

Romans 13:9 in the Navajo Bible

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Háálá díí bee haz'á: Ts'ídá doo azhdilée da, Diné ts'ídá doo diyííhéeł da, Ts'ídá doo azhni'íih da, Ts'ídá doo t'áá ádzaagóó hojilne' da, Ts'ídá doo adázhnoolnii da, nínígíí áádóó t'ááláhídi ha'oodzí'ígíí bee, bee haz'áanii t'áá át'é bi'al'íggo kóní, T'áá ni ádííni'nínígi át'éego bił kéeéhót'íinii ayóó'íini'ní. (Romans 13:9)¹

The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Romans 13:9)²

Introduction

In Romans 13:9 Paul quotes five of the ten commandments.³ Notice the order in which they occur: (7) adultery, (6) murder, (8) stealing, (9) lying, (10) coveting. In this list (6) murder and (7) adultery are reversed. The sequence may or may not be significant, but it is interesting.⁴

When Jesus directly or indirectly cites the same list of commandments in the sermon on the mount He gives them in the order: (6) murder, (7) adultery, (9) lying, (8) stealing, and (10) coveting. In this case (8) stealing and (9) lying are reversed. Here also, notice that the sequence is not the same and that in both cases the fifth commandment is omitted.

The Fifth Commandment

The fact that both Jesus in Matthew 5 and Paul in Romans 13 omit the fifth commandment, about honoring one's father and mother, is not evidence that only the last five commandments are important. Instead it might demonstrate that they did not place this commandment in the second table of the law. They might have placed it in the first table.

The law divides naturally into two categories, which express two basic principles – love to God and love to man. We could think of the first set of relationships as being

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

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³ Exodus 20:13-15,17; Deuteronomy 5:17-19,21.

⁴ See Philo, *De Decalogo*, 12.51. Paul here focuses on the second table (6-10) and reverses commandments 6 and 7. In both cases this shows the influence of Philo, which he would have studied thoroughly under Gamaliel (see Acts 22:3).

vertical (God is in heaven above, we are on earth below), and the second set as being horizontal (we are here, other people are here). What Paul focuses on in Romans 13, and what Jesus focuses on in Matthew 5, is how people should relate with other people.

So why didn't they include the fifth commandment? Perhaps it was selective emphasis. After all, Paul does say, "and whatever other commandment there may be" (vs. 9, above). But it is also the case that both Jesus and Paul were focusing on the second table of the law. It could be that they considered the fifth commandment was not part of the second table, placing it in the first table instead. And yet how could they justify moving the commandment that deals with how we treat our human parents to the first table, which describes our various relationships and responsibilities to God?

The changing role of parents

When a child is born into the world it knows nothing of God. It knows only its own needs. And it soon learns that all such needs are supplied through its parents. When a new life begins, father and mother appear to be the source of all strength, all wisdom, all sustenance, comfort, happiness, and whatever else concerns the child's well being. Another way of saying this is that when a child is first born its parents stand to it in the place of God. As the child grows s/he gradually learns that there is something beyond father and mother – that there is One who is stronger, wiser, more capable, and yes, more loving. But this process takes time. So at first the relationship between parent and child is almost entirely vertical.

In adulthood one's father and mother become friends and equals. This is a horizontal relationship, as all other relationships described in the second table are. And there is a special bond between parent and child that goes beyond just not killing, stealing, and lying. Nothing in later life can change the fact that one's parents are the authors of his or her being, and this fact demands a special level of respect.

As old age approaches, the relationship becomes reversed, as it were. It is vertical again, but this time with the parent depending on the child for strength, wisdom, sustenance, comfort, happiness, and so on. Being a parent is an involving thing, and this is in God's plan. But my point is that the relationships change over time and that one aspect of them has to do with initially standing in God's place to the child. So one could justify including the fifth commandment in the first table on this basis. In any event, one could certainly argue that the fifth commandment occupies a transitional role between the two tables.

The explanation clauses: 1-5

There is another reason for placing the fifth commandment in the first table. This has to do with some textual questions. At issue is whether we divide the commands as four plus six, or five plus five. One could make a case either way. Below I make the case for dividing them as five plus five.

Correctly understood, each of the first five commandments includes an explanation clause. We read through them without thinking, perhaps, but consider the following clauses now in isolation from the command clauses that they clarify.

1. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." (vs. 2)
2. ". . . 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." (vs. 5-6)
3. ". . . for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name." (vs. 7)
4. "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." (vs. 11)
5. ". . . so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you." (vs. 12)

These explanation clauses, which are drawn from each of the first five commandments, do not tell us what to do. They clarify why we should do what God's says in the command clauses accompanying them.

Explanation make up a surprisingly large proportion of the law. If you were to divide up the words from the command clauses in one group, and the explanation clauses in another, you would have about the same number of words in both groups. The actual percentages are about 55% command to 45% explanation.

The explanation clauses: 6-10

We can see the distinction between commands with explanations and commands without explanations in the sermon on the mount, referred to above. Christ does not repeat Himself in the sermon on the mount. The commandments He had already explained (on Sinai) He does not explain again. Instead He starts right where He had left off earlier. "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder'" (Matthew 5:21). That's the sixth commandment. The first five had already received comment in an earlier sermon on another mountain, at a different time and place. When we study these two sermons together (as we must), they complete each other nicely.

These facts would help justify the idea of dividing the commandments as five plus five, instead of four plus six. Each of the first five commandments have an explanation clause; each of the last five commandments do not. And this in turn would help explain why Paul refers only to the last five commandments (not the last six commandments) in Romans 13:9, and why Jesus does the same thing earlier in Matthew 5.

Discussion

The fact that so much of the law – almost half of it – consists of explanations has all kinds of interesting implications, one of which is that God wants to meet our minds. He wants to be obeyed, certainly, and this is entirely fair, but He also to be understood. He wants intelligent and heart-felt service from His creatures – not the blind compliance of one who is merely forced to submit. He wants us to be, not His slaves, but His friends (see John 15:15). Isn't this the same distinction Paul is trying to make when he says,

So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. ⁵ For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. ⁶ But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code. (Romans 7:4-6)

God does want our obedience. He wants us to do exactly and precisely what He says. But our reasons for doing it are important. He does not want our obedience to be cold and unloving. He doesn't want us to act like robots when we serve Him. If He did, He would have made robots instead of people. But He did not make us that way. He made bright, intelligent, human beings, capable of choosing what to do and capable of loving whomever we wish – from the heart. This is the kind of service He wants from all His creatures. Here is the context for another well known passage:

But God found fault with the people and said: "The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ⁹ It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. ¹⁰ This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ¹¹ No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. ¹² For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." ¹³ By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.

The new covenant is not a promise that God will erase His law, but that He will write it on our hearts. What He means by this is that He will give us hearts which respond to Him and obey gladly – not out of coercion.

Conclusion

There are all kinds of interesting things to learn from what Paul says in Romans 13:9, and in the verses on either side (vss. 8-10).

One point we should not try to draw from Paul's discussion is that the fifth commandment is unimportant because He does not mention it. We know this would be the wrong point to draw, because in another passage Paul himself says, "'Honor your father and mother' -- which is the first commandment with a promise" (Ephesians 6:2).

What Paul's silence about the fifth commandment in Romans probably does show is that he places the fifth commandment in the first table. This opens a new discussion just at the point when I have to close this one. We will discuss it in another paper at a later time.