

# The Foundation and Purpose of God's Law

**Text:** Exodus 20:1–21 **Preacher:** Rev. Peter Dietsch **Date:** June 28, 2026

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## Introduction

1. Occasion: following the pattern of the recent General Assembly worship services, in which each minister preached from the Old Testament.
2. Setting of the passage (Exod. 19): the Lord has brought Israel out of Egypt to himself at Sinai. Both parties have declared their intent—God, that Israel will be his own possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation; Israel, that all the Lord has spoken they will do. The people consecrate themselves; God descends in fire, smoke, thunder, and lightning. Exodus 20 gives the words of the covenant itself.
3. Reading of the text: Exod. 20:1–21.

## A. Preliminary framework: the law as the bestowing of rights

1. First through third commandments—God's rights. a. To be the only one worshiped. b. To be worshiped as he has commanded. c. To have his name used as he sees fit.
2. Fourth commandment—a transitional right: God's right to one day in seven, man's right to rest from labor, and the right of domesticated animals to rest.
3. Fifth through tenth commandments—the rights of neighbors: honor due legitimate authority, life, fidelity in marriage, property, good name and reputation, and contentment in the Lord's provision.
4. Value of the framework: it guards against a self-interested reading of the commandments and sustains an others-centered attitude toward obedience.

## B. The question before us

1. What is the proper relationship between the law of God and the grace of God?
2. The question perplexes Christians and ministers alike, yet it is essential for those who would live as faithful children of God and as witnesses to the world.
3. Sinclair Ferguson has called the relation of law and grace one of the hardest knots in all divinity for ministers to untie.
4. Aim: to begin untying that knot, and so to be better equipped to please the Lord, be conformed to the likeness of Christ, and glorify God and enjoy him forever.

## C. Two headings

1. The foundation of God's law.
2. The purpose of God's law.

*Rationale: a right understanding of the law's foundation and purpose is critical to a right application of the law.*

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## I. The Foundation of God's Law (Exod. 20:1-2)

### A. The preamble to the covenant

1. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."
2. Analogy: the preamble to the United States Constitution—"We the People"—opens with a declaration of who the people are.
3. So God precedes the giving of his law by declaring his unique and loving relationship to his people, and thus their identity: *I purchased you as my treasured possession. I am your God. You belong to me.*

### B. The foundation of the law is God's love

1. **The text itself (Exod. 20:2).** The deliverance from Egypt can be nothing other than an overflow of God's covenant love, by which he heard the cries of his people and rescued them.
2. **The Song of the Sea (Exod. 15:13).** In his lovingkindness he led the people he redeemed; in his strength he guided them to his holy habitation—an outline of the whole book: redemption from slavery, guidance through the wilderness, arrival at Sinai. The redemption proceeded from covenant love grounded in the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
3. **Moses' benediction (Deut. 33:1-4).** Forty years later, addressing the second generation, Moses recalls Sinai and places the giving of the law squarely within God's love: "Indeed, he loves the people." God loved his people when he brought them out of Egypt; he loved them when he gave them his law.

### C. Two illustrations

1. **The courtroom.** The guilty defendant is sentenced to death; the Son steps forward, affirms that the law's demand must be met, and takes the punishment out of love, that the accused may go free. a. God made him who knew no sin to be sin, that we might become the righteousness of God in him. b. Foreshadowed in the Passover lamb at the exodus. c. True and necessary—but not the whole.
2. **The living room.** The judge then turns to the acquitted: your place in my home has been purchased by the life of my only begotten Son. a. Adoption: a new creation with a new identity, name, family, and Father. b. The banquet, with the risen Christ seated at the table. c. The house rules: the Father explains how a member of his family is to live. d. The pattern: "Look at my Son—he has kept it perfectly."
3. **Application.** Too many Christians remain in the courtroom and never move into the living room, though that was always the intent of Christ's work. It is not enough to define the gospel as "Jesus saves." He gives life abundant—and Scripture most often describes that abundance in terms of righteousness and holy living.

## D. Two mistakes concerning the believer's relation to the law

1. **Courtroom only.** Some never grasp that they have been moved into the living room; they know God only as judge.
  2. **Living room without law.** Others know God as loving Father but assume the law no longer applies—courtroom is law, living room is grace, and never the two shall meet.
  3. **The common error.** Both drive a wedge between God's law and God's grace, failing to see that in courtroom and living room alike God's love is expressed through both.
  4. **The root misunderstanding (Rom. 6:14).** "You are not under law but under grace," read in isolation, can be made to mean anything. In context Paul's point is the opposite of separating law from grace: by God's free grace in Christ you are no longer slaves of sin but slaves of righteousness, freed from sin and enslaved to God, deriving the benefit of sanctification and eternal life. If righteousness is what accords with God's law, then the child of God has been set free precisely that he might keep it—receiving the law as a precious gift, to be cherished, loved, and pursued.
  5. **Confessional support.** The Westminster Confession employs both concepts: the law gives a clearer sight of our need of Christ and the perfection of his obedience (courtroom), and it encourages believers to do good and refrain from evil (living room).
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## II. The Purpose of God's Law (Exod. 20:20)

*"Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin."*

### A. The setting: holy fear at Sinai

1. The people were rightly frightened by God's holy presence.
2. The pattern throughout Scripture: Isaiah's "woe is me," the terrified shepherds, John falling as a dead man before the risen Christ.
3. Moses' answer is not to dismiss the fear but to explain the purpose of God's coming.

### B. A definition of love

John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*: love is **allegiance, affection, and action**. If you love someone you are loyal to him, you feel drawn to him, and you act accordingly.

### C. Three purposes, corresponding to three aspects of love

1. **Allegiance—"in order to test you."** a. "Test" here does not mean an examination to be passed or failed. b. Biblically it carries the sense of proving quality: the chemist places a substance in the crucible, applies heat, and burns off impurities to reveal its true nature. c. God's law refines his people, shaking loose their former allegiance to their slave masters and to the gods of Egypt, purifying their covenant loyalty to him alone.

2. **Affection—"that the fear of Him may remain with you."** a. The apparent contradiction: do not be afraid, yet fear him. b. The fear of the Lord is not fright but healthy reverence for the sovereign and powerful God, joined to personal relationship, love, and trust in him as redeemer. c. It describes the state of the affections flowing from a changed heart—hence "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," and hence the Gentile worshipers of the New Testament called God-fearers. d. God gives his law to give his people a new affection for him and to rid the heart of its yearning for former masters.
3. **Action—"so that you may not sin."** a. The law is given that we may live according to our original design. b. "To err is human" is false: Jesus is human and never erred, and man was created in God's image, not created to sin. More accurately—since the fall, and in this life, to err is human. c. God revealed his holy law that we might learn to live as designed, and so learn to love as God loves.

#### **D. Confirmed by Christ (Matt. 22:37–40)**

Asked for the greatest commandment, Jesus answers with love—love God with heart, soul, and mind; love your neighbor as yourself—and on these two the whole law and the prophets depend.

#### **E. Summary of the two points**

The foundation of God's law (v. 2) is God's love; the purpose of God's law (v. 20) is to teach his people how to love as he loves. The law is God's grace to us, a blueprint for right allegiance, affection, and action.

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#### **Conclusion: The Law as a Two-Way Mirror (James 1:23–25)**

1. **The illustration.** The interrogation-room mirror serves two functions: it shows the viewer his own reflection, and, examined closely, it reveals those standing behind it.
2. **As a mirror.** The hearer who is not a doer glances at his natural face and forgets what he looked like; the one who looks intently into the perfect law of liberty and abides in it is blessed in what he does. a. Note James's agreement with Paul in Romans 6: freed from slavery to sin, set free to keep God's law—here called the law of liberty. b. Born again, with new hearts, we look into the law and see our sin and shortfall; as new creations indwelt by the Spirit, we can learn and change, growing in righteousness, sanctification, and holiness in allegiance, affection, and action.
3. **As a two-way mirror.** The nearer we draw to God's law in allegiance, affection, and action, the more we see what lies behind the Ten Commandments—the holy character of God himself, a glimpse of true and perfect love, the very heart of God in his law of love.

**Closing prayer.** Thanksgiving for the Son, who kept the law perfectly in our stead and laid down his life as the unblemished Lamb; assurance of salvation through the righteousness

of Christ imputed by faith; thanksgiving for adoption into the Father's family and for the gift of his law, that we may learn to love as he loves and serve him in holiness and thankfulness.