It separates us from the evils in society and away from those who might try to take our faith.

Yes, God is serious about his commandments. But he gave them not to punish you but to bless you. Use the law of God to point you to his love for you in Jesus. As you recognize your shortcomings, let them focus your attention on all that Jesus has done for you. He rescued you from your sin, paid the price for that sin, and guaranteed life for you in heaven. Now go out and let God bless you as you follow his will. Follow these commandments to say thank you to God and live a life that pleases him and honors him as your Lord and Savior. Amen.