

*Exodus 34:1-5 (NRSV)*¹

The LORD said to Moses, “Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets, which you broke. ²Be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai and present yourself there to me, on the top of the mountain. ³No one shall come up with you, and do not let anyone be seen throughout all the mountain; and do not let flocks or herds graze in front of that mountain.” ⁴So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the former ones; and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tablets of stone. ⁵The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, “The LORD.”

Matthew 22:34-40 (NRSV)

³⁴When the Pharisees heard that he [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

The choices we make define us. Where can we turn as we seek to understand what makes some choices better than others?

Few topics are as bewildering to Christians as the Old Testament Law, aka the Law of Moses or the Mosaic Law. On the one hand, many of us were taught that Jesus came to show that “getting to heaven” is not about keeping the Law, as those misguided Jews thought, but about believing in Jesus and inviting him into our hearts. Something like that. But then we read Jesus saying, in the Sermon on the Mount no less, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17). Our heads spinning, we are understandably puzzled. After all, the Ten Commandments seem like a good idea, but then there is all that other stuff in the law, from the practice of animal sacrifice to not wearing shirts made of two kinds of fabric!

The place to begin understanding our relationship to the Mosaic Law is to see that it is about the countless choices that the Israelites made every day. How would they live? How would they worship? What obligations did they have to the others in the Israelite community? To God?

Choices

Everyone wants to have a good life. We want to have close and lasting friendships. We want our kids to grow up loved, well-adjusted, and happy. We want to do the right thing. We want to make wise choices that lead to a good life. The hard part is that often we have trouble figuring out what the good life even looks like, and if we think we know what we want, we have trouble knowing which choices will lead us to the life we seek.

¹The title of this study is taken from an essay by Jay Budziszewski, a professor at the University of Texas in Austin, which was published *First Things* about ten years ago. When I first read it, I was grabbed by the image of the second tablet as a way of expressing the futility of trying to live with others as God intends while ignoring God.

A slender volume on my shelves is entitled, *Smart Choices*. It is an excellent introduction to decision analysis (which is a fancy way of saying deciding among choices). The authors take the reader through a straightforward presentation of how to state the problem, define objectives, create alternatives, evaluate tradeoffs and so on. They are business school types who want to help managers make better choices.

But for Christians, any talk of the good life or making better choices or living ethically must *first* begin with God. This isn't to say that sound analysis is unimportant, but that the analysis must start with God. It is God who is good. It is God who made this world. It is God who made us in his image (*the imago Dei*). Thus, it must be God who points us toward the better choices. It is God who establishes what a really smart choice is. It is God who takes away our blindness and enables us to see the life that we seek and the life that God desires for us.

The ancient Israelites understood that the creator of the universe had created them in his own image, had sought a relationship with them, and had shown them how to live in right relationship with him and with each other. God's instruction to them was the Law and the heart of the Law was inscribed by God on two tablets. The first tablet spoke to the people's relationship with God and the second tablet spoke to their relationship with one another.

Jesus, the Law, and the Two Tablets

When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai, he brought two tablets containing what we call the Ten Commandments. These commandments can be found in Exodus 20. The first four commandments speak to our relationship with God: do not worship any other God, don't make idols, don't abuse God's name, keep the Sabbath holy. The last six speak to our relationship with others: honor your parents, don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't testify falsely against your neighbor, and don't covet other people's possessions. The Ten Commandments lie at the heart of the Old Testament law.

Many people mistakenly believe that Jesus came to abolish the Old Testament. On the contrary, Jesus came to fulfill the law. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples what God's Law is really all about. When tested by the young lawyer, Jesus said that all the Law can be summed in the commandments to love God (the first tablet!) and to love neighbor (the second tablet!). All of the do's and don'ts one finds in the Old Testament are simply concrete expressions of those two commandments – for an ancient people.

To reiterate, the first tablet speaks to our relationship with God. We are to have no other gods or take God's name in vain and so on. The second tablet speaks to how we are to live with others. We are not to steal or give false testimony. We are to honor our parents and our marriages. We are to forsake murder and so on.

Christians understand that attempting to live out the "Judeo-Christian" ethic derived from the second table, while ignoring the first -- the "second tablet project" -- is doomed to failure. We are made in God's image. As the Westminster Confession puts it, we are "made to know God and enjoy him forever." When we seek to build a good life or to do the right thing, we have to begin with God, God's way, and the very reason why we are here in the first place.

As larger and larger segments of western culture have tried to live an ethic apart from any notion of God, they have learned that a genuine ethic is impossible to sustain without a source of the "oughts" other than ourselves. As Nietzsche rightly saw, without God there are only preferences and power. Thus, trying to embrace the ethic of the second tablet while rejecting the claims of the first tablet is a doomed project

God is relational and so are we!

In a letter, the apostle John wrote, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in

God, and God abides in them.” (1John 4:16b) What do you think John meant by saying -- “God is love”? Did he mean that God loves more than anyone? . . . that God loves without ceasing? . . . or perhaps that God loves truly? All this is accurate, but it isn’t saying that God *is* love. After all, it seems almost nonsensical. Love must have an object; we love something or we love someone. How could any single person, in isolation, be love?

However, when we proclaim that God is unity in three persons, then the statement that God is love makes perfect sense. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have always been, are now, and always will be in loving relationship with one another. God is love because God is inherently relational. The loving relationships among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit form the basis of God’s very essence. The three persons of the single Godhead live in eternal community, in a loving community of three persons.

The Book of Exodus

Our Old Testament is the Bible that Jesus read. Some people refer to it as the Hebrew Bible. The first five books of the Old Testament are called the Torah (Hebrew for “law” or “instruction”) or the Pentateuch (from the Greek for five scrolls) For a Jew, these five books – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – are the most sacred of all the scriptures.

The Book of Exodus begins the story of Moses, who is called by God to lead God’s people out of slavery in Egypt and into the land promised hundreds of years before to Abraham. The first part of the book is devoted to the narrative. If you’ve seen the *Prince of Egypt* or *The Ten Commandments*, you know the story. The second part of the book lays out, in some detail, the covenant between God and his people. God tells them how they are to live in right relationship with him and with each other, and God spells out the consequences of not living in right relationship, that is, not loving God and neighbor.

What does this mean for us and the choices we make? The opening chapters of Genesis tell us that humans are made in God’s image. One implication is that we too are inherently relational -- that we are made to live in loving relationship with God and one another.

Thus, it should be no surprise that the heart of God’s Law, God’s instruction, is focused on relationships. It is almost too simple! As Jesus so succinctly put it, God’s Law is summed up in the commandments to love God and to love neighbor. The first tablet sets forth some of what it means to love God. The second tablet sets forth some of what it means to love others. All the rest of the Law of Moses is a further elaboration of what it means to love God and neighbor. Granted, it was written for an ancient people and none of us would really want to live in a society governed by the Law of Moses (e.g. with stonings and more). But still, it points us toward a life lived in the light of God and the love of God.

Finding our way forward

Simply put, the good life we seek is built on loving God and neighbor. Such a life is a holy life. Of course, loving God and neighbor is much easier said than done. Indeed, the story of Israel is largely the story of the people’s inability to live as God hoped. This is also our story. Even if we know what we ought to do, too often, we do the things we know we shouldn’t and fail to do what we know we should (see Romans 7:14-25). Still,

to live as God expects us to live and to build the good life that we seek, we must grow, each day, in our ability to truly love God and our neighbor. As Paul put it in his letter to the Romans, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).

Jay Budziszewski on the Second Tablet Project

Here's Budziszewski in his own words. These are the closing paragraphs in his *First Things* essay (June/July 2002). The complete essay is available in the *First Things* archive at www.firstthings.com.

What shall we say about the Second Tablet Project? Just that it cannot succeed. The Second Tablet depends on the First; whoever denies his duty to God will find, if he is logical, that he can no longer make sense of his duty to his neighbor. Conscience will certainly persist, reminding him of both, but it will seem to him an absurdity in a sea of absurdities. Though he may admit that he has a nature, he will be unable to say why he should keep it. Though he may admit that this nature is governed by certain laws, he will find that their oughtness creeps out the door and that even their prudence slips away. All this will be needless, for he does have the knowledge of God; he merely denies it. But denial only makes his crisis deeper, for lies metastasize, and the greatest lie metastasizes to the greatest degree.

Then should we say that the Two Tablets are enough if only we take them as a pair? More's the pity, no: not even the pair of them is enough by the light of nature alone. Though natural knowledge is sufficient to illuminate our duty, duty by itself is despair. It cannot assure us of the possibility of forgiveness when we fall short; it cannot assure us of the certainty of providence in the face of evil; and it cannot explain to us the fallen dignity we bear as images of God. In want of the first assurance, we seek refuge from guilt by denying our sins. In want of the second assurance, we seek to make everything go right by doing wrong. In want of the explanation, we find it all too easy to pretend that we do not recognize our neighbors for what they are.

In these senses, moral knowledge is protected and illuminated by the knowledge of God, and the natural knowledge of God is protected and illuminated by the knowledge of His word. Faith and reason contain and depend on each other. May we be spared the illusion of an ethics that stands wholly by itself.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. As Christians, we proclaim that there is a God who created everything. We also proclaim that humans are the *imago Dei*, the "image" or "likeness" of God. Human cloning is always in the headlines and some hard choices lie ahead. When we say that humans are made in the image of God, what do you think we mean? Is it merely a matter of our human intelligence, compared to other species? How does the Judeo-Christian belief that humans are the *imago Dei* influence your own beliefs about the wisdom of human cloning? Would cloned humans be made in the image of God? How might your beliefs about cloning differ from those who do not believe in God?
2. The biblical perspective is that making better choices begins with God. Do you really agree? Aren't there lots of moral and ethical people who don't acknowledge God or any divine being whatsoever? Where do their "oughts" come from? Why would anyone care about "oughts" that are derived only from human preferences? What difference does God really make? If making better choices begins with God, why do so many of God's people make such terrible choices? What evidence is there of God at work in our own choices?
3. Finally, you might discuss how you've always understood the Old Testament Law. How has this study affected your interpretation of the Law of Moses?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Exodus 2:23-4:17 God called Moses and reveals his name	Tuesday, Exodus 19 Moses and the people arrive at Mt. Sinai
Wednesday, Exodus 20:1-17 The Ten Commandments	Thursday, Matthew 22:15-46 Jesus debates local leaders, including the young lawyer from today's brief passage.
Friday, Romans 12 Paul urges the Christians to live holy lives.	Weekly Joys and Concerns

