

**+ Exodus 20:1-17 + The Foolishness of the Cross: The Cross Means Living to Serve +  
+ 3rd Sunday in Lent + 28 February 2016 +**

What should a Christian's life look like? Some would say that it has to look perfect. Sure you should go to church, read the Bible, use clean language, and dress appropriately, but you also need to have the perfect marriage, be the perfect parent, be the perfect child, sibling, student, employee. You can't ever mess up or have a sinful weakness or make a big mistake. You can't even have a passing hurtful, lustful, or greedy thought, let alone utter a hurtful word. Your life has to be impossibly perfect, but there's one big problem with that view of the Christian life. Every one of us sins.

So what should a Christian's life look like? Some would say that you have the freedom to think, say, or do whatever you want short of actually sinning—and even that can be a gray line. After all, didn't we just hear in Romans 8:(1) that **“there is...no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”**? As long as you can call yourself a Christian, you're free to do whatever you want, because you've been set free! Do you want to do or say something that will run roughshod over the tender conscience of another person? Go for it! You're free! Do you want to push the boundaries of what's considered proper Christian behavior? Go for it! You're free! God will forgive your sins, so do what you want!

...But that's not what a Christian's life is supposed to look like either. In fact, if you're looking for a “Get-Out-of-Hell-Free” card from God so you can sin as you want, you're going to be greatly disappointed. Paul writes, **“The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.”** (Romans 8:6-7) Using God's grace as a license to do whatever your sinful mind wants is nothing more than rejecting God.

So what should a Christian's life look like? What does God want your life to look like? He wants to see you living to serve him and others in love. He wants you to be obedient to his holy will—not by force, but out of love.

How can you possibly do that? How can you possibly obey his holy will and live to serve him and others out of love? After all, as I mentioned before, **“The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.”** Obedience and loving service don't come naturally. Rather inside of you is a sinful mind that only wants to serve itself and none other.

Our holy God knows how hostile, how stubborn, how foolishly independent, yet blindly enslaved our sinful minds can be. He has witnessed their hostility and stubbornness and foolishness and blind slavery for centuries ever since our first parents willingly disobeyed him in the Garden of Eden. In creating Adam and Eve, the Lord put his holy will in their hearts and minds and hands. He gave them one single command—don't eat any fruit from that one tree. Eat from all the others, but not that one. In doing so, you will demonstrate your loving, willing service to me and we will be at peace. But they failed. They doubted God's promise and broke his law.

Centuries later, the Lord of grace rescued their descendants—the Israelites—from 400 years of hard slavery in Egypt. To do so, the Lord raised up a mighty prophet named Moses to lead his people out of bondage. The Lord brought the mighty Egyptian empire to its knees with 10 supernatural plagues and forced Pharaoh to set his people free.

The Lord wasn't done though. He parted the waters of the Red Sea so 2,000,000 Israelites could cross on dry ground while he defeated the Egyptian army. The time had come to re-establish his covenant agreement with the Israelites—through whom the promised Savior would eventually come—by recording his holy Law in stone.

That's what we have before us in Exodus 20—God's holy Law, the 10 Commandments. Now God's holy Law is written on every human heart, but it had to be written in stone because every human heart is selfishly sinful, hostile to obedience, and stubbornly hard as rock towards God.

The Lord wanted his people to realize that he is both holy God and the Lord of grace who saves his people. So he told them, **“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me...for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.”**

This Law wasn't just for the Israelites, but for all people. As the only true God, as the holy God who acts to save, he alone deserves our highest priority, our love, our obedience. No other god, no other thing, no other

person deserves that service. God wants you to not only love him, but to love his Word, so he commands, **“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God”** and **“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.”**

God wants you to not only love him, but to love your **“neighbor,”** basically anyone whom God puts in your path to serve. So he commands you to give loving respect to the authorities he places over you (**“Honor your father and mother...”**). He commands you to show love for his gift of life (**“You shall not murder”**), for his gift of marriage and his gift of sex within marriage (**“You shall not commit adultery”**), for his gift of earthly possessions (**“You shall not steal”**), and for his gift of a good reputation (**“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor”**)—all in love for those whom God gives you the opportunity to serve. With these 10 Commandments, God provides a picture of what the believer’s life is to look like, but these aren’t suggestions. They are commands. They’re not optional. That’s why there’s still that big elephant in the room. Everyone still sins.

Living a perfect life is impossible on this side of heaven, because you still have a hostile, sinful mind stubbornly refusing to do God’s will and foolishly incapable of doing so. At the same time, your sinful nature wants you to think that trying to live such a willing, obedient life in service to God is foolish. Why not follow the whims and cravings of your sinful nature and enjoy life rather than allow yourself to be crushed by God’s impossible expectations?

On the one hand, you’ll fall short and prove to be a hypocrite. On the other, your plunge into the filth of sin will only lead to despair. Either option ends in condemnation in hell. Yet the Lord of grace provides a third option. Remember that God isn’t just a holy God, but also the Lord of grace who acts on your behalf to save you from the slavery of sin.

Recall what we heard in Romans 8:(2-4a), **“For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us...”** God in his mercy sent his Son Jesus to take your place beneath his own holy Law as substitute and sacrifice.

Now for those of you who have been in my youth confirmation classes, you can probably answer this question in your sleep. How did Jesus save you from your sins against God’s commandments? He did two things. He lived a perfect life in your place and gave his life to pay for your sins. Jesus put it best this way: **“...The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”** (Matthew 20:28) Jesus lived to be your servant, to be your sacrifice that you might be set free to willingly serve.

Let’s walk back through those commandments and see what Jesus did for you. **“You shall have no other gods before me.”** Jesus always made his heavenly Father’s will his highest priority. Unlike you and me, Jesus never made anything or anyone else more important in his life. In fact, he submitted to his Father’s will even when it meant suffering and death for our sakes.

God’s saving name is more than his titles, but Jesus never used that name to lie or deceive, but always used that name for prayer and praise and thanksgiving. He also always gave God’s Word his highest priority. If you’re not sure how serious Jesus is about God’s Word and God’s house, just read John 2:(13-22) again and see how Jesus cleared the temple in a rather violent way to restore it to its primary purpose as the place where God meets his people.

Jesus always willingly obeyed his parents, paid his taxes, and submitted to God’s authorities in the civil government and the church even when it meant he would lose his life—all so he could be your substitute! Jesus defended life by healing the hurting, helping the struggling, speaking up for the weak and powerless, and even raising the dead. Jesus defended marriage and the boundaries it places around God’s gift of sex. His thoughts and words were always pure, even as he called hate and lust and greed what they are—sin.

Jesus gave thanks for all God’s gifts and taught us to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness letting him take care of our needs. Jesus allowed himself to be slandered, but never slandered the reputation of his enemies. Like the Samaritan who helped the beaten stranger in the ditch, Jesus always sought to help whomever was in his path to serve—including us.

Jesus did all that, but most importantly, he knew that a sacrifice had to be made to pay for the sins, the guilt, the self-serving ways of you and me and all people. So as the Lamb of God, as the scapegoat carrying our blame, our guilt, our hostility, our foolishness, Jesus went to the cross and paid for it all. His blood was shed

that you might be cleansed in God's sight. His life was given that you might have life eternal. He allowed himself to endure the pains of hell that you might have the glorious comfort of heaven.

So with his death on the cross, with that final cry of ***"It is finished"*** (John 19:30), Jesus finished his work for you. He shattered your chains and set you free—not to a life of sinful license, but a life of loving obedience. Jesus raised you from the dark death of sinful hostility to a life of loving service to your God.

Now you can live the Christian life that God expects. By faith in Christ, you can live to serve him and others. It will never be perfect this side of heaven, which is why you constantly need Jesus to forgive and heal and restore you, but it's not optional either. Now you live to serve in love because Christ lived to serve you out of love. May your life be full of joyful, willing, obedient service to the God who lives, who loves, and who saves us all. Amen.