**Exodus 20:1-17** March 7, 2021

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*Exodus 20:1God spoke all these words:*

*2“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*

*3“You shall have no other gods before me. 4You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 5You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, 6but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

*7“You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.*

*8“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 9Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. 11For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

*12“Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.*

*13“You shall not murder.*

*14“You shall not commit adultery.*

*15“You shall not steal.*

*16“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.*

*17“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Sooner or later, we learn to follow our mother’s advice; for example: “Take smaller bites.” Hopefully by a certain age, we have learned to not “bite off more than we can chew.” But you can remember that time in grade school. You were at a table with friends. You took a huge bite of a hamburger. Your cheeks ballooned. You realized, “I’m in trouble,” you grabbed for the soda, which only made it worse. Lessons learned the hard way! Worse yet, lessons that prove Mom was right!

If only I had listened to my mom! Today’s Bible reading has all Ten Commandments in it. Three years ago, some might remember, we had a sermon series on the Ten Commandments. That went on for ten weeks, two and a half months—and there was still a lot we didn’t cover! Today, in one sermon, on a communion Sunday, we are covering all ten. More than I can chew, I tell ya!

So, while I usually like to focus on a single point in a sermon and expand on that, today it is going to be more of an overview with general observations about the Ten Commandments.

I suggest as a theme for this meditation on the Ten Commandments:

**Life the Way God Imagined It**

**I. By Necessity, Commandments Limit**

Any time you break out a word like “commandment” or “law” or “rule,” people bristle. That’s because we like freedom. Any time anybody tries to limit our freedom (even if for a good reason), we growl.

However, our freedoms have to be constrained and channeled to be of any good. People who don’t do this are lawless. They become a curse to other people. All of God’s created order works this way, namely, within limits. For example, through a series of constraints and channels, heat from a chuck of burning coal, a solar panel or a nuclear reactor many miles away powers your phone charger. A gun needs a barrel so it can send the bullet where you want it. For any effort to be useful, it has to operate within certain constraints, otherwise it is wasted or even dangerous.

The Ten Commandments are the limits, the constraints and channels, that God has designed us to work in. Within these parameters we become a blessing to other people, and also enjoy our own gift of life from God. How do they work?

**II. The Commandments Are First about God**

…which sounds obvious, but it’s not.

When we think of the Ten Commandments, I think we usually think of our relationships to other people. The commandments everyone knows are “You shall not steal. You shall not murder.” Over the years the Ten Commandments have often been brought in to debates on social issues. But something we need to remember is that the Ten Commandments are first about our relationship to the Lord, our God, the God of Israel.

To prove what I am saying, just take a look at this reading in the bulletin. The part of the Ten Commandments that is about God, verses 2-11, is almost three times as long as the part about people, verses 12-17. In fact, the First Commandment and the Sabbath commandment *each*, by themselves, are longer than all seven commandments about our neighbors put together.

Add to that the fact that the three lead-off commandments are about God. Add to that that when Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment he responded, *“This is the first and greatest commandment: Love the Lord your God with heart and with all your soul and with all your mind”* (Mt. 22:38).

The most important thing to get right in our lives is that God must be in first place. He alone claims the right to be the North Star of our lives. Each of the first three commandments presses this point home.

**III. The Commandments Are Second about Other People**

After the first three commandments about God, the rest of the commandments are about our neighbors. The first is that we must honor parents and other authorities. And then, with society’s authority structures in place, then come commandments protecting people. God prohibits us from taking from our neighbor what God has given them: life, spouse, property, good reputation. All are sacred. We have no right to touch any of them.

If these commandments were followed, we would live in the world we wished we lived in. God has a design for humanity, and his rules are compatible, actually optimized, for his design. If we had stable families, citizens concerned for others, people who would not countenance lies and half-truths, respect for the property of others and authority, we would have the ideal world that the songs sing about and the activists claim they can give us. But we will not do it. We want what we want. When confronted with our failures we can always point the fingers, “But he did it first.” We always have an excuse, or even a reason.

**IV. The Commandments Are about More than Deeds**

Which is all bad enough, but we have not reached the end of the Ten Commandments. At the end comes the most profound commandment of all, the one about coveting: The word “covet” is not about plotting and planning, lurking in the shadows, it is simply about sitting on your front porch (or your workstation) desiring what is not yours to have. ***“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”*** Here God claims the right to tell us what we can think. That doesn’t sit well. If there is one thing we insist on, it is that we are entitled to our own opinion, that we can think what we want.

(I have used the following example before, but it is instructive.) I remember hearing an observant 21st century Jew not too long ago. He rejected the idea of Jesus as his Savior, but basically agreed with all the teachings of Jesus—except for one. He said that he just could not buy that one place where Jesus says, *“Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”* (Mt 5:28). He said, “That is ridiculous. You can’t be serious that God would judge someone because of a desire you can’t help,” at which point I wanted to ask him (but I was listening to him on the radio): “You are a Jew. If you object to Jesus saying it, what about the law given through Moses, ***‘You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife?’****”*

That’s the offensive thing about the commandments. God says that we will be judged even for our thoughts. Even for those times we wonder why someone who obviously has no clue about how to drive gets to have a car like that, when we resent how much people have when we obviously work much harder, when an idle eye casts a desiring look at another’s spouse pleasing of appearance or pleasant in manner. That’s sin. God says so. You have thought sin. The punishment of sins against the fifth commandment and the tenth, sins of deed and sins of thought is death. *“The wages of sin is death.”*(Rom 6:23)

**V. The Commandments Give No Hope, But in the One Who Kept Them for Us**

When Christians look at a broken world, we might think that the answer lies in the commandments. If we would just do these; if we would just fashion just laws based on these; if we would just post these commandments where everyone sees them, teach them in schools, then we’d be okay, right?

Oh, we might shore up the edges a little bit, lower the crime rate a couple percentage points, but humanity will continue under God’s judgment. Just in case we think otherwise, God’s word declares, *“No one will be declared righteous in [God’s] sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin”* (Rom 3:20). Either these commands make you realize that you are a hopeless, miserable sinner, or you become an arrogant and hypocritical Pharisee. But they will not save you. The last hymn reminded us, *“What curses does the law pronounce Against the one who fails but once!... My soul, no more attempt to draw Your life and comfort from the law.”* Rather than saving us, these commandments only make certain what we feared: no matter our efforts to make ourselves right with the God of heaven, we always fall short.

In Romans chapter 7 the apostle Paul mourned his own sinfulness, in spite of his attempts to do better. In the end, the only way he found peace between himself and the Ten Commandments was when he said, *“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!”* (24-25).

The only hope we can have is in the one who died for our sins, and also fulfilled these commandments, even the ones about thoughts. That’s what Jesus had in mind at another time when he said, *“It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.”* (Mt 3:15). He fulfilled them all for us. Again, our hymn sang, *“But in the gospel Christ appears, Pard’ning the guilt of num’rous years… Flee to the hope the gospel gives; The one who trusts the promise lives.”*

**VI. The Commandments Are Valuable as a Guide to Thankfulness**

These commandments do serve us in another way. They cannot save sinful people, but they can guide saved people. Think about that: “The Ten Commandments cannot save sinful people, but they can guide saved people.” And that was God’s intention even back when he first inscribed them on the stone tablets.

These laws were given to the Israelites while they were camped out at Mt. Sinai, a mountain in modern day Egypt, near the border of Israel. Just three months previous, all the Israelites had been cringing under the clubs and whips of their Egyptian slave masters. Then through the most amazing series of events in human history, God cut their chains loose. God struck the Egyptians with Ten Plagues, ten supernatural but almost natural looking disasters in quick succession. There were infestations of vermin, disease, hail and more. Finally when all Egypt’s firstborn died in one day and the Israelites put the blood of the Passover lambs on their doorframes, the king released the Israelite slaves. Days later, God cut a swathe through the waters of the Red Sea so Israel could flee from their oppressors. In the desert God provided food and water for them in ways that could not be explained in any other way than miraculous. Their eyes had seen it! Their mouths had drunk the water! In the last hundred days they had witnessed undeniable proof that God had delivered them. And now God, before an assembly of all the people, in the desert heat at the base of Mount Sinai, he declared that they were his people, and that these Ten Commandments would be the basis for living their lives

He said, ***“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”*** He said that not *after* the Ten Commandments, but *before.* Before God told them to do anything, he told Israel what he had already done for them. He laid claim to their lives, not on the basis of their obedience, but his loving choice.

And so it is with us and these Ten Commandments. Their chief value for us as dearly beloved children of God is not to get our heavenly Father to love us and accept us, but to say to our heavenly Father in word, deed and thought, “Thank you for having loved, accepted and forgiven us in your Son, Jesus Christ.” Amen.