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The National Presbyterian Church

God's Laws for the Good Life

The Story Chapter 5

Exodus 20:1-18; Matthew 5:17, 21-24, 27-28

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In our Sermons this fall and through the winter, we're looking at stories of the Bible as they develop chronologically. We're beginning at "the beginning" – with creation in Genesis, the first book in the Bible. Then moving on to God's choice of a particular family, the family of Abraham, maybe 1800 years or so before the birth of Christ

Abraham was the forefather of the whole people of Israel, and was chosen *to be a blessing* to the whole world when the world had fallen into rebellion against God (see Genesis 12:3). Primarily "this blessing" would come through Abraham's descendants being the people God himself would use, almost 2000 years later to enter his creation in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

So we looked at Abraham – at his life and character, at both his weaknesses and his remarkable faith. And then at his great-grandson, Joseph: at his integrity in the face of one setback after another.

And then last Sunday – Donna Marsh moved us on to 400 years later (c.1400 BC), when the family had now grown into a large tribe and was in deep trouble – in bondage as slaves – in Egypt.

At that moment God raises up a great leader called Moses who not only leads a successful slave revolt to set his people free, but also – by the hand of God – gives to these descendants a set of RULES for LIFE – *rules for the good life* known as the Ten Commandments (sometimes called the "Decalogue" or "Ten Words"): directions and statements that are foundational for the lives of God's people – *back then and, more importantly, for all time.*

AND it's these Commandments that I would like us to think about briefly today (*if you want a "full course" on the commandments, check out my sermon series in our website "Sermon Archive" for the fall, 2013!!*)

The Ten Commandments, of course, have often created some kind of a stir or controversy within our nation, and especially so in the last 30 years.

Sometimes the controversy has raged because of "the issue of location." In other words, the debate is about "Where is it" that the commandments can be posted? *Can we post them in courthouses or schools? Or in other public places?* In fact, one of the lawsuits involving the commandments occurred not too far from us in 2012, in Giles County, Virginia.

The local School Board wanted the commandments to be posted in the school, and there were some parents who said, "No, we don't want them posted in the school." And they took the School Board to court because of this. I cannot remember how it ended up, but I do remember that when the judge first heard the case he said something like this:

*“I want the two parties to come together before we come to trial
Surely you can reach some kind of compromise on this?
After all, only 4 of the commandments explicitly mention God!
So what about choosing just 6 of the commandments to post?”*
Well! My guess is that nobody was happy with that compromise.

So there has been, and remains, controversy surrounding the commandments, and especially about “*where they can be placed.*”

But for me – there *should be no controversy* about one aspect of their location: that, even if there are public places where they *cannot* be posted, there is no law on earth that can prevent anyone *from posting them in our own hearts and minds, and lives and homes and churches.* And that’s where they should be posted or hung **FIRST OF ALL:** in the hearts and minds of every Christian -- across the whole wide-world; of every Christian sharing in communion with Christ today.

In fact, this is one of the things that should unite us as Christians. Because, even though the Commandments were given by God to God’s ancient people Israel, and not first of all to the followers of Jesus; and even though there are many rules and regulations in the Old Testament that as Christians we do not observe (because *we believe* that some of them were given for a particular time and place, long ago). Yet the fact is *that* these Ten Commandments *were not meant to be temporary, but were clearly embraced* as authoritative by Jesus himself, and his earliest followers.

In fact, we find that Jesus, in his central teaching in what we call the *Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew 5-7), not only refers to the Commandments, but applies them concretely to the lives of his followers.

To be sure, Jesus does not *explicitly* mention all 10 of them in a list

Though the first 3 commandments, about (1) God being First, (2) God being alive and not an idol, (3) and God’s name not being taken in vain *are all referenced indirectly* (have you ever noticed this?) in the opening line of The Lord’s Prayer: “*Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed by Thy Name*”

Jesus may not refer to all Ten Commandments explicitly, as a list, but he certainly refers explicitly to a chosen number, and makes them **NOT less** authoritative **BUT more** authoritative! He sees them as words from God, meant **NOT** merely to be known and obeyed on the outside by his followers, **BUT** to be internalized on the inside.

SO, to Jesus, for example, the 6th commandment about murder is not merely about **NOT** killing people (Matt. 5:21-26), but it’s about our internal attitudes and our obligation to treat people positively.

And the 7th commandment about adultery is not merely a commandment about not *committing adultery overtly* (Matthew 5:27-30), but it’s a commandment about *sexuality in general that begins first of all with the way we think about these things in our minds:* in other words, it’s about pornography and the web, and any small steps in the wrong direction leaving us in no doubt that, following the Ten Commandments, Jesus would be right on board in our day opposing any kind of sexual abuse perpetrated by anyone against anyone else – especially men against women (see John 8) – even though this is not explicit. Quite literally for Jesus, “it’s the thought that counts!”

And if Jesus had decided in our day to expand on the 9th commandment about not bearing false witness (which he refers to in Matt 19) then I think he'd almost certainly remind us that (as George Orwell pointed out) once the truth becomes *a game* and the "ends justify the means," and once little lies turn into big lies and "the big lies" become acceptable, to any group or political party (and it can happen on the right AND the left) then *in any society* all hell will break loose, and we will reap the whirlwind of utter confusion in speech and relationships, and then in broader organizations and society, which depend for their cohesion on commonly accepted truth. So Jesus HIMSELF not only refers to the commandments but he *internalizes* them, and therefore *enhances* them and *strengthens their authority* for our lives as his followers

But some questions may be still be raised about *HOW the commandments are to function* within our lives as Christians.

For example, some people may say,

"OK, so these C's are important to Jesus and our Christian forbears BUT I have always understood that as Christians we don't live "under the law" but under grace.

As Christians we don't follow a set of rules in order to please God: we aren't in the business of looking at "commandments" and checking them off the list to earn enough points from God, to get in to heaven. Instead we follow a Savior who loves us – despite our sin and weakness.

SO the whole idea of giving great prominence to these commandments – or any commandments just doesn't sound good to me I thought we followed a God of grace?"

And if you were to say that to me – I'd say to you that is precisely how I understand the Christian faith:

That there are no commandments that we can keep perfectly-enough to earn us God's favor.

God knows this, and so always steps into our lives to meet us where we are, long before we are "where we ought to be."

And that's always been the case – even with Moses and Israel – and the Commandments!

From the very beginning at Mount Sinai, when Moses was given the commandments, the commandments **were't ever given in order to give the people of Israel a way to placate a God, or earn the favor of a God, who wouldn't love them until they kept enough of his commandments to deserve his love.**

No! God gave his people his Commandments as an act of grace, AFTER he had already loved them unreservedly! AFTER he had delivered them by sheer grace from slavery, and in order to show them *what the good life, the best life, a life of gratitude, looked like.*

And this is what the Commandments *themselves* tell us!

In Exodus 20:2 at the very beginning of the list, in a verse often omitted when the commandments are listed, God says, as it were, "This is who I am":

"I – am the lord your God – I am the One who brought you out of Egypt out of the house of bondage, out of the house of slavery."

As if to say: "This is who I am -- this is who I have been -- and this is who I will be, FOR EVER."

In other words, the God in whom we believe, the God in whom Moses believed, the God who gives us these rules, is a God of grace, who, is “passionate about *delivering people, all of us, from slavery*: whether it’s physical slavery or economic slavery, OR mental slavery or and spiritual slavery. And he gives us the commandments *precisely because He knows that it is by living within these gracious boundaries that we will find the greatest human liberty that there is to be found.*

In other words, these *Ten Words* don’t obliterate grace, or turn our religion into a fearful legalism, in which we trying to be “good enough for God”; *they do not to take away our liberty, but they increase it!!*

As St Augustine prayed:

Eternal God, You are the light of the minds that know you, the joy of the hearts that love you, and the strength of the wills that serve you;
Grant us so to know you that we may truly love you, and so to love you that we may fully serve you Whom to serve *is perfect freedom.*

Of course, the truth is that every boundary – every “NO” – can be turned into an obligation we feel *we are told to do* against our will; it can always feel harsh and cruel to someone, somewhere.

But on the other hand *what’s also true* -- is that every human endeavor worth pursuing, every language worth learning, every relationship worth preserving, every Olympic athlete who has ever won a Gold, and every game we play – **all have countless rules and regulations that are accepted as a matter of course and usually far more than ten!**

So you want to play hockey or basketball, for example?

You want to have some FUN?

- Then Rule #1 is that you need to know the rules!!
- And there are lots of them!

(Here’s a rule book for NHL, and for HS Basketball; you can find them online too.) These are *not slim volumes*, but include hundreds of rules and regulations.

But no one says: “I wish there were no rules for Hockey or Basketball!” or “there are far too many rules!”

- Because we know that *the rules MAKE and DEFINE THE GAME*
- And in fact, for those who play the game best, and those who have the most fun, you don’t avoid the rules Instead you set out *to know the rules back to front and upside down*, you internalize them, you know them so well, *that you barely need to think about them.* AND that frees you up, to get on with the game

3400 years ago, or so, when God’s people were set free from slavery by God’s hand (*because God is the kind of a god – a God of Grace, who sets people free from slavery!*), God led them on their way to a new home, the Promised Land through the desert. It wasn’t always an easy route for them to follow. But there in the middle of nowhere *God turned this former rabble into a nation, into a people with a gift: the gift of the rule of law*

- Not given so that they could earn points to get to heaven when they died, or to please a grumpy God who was never really happy with them
- Nor an impossible burden: not hundreds of rules and regulations – *but just TEN*

- Not given to take away their joy, or spoil their fun, *but* to enable them to respond to the grace of God – to respond to God’s passion to set them free!

As if to say:

- *This is how you can live together in the way in which you will have maximum freedom, maximum pleasure.*
- *This is the way in which you can live together, in the way for which you were created by me, your maker.*
- *This is the way to play the game of life with maximum joy – and win!”*

Not hundreds of commandments: just TEN.

To be pondered, and prayed about, and internalized, by God’s people always. *AND, according to Jesus, to be hung and posted deep within the walls of our hearts.*

LET US PRAY

Eternal God, who are the light of the minds that know you,
 the joy of the hearts that love you,
 and the strength of the wills that serve you;
 grant us so to know you that we may truly love you,
 and so to love you that we may fully serve you,
 whom to serve is *perfect freedom*, in Jesus Christ our Lord

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