

Third Sunday in Lent

PRIOR COMMITMENTS

Exodus 20:1-17

Lent 3, Year B

Analysis by Eric W. Evers

Then God spoke all these words: 2I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3you shall have no other gods before me. 4You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, 6but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. 7You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. 8Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work-you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

12Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. 13You shall not murder. 14You shall not commit adultery. 15You shall not steal. 16You shall not bear false witness against your

neighbor. 17You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

DIAGNOSIS: We Have Prior Commitments

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *It's A Nice List*

Don't kill. Don't commit adultery. Don't covet. No bowing down to statues. OK, we can handle that. And we can all agree that it's a nice list. Keeping the Sabbath day holy, well, Sunday's my one day to get to Home Depot, so that's a tough one. But in spirit, we wholeheartedly support this list of commandments, don't we?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *But We've Got More Important Things*

Well, not really in spirit. And not even in letter. Maybe we choose finishing up the project around the house over worship on the Sabbath. Maybe it's the harsh words for the co-worker that we just know are justified, even if they kill his spirit. Or the lingering gaze at the neighbor; at least we keep that hidden, right? And we get the whole thing about not stealing, but come on, I'm talking about my taxes here! Uncle Sam is a highway robber, so if I fudge a bit there's no harm, no foul! We pay lip service to the Ten Commandments (and might even want them posted prominently in public spaces), but in the private spaces of our hearts, we post other signs. We have prior commitments, commitments to our own wants and desires. We pay soul service to ourselves, and that overrides any list, no matter who spoke the words.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *We Know the Lord's Commitment*

Maybe the Israelites were less "in denial" than we are, because

Exodus records their panic at the recitation of these words (20:18-19). But with those prior commitments in our hearts that over-rule our obedience to the Commandments, we know what the Lord has committed to do: “punish children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject [him]” (20:6). We may say one thing (in favor of this divine Top Ten list) and do another (in favor of our own wishes). But the Lord will do what he says, and we can expect punishment, not only for ourselves, but down through the generations.

PROGNOSIS: “No, I’m the One with a Prior Commitment”

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *A Prior Commitment*

Punishment is what the Lord has pledged. But, thankfully, he has a prior commitment: “I am the Lord your God” (20:2). The electing God has chosen. And he keeps that commitment. How far will he go to keep it? Look to the Cross, where all of our iniquities are borne by the suffering Savior. Look to the empty tomb, where the Lord’s true Word of Life trumps our false words of sin, and trumps even the divine word of condemnation! We may waver, indeed we may rebel outright. But in Jesus Christ, God is steadfast and faithful to his commitment, his Word, to us. In Christ, he forgives.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Committed to God*

And in that Word, we are committed to the Lord. Not by our own decision, but by his gracious choosing. And that choosing provides a firmer foundation than our own insecurities and objects of desire. It fills the heart’s hunger that we have tried for so long to sate with our eyes and stomachs. Something other than our own fickleness and whims has a hold on our heart

now. We become grounded in the love of Christ. No obedience could put us there, except for the obedience of Jesus, who followed his Father's will in order to win us for his own.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Whole New Commitments*

With a new Lord of our hearts, our hands and feet and eyes and mouths have new direction. They are freed from feeding our sinful desires, and now we can commit them to serving God and neighbor. In this spirit (in the Spirit), we no longer try to squeak by on observing the letter of the Law; we can see the neighbor as someone to love and serve, and God as the One in whom we can truly delight. Those Ten Commandments are no longer a source of terror (insofar as we trust in Christ) or merely a nice list of recommendations. They are an expression of the Lord's commitment to the world: in choosing to be the Lord our God, he now wants to love those around us through us. By defending the neighbor's reputation, protecting and healing the lives of others, honoring marriage (our own and/or others'), and resting from work, we don't display a show-off piety or placate a jealous God. Instead, by loving our neighbor in those ways we reflect the love of God that has been poured out into our hearts. Commands can't make us like that. Only the commitment of the Lord, in Christ, to be our God can do it. Let us praise him for his faithfulness!