

# Third Sunday in Lent

## I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD

### Exodus 20:1-17

### Third Sunday in Lent

### Analysis by Martin Lohrmann

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: Deadly Commands

### Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *"Good Person" Syndrome*

"Who needs all the baggage that comes with church and religion? I'm basically a good person already." Aren't we all! That's true enough: if we think about those bad things that get people in jail or that ruin lives and reputations, *most people* aren't engaged in those activities most of the time. Logically, too, bad people who do such destructive things deserve their punishment, so that we "good people" can be left alone to our good lives. Even if someone did point out a fault in a "good person," we might easily admit, "Fine, I'm not perfect... but I'm not *that* bad."

### Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Who Do You Love?*

It's true that the commandments address how we treat each other in this world. In that way, we might look at these words of God and figure that we're "basically good people" or at least "not *that* bad." Such a view, however, has already forgotten that the first commandments aren't about us at all. They are about our hearts (1st commandment), mouths (2nd), and lives (3rd) being centered in God: are we loving God with the heart, speaking rightly to and about the Lord with our words, and putting ourselves in the midst of God's word? In this way, keeping God's will is not first about how individuals and communities live with themselves but how we live with the Lord of life, the Alpha and the Omega, who has created all things. All of a sudden, any claims we had about our own goodness are

gone: so much for our “good person/bad person” model.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *So Many Idols***

The first commandment confronts us with the depth of human idolatry (for more, see Luther’s *Large Catechism*!). We have not trusted our lives to the God who bought us and brought us out of the house of slavery. Instead, we have sold ourselves into all kinds of houses of slaveries in our desperate quests for goodness, meaning and safety. The consequence of such idolatry is this: “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.” God is not looking for “basically good people.” God is looking for believers, children and heirs. We have failed. We have not honored our end of the covenant. We deserve the just application of the consequences: the revocation of God’s gift of life.

## **PROGNOSIS: Life-Giving Words**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *“I Am the Lord Your God”***

The good news: Life was never ours to earn or deserve in the first place. The whole thing—all of existence—is grace. The Lord who led Israel out of slavery remains the God who leads us out of our own many slaveries. The Messiah who healed the sick and freed the captives continues to break the chains of sin, death and hell and lead us into life. Our God remains the good shepherd who justifies the ungodly, out of pure love and grace. This is the merciful God we are commanded to fear, love and trust above all else. What better God and life could we want?!

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (External Solution) : *God Goes Before***

Just as the Lord led Israel out of Egypt, the Holy Spirit continues to lead us out of slavery and into life. We do not create our own path into heavenly righteousness...the Lord goes

before. On Sinai, God created a holy people by speaking these words to a band of physically and spiritually weak refugees. Today, God continues to speak us into life through the words of scripture and through words of faith shared with one another. All our following is of the passive variety: we are called, gathered, enlightened and sanctified daily by the Holy Spirit into this wonderful new life in God.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) :** *What Faith Looks Like*

In summary, the commandments don't save. In fact, if our salvation comes down to what they command us to do, then they are fatal words that expose how far from being "good people" we really are. But instead of being only a curse for us, these "ten words" become words of blessing, because through them the Lord has created a godly people out of nothing: a people who lives by faith, receiving light and life through the grace of a loving Lord. How do we fulfill these commandments? Martin Luther wrote, "Faith alone is the righteousness of a Christian and the fulfilling of all the commandments, for he who fulfills the First Commandment has no difficulty fulfilling the rest" (LW 31:353). By trusting in God, we already have all the gifts of life and freedom that the Lord has promised. What do we do then? Then we gladly move along to each of the other commandments, because that's just who God created us to be and what God created us to do.