

OPENING CONSIDERATIONS

PREFACE

Any study of the Old Testament scriptures should begin with the understanding that we today hold a Western Worldview while the ancient Hebrews saw things through an Eastern lens. That is to say that our own cultural and social biases shape the way we look at things. In the same way, the Hebrews of old held their own set of cultural and social understandings based on the world in which they lived. Ultimately, to grasp the message of any Old Testament text, we must begin by putting on an ancient mindset so that we can accurately interpret the Scripture so that we can appropriately apply the inherent principles.

The fact that we have so many English translations today points to the difficulty in fully communicating all that God has to say to us through the Old Testament. Therefore, we must research Biblical backgrounds and the work of Hebrew scholars to even scratch the surface of the incomprehensible mind of God. The responsible student of the Bible must set aside the idea of what the Bible means to them and carefully pour over the Word to determine what God has said to us all.

We often read texts of any sort that make us think of something altogether different. Yet, we cannot approach God's word in this manner. God has inspired the writer's of the Bible with deliberate intent and nuance. We must first discover the intended meaning before we explore personal application or insight. Yes, God, knowing our innermost thoughts, may use a particular text to speak to us in a certain way, but that does not necessarily equate to a specific and accurate interpretation of a Biblical text. If we truly hold to the primacy of God's Word, "what the text means to me" holds little importance until we have first determined the essential meaning. Just as in any conversation, we must intently listen for what the speaker means by what they say. Otherwise, we might jump to the wrong conclusions.

So, let us begin this journey, remembering to start with a bit of historical and cultural background, followed by careful interpretive work before jumping into the many ways that God may lead us to individually apply His Word. At this point in each of our lives,

certain verses will speak louder than others as God directs, but the message is timeless, to us all and for us all. The riches and the depths of Scripture provide many facets and often reflect a myriad of meaning. This is why we can spend a lifetime as a believer revisiting His Word with new discoveries every time we open it.

AN INTRODUCTION

Theologians refer to the Ten Commandments as the Decalogue. This term holds rich meaning and importance. It also provides us with a few intentional principles that should help guide us in our study.

First, the term, Decalogue, derives from two Greek words, dexa (deca) which mean ten, and logos, meaning word. Literally, the term translates to English as “ten words.” Several thoughts come to mind in contemplating the meaning behind this ascription.

Think back to when you learned to count. After starting with single digits, you soon learned to count in units of ten. In application here, it helps us think of the Ten Commandments as a complete unit. Though we may meditate on individual commands, we must understand them in the context of the whole. They ultimately come together as a whole and systematically interweave to provide a full prescription for blessed living. The ancient Hebrews saw things very holistically and simply as opposed to our westerly, dichotomized approaches. Though the text suggests some manner of organization, the commands must ultimately be understood as a whole.

As such, the Bible texts often use symbolism to express ideas and strengthen concepts. For example, when God commands us to love Him with all of our hearts, soul, mind, and strength, He is not suggesting that we have four separate compartments with which to love Him. Nor is it four different ways to love Him. Rather, the number four represents the whole in the same way we have four directions, North, South, East, and West. The literary symbolism in Eastern thought conveys a focus on the whole, which as we say is greater than the sum of the parts. Therefore, the command is to love God completely in every way possible. As to the Ten Commandments, the number ten symbolizes a complete unit, thus inferring the totality of our devotion to God.

Furthermore, we should not relegate the Decalogue to mere suggestions. We rightly see them as commandments. We cannot

pick and choose which to follow and which to ignore, even though each of us may find some easy to obey and others more challenging.

Second, and of no less importance than the first, these are the “ten words” of God. Chapter 20 of Exodus begins by saying that “God spoke ALL these words...” Though these verses, even in the original, comprise of many more than ten words, they are the Word of God and should be treated with reverence and some manor of trepidation. In a sense, these Ten Commandments are instructions that promise generational blessing when faithfully followed (Exodus 20:6). Thus, we take them very seriously and intentionally.

Many translations render the commandments in things that we “SHALL not do.” This rendering suggests that the commandments are something that we should follow. But, notice the negation, “NOT.” In the original Hebrew text, apart from the command to “keep the Sabbath” and “honor your father and mother” all other commands begin with “NOT.” For this reason, some translations choose to start each command with the negative, “DO NOT”. The latter rendering better relates to Hebrew syntax, and it reminds us Western thinkers that eight of these commands are actually prohibitions, that is, strong warnings. While some people find these commands constricting to their desire for independence, to the contrary, a healthy understanding of the commands frees us to live in faith without fear as we rightly relate to God.

Years ago, I had the privilege of sitting under the tutelage of Dr. Samuel Y.C. Tang, professor of Old Testament at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary. He explained the prohibitive nature of the Decalogue as a literary emphatic form that strengthened the critical importance of DOING the right things. In a sense, he asserted that the “do nots” are actually “double do-s.” Simply put, “You shall have no other gods before me” is a command to put God in a place of sole primacy. Put God first above all.

In application, instead of looking at various areas of our lives where we have given too much importance, we should focus on loving and worshipping God all the more. Let me illustrate the positive power of the negation (at the risk of a grammatical no-no): Do not look to NOT do the negative, rather look to DO the positive. Notice the grammatical simplicity of the positive statement. In the same way, our lives simplify and fill with blessing when we DO the right thing. Trying to not do something often

results in a lot of wasted energy and frustration. In the end, we all need to learn to live intentionally and with purpose, rather than spiraling in a cycle of worry about what not to do.

You might think this is just a game of semantics. But, this is so much more. This mindset turns our attention not to our behavior but to God's character, a loving God who seeks an intimate and vibrant relationship that leads to abundant living. A focus on God's character leads us to right action out of love because we so much better comprehend His immense love for us. This view takes the focus off of us and rightly places it on God, wholly and completely.

FINAL THOUGHTS BEFORE WE BEGIN

In closing, I would like to return to my opening comments about historical background. In thinking about an interpretive principle when studying the Bible (or any text for that matter), I hold to an interpretive literary formula: context + purpose = meaning. If we approach Biblical texts from the original historical context and consider the purpose, our study will lead us to rich meaning. As discussed earlier, in the Decalogue, God purposes to direct us in the way of life everlasting and abundant living through these commands. But, let us turn our attention back to the Hebrew's historical context.

During this time in history, God had just delivered the Hebrews from bondage under Pharaoh, and He was leading them into the "Promised Land." Sequentially, God's great deliverance preceded His commands. Thus, God had already performed the work of redemption. He never intended for these commands to infer a new order of slavery. Rather, the "double do-s" would simply insure that His people could enjoy all the benefits of living in relationship with Him that God originally purposed prior to the Fall.

Likewise, for us today, we live post-deliverance. At Golgotha on the cross, Christ already paid our debt to free us from a life of oppressive sin. When we enter into a covenant relationship with Christ, we come to live in a state of grace. These "double do-s" guide us in maintaining a healthful and joy-filled relationship with Christ, fully entering into our own proverbial Promised Land with all its benefits.

Remember, God's nature and His love is unchanging. If we feel distant, it is because we moved. Yet, "He will never leave [us]

nor forsake [us]" (Deut. 31:6). He is the "Lord, your God," a very personal and near God (Ex. 20:2). I pray that you will find this study in the Ten Commandments one that will enrich your walk with God and help you experience, to the full, God's great deliverance.

Michael W. J. Kopulos M.Div