

September 1, 2013

The National Presbyterian Church

## **TEN COMMANDMENTS:**

### **Rules of the Game**

Matthew 12:13:2

Dr. David Renwick

This morning we begin a new series of sermons in which we are looking together at the Ten Commandments – the commandments given by God through Moses to his ancient people Israel after they had escaped from slavery in Egypt and were heading on their way to the land of Canaan, the “Promised Land.” After the people has left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea they found themselves in the middle of nowhere – in the desert of Sinai – and there at Mount Sinai God spoke to Moses and gave him these Ten Commandments: ten rules for life, ten statements about life and how life is to be lived.

Sometimes we call these commandments the “*Decalogue*”: “*deca*” means “ten” and “*logue*” is from the Greek word “*logos*,” which means “word.” So, the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, are ten words or statements that are foundational for the lives of God’s people.

Over the next few months we’ll be looking at these Ten Commandments together, commandments which have often created some kind of a stir or controversy within our nation, and especially so in the last 30 years. Sometimes controversy has raged because of “the issue of location”: where is it that the commandments can be posted? Can we post them in schools? Can we post them in public places? Which public places? And, as we know, all kinds of lawsuits have been brought up because of this question, the question of location.

In fact, one of these cases occurred last year in Virginia – in Giles County, Virginia, at Narrows High School. The School Board wanted the commandments to be posted in the school, and, perhaps quite predictably, 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 don’t know what the final outcome was, though I suspect we could guess it. But when the judge first heard the case he said something like this: “*I want the two parties to come together. Can’t we reach some kind of compromise on this?*” (and this is true, he said to the Board:) “*What about choosing just six of the commandments to post?*” After all, only four of the commandments mention God, so he suggested “just choose the six others.” My guess is that nobody was happy with that.

So there is controversy as to where you can hang, place or post these Ten Commandments. There's also controversy as to how important and critical the Commandments are for our life together as a nation.

Some people would say that the Commandments are so foundational that in the Supreme Court building you can find them engraved in stone, being carried by Moses – proof that Moses and the Ten Commandments are foundational to the laws of our nation. In fact there are a couple of places in the Supreme Court where you can see these depictions, though some doubt that these images are actually portrayals of Moses at all. Most other people would say, however, that they do indeed reflect Moses, but only as one of many law givers (representing different codes of law) etched in stone at various points in the building. And of these other law givers, not all of them by any stretch of the imagination would have embraced the Judeo-Christian world view. And so the debate rages as to where the Ten Commandments are within the life of our nation and within the laws and the principles which create and shape the kind of life that we live together.

In the next months as we look together at the Ten Commandments I need to be clear up front that my intention is to steer clear of these two debates. Those aren't the issues that we are going to look at. One reason is simply that I doubt that I could cast any more light on those issues than you already have, and almost certainly I'd only end up stirring up the controversies again rather than resolving them. A second reason is that there's a whole lot more to talk about! In fact, my base or assumption is that while there are many aspects of the commandments and their interpretation that may be debatable, there are some things about the commandments which are not debatable – at least for Christians, followers of Jesus Christ. For us, there should be no doubt that the Ten Commandments are foundational for our moral and religious lives, and that even if there are public places where they cannot be posted, there is no law on earth that can prevent us from posting them in our own hearts, minds, lives and churches. This is the first place that they belong. Though . . . all the evidence is that it hasn't been done. All the evidence is that even for those who claim to be Christians, for followers of Christ who believe the Bible is not just a book from the ancient past, but God's lasting word to us today, the evidence is that they barely remember the Commandments any more. We need to change that! We need to know them! We need to create a solid foundation for our lives by posting them in our minds and hearts, and in our lives and in our church!

Let me put it another way. Even if the Commandments come from ancient Israel, and not the early church, they were clearly embraced by Jesus and his followers too. In fact, we find that our Lord Jesus Christ, in his central body of teaching that we call the *Sermon on the Mount*, not only refers to the Commandments but applies them to the lives of his followers. To be sure, he does not specifically mention all of them (you can find the complete lists in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5), but he refers to a representative number of the Commandments, and says "I haven't come to abolish these, but to fulfill them" – to apply them not merely to the external

relationships of life but to the internal ones. Jesus enhances them and internalizes them as if to say these aren't just laws that we legislate in society as a whole, but these are ways of living and thinking that we must embody within our individual lives and communities.

So that, for example, the commandment about murder is not merely a commandment about killing people, says Jesus (Matthew 5:21-26), but a commandment about hatred and the way we treat people. And the commandment about adultery is not merely a commandment about not committing adultery in marriage (Matthew 5:27-30), but a commandment about sexuality and the way we think about these things. (see also Matthew 15:17-18; 19:18-19)

So Jesus himself embraces, enhances and internalizes the Commandments.

And not only that, the early church understood the ongoing role of the Commandments in the Christian life as well. So you turn to the writings of the Apostle Paul (Romans 7 and 13; 1 Corinthians 7:19; Ephesians 6:2), to Peter (1 Peter 4:15) to James (2:8-13), and John (1 John 5:21) and while they don't list all ten of the commandments, the commandments they refer to are for them clearly as valid in their day as in the days of Moses.

Indeed, even when we move out of the world of the Bible and the early church, skipping 1500 years to the origins of the Presbyterian church, we find the same emphasis holds true. In our heritage, the Protestant Reformation, the Ten Commandments have always had a powerful place within our life together.

I have with me here today part two of our Constitution. It's called the *Book of Confessions*. The *Book of Confessions* contains eleven documents which are summaries of the Christian faith, summarizing scripture as understood by those who have gone before us, within our tradition.

- We will be sharing in the *Apostles' Creed* later on in our service and this is in our Book of Confessions.
- When we have communion we often say the *Nicene Creed* and this, too, is in our *Book of Confessions*.

There are eleven theological statements and of these eleven statements five explicitly affirm the ongoing validity and importance and foundational nature of the Ten Commandments. And of these, three expound on the Ten Commandments at great length: The Westminster Shorter Catechism, the Westminster Longer Catechism and the Heidelberg Catechism.

So the Ten Commandments were central to the teaching of our creeds and confessions as Presbyterians. The Ten Commandments were central to the understanding of the Christian religious and moral life in the early Christian church. The Ten Commandments were central in Jesus' teaching. the Ten Commandments are central in the book of Scripture.

Some people, though may say, "David I hear that, but I have always understood that as Christians we don't live under the law but under grace. And the whole idea of living our lives in response to these commandments just doesn't sound good to me. I thought we followed a God of

*grace and that we weren't in the business of looking at commandments, checking them off the list to see if we do them in order to win brownie points for God, or in order to get in to heaven?"*

And if you were to say that to me I'd say to you "That's my understanding as well!" That is in fact precisely how I understand the Christian faith; that there are no commandments that we can keep that can earn God's favor. Indeed, even if there were, the evidence is that we would still not keep them! But, in fact, if you look at the Ten Commandments as written in Exodus 20, you will find that that this whole way of thinking is nowhere to be found. Israel wasn't given the Ten Commandments in order to please or placate a God who was hard or loathe to be placated! No! They were given the Commandments in order to respond in gratitude to a God who had shown them grace at the very foundation of their lives.

At the very beginning of the Commandments, even though the God of Exodus is a powerful god, not weak but powerful, you will find the opening statement of the Commandments telling us something else, something critical to know about who God is who gives us these commandments.

For Christians the statement is in what we call the prologue. If we were Jewish we would say that this statement is part of the first commandment, the first word that God gives to us. And that first word is about the nature and the character and the action of God.

Who is the god who gives us these laws, these rules, these commandments? God tells us:

***I am the lord your God who brought you out of Egypt and out of the house of bondage, out of the house of slavery.***

It's as if God is saying, "This is who I am, this is who I have been, and this is who I will be."

The God in whom we believe, who gives us these rules is a God of grace who, before we do anything, says to us "*I want to deliver you from slavery. I want to deliver you from any kind of slavery; from physical slavery, from mental slavery, from spiritual slavery, this is my nature. I would never give you commandments that enslave. My whole purpose in giving you the commandments is to increase the liberty that I want you to have.*"

The Commandments aren't intended to enslave but to set us free. For this purpose God gave us these commandments.

Some people say, "*Yes, but still, I don't want rules and regulations – they hem me in, they limit my liberty.*" And God would say that the opposite is also true, and more so: when you have no rules and regulations you will find that liberty slips away bit by bit. License is not liberty! Of course, rules and regulations harshly applied may take away our liberty; but no rules and regulations, ah, that is chaos, and not liberty at all.

There are other people who would say, "*Yes, I know God is a God of grace and, yes, God gives us these commandments out of grace, not in order to earn brownie points for heaven, but so we can respond in gratitude. But I don't like these particular commandments. I mean isn't it*

*just a long list of ‘don’t do this and don’t do that and don’t do the next thing’? Do’s and don’ts and don’ts and do’s. Well, that’s not how I want to live.”* To which I would respond again, this time by saying “You know, sometimes we say this about religion and about the Christian faith when we don’t say it about other aspects of life at all, when all along they too are filled – YES FILLED – with do’s and don’ts!

Now I suspect that all of you enjoy playing games or watching games. This is what it is to be human, and we learn games from childhood. Let me be blunt: there is no such thing as a game without rules and regulations. It’s the rules and the regulations that define the game, and the nature of the game, and tell you what game you are playing. Without them there is no game and without games there is ultimately no fun in life at all. And this is true of **all** games.

Perhaps the God who loves us out of grace, has given us these rules and regulations so that we can play the game of life to the fullest in a way in which we can be the most effective and find the greatest joy?

This past week I did some research on some rules and regulations for games. I pulled out the rules for football and the rules for hockey, and the rules for baseball and for basketball, and then I pulled out the rules for “tiddlywinks” and “hide and seek” and then I pulled out the rules for eating. For many people, and perhaps some of us here, eating is, of course, a sport. Indeed, after we worship I hope you are going to stay with us to eat. So I’ve got the rules for eating right here. This comes from “EHow.com.”

Now of course these rules for eating get far more serious when you go to Emily Post. Indeed the word “rule” is changed to “etiquette.” Emily and Amy and the others don’t say “rules” or “do’s and don’ts,” but that’s what they are talking about when they write about etiquette! But here are the rules for eating, and just so we don’t gross each other out, make sure you keep these rules:

Number one, take small bites. You don’t want to look like a chipmunk with your cheeks bulging out of your face.

Number two, eat slowly. You’re not in a race.

Number three, swallow before you speak. If your mouth is full when someone asks you a question politely hold up your hand or index finger, completely swallow what you’ve got and respectfully say excuse me and then begin talking.

Number four, take small food portions.

Number five; let someone else have the last piece.

Number six; eat with your mouth closed. Nobody wants to see that.

Number seven, consume quietly.

Number eight, check for crumbs and food bits on your face. Every so often pick up your napkin and gently wipe your mouth and its facility including your chin. And then

Number nine (and I’m going to declare that this is null and void), use utensils. Today I declare that “You may or you may not use utensils”!

. . . . So . . before you go outside for lunch, I hope you commit yourself to follow these rules, these do's and don'ts, these rules, this etiquette.

Not too many of them to remember, are there? In this case there were nine all together. For “hide and seek” I've got five rules: one person is “it”; he or she closes his or her eyes and counts slowly to ten out loud; everyone else finds a place to hide; after counting to ten “it” shouts ‘ready or not here I come’ and begins to look for everyone. And number five, when everyone has been found the person who was found first becomes “it”.

There's actually a rule that's missing for this game that's also important, and that's the rule about boundaries. Almost every game sets boundaries within which the game will be played (the board in a board game; the field in baseball or football, and so on). So in “hide and seek” you also need to know – are you allowed to hide only in the house or outside of the house? in the yard or beyond the yard? Can you go down the street two miles? Won't that ruin it if you go down the street too far? So you must define the area before you begin to play, and that's true in just about every game: you've got to define the area within which it is going to be played or the game will be no fun – in fact, no fun at all if you don't get the rules right to begin with.

Like these children's games, there were just a handful of rules when James Naismith invented basketball in 1891 – only 13 rules. But, let me tell you, when you go to big time sports today, whether to the NCAA or to the professional leagues, while you may find that they have only a handful of areas or categories for their rules, often somewhere between 5 and 9, yet, in each of those areas you have numerous sections, sub-sections and articles. In every case it adds up to hundreds of “do's and don'ts” often needing complicated diagrams of one kind or another to explain.

To be sure, sometimes we may well say, “You know, some of these rules spoil the game. I don't like this new rule that they brought in here.” In most games there is some flexibility, though limited, to change the rules. But the fact of the matter remains: it is the rules which define the game and for those who are really good at the game they don't balk at the rules. Indeed, the reverse is true: they internalize the rules; they know them so well that they can turn the game into an art.

Wayne Gretzky on ice, Michael Jordan playing basketball, RG3, we hope, playing football, they know the rules. They know the game they're playing. And these are so internalized that they play (or played) with a fluidity that brings joy to many people. And when we see it the one thing we *don't* say is: “I hate the do's and don'ts!! No, we say, “That's art! That's beautiful!” You need the rules in order to play the game, in order to have joy and in order to have fun together.

You also need someone to act as an umpire or referee to enforce the rules – if you are to have joy and fun together. Without the umpire what happens? Well you see this most clearly in ice hockey. Ice hockey is always pretty close to the line between fun and joy and murder. Take the referee or the umpire off and it turns into murder. But it's not just in professional games that we need the rule-enforcer or clarifier; it's also in Monopoly and Clue, isn't it? *"Hey that's not fair. Mom, dad, come here! They don't know the rules! They're not playing fairly! We are not going to play this way!"* . . . and the whole fun of the game disappears. The pleasure goes when you don't know the rules and when they aren't kept.

And then there's the possibility, as I said, of changing the rules. There's a point at which there is flexibility. Pop Warner football is still the same as football, but it's different. But there comes a point when if you change the rules it's no longer the same game. If you have a stick in your hand it's not football, it's hockey or baseball.

If you go back in time, back to the early 1800s you will find there was no such thing as football as we know it today. The Ivy League colleges played games; they played sports of one kind or another. Among the games they played were rugby and soccer. And then in the 1870s along comes a man called Walter Camp and working with Harvard and Princeton and with Columbia in particular, he and they said "We're going to change these rules (from rugby and soccer primarily), we're going to do this and that and the next thing and as they did so, along the way the game stopped being rugby or soccer and became something else, a different game, and football was born! They invented a whole new game by making a whole different set of rules and boundaries, through which millions of people, playing or watching, have found enormous pleasure and joy.

Three thousand five hundred years ago, when God's people were set free from slavery (because God is the kind of a god who sets people free from slavery!), God led them on their way to a new home, the Promised Land. It wasn't always an easy route to take, but there in the middle of nowhere God turned this lawless rabble into a nation, into a people governed by law, the rule of law; not to take away their joy, not to spoil their fun, not to give them a way to earn brownie points so that they could get to heaven when they died, or to please a grumpy God who ultimately could never be pleased; but to enable them to respond to the grace of God, a God who says *"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, living your lives in the way for which you were created by me, your maker. I give you these laws as a gift so that you can play the game of life with joy – and win!"*

We may or may not be able to post the Ten Commandments in different places in our nation. We may differ in our understanding as to how foundational they are to our life together as a nation. But we have been called by God, you and I as followers of Christ, and as those who turn to the Scriptures as the Word of God, to take these Commandments and give them a foundational

place within our lives. We are to post them in our hearts and in our heads, on our hands and on our feet, to embody them, to bring them to the world and to say “these are the rules of the game for which I was, and we all were, created to play, and within these boundaries, playing by these rules, I will find my, we will find our greatest joy.”

May we make these commandments foundational in our lives. May we play this God-given game well and passionately, and may we play it to the final buzzer. And then, may we discover that when the final buzzer goes, that there’s more to come: overtime – a new game – to which we’ve been invited as well.

David A. Renwick Copyright © 2013 All Rights Reserved.

To listen on line go to: <http://nationalpres.org/~natio100/sermons>  
To watch full services go to: <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/nationalpres>

**THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016  
[www.NationalPres.org](http://www.NationalPres.org) 202.537.0800