

Sermon 030815 Ten Commandments
Scripture- Exodus 20: 1-17
Sermon Tile- Ten Commandments

To say that the Ten Commandments are a big deal is an understatement. The problem for the preacher becomes how to say something that hasn't been said before. Actually, there is at least one of the ten that I kind of disagree with, which you probably have not have heard before from the pulpit, but I'll get to that later. I have another thought that you may not have heard before. Christians often call God "Father," which has raised objections from some people in recent years. The Ten Commandments might be evidence that God is our father instead of our mother. It's just a thought, but if God were our mother wouldn't there be an eleventh commandment? It would say, "And don't forget to bring a sweater because it might get chilly." Just a thought.

I'm not going to go through the Ten Commandments one by one, but first look at them as a whole, then in the two major sections. The first thing to know is that there were codes of law that preceded the Ten Commandments. The oldest but not the only written law code that has survived is the Code of Hammurabi. Law codes were and are based on the notion that there is a balance in society. If someone does something to disrupt that balance, that person will receive punishment that will theoretically fit the crime. Our current laws are in that model. That is to say, if you are

caught breaking the law, there will be or should be consequences. For example: if you murder someone- the following is the punishment. Codes of law set what is illegal and exact retribution for doing the illegal: crime and punishment. These are human laws. The Ten Commandments is a quite different model.

The Ten Commandments goes beyond describing certain actions as illegal. It calls them wrong. It introduces the concept of, “Don’t.” It does not say, “If you do this, that will be your punishment.” It says, “Thou Shalt Not...” It says that there are moral laws, laws of God, just as there are physical laws. The Ten Commandments calls us to improve ourselves, to be better human beings. They raise us up to a higher standard. Codes of law by definition deal with violations. But God, in the language of Ten Commandments, proclaims that human misbehavior is not inevitable. The Ten Commandments call us toward God and therefore away from destructive behavior. God does not demand the impossible from us. If God tells us to spend the rest of our lives without murdering, stealing, or cheating, it must be possible for people to do so. That is what gives the commandments power and influence beyond secular laws. The Commandments teach us that there is right and there is wrong. They show us the power of the Word of God to raise us to a better way. Make no mistake.

The Ten Commandments marks an important step up for what is called civilization.

We said that the Commandments are broken into two major parts. We think of the Ten Commandments coming down from Sinai carried by Moses on two tablets. The first tablet (the first four commandments) is about how we are to be with God. The second tablet (the other six) is about how we are to be with other people. The first three commandments are preoccupied with the awesomeness of God. God uses the first three commandments to establish himself as well, God. God proclaims himself as, “The Lord thy God” and “You shall have no strange gods before me.” and that also means no idols. God insists on being accepted, affirmed, and fully obeyed as the one and only God. This establishes the playing field. It is like the first day of boot camp or football practice. God is the ultimate coach saying, ‘don’t even think of listening to any other voice but mine.’ The Exodus shows that God has now displaced every other loyalty, has driven from the field all rivals, and now claims full attention.

Question: Who was the first one in the Bible to take a Sabbath Day? Correct- God. Genesis, Chapter 2, verse 2 states, “By the seventh day God had finished the work that he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.” The fourth commandment states, “Remember the Sabbath day by

keeping it holy.” To restate the fourth commandment, “You shall not do any work on the Sabbath.” God is saying, “If it’s good enough for me, it is good enough for you.” Now, this ‘no work’ thing is a commandment, remember. But this is 21st century America. How many of us *don’t do any work* on the Sabbath? I get it on that, but I want to state very clearly that if your life is such that you have work hours on Sundays, or even you need to do work in the yard or house on Sunday, that is okay. But, please hear this, God is giving you this time as a gift. If you need to split your Sabbath among more than one day for sabbath time, do it. Taking Sabbath will make you better at your work. God is right. You need to rest from your work and spend time with God. It will make you better. So the first four are the ‘God commandments.’

For the other six, we turn to the second tablet, which instructs on how we treat each other. A way of summing these six commands up is with the adage, “God has no hands but our hands.” There is one positive command, followed by five prohibitions. John Calvin wrote that the definition of the word ‘charity,’ “contains the sum of the second tablet.” The Golden Rule, treat others as you wish to be treated, is contained in the second tablet. In the first tablet, God sets himself above and beyond humans. In the second tablet, God sets humans above and beyond abuse and exploitation.

The fifth commandment is about honoring your mother and father. The struggles of the generations has gone on since the tablets came down from Sinai and is maybe more fierce now than ever. The word “honor” is a delicate word. Both parties grow in dignity when honor is upheld in a relationship. That commandment to honor your mother and father is always worth remembering, even when your parents have passed.

The sixth command has a crucial word in it. The word is murder. How many times have you heard the fifth commandment stated as, “Thou shalt not kill”? The original Hebrew and our Bible (NIV) says “murder,” not kill. That is a huge distinction. In the line of duty, soldiers don’t murder. But sometimes they kill. Remember that.

Don’t murder, commit adultery, or steal. These are terse commands that preserve human dignity, solidarity and commonality. They condemn destructiveness. Okay, Moses comes down with the tablets. He says, ‘I’ve got good news and bad news. The good news is that I got him down to ten. The bad news is that adultery is still in!’ Relax- it’s a joke!

Bearing false witness does not condemn all lying, you’ll be happy to know. There are white lies and black lies. White lies help other people; black lies help yourself. The commandment about bearing false witness is designed to keep us from distorting

reality to each other. It uses courtroom language but captures the notion of using deception for the purposes of one's own unworthy gain.

The last commandment is about coveting, which is the one I have problems with. It seems to me to be a natural human impulse to see something and want it. The goodness comes from not acting on those impulses, to resist temptation. That, to me, is to be on God's side. Now, the experts say that this commandment is really about land and property (remember, at the time wives were considered property). The experts say that the tenth commandment addresses the taking of land and property from vulnerable neighbors. I think I'll accept that explanation not because I buy it but because I don't think it's a good idea to take on God on the Ten Commandments. So, cancel what I said about the coveting thing.

It appears that for Jesus, the Ten Commandments are first level demands. They prepare us for the more rigorous work of discipleship. The Ten Commandments are the starting point for a life of faith, love, kindness, trustworthiness, forgiveness, helping the needy, and reconciliation as the followers of Jesus. If we start with the Ten Commandments and follow Jesus and we fulfill the formula for a successful life.

Jesus covers the Ten Commandments well in the Greatest Commandment, “Love God with your whole heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” Without specifics, that covers the Ten Commandments. It actually surpasses them by making it about love, not about obedience. The Greatest Commandment even has the two parts, God and neighbor. Follow the Ten Commandments and Jesus, and become the person that God wants you to be. AMEN