**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**EXODUS-018. THE DECALOGUE: PART 1 - MAN AND GOD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *And God spake all these words, saying, 2. I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. 3. Thou shalt have no other gods before me. 4. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in the heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: 5. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; 6. And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments. 7. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain: for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain. 8. Remember the sabbath-day, to keep it holy. 9. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: 10. But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy man-servant, nor thy maid-servant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: 11. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath-day, and hallowed it."*

*Exodus 20:1-11*

An obscure tribe of Egyptian slaves plunges into the desert to hide from pursuit, and emerges, after forty years, with a code gathered into ten words, so brief, so complete, so intertwining morality and religion, so free from local or national peculiarities, so close fitting to fundamental duties, that it is to-day, after more than three thousand years, authoritative in the most enlightened peoples. The voice that spoke from Sinai reverberates in all lands. The Old World had other lawgivers who professed to formulate their precepts by divine inspiration: they are all fallen silent. But this voice, like the trumpet on that day, waxes louder and louder as the years roll. Whose voice was it? The only answer explaining the supreme purity of the commandments, and their immortal freshness, is found in the first sentence of this paragraph, God spake all these words.

**I.** We have first the revelation, which precedes and lays the foundation for the commandments; I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt. God speaks to the nation as a whole, establishing a special relation between Himself and them, which is founded on His redeeming act, and is reciprocal, requiring that they should be His people, as He is their God. The manifestation in act of His power and of His love precedes the claim for reverence and obedience. This is a universal truth. God gives before He asks us to give. He is not a hard taskmaster, gathering where He has not strawn. Even in that system which is eminently the law, the foundation is a divine act of deliverance, and only when He has won the people for Himself by redeeming them from bondage does He call on them for obedience. His rule is built on benefits. He urges no mere right of the mightier, nor cares for service which is not the glad answer of gratitude. The flashing flames which ran as swift heralds before His descending chariot wheels, the quaking mountain, the long-drawn blasts of the trumpet, awed the gathered crowd. But the first articulate words made a tenderer appeal, and sought to found His right to command on His love, and their duty to obey on their gratitude. The great gospel principle, that the Redeemer is the lawgiver, and the redeemed are joyful subjects because their hearts are touched with love, underlies the apparently sterner system of the Old Testament. God opens His heart first, and then asks for men's.

This prelude certainly confines the Decalogue to the people of Israel. Their deliverance is the ground on which the law is rested, therefore, plainly, the obligation can be no wider than the benefit. But though we are not bound to obey any of the Ten Commandments, because they were given to Israel, they are all, with one exception, demonstrably, a transcript of laws written on the heart of mankind; and this fact carries with it a strong presumption that the law of the Sabbath, which is the exception referred to, should be regarded as not an exception, but as a statute of the primeval law, witnessed to by conscience, republished in wondrous precision and completeness in these venerable precepts. The Ten Commandments are binding on us; but they are not binding as part, though the fundamental part, of the Jewish law.

Two general observations may be made. One is on the negative character of the commandments as a whole. Law prohibits because men are sinful. But prohibitions pre-suppose as their foundation positive commands. We are forbidden to do something because we are inclined to do it, and because we ought to do the opposite. Every thou shalt not implies a deeper thou shalt. The cold negation really rests on the converse affirmative command.

The second remark on the law as a whole is as to the relation which it establishes between religion and morality, making the latter a part of the former, but regarding it as secured only by the prior discharge of the obligations of the former. Morality is the garb of religion; religion is the animating principle of morality. The attempts to build up a theory of ethics without reference to our relations to God, or to secure the practice of righteousness without such reference, or to substitute, with a late champion of unbelief, the service of man for the worship of God, are all condemned by the deeper and simpler wisdom of this law. Christians should learn the lesson, which the most Jewish of the New Testament writers had drawn from it, that, pure and undefiled service of God is the service of man, and should beware of putting asunder what God has joined so closely.

**II.** The first commandment bears in its negative form marks of the condition of the world when it was spoken, and of the strong temptation to polytheism which the Israelites were to resist. Everywhere but in that corner among the wild rocks of Sinai, men believed in gods many. Egypt swarmed with them; and, no doubt, the purity of Abraham's faith had been sadly tarnished in his sons. We cannot understand the strange fascination of polytheism. It is a disease of humanity in an earlier stage than ours. But how strong it was and is, all history shows. All these many gods were on amicable terms with one another, and ready to welcome newcomers. But the monotheism, which was here laid at the very foundation of Israel's national life, parted it by a deep gulf from all the world, and determined its history.

The prohibition has little force for us; but the positive command which underlies it is of eternal force. We should rather think of it as a revelation and an invitation than as a mere command. For what is it but the declaration that at the centre of things is throned, not a rabble of godlings, nor a stony impersonal somewhat, nor a hypothetical unknowable entity, nor a shadowy abstraction, but a living Person, who can say Me, and whom we can call on as Thou, and be sure that He hears? No accumulation of finite excellences, however fair, can satisfy the imagination, which feels after one Being, the personal ideal of all perfectness. The understanding needs one ultimate Cause on which it can rest amid the dance of fleeting phenomena; the heart cannot pour out its love to be shared among many. No string of goodly pearls will ever give the merchantman assurance that his quest is complete. Only when human nature finds all in One, and that One a living Person, the Lover and Friend of all souls, does it fold its wings and rest as a bird after long flight.

The first commandment enjoins, or rather blesses us by showing us that we may cherish, supreme affection, worship, trust, self-surrender, aspiration, towards one God. After all, our God is that which we think most precious, for which we are ready to make the greatest sacrifices, which draws our warmest love; which, lost, would leave us desolate; which, possessed, makes us blessed. If we search our hearts with this candle of the Lord, we shall find many an idol set up in their dark corners, and be startled to discover how much we need to bring ourselves to be judged and condemned by this commandment It is the foundation of all human duty. Obedience to it is the condition of peace and blessedness, light and leading for mind, heart, will, affections, desires, hopes, fears, and all the world within, that longs for one living Person even when it least knows the meaning of its longings and the reason of its unrest.

**III.** The second commandment forbids all representations, whether of the one God or of false deities. The golden calf, which was a symbol of Jehovah, is condemned equally with the fair forms that haunted the Greek Olympus, or the half-bestial shapes of Egyptian mythology. The reasons for the prohibition may be considered as two,--the impossibility of setting forth the glory of the Infinite Spirit in any form, and the certainty that the attempt will sink the worshipper deeper in the mire of sense. An image degrades God and damages men. By it religion reverses its nature, and becomes another clog to keep the soul among the things seen, and an ally of all fleshly inclinations. We know how idolatry seemed to cast a spell over the Israelites from Egypt to Babylon, and how their first relapse into it took place almost before the voice which spake all these words had ceased.

In its grosser form, we have no temptation to it. But there are other ways of breaking the commandment than setting up an image. All sensuous worship in which the treacherous aid of art is called in to elevate the soul, comes perilously near to contradicting its spirit, if not its letter. The attempt to make of the senses a ladder for the soul to climb to God by, is a great deal more likely to end in the soul's going down the ladder than up it. The history of public worship in the Christian Church teaches that the less it has to do with such slippery help the better. There is a strong current running in England, at all events, in the direction of bringing in a more artistic, or, as it is called, a less bare, form of service. We need to remember that the God who is a Spirit is worshipped in spirit, and that outward forms may easily choke, and outward aids hinder, that worship.

The especial difficulty of obedience to this commandment is marked by the reason or sanction annexed. That opens a wide field, on which it would be folly to venture here. There is a glimpse of God's character, and a statement of a law of His working. He is a jealous God, We need not be afraid of the word. It means nothing but what is congruous with the loftiest conception of a loving God. It means that He allows of no rival in our hearts affection, or in our submission for love's sake to Him. A half trust in God is no trust. How can worship be shared, or love be parted out, among a pantheon? Our poor hearts ask of one another and get from one another, wherever a man and a woman truly love, just what God asks,--All in all, or not at all. His jealousy is but infinite love seeking to be known as such, and asking for a whole heart.

The law of His providence sounds hard, but it is nothing more than stating in plain words the course of the world's history, which cannot be otherwise if there is to be any bond of human society at all. We hear a great deal in modern language about solidarity (and sometimes it is spelled with a final e, to look more philosophical) and heredity. The teaching of this commandment is simply a statement of the same facts, with the addition that the Lawgiver is visible behind the law. The consequences of conduct do not die with the doers. The evil that men do, lives after them. The generations are so knit together, and the full results of deeds are often so slow-growing, that one generation sows and another reaps. Who sowed the seed that fruited in misery, and was gathered in a bitter harvest of horrors and crimes in the French Revolution? Who planted the tree under which the citizens of the United States sit? Did not the seedling go over in the Mayflower? As long as the generations of men are more closely connected than those of sheep or birds, this solemn word must be true. Let us see that we sow no tares to poison our children when we are in our graves. The saying had immediate application to the consequences of idolatry in the history of Israel, and was a forecast of their future. But it is true evermore and everywhere.

**IV.** The third commandment must be so understood as to bring it into line with the two preceding, as of equal breadth and equally fundamental. It cannot, therefore, be confined to the use of the name of God in oaths, whether false or trivial. No doubt, perjury and profane swearing are included in the sweep of the prohibition; but it reaches far beyond them. The name of God is the declaration of His being and character. We take His name in vain when we speak of Him unworthily. Many a glib and formal prayer, many a mechanical or self-glorifying sermon, many an erudite controversy, comes under the lash of this prohibition. Professions of devotion far more fervid than real, confessions in which the conscience is not stricken, orthodox teachings with no throb of life in them, unconscious hypocrisies of worship, and much besides, are gibbeted here. The most vain of all words are those which have become traditional stock in trade for religious people, which once expressed deep convictions, and are now a world too wide for the shrunk faith which wears them.

The positive side underlying the negative is the requirement that our speech of God shall fit our thought of God, and our thought of Him shall fit His Name; that our words shall mirror our affections, and our affection be a true reflection of His beauty and sweetness; that cleansed lips shall reverently utter the Name above every name, which, after all speech, must remain unspoken; and that we shall feel it to be not the least wonderful or merciful of His condescensions that He is extolled with our tongues.

**V.** The series of commandments referring to Israel's relations with God is distinctly progressive from the first to the fourth, which deals with the Sabbath. The fact that it appears here, side by side with these absolutely universal and first principles of religion and worship, clearly shows that the giver of the code regarded it as of equal comprehensiveness. If we believe that the giver of the code was God, we seem shut up to the conclusion that, though the Sabbath is a positive institution, and in so far unlike the preceding commandments, it is to be taken as not merely a temporary or Jewish ordinance. The ground on which it is rested here points to the same conclusion. The version of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy bases it on the Egyptian deliverance, but this, on the divine rest after creation. As we have already said, we do not regard the Decalogue as binding on us because given to Israel; but we do regard it as containing laws universally binding, which are written by God's finger, not on tables of stone, but on the fleshly tables of the heart. All the others are admittedly of this nature. Is not the Sabbath law likewise? It is not, indeed, inscribed on the conscience, but is the need for it not stamped on the physical nature? The human organism requires the seventh-day rest, whether men toil with hand or brain. Historically, it is not true that the Sabbath was founded by this legislation. The traces of its observance in Genesis are few and doubtful; but we know from the inscriptions that the seventh, fourteenth, twenty-first, and twenty-eighth days of the moon were set apart by the Assyrians, and scholars can supply other instances. The Remember of this commandment can scarcely be urged as establishing this, for it may quite as naturally be explained to mean Remember, as each successive seventh day comes round, to consecrate it. But apart from that, the law written on body, mind, and soul says plainly to all men, Rest on the seventh day. Body and mind need repose; the soul needs quiet communion with God. No vigorous physical, intellectual, or religious life will long be kept up, if that need be disregarded. The week was meant to be given to work, which is blessed and right if done after the pattern of God's. The Sabbath was meant to lift to a share in His rest, to bring eternity into time, to renew wasted strength by a wise passiveness, and to draw hearts dissipated by contact with fleeting tasks back into the stillness where they can find themselves in fellowship with God.

We have not the Jewish Sabbath, nor is it binding on us. But as men we ought to rest, and resting, to worship, on one day in the week. The unwritten law of Christianity, moulding all outward forms by its own free spirit, gradually, and without premeditation, slid from the seventh to the first day, as it had clear right to do. It was the day of Christ's resurrection, probably of His ascension, and of Pentecost. It is the Lord's Day. In observing it, we unite both the reasons for the Sabbath given in Exodus and Deuteronomy,--the completion of a higher creation in the resurrection rest of the Son of God, and the deliverance from a sorer bondage by a better Moses. The Christian Sunday and its religious observance are indispensable to the religious life of individuals and nations. The day of rest is indispensable to their well-being. Our hard-working millions will bitterly rue their folly, if they are tempted to cast it away on the plea of obtaining opportunities for intellectual culture and enjoyment. It is

The couch of time, care's balm and bay,

and we shall be wise if we hold fast by it; not because the Jews were bid to hallow the seventh day, but because we need it for repose, and we need it for religion.