

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church – March 7, 2021

Hymns: 9 – God’s Law Is Perfect; 196 – Throughout these Lenten Days;
694 - This is my commandment; 358 – There Is A Redeemer;

Scriptures: Exodus 20:1-17; Matthew 5:17-20

Sermon Title: The Ten Characteristics

Exodus 20:1-17 - New King James Version (NKJV)

And God spoke all these words, saying:

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

“You shall have no other gods before Me.

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you.

“You shall not murder.

“You shall not commit adultery.

“You shall not steal.

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s.”

Matthew 5:17-20 New King James Version (NKJV)

“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

The Ten Commandments. Have you ever tried to remember all of them? And did you get all ten? Well, if not, you are in good company. A mere 34 percent of clergy surveyed managed to get all of them correctly, according to a Sunday Times (London, England) poll of 200 randomly-selected Anglican clergy. I hope a group of randomly selected Presbyterian clergy could do better, but I’m afraid to find out.

Clergy aren’t alone, though. A number of years ago a survey of 1,200 people aged fifteen to thirty-five found that most of those polled could name no more than two of the Ten Commandments – I wonder which two? - and they weren't too happy about some of the others when they were told about them. They also had clear ideas about how the commandments might be revised for modern times. Support was weak for keeping the Sabbath holy and honouring one's father and mother, but “Thou shalt not drink and drive” and “Thou shalt care for the environment” would doubtless have appeared on any new list of commandments put together by this group. “Thou shalt not commit adultery” somehow managed to survive, but fell to the No. 10 position.

When the respondents were given a list of nonreligious figures, including various celebrities and musicians, and asked who might be entrusted with the task of drawing up a new set of commandments, the person receiving the most support was Oprah Winfrey. That survey was done more than a decade ago; I wonder who would make the top of the list now? I think if you were to do this survey today, in COVID times, Dr. Fauci might receive top marks; here on PEI, maybe Director of Public Health Dr. Heather Morrison would be number one. I think I could guess her first three: “Wear a mask; be patient; be kind.” Those may not be commandments, but they do seem like very good advice.

What is it about the Biblical Ten Commandments, that all of a sudden, they don’t seem quite so universally known or applicable as once they were? Start talking

to people about “graven images” and “taking names in vain” and “sabbath days” and they just glaze over. “Give us some helpful rules,” they say. Besides, present someone with a list of commandments nowadays, and they’ll tell you that you are infringing upon their rights and freedoms. People are very keen upon rights and freedoms lately. I wish people were as keen upon obligations and responsibilities - it would be a better world. But I digress. Back to the Commandments.

In studying these more closely, the first thing I was surprised to learn is that they’re not actually called the Ten Commandments. The Hebrew phrase used in the Book of Exodus from which we get them is “Aseret Hadevarim,” literally, “Ten Statements” or “Ten Utterances.” This is an important point. The Ten Statements are to reflect the principles which define who we are in relation to one another and to God, rather than arbitrary laws given for some external purpose. This is best understood in terms of a family relationship (which is, after all, the kind of relationship God establishes with us). There are things one does or doesn’t do because of societal laws; there are other things one does or doesn’t do because of family identity. For instance:

When I was growing up, some aspects of behavior or conduct were expected: “That’s what we do in this family,” my parents would say if I questioned them. In the same way, some things were prohibited: “That’s not what we do in this family,” is how my parents would correct me. For example, if my sister and I got into a shouting match, my mother would often say, “There’s no yelling in this house.” I’m sure your family had similar defining rules. John Ortberg puts it this way:

“The Hebrew term is aseret hadevarim, which literally means “ten utterances” or “ten statements” because they were rooted in things that are meant to be in God’s kingdom. They flow out of how we were designed, who we were meant to be. We read them as “this is what you have to do,” but God was saying, “this is who you are.” That’s why we don’t so much break the Ten Commandments as we break ourselves when we violate them.”

This is why the opening verse, or preface to the Commandments, is so important, but so often left out of the list. It provides the context for everything that follows: *And God spoke all these words, saying: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” “This is who I am, this is who you were, and this is who you are now,”* God is saying. “I am the Lord your God. I have delivered you. You are my people. This is what characterizes my people, what identifies you as mine.”

This is a major shift in how we understand these Commandments. Try thinking of them not as The Ten Commandments, but as the Ten Characteristics of the People of God; that those who's God is the Lord, behave in this way. Not because these rules are arbitrary; but because these characteristics define us as the family of God. The *aseret hadevarim*, the “ten utterances” are not commandments as such but an articulation of basic principles. They are the ground rules, out of which our relationship with God and one another flow; they are the very foundation of who we are. They define us. Which is to say, our behavior defines us.

We know this. When a public figure breaks the rules – and it seems as though there are daily examples – one of the first things you will hear them say is, “This is not who I am.” The logical follow-up question is, “Then why did you do it?” Our behavior defines us. And the Ten Commandments, the Ten Utterances, are the characteristics, the set of behaviors, which define us and our relationships as the Family of God.

And the very first utterance, the very first principle, the very first defining characteristic of the people of the Family of God, is this: “*You shall have no other gods before Me.*” There are a few other ways to translate this, to make it even more clear to us:

- “*Do not put any other gods in place of me.*” *NCV*
- “*Do not worship any god except me.*” *CEV*
- “*You must not have any other god but me.*” *NLT*
- “*Worship no god but me.*” *GNT*
- And most succinctly, “*No other gods, only me.*” *MSG*

The ancient Hebrews had countless gods from which to choose; the innumerable Egyptian gods, the less prolific but often tempting Canaanite gods, the familiar Baal and Asherah, among others. But family characteristic number one, the first basic principle, the foundation of our faith, is this: “We believe in One God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth.” Not just “a god,” but The God. The God who delivered his people from bondage in Egypt. The God of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, of Jacob and Rachel. The God of Joseph and Mary. The God whom Jesus, and we, call Father.

In this regard, both Judaism and Christianity are not inclusive but exclusive. Everyone is welcome, but every god is not. At the very foundation of our faith, there is no room for syncretism. We are identified by our belief in the One True God. “*No other gods, only me,*” says Commandment One, and inherent in that is a statement of fidelity, a covenant which is the basis of our relationship with God.

Think of another covenant which defines us and our relationships – think of marriage. The whole point of the marriage ceremony, the promises and vows and commitments and rings, are all to say one thing: I commit myself to you alone. Take away the flowers and the limo and the fancy outfits, and the marriage boils down to this: “No other woman but you,” says the Groom. “No other man but you,” responds his Bride. The couple is now made one; this commitment defines them. Break that foundational commitment, and the entire covenant is imperiled, because the foundational identity of the partnership is shattered. Fidelity is not a command; it is the very basis of marriage.

Our foundational identity as Christians is as the children of God, delivered from sin and given new life, new identity, in Jesus Christ. We are incorporated into the very family of God, through turning to Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. Even as God delivered the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, leading them through the waters of the Red Sea and into freedom and new life, so we have been delivered through faith in Christ from our slavery to sin, brought through the waters of Baptism into the covenant community of the Church, in which and through which we live and serve as a new people, whose god is the Lord God, and God alone. Our very identity is wrapped up in who God is, and who we are in relation to God, and in relationship with God.

And so Commandment One is not so much a commandment – “you must worship God alone” – as it is a foundational statement of fact: as Living Faith puts it, *“There is one true God, whom to know is life eternal, whom to serve is joy and peace... We worship almighty God, the source of all life. With thanks we acknowledge God's wisdom, power, faithfulness, and love.”*

You may be worried about me seeming to downgrade the Commandments to “foundational principles” or “defining characteristics,” as though by so doing they are less important than they were. But I think the contrary is true. After all, Jesus, in our Scripture passage from the Sermon on the Mount, teaches that adherence to these laws defines us as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. And vice versa! By understanding the consequences of disregarding the Commandments as relational rather than judicial, we increase, rather than decrease their importance.

For instance: Adultery used to be a crime, punishable under the Criminal Code of Canada. The intention of the law was to ensure the fidelity of marriage. But the real danger of adultery wasn't that you might get caught, jailed or fined; the danger was that it undermined, imperiled and often destroyed your marriage. The fact that adultery is no longer illegal under Canadian law doesn't mean it isn't wrong; its wrongness lies not in its illegality, but in its damage to the marriage relationship. If a

spouse is caught cheating, claiming that it isn't against the law is not going to save their marriage. The consequences of adultery are primarily relational. It destroys the foundational integrity of the marriage covenant.

We are brought into relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ, the path to salvation is opened. In following Jesus as Saviour and Lord, our sins are forgiven. We now relate to God as God's Children; adopted into the Family of God, our very identity is altered. Our lives are now to reflect the love of God as revealed in and through Jesus; and the primary characteristic of God's people is fidelity to the One God, and how we live in the light of that fidelity – loving the people God loves. Loving one another. The Ten Commandments are the outworking of that love.

Jesus made this abundantly clear. When asked which is the greatest of the Commandments, Jesus replied, “*‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’*”

Our adherence to these foundational principles define us as Christians: “*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*” (John 13-34-35) How do you know if someone is a follower of Jesus? That's how. That's how a disciple is defined. By their love. The Commandments, rather than simply rules, are who we are; they are how we live. Or, as my parents put it, “That's what we do in this family.”

Why is it important to understand the Commandments in this way? It turns following the Commandments from passive to active, from “things not to do” to “how we live.” Note that when Jesus defines the Commandments, it is with active words: “*‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’*” Oftentimes, people define what a Christian is by the things they don't do. But a follower of Jesus is defined by what they do, in fact, do. The Rich Young Ruler. The Priest and Levite in the Good Samaritan parable. The man who buried his master's money in the ground. The legally meticulous Pharisees. They were all defined by what they didn't do wrong. And they were all challenged by Jesus to finally do something right.

The Ten Commandments. They flow out of how we were designed, who we were meant to be. We read them as “this is what you have to do,” but God was saying, “this is who you are.” May God help us to live them, each and every day, and may the essence of who we are be rooted in a love which reaches out to all. Amen.