

The Fear of God
Exodus | Exodo 20
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When I was a divinity student I became friends with a Jesuit priest, who was very gracious to field my questions about his life in the Roman Catholic church. This priest was actually said to be the only Jesuit living in all of Tennessee, so I'm sure that he was used to being treated as a novelty. My ignorance of his faith and tradition undoubtedly led me at times to say some very stupid and offensive things. I had always been puzzled, for example, by the Catholic tradition of priestly celibacy. One day I worked up the courage to ask him - "Like, who actually enforces that? If you act on your sexual desires as a priest, are you ultimately accountable in any meaningful way?" He smiled and replied by giving me a good schooling on Catholic teaching. "My superior is in Boston," he said, "and no one is watching me here. I suppose I'm free to hook up with whoever I want, but that wouldn't feel like integrity to me."

Children learn rules through the application of negative consequences. Keep your room clean or you can't go out and play. Even adults are kept in line by the threat of penalties that come from their supervisors at work. Show up on time or have your wages docked. We see these little systems of accountability in most every part of our lives in parenthood, in employment, whenever we buy goods or services and have expectations for their delivery. But of course we know that not all of our relationships are so transactional. And who wants to live a life so miserly and controlling that you obsessively seek a strict accounting of how other people are supposed to behave and what they owe to us.

Unfortunately too many people learn their religion this way, coming to know God only through the promise of rewards or the threat of punishment. They mistake the free and full life of faith for a legalistic code of mandates and prohibitions. Our tradition rejects the idea that the grace of God is something you can just work for or earn by doing the right thing and following the rules. But it doesn't help that the easiest phrase to remember in the whole Hebrew Bible is "thou shalt not..." They say God delivered the Ten Commandments not just on stone tablets to Moses, rendering them nonnegotiable, but also with a frightful display of thunder and smoke. Even Moses is alarmed and struggles to interpret the scene. "Do not be afraid," he says in a panic before acknowledging the exact opposite, "for God is only doing all this to put the fear of God in you."

Knowing virtually nothing about the Jesuit tradition, that's sort of how I thought my friend the priest was supposed to approach his celibacy vows: as a dreadful, daily toil to avoid guilt. Color inside the lines. Follow the rules. Do what is expected. Thou shalt not...or else. And I'm sure there is a system of support and accountability for my priestly friend. No one could make such vows without a community in which to interpret and practice those promises. If he weren't apparently living into his vows I don't doubt that his order would confront him and challenge him. But it was equally clear that no one was watching his every move. He wasn't under surveillance. He wasn't being monitored and micromanaged by his superiors. It was mostly up to him to live in a way that was true to his call. But how is he held accountable? Well, that's between him and God.

Although he may not live out his vows with perfection, it's safe to trust him to honor them because if you knew this priest there was no doubt that he knew God. This priest clearly has a deep relationship with God. And I think that's where accountability is most truly found--in a relationship where we are known. "Blest be the tie that binds," says the old hymn. Children don't obey their

parents only because the parents set the rules, but because the child knows that the parent loves them. And transactional relationships may get us the goods and services that we want, but they are every bit as momentary and fleeting as they are functional and indulgent. Those kinds of tit-for-tat negotiations characterize so much of our life and our understanding of what we owe to one another that it takes forever for the Israelites to learn that their covenant with God is not a transaction. It's a living, continuing, renewing relationship.

The most accountable places I have known spend very little time on formal modes of assessment, judgment, and evaluation. The best teachers aren't necessarily those who spill the most red ink but those who show their love for their students. The best doctors are just those who make the correct medical judgment, but those who win their patients' trust. In all of these places accountability emerges from relationships of mutuality and reciprocity. We all know that it's possible and sometimes even feels good to act without regard to what we know the other needs, but the presence of God will require us to examine ourselves. That's really the "fear of God," not fear of what God will do to me but fear that I can't look at what I see in myself. It's fear that I would let down this other whom I love. It's fear that in the privacy of my own heart where I am alone with God that I would not be true to the relationship that God has with me. That's life in covenant together. The Israelites are free to ignore the Ten Commandments. At times they knowingly, willfully do so. And they are corrected not with the fire and brimstone of judgment but with repeated reminders of their relationship. "Thou shalt not" is always preceded by the reminder of who God is to them. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt." We will always have this relationship...therefore, you will always have to live with me. It's like when your mother catches you in a lie. What hurts the worst, what motivates you to do better, is not what she says but how you feel in your heart.

So what to do with someone who just doesn't follow the rules? What about those who just do not recognize the norms that the rest of us accept? What about those who are truly shameless? How do we hold them accountable? You can drive yourself mad trying to ask that question. Cut off the microphone. Cancel the event. Call them names. Speak to the camera. Get out the vote. The frustrating truth is that our formal tools of accountability are simply deficient. We don't know what to do about behavior like that. None of us has the power to control another creature or to change their behavior. It is clear that they are unaccountable because they are living outside the covenant. Their life must be defined by the tragic absence of love. Who knows what they say to God in the privacy of their hearts. I can only guess that they can't speak to God. They are afraid of God because they don't like what they see in themselves.

How are they held accountable? Well, the best tool we have available to us right now is our vote. That feels to me so painfully insufficient. But I remember the faithfulness of God to this old covenant we know in scripture. You can run from God, and you can hide, like Adam suddenly ashamed of himself in the garden of paradise. But God is always seeking us out. God will come and find us wherever we are. So tell it to the priest. Tell it to the president. Tell it to the voter. Put the fear of God in them.