

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on February 6, 2022

THE GIVING OF THE LAW

The Lord said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there, and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandments, which I have written for their instruction.”

Exodus 24:12

Two weeks ago, we explored the most important miracle in the whole Old Testament – the parting of the Red Sea. Today in our core story we learn of God’s greatest gift to the Hebrew people. If you learned anything from Sunday school or from watching Cecil B. DeMille’s classic movie it is the importance of the Ten Commandments. After their liberation from Egypt the people of Israel were led to Mt. Sinai. Moses went up the mountain and received tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments were written. These Ten Commandments created a new covenant with Israel. These commandments were understood to be at the heart of the relationship between God and Israel.

The people built a highly decorated box they called the “Arc of the Covenant” in which the tablets were placed. The arc was taken with the people to the Promised Land. The final home of the arc was the Temple in Jerusalem where the arc was placed by Solomon in the Holy of Holies.

In 586 BC the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and the arc has disappeared from history. It remains a mystery as to what happened to the arc and the commandments in stone. Its power and importance was brought to mind in the Indiana Jones movie “Raiders of the Lost Ark.”

The stone commandments were the foundation on the communal life of the Jewish people. The heart of Jewish life is studying the commandments in order to follow them in daily life. It is easy to read the command to keep the Sabbath, it takes years to understand how to live it out.

How are we to understand the purpose of the Ten Commandments. I believe that one way for us to understand their function is as an instructional manual for life.

Most of you are not aware of the many ways our Wednesday group “The Loose Screws” assist our Trustees in caring for our building. For several years the glass doors separating the narthex from the sanctuary have had a problem. There was oil in the closers that was leaking. It ran down the doors. The Trustees received an estimate from a door company to replace the closers. The cost would have been something like \$7000. The “Loose Screws” spent many weeks in research. They looked online at the manufacturer’s instructions and learned how to replace the closers. This past Wednesday they completed the last door. Total cost about \$835. All that savings from following the manufacturer’s instructions.

One possible way for us to understand the Commandments is as manual for living our lives. Several years ago, one of our adult study groups, read a book by a New York Times reporter called **Losing Moses on the Freeway: The 10 Commandments in America**. In this wonderfully written book Christopher Hedges took a fresh look at the meaning of the Ten Commandments in our lives in the third millennium. As Hedges tells us in his prologue:

They were for the ancients, and are for us, the rules that, when honored, hold us together and when dishonored lead to alienation, discord and violence.

Instead of seeking first to understand the individual commands, the primary question we need to answer is why did God give these commandments to his people? What function are they to serve?

There are some people who seem to view the Ten Commandments as arbitrary rules given at the whim of an all powerful king. In his book on the Ten Commandments, Emmet Fox reminds us that many people approach the Bible with a preset picture of God. He writes:

They start with the belief in a rather terrible, very severe, limited God, Jehovah, who is going to save a few people and send the rest to eternal torment.

If you have the understanding of an angry, terrible God who seeks only radical obedience, you may approach the Ten Commandments with a limited understanding. They may seem to be merely arbitrary rules set up by the bully of the universe. Their meaning and purpose is not to be understood, all that is required is obedience to the all-powerful deity.

I believe that there are many followers of Jesus and even more non-followers of Jesus who perceive God and his commandments in this way. The commandments are sometimes viewed as a way for God to impose his will. If God was just an arbitrary rule giver, I would find it very difficult to love him.

While God is our King, the Ten Commandments are not merely a manifestation of his power.

There have been some Christians who seem to believe that the Ten Commandments are given as a means of salvation. It seems to me that often children in Sunday school are given the impression that the way to please God and get to heaven is by following the Ten Commandments. It is often intimated that the way we can gain God's favor is by following the commandments to the letter.

The problem with this approach is that it does not work. You and I are unable to follow the Ten Commandments perfectly. We always come up short. Expecting the Commandments to lead us towards salvation ends in frustration and guilt.

This was the experience of Martin Luther. Luther spent the first part of his life trying to make himself acceptable to God by fulfilling the law. Luther was born in 1483 to a family involved in the copper-mining industry. His father wanted him to become a lawyer and sent him to University. Then one day while returning home to school after a visit with this family, a thunderbolt knocked him to the ground and nearly took his life. Luther cried out to the patron saint of miners, "St. Anne, help and I will become a monk."

To the consternation of his father, Luther kept his vow and entered a monastery. Luther attempted to be the best monk that he could be. His purpose was to become the best follower of Jesus that he could possibly be. He desired to make himself worthy of God's love.

The medieval church in which Luther was raised had set up a whole system, which prescribed the actions necessary to earn the grace of Christ. On entering the monastery, Luther threw himself into this system. He wanted to shape his life in order to become acceptable to God. Luther became the perfect monk. He fasted more than the others. He prayed more than the others. He confessed more than his brother monks. Luther sought to follow the commandments as perfectly as he could.

Yet for all his devotion, for all his following of the penitential order, Luther realized that he came up short. He could not earn his way to salvation. He had no assurance that God loved him.

Luther was given a professorship in Bible at Wittenberg University. It was while studying the Bible that Luther was given an insight into the true nature of grace. He came to understand that God's love for us is not dependent upon our fulfilling the commandments, but rather God's own action in Christ. It is Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, which makes us acceptable to God not our own moral struggle. Luther came to trust not in his own righteousness, but in the goodness of God. Salvation comes to us as a gift from God in Christ, not as a result of our fulfilling the commandments.

Therefore we should not look at the Ten Commandments as the entrance exams for heaven.

How then should we approach these commandments? Let us look at the context in which God gave them to Moses. The Book of Exodus begins with the people of Israel in slavery in Egypt. They had no choice as to what they could do with their lives. Their community life and individual lives were directed and controlled by their oppressors. Then Moses came to Egypt and led them to freedom. The crossing of the Red Sea meant liberation from slavery. They had a new beginning. They had choices to make about the kind of community and people they would become.

They journeyed through the wilderness and made their way to Mount Sinai. At Sinai Moses went up the mountain and there God spoke to him in a special way. God gave to Moses the Ten Commandments. These Commandments were given to the whole community to shape their common life. The Commandments were to give order to the freedom that they are had given. They were given to shape how the community can live in harmony.

The first four commandments teach how to relate to God and the final six shape how an individual can live in community. This is reflected in Jesus' two great commands to love God and neighbor.

The Ten Commandments can be understood as a manual given by the manufacturer. God is the maker of heaven and earth. God created each one of us in his image. God knows us better than we know ourselves. He is our creator. He knows the needs of each human being. He is the one who knows how to build human community. He created and shaped the human soul and knows how it works.

I believe the proper approach for us to take with the commandments is to view them as the owner's manual provided by the manufacturer. God has given us the directions for our lives, so that our lives individually and as a community might be fruitful. The intent of the Ten Commandments is to enable us to live successful, happy and faithful lives.

I began this sermon telling you about the new door openers for the sanctuary doors finished this week. If we follow the directions given in the owner's manual, the doors will last longer and operate more efficiently than if the directions are ignored. The manufacturer gave instructions so their product will be used properly.

In like manner, if we study God's commandments and seek to follow them, they will make our everyday lives better.

The Ten Commandments are not arbitrary rules of a capricious God.

They are not hurdles on the way to salvation.

They are not burdens to weigh us down.

They are not a means of making us feel guilty.

The Ten Commandments are a gift.

They are a loving gift from a God who wants our lives to be whole.

If we seek to follow the commandments, they will shape our lives and the lives of the community and lead us to wholeness and peace. As Christopher Hedges tells us:

The commandments call us to reject and defy powerful forces that can rule our lives and to live instead for others, even if this costs us status and prestige and wealth. The commandments show us how to avoid being enslaved, how to save us from ourselves. They lead us to love, the essence of life.