

## Ten Commandments

Exodus 20:1-17 September 10, 2017 Pastor Roger Barkley

One of the political hot buttons a couple of years ago was whether the Ten Commandments should be displayed in courthouses and congressional buildings.

It became very emotional in some circles, with some arguing that no religious symbols should be on display in government facilities, and others complaining that their prohibition is another example of Christianity coming under attack.

A vocal proponent was Republican Congressman Lynn Westmoreland, who co-sponsored a bill to allow their display.

Stephen Colbert invited him onto his show to explain his position, and all went well until Colbert asked the congressman an all too obvious question: “What are the Ten Commandments?”

“All *ten*?” he asked, looking flustered.

He fumbled a little, eventually being able to name three of them.

Now, in defense of the congressman, most of us are in that same position.

We know they a big deal, but we aren’t entirely sure why that is, or really what they are.

I asked Tim to play the *Wedding March* to introduce this sermon because in many ways that explains what was taking place at the foot of Mount Sinai.

In fact, throughout the Middle Ages rabbis often wrote commentaries portraying a Mount Sinai wedding scene with God as the groom, the people as the bride, and the Ten Commandments as their covenant of marriage.

Last week I went to some length to explain that the Commandments and the Law were presented as part of the unfolding narrative of God’s deepening relationship with the Israelites.

They were a radical departure from how other nations’ laws had even been given.

Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece each had sophisticated legal systems, but their laws were stand-alone documents, handed down from their rulers or other political bodies.

But the Ten Commandments flow directly out of the narrative of God's gracious care for His people.

The Law is inseparable from all we've been reflecting on over the past few months, from Genesis 1 to today.

And unlike some legal systems, the Commandments' and Law's purpose is not about entrenching the powerful; they are revelations of God's vision for a healthy, safe and free community.

They are not just about social order; they are about human dignity.

We've followed the accounts of God calling Abram to leave all that was safe and familiar to journey to an unknown land with the promise that he'd eventually father a nation that would bless future generations around the world – which is why God wants His people to live by these Commandments.

This will be a radically new kind of community – one whose example would model peace and justice to all nations.

We followed the Israelites through generations of blessings and troubles, and then saw God rescue them from slavery and lead them through the wilderness.

Now, after three months in the desert they've arrived at the foot of Mount Sinai.

Remember, this is the place where Moses first met God when He spoke through the burning bush and promised that after Moses led the Israelites to freedom that they would gather here again to worship ... and now, here they are!

So, up to now, it's like the Israelites and God have been dating.

God and the people met, and through ups and downs, celebrations and fears got to know each other.

The Israelites learned how God loves them, even at their worst, and how He provided when they were in need, although He would not indulge their every desire.

Now at Mount Sinai, God takes the next step in their relationship and woos them with this proposal:

*Exodus 19:4-5 “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.”*

Last Sunday, Matt got on his knee and proposed to Kerstynn.

Matt said that he cherishes Kerstynn and will stand by her through thick and thin, that together they will create a strong, loving and healthy family ... and in this scene it is like God is doing the same thing, starting by reminding the people of His devotion.

*Exodus 20:1-2 And God spoke these words: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”*

The gods and goddesses of Egypt and the Ancient Near East were distant, disinterested and disengaged with humans.

They lived in a once-upon-a-time heavenly realm unconcerned about how the wars and dramas among themselves affected humankind.

But our Lord has shown Himself to be different.

He’s been personal, present, and passionate.

Actually, the term “Ten Commandments” does not appear in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Hebrew scripture calls them the Ten Words.

In their original oral form, they may have been blunt, primitive injunctions – the Hebrew imperative preceded by the one syllable negative prefix – like “no-kill”, “no-steal”, “no-lie”.

Remember, for centuries this was an oral tradition, and ten words were easy to memorize; an early nomad could teach his or her children to keep track by ticking off each law on their ten fingers.

Seven or eight centuries later when they were written down, scribes made them fuller and more literary, but the Hebrew scripture retained the name “Ten Words” even though more words were then used.

Some rabbis preferred to call them “ten divine revelations”.

According to Exodus 20, only these ten revelations were heard directly by the people because they became so terrified by God’s thunderous voice bellowing through the fiery fog that they never wanted to experience it again.

After that, all God’s direct communication was with Moses.

And only these ten revelations were engraved into the stone tablets by God’s own finger.

In fact, God did so twice because Moses would later become so angry at the people’s rebellion that he smashed the original version.

Rabbis speculated that the differing stone versions of the Ten Commandments – this one from Exodus and second in Deuteronomy - indicate that God intended flexibility in the interpretation of the Law – they are to be applied as the times and circumstances require.

So, the Ten Words or the Ten Commandments – sometimes called the Decalogue – is the foundation of this marriage covenant between God and Israel – and the rest of the Torah (all the other rules that follow) are applications and interpretations for particular times, circumstances and cultures.

Next, God says that if you enter this marriage covenant, then you aren’t to flirt with the other gods and goddesses out there.

Exodus 20:3 *“You shall have no other gods before me.”*

Some years ago, we had a workshop here at church for married couples.

After some exercises to help people give word to their values and goals, we had each couple write a vision statement for their marriage: this is who we want to be as a family, this is what we stand for, this is what will make us unique.

That’s just what God is doing here - casting a vision for this alternative community that will live in stark contrast to the injustice the Israelites had known in Egypt.

The commandments give a way for humans to live fruitful, productive, and meaningful lives, even while journeying through the wilderness.

When people experience social change – even good and progressive change that they think they should applaud – their instinct is to resist.

Our natural negativity bias zeros in on every possible pitfall.

Our fear assumes there's danger lurking in every shadow.

Our defensiveness projects evil in the face of everyone outside our own tribe.

Then our memory magnifies the positives and minimizes the negatives of the past.

This is what had happened when the going got tough for the Israelites.

*Exodus 16:2-3 In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."*

But the Mount Sinai Covenant is to be the opposite of realities of slavery in Egypt.

Unlike other cultures, the first laws oppose using idols to represent God, restricting the community's worship to the Lord only.

This is like a monogamous marriage, and devotion to just the one God becomes central to the Israelites' identity.

Unlike other cultures who worship whatever god might promise a fruitful crop, abundant rain, or fertility for your wife, these people are to match God's single-minded devotion to them with a single-minded devotion to Him.

In Exodus 19, God said that he rescued His people like an eagle holding her young to her breast and flying them to safety.

It is out of that tender love that God gives the Law.

Ever think what a strange word God chose when He said,  
*Exodus 20:5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God.*

Jealous.

This is the image of a lover worrying about her man when he's away on a business trip, or a man keeping his eye on his woman as she attracts the attention of other men.

That word, "jealous", adds to the quality of the Ten Commandments being like a covenant of marriage.

Then comes the Sabbath commandment, which is placed at the center of the Decalogue.

While Egypt was only interested in work and productivity, this alternative community insists on rest and restoration for every person, animal, and field.

Just as God rested on the seventh day, so must the Israelites.

To rest, renew and enjoy life is an essential part of what it means to be human.

More than just a day of rest, the Sabbath becomes an act of worship, both by following God's example, and experiencing the restoration and healing of God.

*Exodus 20:11 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.*

Each of the commandments that follow is given to assure freedom and wellbeing of the community.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not give false witness.

You shall not covet others' property.

This is how to be a community where no one lives in fear that they will be swindled, cheated or worse.

This is what freedom looks like.

I recently heard about a man named Frank, who, when he was about eight-years-old, started arguing with his sister.

Before long, arguing turned to pushing and shoving, and, soon enough, Frank had his younger sister pinned to the ground with his fist raised in the air.

At that moment, his mother burst into the room and told him to stop it.

In response, Frank reared up as only an eight-year-old can and declared, fist still raised in the air, “She’s my sister. I can do anything I want to her.”

At this point, his mom swooped across the room, towered over him, and said, “She’s my daughter – *no you can’t!*”

That’s the point of these Commandments:

Rather playing “gotcha” whenever we mess up, God’s gift of the Commandments is to protect and care for all God’s children.

In God’s community, even the vulnerable are valued and protected.

“No, you can’t hoard everything.

“No, you can’t discriminate and exclude.

“No, you can’t violate and exploit. Because she is my daughter, and he is my son.”

From the moment God called Abram, He had been saying that not only would He form a nation that is blessed, but that He had the purpose of forming a nation that would be a blessing to all nations.

Exodus 19:5-6a *“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”*

“Holy” means set apart for a reason.

All creation, all nations are God’s, but God chose these people to be an example to all the nations.

OK, they and we may have fallen way short of being that example, but we can learn something about God's values and priorities by considering whom He chose.

God did not choose the wealthy, powerful, dominant empires to be what He called his "treasured possession" and the holy nations that would bless the world.

God chose the migrants, the former slaves, those who had been lost in the wilderness.

Maybe it's just that those with all the chariots and silos of stored grain never heard God's call.

Or maybe they were just too obsessed with themselves to hear or to care.

I was just reading some research from the Pew Foundation about the unprecedented shift of people away from communities of faith – Christian and otherwise.

In just five years, there has been an 8-point increase in people who describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious" – now representing over a quarter of Americans – and in terms of demographic shifts, an 8-point swing is huge.

They've not become atheists, but they have been turned off by formal religion.

Now we are the country with all the grain silos and chariots, so what are all our religious institutions to do in order to be God's voice in the midst of our self-obsession and injustice?

I'm just going to leave us with a question this morning:

What should we be as a church, to be a living example of God's graciousness, an example of the healthy, safe and compassionate community that some of those turned off by church might find compelling?

How can we be God's treasured possessions that are a blessing to those around us?