

"Timeless Truths: The Ten Commandments"

Pastor Rich Knight
Trinitarian Congregational Church
October 2, 2011
Exodus 20:1-17

I have a little trick for remembering where the 10 Commandments are in the Bible. First of all you have to remember when they were given. They were given just after the Israelites had made their Exodus from Egypt. So what book are they in? - Exodus. Secondly, all scripture is important, but some scripture is more important than others. The 10 Commandments are doubly important. So what do you get if you double 10? 20. So the Ten Commandments are found in Exodus 20. (Now you know why I make the big bucks!)

The setting for the giving of the Ten Commandments is important to remember. The Israelites have just been set free from the bondage of the Egyptians. They've escaped the slavery of Egypt through the Crossing of the Red Sea. They will now be a nation in and of themselves. They will one day settle in the Promised Land. So God gives them 10 rules to live by that they might be successful in the Land of Promise. The other thing to keep in mind is the word Covenant. We came across this over and over again in our study of Genesis, as God made a Covenant with Abraham, Isaac & Jacob and their offspring. A Covenant is a loving partnership between two parties. In the Ten Commandments God spells out how God wishes God's covenant partners to live.

Let's take a look: Exodus 20:1-17

Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no

other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work-you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that 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, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Notes on the text:

Vs. 5 - "visiting" not "punishing" but rather that sadly the consequences of sin are often handed down to the next generation

Vs. 11 - "slave" is a disturbing word. It demonstrates that even though these are timeless truths they still reflect the times in which they were recorded.

Vs. 12 - "honor" = pay attention to the needs of

We Americans love the Ten Commandments. We love the movie. We love Charlton Heston playing Moses. We love the idea of the tablets. (Raiders of the Lost Arc was about those tablets) We love depictions of the Ten Commandments - the two tablets with Roman Numerals, as if they'd been invented then. We love catchy sayings about the Ten Commandments. "The Ten Commandments are not multiple choice." We love the Ten Commandments. We just don't know them very well.

The 10 Commandments Study (9/2007 Kelton Research and 10 Commandments Commission) revealed the following statistics:

- 35 percent of Americans can recall all six Brady kids from the Brady Bunch
- 25 percent could name all seven ingredients of the Big Mac.
- Only 14 percent can accurately name all Ten Commandments.

I remember an embarrassing time when my ignorance of the Ten Commandments was on display. I was in college and our conference of the UCC held an event for college students planning on going to seminary. I was seated next to the Conference Minister, who's like our bishop. We were having a discussion about some of our favorite passages in the Bible. Someone mentioned Matthew 22:34-40. Jesus said the greatest of all the commandments is *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength."* And the second greatest is like it, *"Love your neighbor as yourself."*

The Conference Minister asked, "Which commandment is 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength'?" I quickly replied, "#1!" "No," he said, "It's not one of the Ten Commandments. It's from the Book of Deuteronomy." I resolved then and there to stop answering the

questions so quickly and also to read my Bible.

Matthew 22 however is related to the Ten Commandments. The church I served in Pennsylvania had stained glass windows. There were Christian symbols depicted in each window. And in one of the windows were two tablets representing the Ten Commandments. But what caught my eye on day was the fact that on the first tablet there were the Roman numerals for I - IV. And on the second tablet there were the numerals for VI to X. So 4 on the first and 6 on the second. My first thought was the artist did what we all sometimes do - we start out writing too big and can't fit everything in the space we'd hope. But if you're making a stained glass window you'd think you'd plan it out a little better. I've actually seen this way of representing the Ten Commandments elsewhere and one day I came across the explanation. The first four commandments are about loving God. The next six are about loving your neighbor.

So the first four help us fulfill what Jesus said is our greatest calling, to love God. The next six commandments help us fulfill our other great calling, to love our neighbor.

Commandments # 5-#10 are the most familiar. They roll off our tongues:

- Honor your father and mother
- You shall not murder
- You shall not commit adultery
- Don't steal
- Don't lie, and
- Don't covet

Those are pretty basic and yet they're very comprehensive. They cover family life, marriage, property, speech and an attitude of the heart, coveting. It strikes me that these commandments (#5-#10) are for all

people everywhere and they can be practiced by people of other faiths or by people with no faith at all. The first four commandments are different. They are specific to the Judeo-Christian faith. They're for Jews and Christians. In fact, God gives a self-identifying statement to start it all off. *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."* "LORD" in all capital letters means, *"I am Yahweh your God"* (Yahweh, the name of God as revealed to Moses at the burning bush). This is not the "Man Upstairs" speaking, or the voice of a Higher Power - undefined, unspecified, like Aristotle's "Unmoved Mover."

This is the God of the Israelites, the God of Abraham & Sarah. And we learn that this God is a jealous God.

Commandment #1 - You shall have no other gods before me. I will be your God and you shall be my people. Serve only me. Worship only me. Don't put anything before me. Don't pledge your ultimate allegiance to anything or anyone but me.

Commandment #2 - Do not make for yourself any idol. Do not make them and certainly do not bow down to them or worship them. Don't worship anything man-made. Don't put anything ahead of me. I'm a jealous God. I want your heart.

Commandment #3 - Don't misuse my name. If you speak of me, if my name passes over your lips, let it be in the form of a prayer, not a swear. Don't throw my name around that way. And if you say you belong to me, don't let that be in vain. Don't take my name in vain. Let it mean something.

Do you see how these are very religious commandments? They're for those

who wish to devote themselves to God. They're showing us how to love God, how to put God first in our lives.

And, Commandment #4 - Remember the sabbath and keep it holy.

Refrain from working one day a week. And make it a holy day, a day for God. Consecrate that day. It's God's Day. Spend it with God.

Here's something I found in my research this week. These first four commandments were all brand new ideas. Most of them are without precedent in the ancient world. For instance worshipping idols was the norm in ancient times. - that's how ancient religions worked. People manufactured representations of their gods and then bowed down before those representations. And pretty soon the representation took the place of God. But the God of the Israelites, the One True God (by that I mean monotheism), this God cannot be confined to an idol. This God is everywhere. This God will walk with you wherever you go.

That's also the point of, *"Have no other gods before me."* In ancient times each nation had their own god. And when you went from your nation to another, you left the jurisdiction of your god for the jurisdiction of another. But in monotheism, which the Hebrew scriptures introduce to the world, there's only one God. And that God is not bound by nationalities or political boundaries. Do you see the point? Having only one God, not making idols to worship, having a Sabbath to the Lord, all these were brand new ideas and put the Israelites at odds with the prevailing practices at the time.

And perhaps that's the point - God's people are to be distinct, unique, set apart, different. All those who practice the Ten Commandments will be different. A friend I grew up with, Denny, became a missionary, serving God by serving the poor in Cairo, Egypt. He did so because one day someone said to him, "You're a cool Christian, Denny. You're just like everyone else." And he realized he wasn't supposed to be like everyone

else. He's supposed to be different.

Think about it.