



Exodus 19:16-20:20

“TEN GIFTS FROM A COMMANDING GOD”

July 22, 2012

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“Following Christ at City Center!”

EXODUS 19:16-20:20 "TEN GIFTS FROM A COMMANDING GOD"

1) 19:16-25 PREFACE TO THE COMMANDMENTS: THEOPHANY, = GOD MANIFESTED

3 Months Out Of Egypt

a) vv.16-19 Manifestations Of Deity (Sight & Sound), Moses As Intimate With God.

16 1 On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountain,
2 and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled.
17 3 Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God; Moses As A Broker!
and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. "God, This Is Your People!"
18 1' And Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD (Yahweh) descended upon it in fire;
and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked greatly.
19 2' And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder,
3' Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. This Man Moses Knows This God!

b) vv.20-25 The Issue Of The Boundaries Of Holiness, Moses As The Exception.

20 1 And the LORD came down upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; Descent Of Presence
and the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. Ascent Of Moses
21 2 And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, Spoken In 3rd Person
lest they break through to the LORD to gaze and many of them perish. Numinous Attraction
22 And also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves,
lest the LORD break out upon them." God's Holy Presence Is Dangerous
23 3 And Moses said to the LORD, Moses Converses With This God!
"The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai; for thou thyself didst charge us, saying,
'Set bounds about the mountain, and consecrate it.'"
24 2' And the LORD said to him,
"Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you;
but do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD,
lest he break out against them."
25 1' So Moses went down to the people and told them. Descent Of Moses As God's Prophet
Actually 14-15 Imperatives Grouped Into Ten

2) 20:1-17 THE TEN COMMANDMENTS WITH EXPLANATIONS. All Are Gifts

What It Means To Belong To This God, How To Stay Free!

vv.1-2 Preface: God's Person And Gracious Work On Their Behalf. //Dt. 5:6-21, Ex. 34

1 And God spoke all these words (utterances), saying, Preface To Commands: God's Actions For Us
2 "I am the LORD (Yahweh) your God, God's Person: Yahweh your God (Commands 1-5)
who brought you out of the land of Egypt, God's Work: The Rescue Of A People, Set Free To Obey
out of the house of bondage. Liberation From Bondage And For God
Overtly Religious Text, Commands Linked To This God

a1) vv.3-6 Commands Concerning God's Unique Person, 3 You Shall Not Prohibitions.

Personal Address, You/Your, Each Conceals A Promise, Each About Love

Another God 1) v.3 No Other Deities Or Powers Are To Be Regarded As The One, True God.

3 "You shall have no other gods before me. Exclusive Loyalty In A World Of Polytheism, Monolatry
2 Tablets, 10 Statements/Words, Ex. 34:28, Dt. 4:13, 10:4

2) vv.4-6 No Representations Allowed, Not Worship Those Of Others, Sanctions Added.

4 "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, Make An Idol To Be Worshiped, Not Anti-Art
or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, Comprehensive Ban On Creation
or that is in the earth beneath, As Spirit, God Has No Likeness In Creation
5 you shall not bow down to them or serve them; No Worship Of An Idol Made By Another
for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, Reason: God's Exclusive Character, Marriage
visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children Path Of Cursing
to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, Serious Sanctions
6 but showing steadfast love Path Of Blessing
to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. Love = Obey
Roman Catholics Count v.7 as No. 2, Divide No. 10 (lust & property)

3) v.7 No Misuse Of God's Holy Name, Sanctions Added, No Frivolity.

7 "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain; God's Name Is Reflection Of God's Being
Trivialize God for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. No Insincere Oaths

a2) vv 8-12 Two Positive Commandments: God's Day And One's Parents.

Make A God
Of Ourselves

Back to Genesis, Set Apart, A Special Gift From God

4) vv.8-11 A Day Of Rest With A Creation Theological Warrant (7 Day Week).

8
9
10

Concern
For Weak
11

1 "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Dt. 5 *Safeguard, Don't Forget That It's Different*
2 Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; Longest Commentary, Idol Making Is Second
but the seventh day is a sabbath to **the LORD your God;** Sabbath Means *Stop Productivity*
3 in it you shall not do any work, Head Of Household
you, or your son, or your daughter, No Delegation To Children
your manservant, or your maidservant, No Delegation To Slaves
or your cattle, No Delegation To Animals
or the sojourner who is within your gates; No Delegation To Foreigners
2' for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, Dt. 5 Gives Exodus Rationale
and rested the seventh day; God Did; So Can You!
1' therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it. Nation Of Slaves Is Invited To Imitate God!

5) v.12 Honor And Obligation Between The Generations: Promise Added.

12
Respect Elders

"Honor your father and your mother, 1-4 Vertical, 5-10 Horizontal, Love God/Neighbor
that your days may be long Honor Does Not Mean *Worship*
in the land which **the LORD your God** gives you. Promise
Family: vv.5b-6, 10, 12, 14, 17

b) vv.13-17 Boundaries On The Relationships With Others: 5 You Shall Not Prohibitions.

We Need Others

2nd Pentad, Protection Against Injustices Of Others:

6) v.13 No Murder: Life Is Valuable.

5 Don'ts! Life, Spouse, Property, Good Name, Fear

13

"You shall not kill (murder). Governments Not Denied Self-Defense In Just War Theory
No. 6-10 = Abrupt Change Of Style: Staccato

7) v.14 No Affairs: Marriage Is An Intimate Covenant And An Exclusive Bond.

14

"You shall not commit adultery. Sexual Integrity, Excludes Lust And What Excites It
No Predators Welcome In This Community!

8) v.15 No Theft: Ownership And Property Are Extensions Of The Person.

15

"You shall not steal. (or, Do not kidnap) No. 9: Don't Misuse Language

9) v.16 No Misuse Of The Legal System: Integrity In All Speech, No Gossip.

16

"You shall not bear false (vain) witness against your neighbor. Another's Name, Not Misuse The Courts
No One Escapes Last Commandment!

10) v.17 No Envious Desire: Goes Beyond Behavior To The Desires Of The Heart.

17

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house; Desire As Ground Of Adultery/Theft
you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, Treats People As Property
or his manservant, or his maidservant, Acknowledge, Not Sanction Slavery
or his ox, or his ass, Particulars + Generalizing Summary
or anything that is your neighbor's." Decalogue = Living Relationship With This God, Mt. 19:16-19

1') 20:18-20 CONCLUSION TO THE COMMANDMENTS: THEOPHANY = GOD MANIFEST.

18

Now when all the people perceived the thunderings and the lightnings
and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking,
the people were afraid and trembled; and they stood afar off,
and said to Moses,

19

"You speak to us, and we will hear; but let not God speak to us, lest we die."

20

And Moses said to the people,

Goal

"Do not fear; for God has come to prove you,

and that the fear of him may be before your eyes, *that you may not sin.*"¹

Remedy To Ignorance=

¹ For a thoughtful commentary on the decalogue, see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), sections 2052-2557. Also Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays In Ten Thousand*

TEN GIFTS FROM A COMMANDING GOD

“You shall have no other gods before me.”

Displacing false centers of loyalty is a lifelong struggle.

EXODUS 20:3

Like most of you, if my guess is correct, I assumed the Ten Commandments had always been on public display. I remember the single page version posted in our school classrooms in Cheraw in the late 50's and early 60's. The parchment colored paper made it look old, so as a first grader I assumed it was. Been there forever, all the way back to the olden days. No so. In fact, they had only recently been printed and posted in schools across the nation. True enough, the Ten Commandments and Moses as the law giver are displayed in several prominent places in the Supreme Court building, but widespread display in schools and on state house grounds is fairly recent as national traditions go.

It all started in 1946 with a Minnesota juvenile court judge named E.J. Ruegemer had a car thief up for sentencing. In an act of creative mercy, the judge decided against reform school for the joyrider and sentenced him to memorize the Ten Commandments and live by them. The boy received instruction from his pastor, and apparently turned his life around. It was, in effect, remedial Sunday School under court order with a pastor as the parole supervisor. In a newspaper interview only a few years ago, the aged Ruegemer implied one can take the Ten Commandments as a moral code rather than a religious covenant. Biblical scholars and theologians would not agree, but it was his opinion nonetheless.

It was one of those ideas whose time had come, and Judge Ruegemer turned it into a national campaign and moral crusade. There were lots of young children in American in the early days of the baby boom; putting the commandments in plain view might prevent a few car thefts and keep Archie and Veronica on the strait and narrow! It so happens that Ruegemer was a leader in a civic organization, The Fraternal Order of Eagles, which took up his idea of posting paper copies of the Ten Commandments in schools and courtrooms throughout the country. In 1956, director Cecil B. DeMille for looking for a way to market his blockbuster movie *The Ten Commandments*. He heard about the Eagles project and asked

Places (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 252-259.

to cooperate. In what was clearly an upgrade, the Eagles then added granite replicas to paper prints. Monuments were dedicated in ceremonies that often included the movie’s stars: Heston, Yul Brenner, and Martha Scott. Over 4,000 Ten Commandment monuments were eventually placed in public places around the country. After presenting the history I have summarized, Professor Laytham of North Park Seminary in Chicago made this observation:

“Before Christians spend too much energy trying to keep those monuments in place, we should ask whether we really have a stake in a project that originated in a secularized understanding of the Ten Commandments- and was then transferred into mass marketing for a movie.”²

So now- as Paul Harvey used to day- you know the rest of the story.

I think we have a stake in the ongoing debate about the Ten Commandments, but not for the reason most people think. It is not the job of the courts to do remedial Sunday School. That is the job of the church and the Christian family, and of late we’ve been doing a poor job of it. Posting the Ten Commandments in every school will not raise the level of national morality and personal ethics. Even Judge Ruegemer did not just hand the young man a Bible with the right pages marked to work it out on his own. No, he sent him to a pastor for personal instruction and spiritual formation. Moral information alone does not bring outward conformity or heart level change; it must be fleshed out in a close personal relationship between one who knows the moves and one who wants to learn them.

There is no doubt the Ten Commandments stand at the headwaters of Western legal theory because of the close relationship between the church and government through most of European history. After the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century the church was recruited to help administer the Roman Empire, so its moral code began to have great influence. As new converts flooded in, the Ten Commandments were at the heart of the instruction for those to be baptized. As deepened by the teachings of Jesus, they gave new converts an outline for a life that pleased God and stood over against the prevailing ways of inherited paganism: things like worshipping the one God in community with no animal sacrifices, a day set aside for rest and worship, the obligation to honor one parents and uphold the institution of marriage with clear limits on sex, no murder or stealing, no lying and no wanting what others have, the very idea of sin as a breach of relationship with a God who wants to guide us all. It was revolutionary stuff, totally counter-cultural. The idea that the universe is morally grounded in a personal God was taught. The outlines of a work ethic were established: don’t steal, don’t covet, serve a God who is willing to bless in this life,

² Editorial, ‘Keeping the Commandments in their place,’ *The United Methodist Reporter*, no date.

provide for your aged parents, work hard for six days but not seven. It is impossible to overestimate the good effects of these commandments on our society's history.³ This teaching shaped the newly emerging Christian culture in profound ways.

One early Christian thinker, Tertullian, theorized that the commandments given to Israel by Moses were first written on the hearts of all humanity and only then onto tablets of stone.⁴ Thus they were natural law, part of the very nature of things and accessible to the reason of people. Sin has obscured and clouded the inward writing, but it was still there to be uncovered and already witnessed to in many existing law codes. This is not something alien God imposed; it's the way things are and the way life works best in this sinful world still short of the kingdom of God. It was with profound insight that St. Augustine saw that it was love for God and neighbor that unified the ten commandments, so he wrote, "Every commandment concerns charity (that is, love)."

The Ten Commandments were central to English law from the beginning. In the ninth century King Alfred the Great placed the Ten Commandments as a prefix to his own legal code to show how human law developed from a divine gift. In the sixteenth century the Roman Catholic Church officially placed the Ten Commandments as one of the four pillars of teaching for every new believer, along with the Creed, the liturgy of the Mass, and the Lord's Prayer. The Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin continued this tradition by commenting in detail on each of the commandments in their Catechisms for adults and children. They believed and taught, as we should, that it is the duty of every Christian parent to bring their child to worship and to help them memorize and understand the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments so that they would know what the church believes, how to pray according to Jesus' command, how to behave as a Christian, and what the boundaries are. We have lost something precious, haven't we? The teaching of the faith and its obligations in the home. A child without the commandments in the memory of the heart and in the understanding of the head is easy prey for the devil and his tempters. The Ten Commandments are the divine anvil on which a Christian conscience is hammered out.

³ See David Lyle Jeffrey's essay on the Ten Commandments in his *Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992).

⁴ For a surprising recent confirmation of the idea of an innate moral code, see Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York, NY: Pantheon, 2012), and for a review Rob Moll, "Views of the WEIRD (Wester, Educated, Industrial, Rich, And Democratic)," www.christianitytoday.com. See also David Baggett, Jerry L. Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2011).

It was over two decades ago that Ted Koppel assumed the chair of Moses at a Duke Commencement. His words stunned the hearers; they were in sharp contrast to contemporary university culture. Koppel said, rather he announced; better yet, he prophesied:

"Truth is not a polite tap on the shoulder; it is a howling reproach. What Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai were not the Ten Suggestions; they are Commandments. Are, not were. The sheer beauty of the Commandments is that they codify in a handful of words acceptable human behavior, not just for then or now, but for all time."⁵

So important were the commandments seen to be during the English Reformation that Queen Elizabeth ordered them painted on the walls of the churches over the communion table, even over previous art work.⁶ That is the reason in many Episcopal churches you still see the commandments painted on one side and the Apostle's Creed on the other so they are always in plain sight of the worshipers, the law and the gospel in one stereoscopic view. The church lives with the law of God and with the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, both of which are necessary to a good and ordered life. To be freed from the burden of sin and not given a clear outline of what God expects is not enough. Salvation is more than a ticket out of hell and a pass to heaven after death; it is the first step in the pathway to holiness, a life that pleases God, a way lit by the light of the Ten Commandments. God's law still stands for his people, not as a means of salvation, but as a standard held up against every life, a reminder that God takes a keen interest in the order and decency of all relationships.

Note where our text begins, not with the list of commandments but with the gracious and powerful action of a God who saves and rescues, a God who brought a band of slaves out of Egypt. Note also that they end with a heart that has learned to be content with what God provides. The God who saves me is able to make me into a new person from the inside out. This is the gospel hidden in the Ten Commandments and revealed in Jesus Christ who did not come to deny the law but to give us a new way to fulfill them from the heart. They are God's righteous demand, and if you can go through them sincerely without your heart being pricked and stabbed awake by the fact of your sin and moral failures, then you are in a dangerous condition indeed. You are spiritually dead. They are the light of God for our path and the great hammer of God that pounds upon our pride and self-deception. And if you are naive enough to go through the first nine unscathed, the tenth will pierce you. It is not enough to obey them outwardly; they call for a deep inward obedience at the level of our

⁵ *Religion and Society Report*, Vol. 5, Jan. 1988, 3.

⁶ On the history recited in these paragraphs I am dependent on Chris Armstrong, "The Ten Commandments, How Deep Our Debt," *Christianity Today*, August 22, 2004.

desires- what we most want. Coveting is not an outward action but an inward attitude. It is the dark seed of which envy is the green shoot and misery the bitter fruit.

I love to sing *God Bless America*, but when the music has died down, when the last stanza is sung, and when the froth of patriotic emotions has evaporated, I ask myself in private, Why should God protect and continue to bless us if we continue to ignore and even mock his righteous demands? Could it be that our current malaise is directly related to the kind of moral slackers we have become? We have nearly lost the ability to say to one another in the church *this is wrong* and *this is sin* and *this is against God's will* and *you are corrupting our common life* and *can we help you heal and find moral sanity again or else help you some other place to practice a diminished faith.*

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS IN REVIEW

Moral codes, if they are to be convincing, must be rooted in something beyond themselves. They do not stand alone. This is why it is a dead end to reduce the Ten Commandments to a general moral code separated from its religious origins. This is a list of authoritative commands from God through Moses for a people who have been set aside as God's own by an astounding act of divine rescue from Egypt. This is how we live with God.

I empathize with the impossible situation of school superintendent Robert Hooker who tried to get around the Indiana courts by reducing the Ten Commandments to what he termed the *Common Precepts for Moral Behavior*. He saw kids floundering without an objective standard and did his best. Even here the ACLU watchdogs made him remove the first of his new catalog, "Trust in God." What was left was ten good ideas:

"...respect authority, honor parents and family members, speak truthfully, abstain from sex until marriage, resolve conflicts without violence, stay drug and alcohol free, speak kindly to and about others, leave other people's property alone, treat classmates and teachers with respect and avoid being jealous of what others have."⁷

Not bad, but without the first, "Trust in God," the list hangs in mid- air with no grounding in anything greater and no ultimate sanctions. And beyond that is the issue of *which God* are we referring to? In the preface to the commandments it is the God of the Jews, Yahweh, who is specified as the One who rescued them from Egypt, so already were are at the core of particular Jewish memory, not some generalized standard for good conduct

⁷ "Indiana public school substitutes ten 'common precepts' for Ten Commandments," *Church & State*, Feb 2000.

by all fair-minded people. The ten are reduced from divine revelation to another social contract, not something from God but something we agree on among ourselves because of our concern for good order and fair play. The power of the Ten Commandments is that they are given by One who acts in history and has power to enforce them with ultimate sanctions of blessing and cursing. We do not break the commandments; we break ourselves against them. These ten are the healing medicine for the pathologies of our culture and for the church. They are how the good life is ordered, and it does not work without the God of the Jews and of Jesus, so to the question, Who is God? we answer, “whoever it was that rescued the Jews from bondage and Jesus from a grave.” This is the One who gives us a civic order grounded in transcendent wisdom.

The Ten Commandments as read on 4000 stone monuments is a highly edited, abbreviated version not found in any Bible. The commandments are briefly listed without the expansions and without the promised blessings and threats of punishment, so the context is lost. They come across as bald demands and not as invitations to a deeper relationship with a God who is already known, so they are- as popularly presented, a distortion. Their goal is a minimal civic morality, not a people who have a living history with God. What was written on stone tablets was meant to be written into the hearts and lifestyle of a peculiar people as a living witness. No amount of public postings of an abbreviated version will do the job if God’s people, the Jews and the church, do not embody them in our common life. If we don’t keep them among ourselves, how can we have any credibility with the skeptical world outside our doors? Why should they obey them and their implications if we don’t? So don’t complain about moral decline in the culture if you are unwilling to measure your life and this church by this list and enter into serious repentance. People have often asked me, “Pastor Phil, why do we so often open our worship with the Ten Commandments and the response, “Almighty God, write your law upon our hearts.” Two reasons, because we so easily forget God and our duties, and secondly because you pay me to keep the truth before you. And until we are all a great deal improved, you will see them often so that the Holy Spirit can bring correction and realignment.

Why the Ten Commandments? Because in a sinful world the people of God need clear boundaries and clear moral duties that do not change with the times. In this world, while love is the goal, love without law is not enough. Here an analogy is helpful. Until a few years ago, there were no laws about child safety seats. Many young children were not belted and died in accidents. Today, though, laws prohibit small children from riding without a child seat facing the right direction and properly installed.

Of all the expressions of human love, none is more basic than that of a parent for child. But when a child's safety is at stake, love is not enough. Parents did not always do what was best for their children. A law or official boundary was needed to ensure that love for children did not fall short of action. Emotion must be supplemented with obligation,



accountability, and consequences. God knows the same is true of our love and devotion toward him and other people. Our feelings and good intentions are not enough. Sturdier stuff is needed to structure life. In our fallen world this side of the kingdom of God, we need laws and boundaries in the form of commands to aid us in loving God and other people fully.⁸

Therefore it should not surprise us when eight of the ten are prohibitions, the blunt *You shall nots*. Two are positives: keep the Sabbath holy and honor your father and mother, but the remainder have a clear limiting function. For all our supposed maturity, before God we are all children who still need to be told No and taught proper manners. We need guidance to find the good. But in the community of God’s people, we are given guidance and embedded in a people who practice this disciplined way of life together.

The setting is impressive. The Lord puts on an awesome display atop Sinai to induce a sense of holy fear in the recently freed slaves. This God is holy and has real power. Proverbs is right; it is the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom, and unless people have a prior depth of respect for the person of God, they have no reason to take the Ten Commandments seriously. It is only in a living relationship with this Living God that the Ten make sense. The people trembled before the awesome presence, Moses spoke, and God answered in thunder! Boundaries were set past which the people could not pass without danger of death. And at the end, when the commandments had been spoken, there was more smoke and thundering and lightning, so severe that the people begged Moses for God not to speak to them again lest they die. This is a God of dangerous holiness. It is only then that Moses gives the interpretive key as to the why of the commandments, “Do not fear, for God has come to prove you, and that the fear of him may be before your eyes, *that you may not sin.*” No more ignorance; now you know that you are to respect and obey God.

The preface and first three commandments tell us some things about the person and work of this God. First a proper name and the gift of a relationship, “I am the Lord, your God.” Then a reminder that this mysterious God of holy love is the one who set them free three months earlier, “...who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” This is the God who saves, and only then makes demands. First grace, first mercy, first freedom, first rescue, then the firmness and demands of guidance.

The first of the ten, “You shall have no other gods before me,” is a separation from all the forms of polytheism which claim multiple centers of loyalty. It is not a denial that there are other spiritual powers in the world that vie for human worship, only that none of them are to claim the loyalty of this people. When Jesus in his temptations refused to worship Satan and accept the confession of the demons, he was obeying this commandment.

⁸ PreachingToday.com search under the key word *Ten Commandments*.

The doctrine of our church asserts that the one God is an eternal Spirit and without body or parts; any physical representation of God as an object of worship is automatically a distortion. The God we serve is not a God we can control or capture in an image. Apart from Jesus Christ, the person of God is transcendent and invisible. Again, the opponent is paganism and polytheistic forms of worship, as is made clear in the phrase, "...you shall not bow down to them or serve them." And if you do, the commandment warns, you will open yourself to their inherent evil with the result that God will allow its effects to pollute your family for three or four generations. This is an honest warning against all occult involvement; it places a curse on your grandchildren. Behind the idols are demonic powers who delight using the sins of the parents to corrupt the children. By the power of Jesus Christ such curses can be broken and a new legacy of blessing begun, which is the wonderful promise that ends the second commandment, "...but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments."

In the third utterance we are commanded to speak God's name, but always with reverence and to never attach it to anything unworthy of God's character. Several years ago I heard of a contractor who trotted out the language of piety in order to win a contract at a local United Methodist Church. I am told he wore a cross on the lapel of his suit and laid it on quite thick. He lost the contract to another Christian who did not trot out the language of Zion to gain the work. "For the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain." Judgment is not just at the end but now. Watch how you use the divine name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. To curse with them is to bring a curse upon yourself. Never use it casually or without deep respect. God's holy name is an extension of God's person, as we pray, "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed and holy be thy name." The Ten Commandments do not begin with ethics; they begin with the revelation of God's holy personage and the requirements of right worship and right speech. Each week we open our worship by honoring the name of our God in line with the third commandment, "Blessed be God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. **And blessed be God's kingdom, now and forever. Amen.**"

The fourth and fifth commandments are distinguished by their positive form, "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it set apart from the others," and "Honor you father and your mother." For a nation of slaves a day off a week was a great gift and a weekly reminder that life was more than labor. Without holy leisure, there is no worship, no flowering of culture, and no learning. Weekly leisure is a gift of God. And because we are predisposed to greed and the fear of not having enough, the fourth command explicitly prohibits us from delegating our work to others, even to the animals who also need a rest. And if God could get the work of creation done in six, then so can we. America needs to see two things from the church. They need to see us rest and play and worship as we practice for heaven, and they need to see us nurture the bonds of love and care between the generations. Weary workers and fractured families need what we have to offer. Note that the fifth word

has a promise attached. First the command, “Honor your father and your mother,” then the promise, “that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you.” God appeals to self to motivate us to do what is selfless; it is good for all.

The next four commands, numbers six through nine, hang together because they are brief and require no footnotes to explain them. When these are violated, human community becomes impossible. Because we bear the image of God, murder is outlawed. Life is precious. Fifty million abortions are a witness to our lack of seriousness here, as is the recent massacre in Colorado. Life is getting cheaper, isn't it?

Number seven teaches that because the human family is replenished through the union of male and female, the intimate bond and the stability it provides for children must be protected, thus, “You shall not commit adultery.” Sexual self-control and the channeling of sexual energies into marriage is God's way. Outside these boundaries, ultimate sexual expression is always destructive.⁹ Fornication, sex apart from marriage is out. Porn is out. Inside the orders of creation and under God's guidance there is safe and free and joyful expression, but only there. Let us be a people of utter integrity in this area, and let us be a people who can love and heal those whom come to us as casualties of the sexual revolution.¹⁰

Next comes property, because what I own is an extension of who I am, “You shall not steal.” Instead, you shall work six of the seven days of each week and provide for yourself and your family and your church. Private property is honored, but it is not an absolute right since the commandments are all communal. The *You* here is plural. All property is held in trust for God and to be used in line with the other commandments. Article XXIV of our *Articles of Religion* can be taken as a commentary on the eighth commandment:

“The riches and goods of Christians are not common as touching the right, title, and possession of the same, as some do falsely boast. Notwithstanding, every man ought, of such things as he possesseth, liberally to give alms to the poor, according to his ability.”¹¹

Life is precious; protect it. Marriage is exclusive; honor it. By design the creation is

⁹ It may surprise you, that for all our reputation as a liberal church, that the U.M teaching on human sexuality clearly states that “sexual relations are affirmed only with the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage” (*BOD 2008*, 103).

¹⁰ David Kyle Foster, *Sexual Healing: A Biblical Guide to Finding Freedom from Sexual Sin and Brokenness* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2001).

¹¹ *The Book of Discipline 2008*, 69.

economic; enjoy what you earn and develop the virtue of generosity, all the better if done secretly. And truth matters, especially in the courts where truth is sought and disputes are resolved, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” If you don’t know the truth, don’t speak, and if it is the truth, go speak to the person directly after examining yourself for the same fault. First take the log out of your own eye. Anything else is gossip, and when I speak about you to another rather than to you in love I show myself to be both a coward and a slanderer. Gossip is poison to the church; it is not the way to settle differences. We are to have both truthfulness and love in our speech.

Friends of Main Street, listen. God is watching my heart and my hand. I must love my neighbor as I love myself. Not kill him to take his stuff. Not violate a marriage through seduction. Not break in and steal. Guard their name and reputation as well as my own. I must learn to trust God to meet my needs through work and through the care of the church. And I must not believe the lie that things beyond the basics are the key to the good life. Knowing God is not just limited to what I do outwardly but who I am becoming inwardly. If I can’t tithe because I already have that next thing picked out, then I am in violation of the tenth commandment, “Thou shall not covet...” Don’t buy one new thing until you settle this issue. If you can’t honor God off the top and strengthen the church to do its work, then why should God honor you? Money is not protection; God is our protection. And when it comes time to die, money will be of no hope at all. The only safe place in the universe is living in close covenant with the Living God, which means following Jesus Christ and with his help obeying God’s good and holy laws from the heart.

CONCLUSION

Fifty years ago General Omar Bradley said, "America today is running on the momentum of a Godly ancestry, and when that momentum runs down, God help America."¹² I think we are getting very close to the outside edge of our legacy. If there is to be a moral and spiritual awakening across the land, it will not come from the Supreme Court or from the State legislatures, important as they are for maintaining public order. It must start with the church, which means with us, with our crying out to God for the grace of repentance and for a fresh revelation of the God who came down in fire on top of Sinai and who came down in flesh in Jesus Christ.

This is your conscience speaking.

Phil Thrailkill, Main Street UMC, July 22, 2012

¹² Idem.

STUDY QUESTIONS

19:16-25

1. Note how vv.16-19 form a two stanza unit. How is Moses a marriage broker
2. How is God's otherness, God's holiness, portrayed in vv.20-25?
3. How have we so lost the fear and reverence of this God? What wrong with chumminess?
4. What does it mean for Moses to be a priest before God and a prophet to the people?
5. What would it mean to come face-to-face with this God in worship?

20:1-2

6. What great act of God is rehearsed in vv.1-2
7. How do verses 1-2 illustrate the idea that love precedes religious demands?

20:3-7

8. How do commands 1-3 reinforce one another? How are they against polytheism?
9. What is it about false worship that corrupts future generations in vv.5-6?

20:8-12

10. Why does the Sabbath command in vv.8-11 have such a long explanation?
11. What happens to a society and to people who have no leisure or holy rest?
12. Why are we not to throw away our aged parents when they are no longer productive?

20:13-17

13. The order of these five is life, marriage, property, courts, and desires. How is this a logical ordering.

20:18-20

14. Why is it good for us to at times have bone-rattling meetings with this strange God?
 15. How is the final phrase *that you may not sin* the interpretive key to the commandments?
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WHAT NOW? POSSIBLE ACTION STEPS

1. Read the Scripture sheet once a day for the next week, then notice what you see in the papers and in the media.
2. What are the signs of a loss of reverence for God in our culture?
3. Listen to political rhetoric for good and bad use of the commandments.
4. Reflect on your own family history of sin. What sins came down to you?
5. How about your Sabbath keeping? How is this a counter-cultural discipline?
6. Ask God how you are to guard the divine name in your speech.

V. A PRAYER FOR THE CHURCH

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us pray:

**Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
you are revealed in creation- which is the theater of your glory,
in human conscience- which is your inward witness,
in your book the Bible - where we learn your ways,
and above all in Jesus where we see your face.
Send your Holy Spirit upon the reading and hearing of Holy Scripture.
May divine light and holy fire come off the page and into our minds.
We thank you for your faithful servant Moses who received the law.
May we stand today at the foot of Mount Sinai in fear and trembling.
May we receive again the great gift of the Ten Commandments.
May we become the people who obey your law from the heart.
Set your judgments in our midst and save us from being a people
who bring shame and disgrace upon the reputation of your church.
Have mercy upon us, and let us hear your living voice.
Amen. (Silence is kept for listening prayer.)**
