



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## Of Course There Are Conditions

Exodus 19; Ephesians 2, 4

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### *Introduction*

1. We were on opposite sides of the question and the directness of the exchange was mitigated by the fact that we were friends who had enjoyed several hours of meaningful discussion about the Bible and our shared faith.
  - a. Background: a mutual friend had come to me with a concern about a view expressed by one of our teaching colleagues. Jesus had done away with commands, he assured her. All we needed to do was love. She knew he had grown up in churches of Christ and so she thought surely he would affirm the necessity of baptism. But no, he said, baptism had a place, but was not a requirement. He reiterated: only love need concern us.
  - b. I don't recall whether my friend and I were talking about that previous conversation, but I suspect it was in the mix somewhere. But the subject was the same. He, too, affirmed that only love mattered. And then he quoted Scripture to support his view, the words of Jesus himself (John 13:34-35; cf. 15:9, 12).
2. As we stood on the parking lot that morning, I replied by also quoting Scripture—from the same context—citing verses that connect love and commandments (plural) that Jesus said were his followers are to keep as *proof* of their love (John 14:15, 21, 23, 24; 15:10).
3. We were wrestling with a longstanding question. What do we do about commands and love? About works and grace? These questions, addressed in many exchanges like that between my friend and me, continue to trouble us.
  - a. On the one hand, the Bible is clear that we are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9) and that “if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace” (Romans 11:6). I will “go the wall” over those texts.
  - b. But there are also passages like those already cited from John that tell us that commands and obedience make a difference with respect to whether we please God and can expect eternal salvation. While I think my friend had given scant attention to the verses I cited from John 14, I never thought he believed it was acceptable to live any way one chooses.
  - c. Two sets of clear passages; two important teachings. Yet there remains so much tension—not just between well intentioned brothers and sisters, but also within our hearts. Is it possible to reconcile these two views and properly understand how they relate to each other?

4. I have long been persuaded, and am more convinced the more I study it, that there is and that a key to that understanding is found in the biblical idea of covenant.
  - a. We have already seen that “biblical religion is covenant religion” (Everett Ferguson), that covenant is the theme that pulls the entire Bible story together; it explains Israel’s longing and the people’s joy at being told Messiah had come (cf. Luke 1:68-75; Heb 8-10).
  - b. We have also seen that the covenant issue directly affects us, for we are spiritual heirs of the covenant promise made to Abraham, satisfied in the life of Jesus who gives all who accept him through faith the blessings that come with salvation (Gal 3:8-29).
  - c. We also saw that covenant was what Jesus was about; he was the one who introduced the idea of a new covenant in connection with his sacrifice to bring about our salvation (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 2 Corinthians 3; Hebrews 8-10; cf. Jeremiah 31:31-34).
5. What remains is for us to talk about how a covenant works. When we see that, we’ll have a better understanding of God’s grace even as we see that the conditions of obedience to his commands are part of a covenant’s nature.

### *Body*

- I. The Basis of Comparison: Covenant Conditions at Sinai.
  - A. Since the frame of reference for the new covenant is the Sinai covenant (2 Corinthians 3; Hebrews 8-10), we need to study the shadow before we study the substance (see Hebrews 8:5; 10:1 in context).
  - B. We see a summary view of the process in Exodus 19:1-8.
    1. The basis for the covenant was what God had done in delivering Israel from slavery and amounted to a promise to make Israel his special people (vv 1-6).
    2. The people were expected to obey his commands (v 5) and, as they ratified the covenant, they declared they would (vv 7-8).
  - C. What we learn upon closer study
    1. What we see is in keeping with what typically happened in the ancient Near East when a king would offer a covenant (treaty) to a subject people.
      - a) Those covenants “emphasized the benevolent action of the suzerain and the dependence of the continuation of the relationship on his graciousness.”<sup>1</sup>
      - b) This point is emphasized in the restatement of the covenant in Deuteronomy 7:7-9.
      - c) Notice that, in the nature of the covenant, the obedience of the subject people was an expected *response* to the grace of the King.
    2. The connection between grace and response, along with the nature of the response, is seen more clearly when we look at the Ten Words in Exodus 20:1-17.
      - a) The text begins with a brief repetition of the basis for the covenant (1-2).
      - b) Notice what the text actually *says*, beginning in v 3.
        - (1) The verbs are not imperatives, but “simple future indicative verbs that indicate the future action that is the expected consequence of the preceding prologue.”<sup>2</sup>
        - (2) Put another way, the commands are stipulations which flesh out specifics about God’s nature and will, the ultimate concern of the community as they enact the principles upon which God directs their lives (ABD, 1184).

<sup>1</sup> Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today*, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> George E. Mendenhall & Gary A. Herion, “Covenant,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ABD) 1:1184.

3. The following ideas are vital for understanding covenant.
  - a) Although many have emphasized otherwise, the commands from the very beginning were put in terms of a relationship based on and responding to God's *grace*.
  - b) Having said that, "Obedience is connected with the covenant as the faithful response of those to whom the gracious promises are given. The Sinai covenant was a conditional covenant" (Ferguson, 4).
  - c) By definition, a covenant had to incorporate both these ideas.

## II. Our Situation: Covenant Conditions in Christ.

- A. An example of how this works out in Christ's new covenant is found in a letter not typically known for its covenant emphasis, but which in fact turns on the question of who is included in the covenant community (ἐκκλησία, *ekklēsia*).<sup>3</sup>
  1. Notice Ephesians 2:11-13 where we read that Gentiles may now be included in a covenant commonwealth with the expectation of receiving the full benefit of the promises in question (see esp v 12).
  2. What makes this possible is the [covenant] blood of Christ (v 13; cf. Matthew 26:28; et. al.).
- B. As at Sinai, the basis for the covenant is the graciousness of the King.
  1. Chapters 1-3 explain this in more detail.
  2. But the point is focused in 2:1-10.
    - a) There is deliverance from slavery (vv 1-5).
    - b) There is the conferring of benefits and blessings (vv 6-7).
    - c) There is the expectation of a response of faith (vv 8-10).
- C. The form is different from the Ten Words of Exodus 20, but there is also the expectation of an obedient response that reflects God's will and the ultimate concern of the community as we enact the principles upon which God directs our lives.
  1. Notice the word "therefore" in 4:1 and the transition in that verse from the theology of grace to the life that responds in a manner that reflects the essence of God.
  2. The *ekklēsia* is a community that is called to maintain oneness because that is the nature and priority of the King who created it (4:1-16).
  3. It is a community called to live differently from the surrounding world because that reflects the character of Christ whom the community is expected to learn (4:17-24; note especially v 20).
    - a) Notice that, in keeping with Jeremiah's prediction (31:31-34), the principles are internalized; external behaviors arise from inner character (4:17-19, 21-24).
    - b) Notice also how the specific application issues specified in 4:25-6:9 reflect concern for showing the character of God (cf. 4:32; 5:1-2)<sup>4</sup> and loyalty to/strengthening of the community (cf. 4:25-28, 32).
    - c) Conditions having to do with morality (5:3-20) and household codes (5:21-6:9) reflect these twin emphases.

<sup>3</sup> When we understand the basic meaning and nature of *ekklēsia* as community, and remember that covenants as known in the Near East generally and in Scripture in particular were always communal in nature, we expect to see a covenant focus in a writing on the church. Although Paul only uses the word once, the theology and applications he makes for living in Christ's *ekklēsia* fit the covenant model.

<sup>4</sup> 4:32 is of particular interest since the word translated "forgive" is χαρίζομαι (*charizomai*), the verb form of the word translated "grace" (χάρις, *charis*) throughout the letter (Ephesians 1:2, 6-7; 2:5, 7-8; 3:2, 7-8; 4:7, 29; 6:24).

D. The new covenant thus works like the old covenant.

1. The same things we noted about the Sinai covenant apply to the new covenant.
  - a) The commands from the very beginning were put in terms of a relationship based on and responding to God's grace.
  - b) Having said that, "Obedience is connected with the covenant as the faithful response of those to whom the gracious promises are given. The . . . covenant was a conditional covenant" (Ferguson, 4).
2. There is one significant difference between the new covenant and the old that needs to be emphasized: entrance into the new covenant community is a voluntary choice.
  - a) Membership in the Sinai covenant community was generally based on the condition of being born an Israelite; those so born had no choice in the matter.<sup>5</sup>
  - b) Members of the new covenant community are also born into the community, but it is a spiritual birth that one chooses, accepting the conditions God established for entrance (see Ephesians 4:4-6; 1 Peter 1:22-2:3).

*Conclusion*

1. Everett Ferguson has written: "Response to what God has done in Christ does not achieve salvation or establish the relationship with God (although disobedience, which is an expression of a lack of gratitude, as with Israel, deprives one of the blessings). Entering into the new covenant makes one a child of Abraham, a servant of the king, and a part of the Israel of God" (Ferguson, 18).
2. Biblical religion—*Christian* religion—is covenant religion. Are there conditions for receiving the blessings of that covenant? Of course. That's the way covenants work. But the conditions are our response, offered in gratitude to the God who makes a way for us when we had lost the way for ourselves.
3. As he has for centuries, God stands ready to save us by grace, through [the response of] faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). He desires that everyone receive that salvation. Have you accepted his grace?

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<sup>5</sup> An exception that illustrates the stipulations idea is that of the Jewish proselyte. Conditions had to be met before potential converts were accepted into the covenant community. Godfearers, Gentiles who participated in some Jewish rites, also were allowed to do so only under certain conditions. That godfearers were not proselytes further illustrates the point.