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by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

Lecture #31

The Ten Commandments:

A Preface of Grace

Catechism Questions 43 thru 44



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- 25. Adoption—*Question 34*
- 26. Sanctification—*Question 35*
- 27. Blessings of Salvation in this Life—*Question 36*
- 28. Blessings of Salvation at Death—*Question 37*
- 29. Blessings of Salvation at the Resurrection—*Question 38*
- 30. The Duty Required of Man—*Questions 39 through 42*
- 31. The Ten Commandments: A Preface of Grace—*Questions 43 & 44***
- 32. The Ten Commandments: Love for God—*Questions 45 thru 48*
- 33. The Ten Commandments: Love for God's Worship—*Questions 49 thru 52*
- 34. The Ten Commandments: Love for God's Name—*Questions 53 thru 56*
- 35. The Ten Commandments: A Day for Holy Love—*Questions 57 thru 59*
- 36. *Coming Soon*
- 37. *Coming Soon*
- 38. *Coming Soon*
- 39. *Coming Soon*
- 40. *Coming Soon*

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Lecture #31

The Ten Commandments: A Preface of Grace

Question 43: *What is the preface to the Ten Commandments?*

Answer: *The preface to the ten commandments is in these words, “I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”*

Question 44: *What doth the preface to the ten commandments teach us?*

Answer: *The preface to the ten commandments teacheth us, That because God is the Lord, and our God, and Redeemer; therefore we are bound to keep all his commandments.*

In our lesson today, we begin our study of the Ten Commandments. You may already be very familiar with each of these Ten Commandments, but if not, I hope that the following lessons will assist you in understanding this divinely given summary of the moral law, what God requires of all men. If you haven't yet done so, let me encourage you take the time and to commit the whole of the Ten Commandments to memory. As you do so, you'll begin to meditate upon this grand summary of all that the Lord requires of us. And you'll find help, by the Lord's blessing, not only for the conviction of sin, but the understanding of what Christ did for us in fulfilling these commandments, as well as learning to express your gratitude in trusting him.

Well, how do the Ten Commandments begin? I would certainly understand if you said, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” That is the first commandment. However, it's not actually how the Ten Commandments start. And what do I mean? It's that they begin with an introduction, and an important introduction. This introduction helps provide us with a key to understanding the right way of using the Ten Commandments. And it gives us encouragement as well, as we consider obeying them. Our *Catechism* refers to this introduction as a “preface.” A preface is something that goes before other things. Many books will have a brief preface preceding the main body of the text. The preface usually supplies helpful insights for understanding the rest of the book. And as we'll see, this is true of the preface to the Ten Commandments. If you've not yet memorized the Ten Commandments, be sure to start with this preface, and you'll find that it supplies you a great help as you consider these blessed words.

There are two Questions for our lesson today. The first is Question #43 in the *Shorter Catechism*.

It supplies us the words of the Biblical text itself. And the second, Question #44, helps explain the meaning of these important words. The first, Question #43: “What is the preface to the Ten Commandments?” And the Answer: “The preface to the ten commandments is in these words, *I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.*” These are the words that we find in Exodus 20, verse 2. It’s helpful to see, as well, that just before this verse, in verse 1, we read, “And God spake all these words, saying.” Always remember this. The Ten Commandments weren’t given by Moses. They aren’t Moses’ words. They aren’t Moses’ commandments. These commandments were spoken, written, and delivered by God.

Now, our next Question, #44, helps explain the meaning of the words of verse 2: “What doth the preface to the ten commandments teach us?—The preface to the ten commandments teacheth us, That because is the Lord, and our God, and Redeemer, therefore we are bound to keep all his commandments.” As the answer to Question #44 shows, the preface actually provides us helpful reasons to remember why we should keep his commandments. We’re to look at each of these in the lesson that follows. Following this helpful guidance of the *Catechism*, we’ll look at three points, all of which show us reasons for obeying God. The first is, God’s Transcendence; the second is, God’s Covenant; and the third is, God’s Redemption.

Now, before we go further, let me simply note that when we understand the preface well, we will see there is no argument to obey God in order to earn salvation. The preface itself addresses a people God has already called to himself, a people that he has brought out of bondage. There is a significant point here for us to understand that both for Israel under the Old Testament, and for the obedience offered by the believer today, we do not obey God’s commandments in order to be saved. But rather, because he’s shown mercy to us, and, yea, even when he’s redeemed us by the blood of Christ, we thus are those who want to keep and obey his commandments, which is his holy will for us.

Well, first then, for our lesson, God’s Transcendence. “Transcendence” is a big word. The word itself comes from the idea of climbing, or going beyond something. You can fill a cup with water, however, you can also hold it under a faucet, and let the water fill it and overflow the cup. The cup is too little to contain all that’s being poured into it. The water transcends it. When we speak about God’s transcendence, we refer to the truth that God transcends, that is, he exceeds or goes beyond our ability to comprehend him fully. Remember, he is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable.

And notice the words of the preface, “I am the LORD.” In the Hebrew, the word “LORD” is “Jehovah.” It is the name God takes to himself, and it’s related to his words that he spoke to Moses at the burning bush, in Exodus 3, and verse 14. We read, “And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.” It refers to God as he is self-existing. The *Larger Catechism* helpfully explains this a bit more, when it says, “God manifesteth his sovereignty as being JEHOVAH, the eternal, immutable, and almighty God, having his being in and of himself” (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, Question #101). Whenever you read the Bible, and you come across the Lord’s name, and in the English, you see it as “LORD” with all capital letters, that’s standing for JEHOVAH. You should have this in mind, that this is reminding us that he is Jehovah, the eternal, immutable, and almighty God, who has being in and of himself. He’s dependent upon none.

Well, with that for our understanding, this then is why our Question says, “because God is the Lord.” God that gave these Ten Commandments is Jehovah, the glorious God who transcends all creation. In that he has all life and being of himself, he is not part of the creation. He is the Creator. This reminds us that he is supreme. His authority is above all else that is. There’s no one before

him, and there's no one above him. Let's put it a little bit differently. If we were to disobey him, indeed to our shame, when we disobey him, we disobey the greatest, the highest, and the best that there is. It shows us the great wickedness and foolishness of sin. And we would remember that God is the supreme one, the all-glorious one that transcends all, we see, "Well, of course, I ought to obey him." There is none better than he is, none greater than he is, none more glorious than he is. And the preface helps remind us of this. No one compares with God. God is above everyone. And so we shouldn't think, Well, I'll follow after my friends, or my fellow students, or I'll go after what I want to desire. If it's in contradiction to what God has explained in his Word, we would be following a lesser, instead of the greatest. And so we remember, because God is the LORD, because he's the greatest there is, we're bound to obey him.

But notice, second, God's covenant. We see these words, "I am the LORD thy God." Of course, it's true that God is God over all that is. The God of the Bible, the God that gave the Ten Commandments is God over atheists. He's God over Hindus. He's God over Muslims. He's God over all pagans and idolaters. He's God over all the world. However, this expression, "thy God," refers to that special relationship he established with his people—the covenant. You see this well expressed in Genesis 17. It's certainly not the only place, but it's a helpful illustration of this great privilege of being in relationship with God by covenant. This records, of course, when God was establishing this covenant with Abraham. So notice Genesis 17, verses 7 and 8. God says, "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." Now, as this passage shows, God established a special relationship with Abraham and his descendents. Notice again that language, "I will be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee...I will be their God." This, of course, is a foundation for all that he's doing toward his people.

We've come across this word "covenant" before. We noted then that the word "covenant" refers to a special relationship established between two or more people. In a covenant, there are promises, and there are responsibilities, and there are often blessings for keeping those promises, and consequences for failing in our responsibilities. We can see some of this in Genesis 17, that's just been mentioned. There's a special relationship established between God and Abraham, and Abraham's descendents. There are promises given, the most fundamental of which is, "I will be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee...I will be their God." Well, this brings them into such a relationship that God now says, "I am the LORD thy God."

Yes again, it's true, all mankind is answerable to God, for he is God over all the earth. However, those with whom he has covenanted, they have been given a tremendous privilege. This privilege makes it so that they should obey him all the more. He's come near to us and said, "I will be your God. You will be my people." He owns us as his own people. And he gives us the privilege of having him as our God. Doubtlessly, you've seen baptisms take place, and what's taking place in a baptism is, the outward sign and seal of the covenant of grace is being applied to one. And think of the language, "I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." There's a relationship of one being brought into fellowship, a covenant with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Now, as we've said before, this doesn't mean that that person is saved, but what it does mean is, God is saying to that one, "I will be your God. And I'm privileging you with all of my care, all of my Word, my promises and commandments. I'll give you the privilege of hearing my Word Sabbath by Sabbath. I'll give you the privilege of shepherding you

by those pastors that I've sent after my own heart." And so he cares for us, and he takes us, as it were, out of the world, and places us into the context where he teaches us his covenant.

Now this is a great privilege. And if you are in God's covenant, if you've been baptized, God has said to you, "You are mine, and I offer to you all that I am, for you." Well, this then is why the *Catechism* includes a reason for obedience, "Because God...is our God." Yes, while he rules over all others, and he even shows mercy to them, he has not come near to all others, as he comes near to his people. Because to his people, he says, "I give you promises. I hold forth my covenant to you, to be your God to call upon, to look to, and to be saved by." In this way, he distinguishes his covenant people from the world, which is a tremendous privilege.

Well, seeing then that God has been so kind to us in this, is it not right that we should be called to obey him? And you'll notice the language of the *Catechism*, "therefore we are bound to keep all his commandments." This binding is a notion of covenant relationship. "I am your God, so follow me." Sometimes children will say to their parents, "Well, my friend gets to do this or that." And the parent will rightly say, "Well, I'm not that person's mom or dad. I'm your mom or dad, and you are supposed to listen to me." Of all the care that mom and dad provides, they have a right to say unto their children, "This is the way our family will be." How much the more that God has established a relationship with us that is far superior to every other relationship, that in his display of kindness to us, and care and protection for us, that it would be right for him to say, "Therefore, obey me."

Well, third, God's Redemption. To "redeem" means "to buy back. It is to purchase something so that the thing you purchased is now especially yours. This is exactly what God has done for his people. Notice the language of the preface, "which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." This language, of course, speaks of deliverance. God has given his people liberty from their former bondage. However, how did he accomplish this deliverance? How did he bring them out of the house of bondage? He did so by redemption. What was the redemption? When did God purchase his people? Well, you'll notice the preface looks back to Exodus. We see this in Israel's history, early on in the book of Exodus. I hesitate to direct you to a longer passage, but notice the following portion from Exodus chapter 6, verses 2 through 7. And as you have this passage before you, listen, and you'll notice all three of these points, God's Transcendence, God's Covenant, and God's Redemption. Particularly pay attention to how God says he will redeem his people. Exodus 6:2 through 7:

"And God spake unto Moses, and said unto him, I am the LORD; and I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty, but by my name JEHOVAH was I not known to them. And I have also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their pilgrimage, wherein they were strangers. And I have also heard the groaning of the children of Israel, whom the Egyptians keep in bondage; and I have remembered my covenant. Wherefore say unto the children of Israel, I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great judgments; and I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God: and ye shall know that I am the LORD your God, which bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians."

Well, that's a longer passage for our lesson, but it's a very clear testimony of these important truths. Notice God's transcendence—"by my name JEHOVAH." God's covenant—"I have also

established my covenant with them,” later, “I have remembered my covenant.” But now, God’s redemption—“I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great judgments.” And then he says, “I will take you to me for a people.” Instead of being, as it were, under the bondage to Egypt, “I’ll redeem you, I’ll bring you out, and you will be my people.”

Well, God redeemed his enslaved people from the cruel bondage they suffered under Pharaoh’s abusive control, and he did so by great judgments. Do you remember them? You can read of them throughout the early portion of the book of Exodus. They were the plagues that he brought on Egypt. The last and the culminating plague, was, of course, the death of the firstborn. And you ought to remember what God did for his people when he brought that plague upon the land—it’s when he established the passover. You can read of this in Exodus 12, but you probably know the main parts already. Each household was kill a lamb, and put its blood on the doorway to their home. And God says, in Exodus 12, verse 23, “The LORD will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when he seeth the blood upon the lintel, and on the two side posts, the LORD will pass over the door, and will not suffer the destroyer to come in unto your houses to smite you.”

Now, why do we focus on this? It’s because, when God says, “I delivered thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage,” he’s actually pointing us back to this historical even. But this is also significant for us today, because we find that the passover—which was that culminating act of redeeming and delivering his people from this bondage—the passover ultimately points to the Lord Jesus Christ. The passover was a shadow, it was a type, it was an anticipation of Christ to come. You can see what John the Baptist said, when he saw Jesus, and he cried out, “Behold, the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world.” Jesus is the Lamb God provided to address the sins of his people throughout the world. His blood redeems them. In Galatians 1, verse 4, Paul tells us briefly why Christ gave himself for us. He says, “Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father.” You see, Christ’s work redeems from the bondage of the evil world. It delivers those who trust in him.

The link between the passover and Jesus Christ is not something we make up. The Scripture explicitly identifies it. Paul writes of it in 1 Corinthians 5, and verse 7, when he exhorts the Christians to “Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us.” Well, it’s true that believers today do not experience the historical passover that’s recorded in the book of Exodus in the Old Testament, but it’s also true, and ought to be remembered, that we do have, with all believers of all ages the reality to which the Old Testament event pointed. The events of the Old Testament were pointing to, preparing for, and anticipating the fullest deliverance in and by Christ Jesus, and the shedding of his blood upon the cross. This means that as we look back to what Christ did for us, we too enjoy the benefit of being delivered out of the house of bondage. In other words, the preface to the Ten Commandments points us today to the redeeming work of that Mediator, Jesus Christ. And it does so by remembering that historical Old Testament event that points to that deliverance that would be wrought by Christ.

Well this helps us understand the relevance of the preface to the Ten Commandments. When God redeems a people, when he forgives them of their sins, and he purchases them unto himself, it doesn’t mean that they’re now delivered to do whatever they want. Rather, he’s purchased them that they would be his people. He makes them his. He purchases them unto himself, which is, of course, what we find throughout the Bible. Notice how Paul expressed this, as one example, in 1 Corinthians 6, verse 20: “For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s.” God has purchased us by the blood of his Son Jesus Christ. Which

means we're no longer our own. Therefore, we are to serve the Lord with our body and soul, for all that we are now belongs to him. Peter writes the same thing in 1 Peter 1, verses 18 and 19: "Ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot." You can hear Peter pointing to the passover, and saying, "Christ, our passover, has purchased us, and redeemed us to God.

You see then, the preface is telling us that God's transcendence, his covenantal relationship, and his gracious redemption all unite and call us to obey him. "Because God is the Lord, and our God, and Redeemer, therefore we are bound to keep all his commandments." This grace does not remove from us the call we have to obey him. It strengthens that demand, and gives us encouragement to obey him.

Unfortunately, not everyone realizes this today. They think that God's grace and kindness removes any reason for obedience. It's true certainly that God's grace removes any attempt that we would have to obey in order to gain his salvation. Christ alone fulfills the law that we may be accepted with God. However, God's grace does not remove our responsibility to obey him, and to obey him in love. Quite the opposite—his goodness and kindness, and his love, and his grace, and his redemption all join together and cry out, "Obey me." Christ himself said, "If you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). But why is it that believers love him? John writes, in 1 John 4, "We love him because he first loved us." When we know God's love to us, it leads us to obey him. If we love him we will keep his commandments. Well, this is the message then of the preface. God shows us his goodness and love, and therefore, because of his great glory, because of his covenant, because of his redemption, let us obey him.

And we'll simply close with this—two important applications flow from this preface. The first is, there is no true obedience to God without a knowledge of his transcendence, and covenant, and redemption. Now if you're trying to obey God's law without these, you must look again, and consider your in need to embrace this covenant and trust in Christ alone for your redemption. Only then will you be led truly to obey.

And the second is this—if you are trusting in Christ, if you have been redeemed by his blood, oh, dear believer, rejoice in the Lord for his mercy, and consider well his love. And then give yourself to that loving and glad obedience which you owe to him, obeying his will revealed in the Scriptures, and as stated here in these Ten Commandments.