

Chuck Blaisdell, Senior Pastor  
First Christian Church  
Colorado Springs, Colorado  
September 14, 2014  
© 2014

## Words to the Wise: A Sermon Series on the Ten Commandments I. “No other....”

Exodus 20:1-3 (CEB) Then God spoke all these words: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You must have no other gods before me."

It is either a foolish or courageous preacher – perhaps both – who would voluntarily choose to do a sermon series on the Ten Commandments. It feels a it like how it feels each year facing the Easter and Christmas stories, wondering what I can possibly say that is fresh, interesting, or helpful in the face of such well-known stories. And indeed, “the Ten Commandments” are very well known – although perhaps not as much as we think.... After all, sixty-percent of Americans can’t name even half of the commandments.<sup>1</sup> And only barely half know that the Golden Rule is not part of the Ten Commandments.<sup>2</sup> A survey a few years ago showed that while eighty percent of Americans could name the primary component of a Big Mac – “two all-beef patties” – and sixty-two percent knew that the Big Mac has a pickle, only thirty-three percent of Americans correctly answered that “remember the Sabbath” is part of the Ten Commandments – far less than the forty-three percent who could name every member of the Brady Bunch.<sup>3</sup>

The Ten Commandments was the subject of one of Cecille B. DeMille’s earliest silent movies in 1923 and our cultural cinematic image for them was fixed in the popular mind by Charlton Heston’s portrayal in 1956. Folks have fought over whether they

---

<sup>1</sup><http://www.cbn.com/cbnnews/us/2009/June/Do-You-Know-Your-Bible-Many-Christians-Don't/>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.pewforum.org/2010/09/28/us-religious-knowledge-an-overview-of-the-pew-forum-survey-results-and-implications/#2>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/10/12/us-bible-commandments-idUSN1223894020071012>

could be put in courtrooms and on courthouse lawns, in schools and parks. The image itself has become so commonplace that when folks want to create a set of rules about something, they often will call them “The Ten Commandments of This or That.” And so, for example, you can find the “Ten Commandments for the Internet,” and the “Ten Commandments of Computer Ethics,” the “Ten Commandments of Italian Cooking,” and the “Ten Commandments for Raising Chickens.” But for all the ubiquity of the image, I would suggest that we may not really know the Ten Commandments as well as we think we do and that therefore a re-introduction to them is a worthwhile thing to do.

The first thing to note, though, is that we will fail to truly understand the Ten Commandments if we don’t see them in their **context**. Without that context, it is similar to those laws that are still on the books but which now seem baffling because we no longer know the context of them. For instance, in Alabama it is still illegal to put salt on a railroad track, and in Kentucky you may not carry an ice cream cone in your back pocket.<sup>4</sup> But what we don’t now recall or know is that these laws originated from real situations: in the mid-19th century anti-railroad vandals would put salt on railroad tracks, which attracted cows to lick the salt and which caused more than a few train accidents. And there apparently was a court case from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century where a defendant charged with horse-stealing claimed that he didn’t steal the horse, but the horse only followed him home when the man “accidentally” put an ice cream cone in his back pocket. (Sounds like a very sticky way to steal a horse). Without the context and the history of a particular law or rule, we will find ourselves more puzzled than enlightened.

It is the same with the Ten Commandments. Without their history and context, they too can seem to be simply arbitrary laws and rules. But they are not, for they indeed do have a history and a context. And moreover, that history and context is not

---

<sup>4</sup><http://emilycheath.com/2011/10/05/laws-without-legalism-a-sermon-on-the-ten-commandments-for-october-2-2011/> and <http://www.omgfacts.com/Interesting/In-Kentucky-it-is-illegal-to-carry-an-ic/1606>

something for society in general but for the Jewish people, and by God's gracious adoption of us into God's covenant with them, we Christians as well. So let us do a little remembering of the context and that context goes back all the way to Abraham and Sarah. Abraham and Sarah and their children and grandchildren are the "first family of faith," the first ones to whom God disclosed the Divine Self, the ones to whom God made the promise of a covenant that would include descendants outnumbering the grains of sands. Eventually that family extends to Joseph, the one who was sold into slavery in Egypt, but who came to be the Egyptian chief of staff and who saved both the Egyptian people and the Hebrew people from extinction when a seven year famine came and Joseph invited his extended family to flee to the protection of Egypt.

And so the Hebrew people lived on in Egypt for several centuries, but over the course of that time, the Egyptian government came to be no longer the protector of the Jewish people but their oppressor. As it says in Exodus "There arose over Egypt a king who did not know Joseph."<sup>5</sup> And the Egyptian leaders began treating the Hebrew people harshly, going to far as to demand that their midwives kill all newly born Hebrew baby boys, and seeking to extinguish the people's practice of their ancient worship of their ancient God, the God of Abraham and Sarah and their family. So, it might be said that not only did Egypt come to have a king who knew not of Joseph, so too had the Hebrew people, under the lash of Egyptian oppression, increasingly forgotten God. In fact, if you read the fifth chapter of Exodus closely, when Moses confronts Pharaoh and asks that he let the Hebrew people go, it's not simply because they are being oppressed, but so they can become re-acquainted with and worship Yahweh, the God whom they have almost forgotten!

And then – to fast forward to our scripture for today – once the Hebrew people have finally fled Egypt and have stopped to catch their breath there beneath Mt. Sinai,

---

<sup>5</sup>Exodus 1:8

God gives them these Ten Commandments (or as some translations and traditions call them, The Ten Words) with a seemingly strange beginning. Did you notice it? *“Then God spoke all these words: ‘I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.’”* In other words, the first words of the Ten Commandments are God re-introducing himself!<sup>6</sup> Why? Because the people did not know who that God was; they had forgotten who the real Lord of their lives was, they thought that any “god” must be like the various capricious and often cruel deities that the Egyptians had worshiped.

Now do you begin to see why the historical context for The Ten Commandments is so crucial to truly understanding them? As pastor Emily Heath puts it:

...we’re not just reading about some sort of divine law book with no longer relevant statues. We’re reading about the foundation for a covenant, the foundation for a relationship. We’re reading about God reaching out to God’s people and saying “you are not in that place of harshness and punishment anymore. You are not bound to me out of fear. You are bound to me out of love.”<sup>7</sup>

You see, the Hebrew people’s most recent experience had been that “the gods” were harsh, uncaring, and capricious. And so they had to be re-introduced to the real God, and be reminded that the covenant made so long ago with Abraham and Sarah still stood. That reminder is similar to what can be found at the very end of the book of Exodus as the Hebrew people are on the verge of finishing their journey and entering the promised land, when Moses gives them a final reminder of who God truly is. In the words of Rev. Barbara Blaisdell,

---

<sup>6</sup>I am indebted here to Joseph Morgan-Smith’s insightful “A Sermon on the Ten Commandments” for his reminder about the importance of realizing the import of God’s “re-introduction” to the Hebrew people. <http://theologoholic.wordpress.com/2011/10/01/a-sermon-on-the-ten-commandments/>

<sup>7</sup>Emily Heath, “Laws Without Legalism: a Sermon on the Ten Commandments,” <http://emilyheath.com/2011/10/05/laws-without-legalism-a-sermon-on-the-ten-commandments-for-october-2-2011/>

There in the mountains, overlooking that golden, fertile valley Moses reminded his people of how far they'd come. He reminded them of why they'd left Egypt in the first place and of all God had done to save their fannies from Pharaoh and from famine and from fatigue.<sup>8</sup>

And, moreover, these “wise words from God,” these Ten Commandments, also delivered the people from that exhausting business of trying to appease all those other so-called Gods.

And that’s the point where we begin to find this first commandment’s relevance to us today. Again, in the words of Barbara Blaisdell

...the magnificent theological and ethical insight of the Hebrew people [is that] there is but one good, one God in this world. To serve anything less than the ultimate good is to serve an empty and false god. In the time of [Moses, though], most of the world served competing goods/competing gods. The god of rain demanded this sacrifice. The goddess of fertility required that one. And each person danced between the gods, trying to appease each. And we do the same thing. We dance between all the demands of our lives:

to be good and give to those less fortunate

to remember to call in our pledge to public television or radio

to make our sacrificial gift to the church

to take care of ourselves at the gym and the mall and the bookstore; and

don't forget aroma therapy and Chinese medicine and massage; all so we

don't get burnt out

so many rain dances and rituals and sacrifices

---

<sup>8</sup>Barbara S. Blaisdell, “The Jesus Creed: Jesus’ Way of Growing Disciples,” a sermon preached at First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Tacoma, Washington. September 7, 2014.

so many gods and goods to appease<sup>9</sup>

My friends, what gods do you find yourself trying to appease? How do you need to be re-introduced to the one true God, who is ever and only good? You see, the Ten Commandments, in the words of one preacher, “constitute a way of life for the people who know who they are and whose they are – people who are freed **from** the Pharaohs of this world [and freed] **for** the worship of the Lord.”<sup>10</sup> Are you under the mistaken impression that God is an angry scorekeeper, one who is just waiting for you to slip up, one who has more to do with the pharaohs of this world than with the God of gracious love whose mercies are new every morning? If that is you – or if you find yourself slipping into trying to appease a God who won’t act unless you say the “right” words – then surround yourselves with people who know that even though they are sinners that God’s gentle, forgiving, empowering, overwhelming grace is indeed, as the hymn says, “greater than all our sins.” For the God that introduced Himself to Abraham and Sarah, and to Moses, and to the Hebrew people ever wants to reintroduce himself to you too – so that you can know the peace of not having to live in fear, that you can remember that God alone is God, not the things that try to claim god-like power over our lives – not the nation, not our jobs, not our families, not our political parties, not our ideologies. God alone is God.

In this regard, let me close with some words from a sermon by a preacher named Joseph Morgan-Smith. He says this: By the time the Hebrew people actually made it to Mt. Sinai,

...it has been so long since anyone has worshiped the Lord, they don’t remember how. So Moses is summoned to the top of Mount Sinai, and there come the list

---

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Morgan-Smith, Ibid. Emphases mine.

of commandments: “Don’t have idols.” “Don’t steal.” “Don’t have sex with other people’s spouses.” Moses must be thinking, “this doesn’t sound like any worship service I’ve ever been to!” So it turns out that God is less concerned with the kind of music we sing, with whether our liturgy is low-church or high, with whether we wear vestments or use incense, than he is with the way we live our lives. To worship the Lord, the story seems to suggest, is to be the people redeemed by God—rescued from slavery... —in order to live in faithfulness to [God’s] commandments.

And then he concludes this way: The Ten Commandments are ever the reminder that ...this thing between us and God matters. That God cares how we make our schedules, how we treat our parents, how we deal with our property, how we have sex, and that we tell the truth.<sup>11</sup>

*“That we tell the truth.”* Indeed the truth this morning is that those words so long ago to Moses reintroducing God to a lost and frightened people are not oppressive rules from a dictatorial deity, but, as the hymn says, “words of life, wonderful words of life.” That is the truth indeed for you and for me, it is the truth that God wants you to share with those who have felt oppressed by wrongful ideas about God, those who need to know the joy of life lived in the arms of a God who is love unbounded and grace unyielding. That’s the truth. That’s the truth. Will you go tell it?

---

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.