

(5b) THE PHOENICIANS: Sin, Sex & Sinai

Child abuse, domestic and political violence, rampant suicide, broken homes and marriages, political scandals, muggings, rape and Rambo-type shootings of innocent people on streets and in schools. What's gone wrong with society and can anything be done to turn things around?

Sir Arnold Toynbee, celebrated English historian, in his *A Study of History* painstakingly analyzes the histories of 21 different world civilizations including Ancient Rome, Babylon, imperial China, Greece and the Aztecs. In volume 5 he writes on "The Disintegration of Civilizations" in which he gives six unmistakable evidences for the disintegration and collapse of a world civilization. Toynbee's final characteristic and evidence for the disintegration and collapse of a civilization is that societies fall into a sense of, "*abandon*"- a state of mind that accepts antinomianism (Old English word for lawlessness) ...as a substitute for creativeness' (p399).

Little wonder that in Revelation we discover an urgent message for earth's last generation poised on the brink of global collapse – "*Fear God...for the hour of his judgment has come*" (Revelation 14:7). There is a matching verse to this angel's cry in Ecclesiastes 12:13. "*The conclusion of the whole matter,*" which is also "*the whole duty of man and woman,*" is to "*Fear God and keep his commandments!*" The word fear means to "take God seriously." How very appropriate for our planet today, which has laughed him off the comedy stage as "the Old Man upstairs" or the "good buddy next door." We don't have to be afraid of God – but to be in awe of this majestic being, who genuinely cares for us. "*Fear God and give glory to him,*" shouts the angel - "*Fear God and keep his commandments,*" writes Solomon. And therein lies the perfect antidote to Toynbee's final indicator of lawlessness.

But what commandments are we talking about? The book of Revelation has the answer: "*The nations were angry, and your wrath has come, and the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that you should reward Your servants the prophets and the saints, and those who fear your name...Then the temple of God was opened in heaven, and the ark of his covenant was seen in his temple...*" (Revelation 11:18,19). When Moses led Israel through the Sinai Desert notice what God did: "*So he declared to you his covenant which he commanded you to perform, the Ten Commandments; and he wrote them on two tablets of stone*" (Deuteronomy 4:13). The 10 Commandments are called God's Covenant, which Moses was told to place in the ark or box: "*And I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke; and you shall put them in the ark*" (Deuteronomy 10:2). The ark with these

commandments then went into the temple. Because the 10 commandments or covenant were placed inside the ark, it was called the *Ark of the Covenant*. Thus in earth's final crisis, God is drawing the world's attention to his commandments But why is this? What is their purpose?

Firstly, the Ten Commandments are the standard of judgment: "*So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. For he who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder'*" (James 2:12,11). Quite clearly the law of liberty used in the judgment is the Ten Commandments for he quotes from them.

The second purpose for the Ten Commandments is to define and protect our most important relationships. These commandments given by God to Moses are recorded in Exodus 20. The 1st commandment tells us to make our relationship with God our number one priority in life (Exodus 20:3). This commandment reveals God as a being who quests for relationships. Lovers and friends know that no relationship can ever deepen if it has to play second fiddle to someone else.

The 2nd commandment calls humans to turn aside from worship of idols (Exodus 20:4-6). God calls himself a "jealous" God, using very familiar human language describing the passion of life's most intimate relationships. God longs for an intimate relationship with each of us on planet earth tonight. Sir Arnold J. Toynbee noted idolatry as "*one of the causes of those breakdowns from which the disintegrations of civilizations follow.*" – Toynbee, *A Study of History*, p412.

The 3rd command calls us not to misuse God's name (Exodus 20:7). Friends always protect each other's good name in public and in private. The lawgiver very obviously longs to protect his relationship with his children.

In the 4th commandment is an incredible relational portrait of God, where he calls us to take quality time out (a whole day) with him (Exodus 20:8-11). Time together is what is needed to develop any friendship. God says, "My friendship with you is so important I am giving you one day every week to celebrate our relationship together."

These first four commandments protect our relationship with God. The last six define, protect and nurture our relationships with other humans – family, friends, neighbours and strangers. But notice God begins the commandments by prioritizing and protecting our relationships with him because this then leads us to protect our relationships with others. He is saying: "Let me be your first relationship – then every other relationship will last!"

The 5th commandment aims at protecting the most basic relationship on earth - that of a child with its parent or parents. However the sad reality of our disintegrating civilization is that our society seems bent on destroying itself through its moral abandonment of the home and family unit. To even speak the words – divorce, latchkey kids, single parent homes, and deadbeat dads – is to open within us all, emotions of pain, guilt and sorrow.

The 6th commandment protects human life – life is sacred (Exodus 20:13). How safe can society remain in the face of growing wanton disregard of human life everywhere on this planet?

The 7th commandment deals with our sexual relationships (Exodus 20:14). There is no more intimate relationship than that between a husband and a wife. God isn't being a killjoy – he's protecting our lives from a range of sexually transmitted diseases, which are on the increase today. Why are they increasing? Because today we initiate sexual intercourse early, marry late, and divorce easily. When they're not married, and sometimes when they are, many have several sexual partners. When God declares, "You shall not commit adultery," it is out of love for his children and his longing to protect our ultimate, lifelong happiness, security and peace of mind.

The 8th commandment deals with our material relationships (Exodus 20:15). There is no more practical relationship human beings can share than to honour each other's possessions.

The 9th commandment protects human integrity and trust (Exodus 20:16). Nothing stabilizes relationships more than trust. White lie, black lie – it doesn't matter – the answer is "NO! Don't lie."

The 10th commandment deals with our relationship with ourselves - our internal relationships (Exodus 20:17). God wants us to be content within ourselves.

There are the 10 commandments – the one moral code on earth that could halt the breakdown and reverse the collapse of this civilization. James 2:8-12 describes the 10 commandments as a law, which preserves our freedom. No wonder Billy Graham said, "*The Ten Commandments are never out of date.*" This law code is so relevant and so desperately needed today.

As we saw earlier, Sir Arnold J Toynbee found that civilizations breakdown when lawlessness prevails in a society. Israel is a classic example of that. Their Canaanite neighbours practiced temple prostitution and child sacrifice in the worship of their gods. Evidence for such lawlessness was discovered at Ras Shamrah in Syria and at Carthage, a Phoenician Canaanite colony. Sadly Israel followed their example and as a result their civilization was destroyed by the Assyrians and Babylonians. Daniel the prophet spelt this out clearly (Daniel 9:5-12).

The third purpose of the Ten Commandments is to reveal our sin or wrong doing: "*Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin*" (Romans 3:20).

"What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, 'You shall not covet'" (Romans 7:7).

But what is sin? "*Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness*" (1 John 3:4). Since the commandments help us to preserve our most important relationships, therefore at its heart, sin is about breaking relationships. When we sin someone always gets hurt. Which is exactly Isaiah's relational portrait of sin: "*But your iniquities have separated you from your God...For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue has muttered perversity*" (Isaiah 59:2,3). When we sin we break our relationship with God. Which is why Jesus said: "*If you love Me, keep My commandments*" (John 14:15).

But while the commandments reveal our sin, they can't remove it: "*Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight...*" (Romans 3:20). Only our acceptance of the gospel can forgive our sin, restore our broken relationship with God; and empower us with love to obey his commandments: "*For this is the covenant that I will make...says the Lord: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people...For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more*" (Hebrews 8:10-12). Thus God's amazing grace rather than abolishing his commandments exalts them: "*Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law*" (Romans 3:31). Which is why John saw that Jesus' friends, just before He returns, are the very ones who obey God's commandments: "*Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus*" (Revelation 14:12).

At the heart of God's law for us, is his love for us. Which is why, when humans broke God's law and opened the flood gates to suffering and death under the reign of Satan, the great lawgiver himself died on an old rugged cross in order both to forgive and to enable us to order our lives by these great moral principles of love (Hebrews 8:10-12). Why would any of us want to spurn such love by deliberately trampling on both God's relational portrait, as seen in these great moral principles, and the very means to preserve our most important relationships in life? If you have not yet done so, why not ask God right now to forgive your sin – your breaking of His ten commandments, and to write them on your heart and mind?

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