

“The Ten Commandments”
Ten Commandments Series, No. 1
Exodus 20:1-17
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This morning I’m beginning a new series of sermons devoted to the Ten Commandments. There are several reasons for my choice of topic. *First*, such a series follows naturally the series I completed just before Palm Sunday, a series of eleven sermons on “the Gospel.” The good news of salvation in Christ is in large part the promise of a transformed life, now and forever. Transformed into what? Well the Bible’s answer to that question is a life transformed according to the Law of God, summarized in the Ten Commandments. As the Scot Ralph Erskine put it in one of his 18th century *Gospel Sonnets*,

When once the fiery Law of God
Has chased us to the gospel road,
Then back unto the holy Law,
Most kindly Gospel grace will draw.

That is, we were saved to keep the commandments of God! As the always insightful John Duncan, the 19th century Scottish missionary and theologian, put it, “The best preaching is: Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and keep the Ten Commandments.” [*Just a Talker*, 139] For generations that was accepted wisdom by almost everyone. We need to know and live by the Ten Commandments. You will hear this much less in our day. *Second*, I haven’t preached on the Ten Commandments for a long time. In fact, the only time I preached a series on the Ten Commandments was in 1982. A very few of you were here thirty-six years ago! I want you all to know and love the Ten Commandments!

And, finally, there is this reason. We live in society that is much more antinomian, much less attuned to the law of God, much less conscious of the authority of that law and of the necessity of obedience to it than even it was in 1982 and it was already fiercely antinomian then. More and more the elite culture is willing to speak openly of its contempt for the Law of God. There are many more nowadays who would say, as H. L. Mencken said nearly 90 years ago, “The best thing about the Ten Commandments is that there are only ten!” As the wag has it, in our time the Ten Commandments have been reduced to the “ten suggestions,” but more and more the culture has little time even for such suggestions. What is worse antinomianism – a term used to describe views that range from a passive neglect of the Law of God to an outright rejection of the necessity for a Christian to obey it – has steadily seeped into the Church over this past generation. Christians are less and less troubled by their disobedience to God’s commandments, surely a recipe for spiritual catastrophe. Young Christians especially – and this is being noted in virtually every survey of Christian opinion – have grown up without respect for the Law of God. Disobedience to it seems to them a small thing. When I entered the ministry, congregations were accustomed to hearing sermons on the Ten Commandments. That is so much less the case today that I would say the average American evangelical believer has never heard a series of sermons on the 10 Commandments. John Calvin in his *Institutes* devoted some 60 pages to an exposition of the 10 Commandments. Francis Turretin’s classic statement of Reformed Theology includes

some 170 pages on the Ten Commandments and Charles Hodge's 19th century *Systematic Theology* over 200 pages. In a new Reformed systematic theology, a substantial work of over a thousand pages, three pages are devoted to the Law of God as a rule for Christian living, there is no exposition of that Law, and no mention of the Ten Commandments in the index. Perhaps that is simply because the author thought an exposition of the commandments belonged in a separate study of Christian ethics; but perhaps not.

Text Comment

- v.3 One thing to remember as we read through the Ten Commandments: they are all cast in the second person *singular*. They are addressed to us *as individuals*.
- v.4 There is, as you may know, a disagreement as to how to number the commandments. Roman Catholics and Lutherans typically combine vv. 3-6 into a single commandment; other Protestants typically make v. 3 the first commandment and vv. 4-6 the second. We know there are ten because the Bible itself refers to the *Ten* Commandments. So, the Catholics and Lutherans reach the number ten by dividing the commandment against coveting into two commandments. It has often been alleged by non-Catholics and non-Lutherans that this system of numbering is due to the fact that both those churches employ images in their worship and it behooves them to minimize the commandment against images by burying it, making it only a sub-section of the first commandment. There may be something to that by the time of the Reformation, as replete with images as medieval worship had become (cf. D. MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 192), but, in fact, this division of the ten commandments was known to the Jews very early and to early Christian theologians such as Augustine and does not seem to have been invented to serve a purpose. The Reformation renumbering of the commandments was very definitely a protest against the use of images in Christian worship. Having said all that, it is extremely unlikely that we should divide the commandment against coveting into two in order to get ten. The numbering we are used to is certainly the proper numbering.

Now, the first thing I need to convince you to believe as we begin this series is that *you should look forward* to a study of the Ten Commandments. It is something you should find both fascinating and immensely helpful. The commandments, however, are rules and, all the more in our day, few people expect to get excited about rules! On the other hand, in our day, a great many people feel adrift, rudderless, and unsure of what they should do with themselves or how they should live their lives. They live, whether they have ever articulated this to themselves, with a nagging sense of purposelessness. What is more, the absence of rules has not led to the flowering of the human personality; it has led to personal and relational chaos.

A very popular book these days, a *New York Times* bestseller, is entitled *The 12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, by Professor Jordan Peterson, a Canadian clinical and academic psychologist who has taught at both the University of Toronto and Harvard. Peterson is no Christian to be sure, though he is very respectful of the Bible, but Christians have found that many of the things he says have a biblical ring to them. Non-Christians are reading him in some part because modern culture is, morally speaking, formless and void. One ethical pillar after another has been knocked down, but little to nothing has been put in its place, vague platitudes

only, and it is becoming more obvious to more people that the future of western society is more forbidding than hopeful. We seem to be descending into a cauldron of competing personal interests with no way to judge between them, no standard by which to subject human life to moral evaluation.

“Do your own thing,” was the battle cry of the 1960s radicals, but as that childish moral principle has worked itself out in our social life it is now becoming obvious that when everyone is doing his or her own thing, society comes apart, it does not come together. What is more, even what many nowadays regard as ethical certainties – for example the personal freedom of everyone to be and do what he or she pleases – lack any convincing foundation. How do we know that an individual has such freedom, and if we have it why does it seem that everyone still seems ready to prohibit some other people from doing what *they* please? Again and again we have to make choices between one person’s behavior and that of another. In California, if one legislator gets his way, no one will be able to help a homosexual who wishes to become heterosexual. So even a homosexual cannot “do his own thing” if that thing is what someone else does not want him to do! What kind of ethical norm is it when it only applies to some people and not to others?

Christians, whatever their differences concerning the Law of God, understand that God has written his Law – his will for our lives – upon the hearts of human beings; which is why for all our inconsistency and hypocrisy all human beings to an impressive degree share a common moral sensibility. We all think that it is wrong to murder, to kill an innocent person out of self-interest, to steal the property of someone because one wants it for himself or herself, to betray the trust of another, and so on. But Christians also believe that the same law God has written upon the hearts of all men – created in his image as they have been – he has expounded in greater clarity and detail in his Word.

It is important to say this at the outset. There is nothing in the Ten Commandments that does not apply, obviously and practically, to the life of every human being. The Ten Commandments are, when rightly understood, the transcript of not only a good life, but a happy life, a fruitful life, a life such as God made all human beings to live. God made us and God made the world to work in a certain way and obedience to the Ten Commandments is that way. The Ten Commandments are, as it were, the owner’s manual God has provided for a human being.

Have you noticed this about the Ten Commandments: their universality? They speak to every area of human life. Take even the 4th commandment, the obligation to sanctify the Lord’s Day, which is probably the commandment that is honored most in the breach. Why is it, after all, that everyone thinks it their right to have a day off? Why is it that in all human societies there is the acceptance of both the importance of work and, at the same time, of the importance of holidays? People may not want to keep the Lord’s Day holy, but they expect their day of rest from work each week? Why, for goodness sake? And why are holidays such an important feature of human life? Why do we mark our time by the holidays? It is the Law of God! Written on the heart of man and then explained in greater clarity in the Word of God.

Indeed, it is not too much to say that the Ten Commandments *serve as a definition of reality*. In other words, people must live in obedience to them if they wish to adjust their lives to reality, if

they wish to live according to the way things actually are. The first commandment reminds us at the outset that God defines reality because he made it; we do not. The second reminds us that God is who and what he is, not a creature such as we are. We cannot manufacture him or anything about him. But, at the same time, we are not mere animals. The lives of animals are determined by their environment; *their days* are always the same, but *ours* are not. We have work days and rest days. We are so much above the animals that we are responsible for their care. We are to ensure that they are not overworked, that they are cared for because they too are God's creation. All that in the 4th commandment. In the fifth commandment we are taught that we are not independent, our lives are made and shaped by relationships, the first, of course, being that with our parents. The sixth reminds us that God created life, it is not ours to do with as we please and life and death are not the same. The ninth commandment – “Thou shall not lie” – teaches us that we live in a world of truth and falsehood, a world of clear definitions to which we are and must be subject. And so on. The Ten Commandments are for everyone, like it or not. Indeed, in an age when we are endlessly talking about human rights and inventing new human rights year by year, it is worth remembering that 1,400 years before Christ the Ten Commandments bestowed four fundamental rights upon the human race: life (6th), home (7th), property (8th), and reputation, a reputation only the individual himself is free to damage or ruin (9th).

Now, to be sure, while a law for all people, these Ten Commandments have a special place in the life of God's people, those who believe in him and love him. One of the most remarkable and consequential archaeological discoveries of the 20th century was that the Law of God, God's covenant with Israel, as delivered in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, was written in the form then in use in ancient near eastern diplomacy. This political convention of the ancient world – like treaties entered into today – served to order relationships between nations or empires. And, likewise typical of diplomatic treaties today, they were written according to a highly stylized and familiar template. We might refer today to diplomatic-speak or legalese. Suzerainty treaties tended to have the same literary or written form. A suzerainty treaty, which most of the ancient treaties were, was a treaty imposed by a more powerful king upon a less powerful one, imposed upon a king who had been conquered or who had considered discretion the better part of valor and had made peace before suffering defeat on the field of battle. The greater king imposed his will upon the lesser one, but still there was a treaty and it was written up in a conventional form.

This literary form, as it turned out, was quite easy to recognize because it was hewed to quite closely in the treaty documents of the 2nd millennium B.C. that were discovered, dug up, and translated. But then it was discovered in the middle of last century that the biblical material was written in that same conventional way, as if God, the great king, were entering into a treaty or covenant with the nation of Israel. Indeed, the Bible uses the same word for treaty or covenant that was used for those political treaties. In point after point, as the comparison of the biblical material was made with the ancient near eastern treaties, it became obvious that Yahweh had employed conventional diplomatic language to reveal his covenant with his people. Even the opening words of Exodus 20, “And God spoke all these words,” was ancient near eastern treaty or covenant language. That is the way the treaties began: “These are the words of King So and So...”

Also very regular was the order in which the parts of the treaty or covenant were found. After that opening statement, there was typically found what scholars came to call “the historical prologue.” This was a review, shorter or longer, of the past relationship between the parties, a review designed to explain *why* these two parties were making a covenant and why the lesser party should be faithful to its stipulations. Clearly this part of the covenant or treaty document would be different in each case, as each covenant had a different story behind it. That historical prologue is found here in v. 2: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” Short, sweet, and immensely significant.

In other words, Yahweh was Israel’s God, her King who had called her into being as a people. What is more, he had in mercy and tremendous power delivered his people from cruel bondage in Egypt. *These are the reasons why Israel should keep the covenant God was making with her.* He had formed her and he had redeemed her, delivered her from slavery. Israel *should want* to serve Yahweh, given what he had done for her. The exodus, as you know, was the great redemptive event of the ancient epoch. It defined Israel’s life and her relationship to God. As we are taught in the Bible, the exodus was also the anticipation, the prefigurement of a still greater redemption to come, that accomplished by Christ on the cross. So, when Jesus told his disciples, “If you love me you will keep my commandments,” he was using the same argument we find in Exodus 20:2. We love God because he first loved us, because he redeemed us from sin and death, because he brought us into the glorious freedom of the sons of God. And loving him, we want to do his will. Yahweh is not a great king who conquered a nation in battle and now imposes his will upon a subject people who have no choice but to accept his draconian terms. He is a Savior who loved his people in spite of their lack of love for him, who redeemed them at great cost to himself, and who enters into covenant with them not to get something *from* them, but to give something wonderful *to* them: life and life forever. But notice the order, fabulously important for anyone’s understanding of the Word of God and the Christian life: redemption first, salvation first, freedom first; only then a law to obey. Christians don’t keep the commandments *in order to be saved* but *because they have been saved*. Their obedience is an act of thanksgiving and an act of confidence in the goodness of God.

After the historical prologue came the stipulations and usually first the general stipulations which were then explained and applied in greater detail. The Ten Commandments are such general stipulations and the case law that follows, chapter after chapter, is the elaboration of those general laws. All of them together, however, amount to the fundamental obligation of loyalty. It is no mere happenstance that the first commandment reads as it does. In one of the Hittite treaties of the period we read at the beginning of the stipulations, “Do not turn your eyes to anyone else!” That sounds something very like, “You shall have no other Gods before me.” The blessings and curses, the provision made for the deposit of the covenant document in the temple, and so on were also typical of these ancient near eastern treaty or covenant documents and are likewise found in similar words in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Why are there two tablets of the Law? Because, unlike a diplomatic treaty between two ancient near eastern nations, in which one copy was deposited in the sanctuary of the one king and another deposited in the sanctuary of the other king, in Israel’s case both God’s sanctuary and Israel’s sanctuary were the same; so, both copies of the covenant document were deposited in the same Arc of the Covenant.

Now, don't misunderstand me. This does not mean that God's covenant with Israel was just like the covenants or treaties made between ancient near eastern kings. The fact of the matter is, there is no covenant like this covenant in the ancient world – between the living and true God and his people. The content of the covenant is, of course, profoundly different and is altogether unique among the documents of the ancient world. What is meant is that God, to help his people understand, used a familiar, conventional form to *reveal* his covenant. There are, of course, profound differences and the differences are much more important than the similarities. But the literary form is very revealing and helps us to appreciate the place of the Ten Commandments. They come only after the identification of the Great King and only after the historical prologue that sets the Law of God firmly within the context of redemptive history. Obedience is our answer to God's grace! The general laws followed by specific applications helps us to understand that the Ten Commandments describe general areas of our duty that have manifold applications for all areas of our lives. And so on. *The Ten Commandments are, in other words, the rules that prevail in God's family, the family into which we have been adopted by the grace of God, the rules that teach God's children both how to serve God and, at the same time, how to be happy themselves.*

All of this is then confirmed in the life and teaching of the Lord Jesus. He was himself a man of the Ten Commandments. He obeyed them. He ordered his life according to them. He also spent considerable time teaching his disciples about the Ten Commandments, clearing away misunderstanding and deepening their appreciation of what the law actually required. His searching exposition of the Ten Commandments in his Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere served, as it were, to give new life and even deeper authority to the Ten Commandments. He saw them as titles for general areas of duty, duty to be fulfilled not only in actions but in thoughts and attitudes as well. He famously observed, for example, that the 7th Commandment, forbidding adultery, must be kept first in one's thoughts before it is kept in one's behavior.

But, even more important, he gave immortal expression to the principle already taught in the Old Testament but never so clearly until he said it, that the Ten Commandments can be summarized in only two: to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind and to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves. One may not realize at first, as he or she reads through the Ten Commandments, that they are all, in fact, simply instructions in how to love God and one another, but that is in fact what they are. People don't find it easy or natural, even Christians don't find it easy or natural to regard "Thou shalt nots..." as the language of love. People are forever pitting law and love against one another. But unless love is a mere feeling, love must be meaningful action. But what action? Precisely how must love demonstrate itself? I remember Elizabeth Taylor explaining her second divorce from Richard Burton by saying that they just loved one another too much. Exactly how do you love someone else? Well surely loyalty, honesty, practical care for others, for their persons, their welfare, their property, their reputations, and their very lives. And that is what the Ten Commandments teach us: how to love God and to love one another. It is when *that* is appreciated that one learns to call the Ten Commandments, as Augustine did, "that instrument of ten strings." He was saying that these commandments make beautiful music. *They are, in fact, a love song!*

The fact is, everyone has rules, whether or not he or she thinks about this; no one lives without them. The real question is not: shall we have rules, but are these rules good or bad, wise or

foolish; do they match reality or are they someone's pipe dream? Will obedience to them make my life good or bad, useful or a drain on the life of mankind? Can I explain them to others as not only right for me, but for everyone? Are they obvious, in other words? Do they have authority or are they only the evanescent opinion of one person or one culture, here today, gone tomorrow?

In our time and place, we may struggle to understand why we should *love* the Law of God as the Bible tells us to do, but if we love life and if we love God and if we aspire to love one another, we ought to love the law of God for it teaches us how to love with integrity and in the way that matters most. In our struggle to obey we may wonder how John could say that the commandments of God are not a burden, but if we care to live a godly life, a useful life, a fruitful life, it should not be difficult to see that the commandments of God are no more a burden than wings are a burden to a bird. As Ralph Erskine put it:

A rigid master was the law,
Demanding brick, denying straw;
But when with gospel tongue it sings,
It bids me fly, and gives me wings.

God's people throughout the ages, the wisest among them, have always known that it is an immense privilege to know *how to live*, how to live so that a human life comes into its own, that it becomes what it ought to be, that it pleases God who gave that life in the first place and promises to bless it if offered back to him. No wonder the author of Psalm 147 should sing: "*He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and rules to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his rules. Praise the Lord!*"