

TEN COMMANDMENTS REVISITED

Introductory Sermon to Series

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
January 6, 1985

Exodus 20:2-17, I Peter 2:9-10

Let's revisit the Ten Commandments. From time to time, it is good to re-examine the basic ethical code of our faith; indeed, of civilization itself. As we begin a year--1985--let's revisit the Ten Commandments. Our society certainly needs another look. Christians need to be reminded of the basic ethical code, the minimum of expected behavior. It is an interesting phenomenon that with the religious revival of our day--particularly a revival of interest in right-wing Christianity--there is little difference in behavior. The crime rate soars; emotional stress and mental breakdown abound. It is difficult to identify Christians on the basis of their lifestyles in comparison to those around them. Do we even know what the lifestyle of a Christian is? Could you quote the Ten Commandments from memory if we hadn't printed them in the bulletin this morning? If a religious experience does not affect one's lifestyle, is it really genuine religious experience, or just emotion, or just form?

Moses gave us the commandments in about 1200 B.C. Dr. Houghton told me this morning how it happened. On top of Mt. Sinai, God gave Moses the ten commandments on tablets. When Moses asked, "What do I do with these?" God replied, "Take two and call me in the morning!" After the escape from Egypt, Moses had the gigantic task of forming a people. They were ignorant slaves. They had no experience in government, religion, or living as a people. It took Moses 40 years to organize them, teach them, and form a people that would be strong enough to become a nation. One of the foundational tasks was to form an ethical code, the nucleus of which was the commandments. They are not necessarily original with Moses. Several of them are found in older societies. They include basic statutes and principles for any civilized society.

The comic strip, "Frank and Ernest," has Moses standing on top of the mountain, with two large stone tablets in his arms, looking up into the clouds and saying, "I think they'd go over better if we called them voluntary guidelines." We would prefer the commandments to be voluntary guidelines; in fact, our society is expert at relativizing just about everything. We chafe at the idea of absolutes, commandments, rules. Our society prefers the guideline, "If it feels good, do it." But, that guideline is not working. Much of what is failing in our day is the result of trying to turn the commandments into voluntary guidelines. The Ten Commandments are basic, common-sense, practical principles of how people live together.

In the final analysis, you do not break the commandments; the commandments are still intact. You break yourself on the commandments. The commandments are the bedrock, the foundation of human living. The first commandments deal with priorities. Without priorities in your life, without order, you break yourself. The fourth commandment is about rest. You do not break the fourth commandment by overwork, overplay, anxiety and tension. You break yourself! You shatter your physical body and mental outlook. The marriage relationship, the family relationship, is built on loyalty and commitment. Contrary to the TV soap operas, commitment is the heart of marriage. Adultery does not break the commandment, for the commandment is still intact. But, a marriage is broken, at least severely damaged, by adultery. The commandment against lying is not broken, but you can break friendships by lying. You can lose respect, respect from others and respect for yourself. In the last analysis, you do not break the commandments; you break yourself on the commandments.

But, there is another reason for the importance of the commandments, besides being consequential to society. The Ten Commandments are expressions of the covenantal relationship between God and God's people. To revisit the Ten Commandments, to look

at the bedrock of our faith, to rediscover our heritage, we begin with the covenant. We as Christians often forget the covenant. Do you realize each day that you are living in covenant with God? It would make a great difference if we did.

The Ten Commandments begin with God proclaiming, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." There in the wilderness, God made a covenant with the Hebrews. No longer were they a band of run-away slaves. No longer were they orphans with no home. No longer were they misfits, the scum of society. Now, they were God's people. I am your God; you are my people. God's part of the covenant is the act of love, adopting them as his people. God promised to bless them, to protect them, to make of them a great nation. God had made the promise to Abraham some 800 years before; there in the wilderness God renewed the covenant with Moses.

The covenant, like a marriage covenant, is a pact, an agreement, a contract, made between two parties. God will be our God, and we will be God's people. "Once you were no people," wrote Peter in our Epistle lesson. "Now you are God's people." Our part of the covenant--our part of the agreement--is to live as God's people, beginning with the observance and keeping of the Ten Commandments.

What does it mean to live in covenant? To live in covenant means that you no longer are alone. You no longer live your life all alone. You do not make decisions entirely on your own understanding and sense of direction. You do not live your life out there on the end of the limb, hoping you won't fall off, hoping someone won't come by and saw it off at the trunk. You are not alone. You are in covenant. God is your God, and you are God's people.

To live in covenant does not mean that God is the judge demanding that you obey the commandments, and then punishing you when you disobey. The commandments are not "shoulds" or "oughts." You should do this. You ought to do that. The commandments are placed within the framework of the covenant; commitments like the vows of marriage. "For better or worse, for richer or poorer, I will love you and be faithful to you." Those are the vows of marriage: your keeping of the covenant, your commitment, your privilege and joy. The commandments are the vows of the covenant: your commitment, your privilege and joy.

To live in covenant with God means that the one who made you, the one who knows more about you than you know yourself, the one who knows your potential, the one who loves you--God--will lead you, protect you, and be with you. To live in covenant means that you cooperate with your Maker, you live in harmony with the universe, in tune with the core of your being.

To live in covenant means that you live in a state of salvation. God so loves you that he came to the world in the flesh, as Jesus the Savior. Because of his love for you, Christ died for you so you might be reconciled to God, reunited with God. Your relationship with God is a gift. Your salvation is a gift. Forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, harmony, love are all gifts from God. God gives you eternal life. To live in covenant means you live in the assurance, the certainty of eternal life. You live in confidence, in the ultimate security that you belong to God.

To live in covenant means that you live God's lifestyle, beginning with the basic, the minimum essentials, the Ten Commandments. Jesus summarized the commandments and reinterpreted them. He summarized the commandments into two: you shall love the Lord your God, and you shall love your neighbor. What does it mean to love God? Minimally, Jesus means the first four commandments: You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make a graven image. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy. Those are the minimum essentials. What does it mean to love your neighbor? At the very least, it means to honor parents, not to kill, not to steal, not to commit adultery, not to lie or to covet.

What is the purpose of God's establishing a covenant with you and me? Not so you can live a successful life, although that is a significant spin-off. The purpose of the covenant is so you will be an example to the world. Do you live each day with that challenge in mind--that you are an example of God's way to those around you: your family, your neighbors, your fellow workers? Don't be caught up in the immorality around you. Don't be part of the crowd. For you are an example. God has called you to be his people--to be a light to the world--so that others might see God in you, that they might find God and serve God because of the witness of your lifestyle.

Living in covenant is not a duty or obligation, but a privilege and a joy. You have been called, you have been chosen to live as God intended people to live. "My delight is in the law of the Lord," wrote the psalmist. To a good Jew, religion was not a burden, but a joy. In the law is freedom. In living God's way there is satisfaction. Your life starts to hang together, starts to succeed when you live in covenant.

I'm glad for this sermon series, and I hope you will find it stimulating. Come each Sunday, and let's begin 1985 revisiting the Ten Commandments. Read the commandments and find the references to Jesus' further interpretations, primarily found in the Sermon on the Mount--Matthew chapters 5, 6 and 7.

On this first Sunday of the new year, we are also observing an ancient Methodist service. The Wesleys wrote and encouraged us to begin the new year reaffirming the covenant. We are using parts of this ancient service today.

Make a resolution this year to live each day reminding yourself that you live in covenant with God.

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DOUGLAS NORRIS
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

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