

4. The Six Commandments

Mark 10:17-20a

Like John before him, Jesus preached “repentance and forgiveness.” But with Jesus, the sins to be repented were far fewer, and the chance that people could be reconciled to God in this way was, accordingly, far greater. So was the chance that Israel as a whole could be reconciled to God, and that God in turn would give his favor again to Israel, and throw off the Roman occupation. From this fact came the dangers of which Jesus in Mark is constantly aware: his mission is directly anti-Roman.

What was the content of Jesus’ version of the Law? That comes out in this story, which is from a later layer of Mark, but probably gives a correct account of this aspect of his teaching.

Judaism of the day had three requirements: devotion to God, obedience to his commandments, and charity toward others. Here is what Jesus taught about the second of these things: the commandments as he saw them.

In the story, a man asks what must be done to inherit eternal life. In answer, Jesus recites six Commandments, seemingly drawn from the usual Mosaic Ten, except that five are missing, and one against fraud has been added.

It has been the custom to read past this story, or to assume that in giving six commandments, Jesus means to imply the rest of the 613 commandments which experts identify in the Hebrew Bible. No, Jesus means his list to be complete. Here is the story.

And as he was going forth into the way, there ran one to him, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?

And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? None is good save one, even God. Thou knowest the commandments: Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor thy father and mother.

And he said unto him, Teacher, all these things have I observed from my youth . . .



Reflections

We expect Jesus to recite the entire Decalogue. But he doesn't. Here is the Decalogue, from Deuteronomy 5:7-22. Items omitted by Jesus are bracketed:

[Thou shalt have no other gods before me]
 [Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image . . .]
 [Thou shalt not take the name of Jehovah thy god in vain . . .]
 [Observe the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy . . .]
 Honor thy father and thy mother . . .
 Thou shalt not kill
 Neither shalt thou commit adultery
 Neither shalt thou steal
 Neither shalt thou bear false witness against thy neighbor
 [Neither shalt thou covet thy neighbor's wife . . .]

As for fraud, that can be seen as a promotion from Deuteronomy 24:14-15:

Thou shalt not oppress a hired servant that is poor and needy, whether he be of thy brethren or of thy sojourners that are in thy land within thy gates; in his day thou shalt give him his hire, neither shall the sun go down upon it (for he is poor, and setteth his heart upon it), lest he cry against thee unto Jehovah, and it be sin unto thee.

Students of Scripture will have seen that the early and later prophets conflict. How are such conflicts to be regarded? The view here taken by Jesus is that only the parts that do *not* conflict, that is, the overlap between the two, are valid for the present day. The later prophets, as the latest revelation of the will of God, have priority over the earlier prophets. The result is that the Mosaic commandments concerning God are omitted, and those concerning man are expanded. Merely *coveting* a neighbor's wife is not a sin; only the act of adultery would be a sin. There are thus no crimes of temptation or intention. Only acts are actionable. It is very simple.

To Jesus' hearers, this new system must have come as a relief and a release. The many rules of sacrificial piety, all of which were sins if broken, and the wages of any sin was death – what chance did one have? But to refrain from murder or theft, to be scrupulous with money owed – how hard is that, really? On that basis, pretty much anyone can enter into a state of sinlessness.

Jesus by no means broke with the political conception of Israel. He meant to realize the promise of God to David. But for that Davidic program, a majority of Israel must return to righteousness. What Jesus got from Micah was a *redefinition* of righteousness. On that new understanding, Israel can be saved. And if it can be saved, it can regain its sovereignty, and rule itself.

Jesus' view had its opponents. Not just in the Roman army of occupation, but also among the Jews.