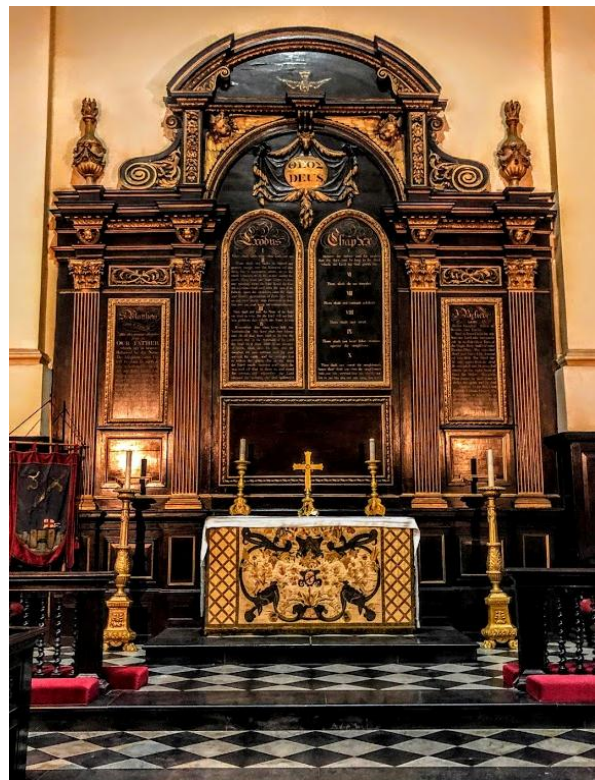


On the Commandments of God

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Deuteronomy 30.15-end

It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that God's 'commandments' are a legalistic set of rules and regulations which must be obeyed at all costs – that they are something oppressive and controlling. Perhaps this is the way in which they have often been taught; certainly it seems that this is often how they have been *experienced* – as a kind of straitjacket which thwarts our freedom of action and possibly even of thought. Much of the teaching of St Paul is designed to help us overcome this very negative experience of 'God's commandments' – it is why he writes so often and at such length about *grace* being the foundation stone of our life before God, rather than adherence simply to 'the Law'. Hence he can write about the 'glorious liberty of the children of God' (Romans 8.21). St Paul believes that God's intention is that we should be free from burdens and oppression, not that we should be



entrapped; and if the effect of our perception of the Law – he means the *Torah* – is itself burdensome and oppressive, then we have got something wrong. Something similar is going on in Jesus' own criticism of the kind of Pharisaism which *places burdens* on people rather than *setting them free*.

The text this week from Deuteronomy – itself part of the *Torah* – helps us make sense of what Jesus and St Paul are really trying to say. God has set before his people *two possibilities* – one which he describes as 'life and prosperity', the other of which is 'death and adversity'. The former way is that of the 'commandments, decrees and ordinances' of God, and it leads to *blessing*; the other is blind and deaf and led astray by 'idols' – and this leads to *perishing* and *death*. The choice is less between 'obedience' and 'disobedience', but actually something more fundamental – whether we conform to the *image and likeness of God* which has been placed within us from the beginning (Genesis 1.26-7), or we offer our obeisance to false gods (including the 'gods' of selfishness and self-aggrandizement, of coercion and control, of greed and selfish desire). Shall we conform to our *true* nature, moulded by God, or our *false* nature, controlled by self-reference and *ego*.

Here in the Book of Deuteronomy, at the very heart of the Books of the Law, God expresses this fundamental choice absolutely clearly: '*witness today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life, therefore.*' The commandments are not a burden, but a framework within which we *find God*; 'disobedience' is not simply an assertion of autonomy so much as a *turning away* from God at the profoundest level. It is this choice over the basic orientation of our whole life and destiny – *towards* God or *against* him; in tune with the image and likeness of God placed within us, or distorting it – which is what matters most of all. It is why our adherence to the commandments of God can genuinely be described as *freedom* and as *life*, and why the assertion of self-preoccupied independence from God is, instead, a kind of curse. This is the basis of Jesus' challenge against the legalism and judgementalism of the Pharisees (after all, all judgement belongs exclusively to God, not to you or to me), and it is the starting point for St Paul's focus not on Law but on grace. As we, too, conform more closely to the precepts of God, may we find them, in turn, to be life-filled and abounding in justice and mercy and peace.

The image shows the Ten Commandments behind the altar in St Martin Within Ludgate, one of Sir Christopher Wren's churches in London