**Exodus 20:1-2 – *First in Ten Commandments Series*** June 24, 2018

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

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

Dear Friends in Christ,

**The First Word**

The Ten Commandements. Today we start a series of sermons looking at the Ten Commandments. When you think of the Ten Commandmets you think of those big stone tablets which Charleton Heston, I mean, Moses brought down from Mount Sinai. Words inscribed by the firey finger of God on cold hard stone. That’s what we think of when we think of the Ten Commandments.

That has a lot of appeal. In a world gone mad with change, it is good to have something that doesn’t change. For the past 150 years, each generation has lived a life that the previous generation couldn’t have imagined. When I grew up the VCR tape was high technology and cell phones were so big you had to have a car to carry them around. Yet in its day we thought we were pretty sophisticated. But we, *we* in 2018 know so much better, don’t we? Not so fast. In another 30 years people will look back at us in 2018 and laugh at how slow our optic fiber internet connections are, and how bad the resolution is on our 4K TVs. They are going to look back at us and think, “Am I ever glad I don’t live back in 2018! Life must have been unbearable back then!”

In the middle of a changing world, it is nice to have something inscribed in stone that doesn’t change. That is the charm, if you will, of the Ten Commandments. For all the controversy surronuding them, there they still are after 3,500 years. We may like change, but we also appreciate one or two things that don’t.

But not everyone likes the Ten Commandments, you know. Some people are willing to protest even to go to court to get the Ten Commandments out of public places, out of parks and courthouses. Pretty interesting that a 3,500 year old document can do so much to stir the pot.

As Christians, we realize that the Ten Commandments are important. They are an important summary of what God wants. But what are they?

“Well, they are those two large flat sheets of rock that Moses carried down from Mount Sinai with writing on them, right?”

“Ok. But what did God write on those rocks?”

“He wrote the Ten Commandments?”

“And what are the Ten Commandments?”

“Well, they are the words God wrote on those rocks.”

“But what did write?”

“The Ten Commandments?”

We like the Ten Commandments. But it would be interesting to see how many of us could recite more than half of the 10. How many could you recite? And that is us here in this church! And how many of us could explain what it means “to give false testimony” or “to covet”. It is kind of strange how little people who honor the Ten Commandments generally know about those Ten Commandments.

**Numbering the “Commandments”**

But here something to think about. We actually don’t know what the first, second, third, fourth, or tenth commandment is! What I mean is: the Bible never says, “This is the 1st. This is the 2nd. This is the 3rd.” It just says that this port of scripture from Exodus 20:1-17 is the Ten Commandments. There are ten, but it doesn’t tell us how to number them.

This is a problem because there are more than 10 commands in these seventeen verses. So in order to get Ten Commandments, people start grouping things.

Lutherans and Catholics group the first two commands as one commandment, because they are both commands about worshiping only the Lord God. Most other Protestants group the last two commands together in one commandment, because both are commands about coveting. Other believers follow a third plan – more about that in a moment. We have these different ways of numbering the Ten Commandments because there are actually more than 10 commands in Exodus 20.

So what to do? Numbering the commandments has been a dispute through the centuries. However, most have agreed that how we number them is not so important, as long as the way we divide up the Ten Commandments teaches the full message of Exodus 20:1-17.

Here is something that makes it even more difficult and interesting. In the Hebrew, it does not say there are Ten Commandments. What it literally says is that there are “Ten Words” or “Ten Statements.” That is different from Ten Commandments. That opens the way for us to consider something that maybe not all ten of the words are commands. That opens the possibility that today’s reading is actually the *first* of the Ten so-called Commandments – which is in fact how many Jews number the ten commandments.

**The First Word**

If we look at today’s reading carefully, it says, (and here I read from the Bible), it says, ***“God spoke all these words.”*** It doesn’t say, “He spoke all these commandments.” It says, ***“God spoke all these words.”*** Then he gave the Ten Commandmetns. And the first, *the first* thing that God says is not a command or demand, a statement of his good will. The first thing God says in the Ten Commandments is, ***“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”*** God explains his relationship to Israel, first. Before he asks or commands anything of them, he tells them what he does done for them. That is important for us to understand as Christians.

And that is what we are to understand about everything we do for God. Before we do anything for God, we need to understand what God has done for us. You saw it on the marquee outside church. You heard it in our second reading. ***“We love, because he first loved us.”***

**Our Response to the First Word**

When we look at the Ten Commandments in this way—that the first statement isn’t a command—that is what we call the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. The Gospel, the Good news of what God has done for us, leads us to follow God’s laws. Everything we do is thanksgiving for what God has already done.

It might not be apparent at first, but this is profound.

If a woman came up to you on the street and said, “I need ten dollars.” You would have questions, wouldn’t you? “Who are you? Why do you need ten dollars? What are you going to do with those ten dollars?” And you still probably won’t give this stranger the money. And even if you should fork over the ten dollars, you are going to have doubts.

But now, what if it is your mother who took care of you, cooked thousands of meals for you, kissed all your boo-boos, bought you better clothes than she bought for herself, who never forgets your birthday… What if your mother suddenly turns to you and says, “I need ten dollars”? You are going to give it to her aren’t you? In fact, you might even say, “Mom, is ten dollars enough? Do you need twenty? Fifty?”

What is the difference between the requests of the two women? Of course, it isn’t the request, but it is your relationship to them. The relathionship makes all the difference in how you act.

And God, when he gives the Ten Commandments, before he asks the Israelites for anything, he tells them, ***“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”*** He is a caring God.

These people, these Israelites, knew what he was talking about. Standing before Mount Sinain they were just three months out of Egypt. They bore the physical scars of the whip lashes of the Egyptian slavemasters. Some of the women bore the psychological scars of babies forcefully taken from them and thrown into the river Nile at the order of Pharaoh (Exodus 1). ***“I am the Lord who brought you… out of the land of slavery”*** is a reality they felt and knew. This was not some generation that knew only tales of slavery from their grandparents around the campfire. They had lived it just twelve weeks before. And God had gotten them out of it. And *then* he gave them his commands.

And so it is with us. When we understand what God has done for us, then when we hear God’s commands, then we desire to do those commands. Not to gain God’s favor, but because God has already showered his favor upon us. This was most clearly seen in the Gospel reading where we heard of the death of Jesus.

We have a deliverance even greater than the Israelites’ deliverance. Through Jesus’ death on the cross, our death sentence in hell has been pardoned. The chains of sin unshackled. And now Christ comes to us and says, *“You should do as I have done for you”* (John 13:15). That’s is what the Ten Commandments are for us.

Indeed, at your best moments, you do enjoy fulfilling God’s commands. You know God’s commands to love him and to love one another, and you try to! You fight against selfishness, against temptation. Sometimes you ask me what you should do. You go to God in prayer for wisdom in tricky situations. And when you fail to keep God’s commands, as all who are still in the flesh do, you go back to God confessing your sins and desiring to hear the word of forgiveness from his mouth.

This is what inspires you to try to keep the Ten Commandments. For people who know what God has done for them, the Ten Commandments are a joy.

**The Ten Commandments Proper Place**

But at just this point, I must close with a word of caution. On the one hand, we hope that people will follow the rules in the Ten Commandments, because if they do, our society will be a better place. We will have stronger families, a better court system, kinder public discourse. But the command part of the Ten Commandments can’t save anyone. This is where the Ten Commandments in our courthouses is problematic. Because even if people would do all of the “Thou shalts” and “Thou shalt nots”, they still are no closer to heaven than if they had never heard the Ten Commandments.

If we tell people that God wants them to be kind, truthful, loving, responsible, chaste – and God does want these things – but that is *all* we say, then we have saved none. If the Ten Commandments were posted on every street corner, and everyone conformed their lives to the Ten Commandments, but that is all they did, we would have helped no one spiritually. The Ten Commandments are not the way to heaven.

That is why God, before he gave the Israelites all the “Thou shalts” and “Thou shalt nots”, he said, ***“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”*** In our day, he tells us first that we have been loved and saved in Christ, and then calls us to a new way of living. God makes us his own through his grace. *Then* he tells us how he wants us to live.

As we look at the Ten Commandments in the coming weeks, let always have this question in the back of our minds, “Which came first? My obedience or God’s love?” God’s love. Now live like he loves you. Amen.