

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS IN THREE EASY LESSONS

February 4, 2007

Today we begin a three week sermon series entitled, “The Ten Commandments in Three Easy Lessons.” Our scripture lesson, of course, comes from Exodus, Chapter 20, verses 1-17. (The Ten Commandments are also found in the book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 5.) I want to capture your attention and draw you into the text and the timeless truth it holds and offers as an invitation to us to experience life. Hear the Word of the Lord.

“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 the parents, to the third and 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 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.’”

Here ends the lesson. Will you pray with me, please? Lord, open our eyes that we might receive in our hearts the wisdom of the ages contained in Your commandments. Help us to recognize this day that in the laws You offer you offer to us life. In the parameters You establish, Lord, You protect that life that we might truly live long within Your love. In Christ, Amen.

Any Ted Turner fans? To give him his due, the man is a communication genius, he is! It is just that some of the things he communicates are rather questionable. For instance, in 1988, at the National Press Association meeting, he commented on the Ten Commandments. This is what he said, “We’re living with outmoded rules. The rules we’re living under [are] the Ten Commandments, and I bet nobody here even pays much attention to ’em, because they are too old.” (Maybe he’s just speaking for himself there.)

“When Moses went up on the mountain, there were no nuclear weapons, there was no poverty. Today, the commandments wouldn’t go over. Nobody around likes to be commanded.”

So Ted has offered an alternative; he calls them the ten voluntary initiatives. Let me share just two with you. Number one, “I promise to love and respect all living things on planet earth, especially my fellow species.” That sounds good, doesn’t it? Voluntary initiative two, “I promise to treat all persons everywhere with dignity, respect, and friendliness.” (Where does he get friendliness?) And then he went on to call Christians losers and bozos. I think he violated one of the voluntary initiatives, don’t you? Isn’t it true?

Well, regardless of what you think of Ted Turner or his thoughts on the Ten Commandments, he does raise a provocative question, doesn’t he? When you realize that the Ten Commandments were crafted and handed from God to Moses thousands of years ago, you have to ask yourself - what is the relevance for today? *Are* they even relevant for us today? And that is the question I leave to you as jury and judge. Because truly, you need to determine how relevant the wisdom of God will be in your life. So here is the plan; here is what I would like to do. Today and for the the next two Sundays, I will be preaching on “The Ten Commandments in Three Easy Lessons.” But that is not quite accurate, as today, I would like to talk about the first four commandments. Next Sunday, I’ll discuss the latter six commandments, and then two weeks from today, I’ll take a look with you at how Jesus summarized all the laws and the prophets. Then, I would invite you to make a determination in your mind and your heart as to how relevant the wisdom of God is to the life you lead. Are you willing to withhold judgment until you have heard what God has to say? Are you? Well then, come on; let’s take a look at the text. When is the last time you read the Ten Commandments, truly? Here is what it says in the Bible, and I am just going to summarize as I go through.

As I stated, today I’ll be focusing on the first four commandments. This is what God said: “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” - the first commandment. Second, “You shall not make for yourself an idol.” The King James Version says, “You shall not make a graven image.” The scripture elaborates and makes it clear that He is talking about anything we fashion with our hands and worship with our hearts; whether it appears to look like anything in heaven, on earth, or under the sea, it is prohibited. And then the third: “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.” And then the fourth, “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.”

Those are the first four, our focus for today. Here is the question to ponder: are these relevant to the lives we live in the 21st century? Consider with me these four commandments; they are here before you on the screen. What God is doing is requiring of us an exclusive relationship with Him that excludes any idols or golden calves, invites us to treat His name with dignity and respect, and encourages us to do our living in such a way that there is a wonderful rhythm to life - of work and rest, of play and prayer, of

living in that incredible synchronicity with God that leaves us feeling fulfilled rather than depleted.

Let's consider each one. The first commandment: "You shall have no other God before me." Today is the Super Bowl, right? Are you going to watch the game? Do you have a dog in that fight? Who are you cheering for, the Bears or Colts? Oh, it sounds like a bit of a divided audience. Since neither the Chiefs nor the Packers are playing, I really don't care. Having grown up in Wisconsin, watching the Bears send linemen out to try to decimate the kickers, I must admit, it's tough for me to root for the Bears. Remember when they used to go after Chester Marco? Remember that? He would run to the sidelines as soon as he kicked, he really would! I couldn't make this stuff up! I guess I am leaning a little toward the Colts.

Everybody in the press is making a great deal about the fact that we now have two African-American head coaches. More than forty years after King's dream, it seems like that shouldn't be significant; it seems as if that should simply be the norm - that someone's race shouldn't be a distinguishing characteristic. But you know what excites *me* about these two coaches? Both of them are profoundly devout Christian men. In fact, ESPN picked up on this: "Dungy and Smith are Christian men who serve the Lord first and spend nearly as much time serving their communities. Doesn't prevent them from winning. And often. . . After they won their conference championships, you heard Smith talk about his 'being blessed' and Dungy gave thanks to God. That isn't just lip service with these guys." This is from ESPN! "As Christians they believe it is their responsibility to let their light shine whenever they're in the spotlight. Just as they have a game plan for each other come Super Bowl Sunday, both plan to use the global platform that the Super Bowl provides to speak words that could make an impact beyond football."

Do you realize how significant that is, and how rare it has become, especially in a culture that almost worships football - that puts Super Bowl Sunday at the pinnacle of life? I mean just look at the people of Texas - football is almost a cult, isn't it? And yet here we have two wildly successful coaches who point to God as primary in their lives. Remember when Jimmy Carter was elected president? He was interviewed by Bill Moyer, and it was remarkable. Bill Moyer said to President Carter, "What is the most significant discovery Jimmy Carter has made?" And Jimmy Carter said this, "This is embarrassing a little bit for me to talk about, because it is personal, but the most significant discovery that I have made is my relationship with God through Jesus Christ."

This is what the world has gotten wrong. We have come to the conclusion that it is possible to hold God as a secondary priority in our lives, as if other things could be more significant, never realizing that the paradox of the gospel is this: when God is first and foremost in our hearts and lives, every other relationship that we are a part of is enriched and enlivened and made more precious and significant. This seems counter-intuitive, I know, but from personal experience I can witness and testify to the truth of this. When God is first in your life, every other relationship in your life is elevated. If you want to be a better husband, put God first in your life, and you will be astounded at the way you perceive your wife. You want to be a better wife? Put God first in your life, and you will

be amazed at how it transforms your relationship with your husband, or your children, or your parents, or your very best friends. Because when God is first, our spirits are in a state of equilibrium of synchronicity - all of a sudden, things seem to click. Saint Augustine said it this way, "There is a void deep within our souls that is exclusively shaped for God", and if we put anything else there, our lives are out of whack and we can feel the difference. But when God is first, everything else changes. God expects an exclusive relationship with us; He intends to be first and foremost in our hearts.

The second commandment that He offers is that there are to be no graven images. God said it this way, "You shall not make for yourself an idol." Now of all the commandments, that is the one that seems to be most suspect in terms of its relevance today. I mean, you don't make any idols, do you? Or do you? Think about that for a moment. I did a funeral once for a wonderful, wonderful gentleman - an older soul who was a very successful fellow. He had stopped driving sometime before he died and he had given his automobile to his son - I believe it was one of the biggest Mercedes made at the time. (I don't know what series that is; I am not really up on Mercedes.) But the son inherited from the father this big automobile. And the son was talking to me and he said, "You know, I have always had kind of a funny attitude toward cars; I always thought cars were about the worst investment you could make. I mean, what else can you buy, drive off the lot, and watch its value plummet by almost 50%? So, for the first time in my life, rather than driving cheap cars (which is my norm), I am driving this big Benz." And he said to me, "You know what is interesting, is the way people look at me and treat me."

It is amazing what we worship in our culture. And if we are honest to God and honest to ourselves, we will admit that we make idols all around us. We idolize beauty; do you doubt it? Look at a Vogue magazine; those women aren't even *real*! Or go to a GQ and look at those guys; you don't see those guys anywhere around here, do you? I mean, think about it - we idolize beauty, we idolize athletes, and we idolize wealth and all the attributes that go with it, as if someone is good, secure, and happy simply because they are wealthy. And we mustn't forget that we idolize influence. The truth is, none of us is exempt from the temptation to build golden calves in our lives. Henry Allen was a professor, a brilliant Christian author, Catholic priest, and psychologist. I remember a series of lectures he gave in class, which then became a lecture he gave out in public, and ultimately became a book, in which he talked about the temptation of preachers. He said that our temptations are really identical to the temptation the devil offered Jesus - to be relevant, to be spectacular, to be influential, to be popular, to tell people what they want to hear rather than what the word of God says. None of us is exempt. The language referring to graven images may be archaic, but examine your life and see if there is anything that you worship more than God.

The third commandment regards God's holy name. This is how He says it: "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." You know, it is fascinating to be a pastor - you already suspect that, don't you? It is an amazing existence, and it is a marvelously blessed life, it really is. But it is astounding how people relate to you when they find out you are a preacher. For example, everybody wants you to be at the wedding, but nobody wants you to show up at

the reception. Isn't that true, isn't that true? I mean, it is kind of like that! It is always fascinating when I am with people who've just discovered or have forgotten that I am a preacher. Not long ago I was with some folk and this guy said, "Ah, for Christ's Sake!", and then he looked at me and said, "Oh you are a preacher." And I wanted to say, "It's OK, you didn't take *my* name in vain, but God might be really ticked off at you right now." I wanted to say that; I just didn't know him well enough - maybe next time I will. I should have.

Some of you are fans of the Harry Potter series, aren't you? My daughter is a huge fan! She recently told me that we can pre-order the book that is coming out in July right now, so that our name will be on a list at Border's, and we can go down and pick it up as soon as it arrives at midnight, on whatever that day is. I said, "Oh, I think you can hold off putting in your name; there will be ample copies." But in the books in the Harry Potter series, there is the evil character, whom they refer to as, "He who must not be named." And as I've watched the movies, I have found it so evocative, because they really capture that sense of threat and danger. The fear is so powerful and mighty, the characters don't dare utter the name "Voldemort", which is the name of the evil character. And it caused me to think that as Christians, we have lost that sense of awe and wonder of God. A good Jewish man or woman won't utter the name of "Yahweh", because it is too holy, too good, too precious, too distant. And yet we talk about God as if He is a good buddy. And in the process, it is almost as if we demean and disdain the holiness.

I think C.S. Lewis in his Chronicles of Narnia captured it; many of you saw it in the movie with Aslan, the lion. The question is asked, "Is Aslan good?" "Yes he is good." "Is he safe?" "No, he is God." And we need to rekindle within our hearts that genuine fear of God, for we are far too often so unholy in the presence of the holy. There ought to be a measure of wonder and such awe that we wouldn't dare take His name in vain or disrespect God by using His name in a way that is disdainful. Think of that. So many people have the tendency to swear when they are angry, in moments of passion. That is not a good habit for a preacher, so at an early age I cultivated the habit of saying, "God bless it!", which seems to be the only appropriate response when that anger wells within, and it reminds me that God is mighty and not to be mocked.

Let's talk about the fourth commandment. This is one of my favorites: "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." I have listened to people, I have heard the stories. People say, "I can worship God on the golf course; it is beautiful, it is gorgeous! I pray on the golf course." People have the audacity to say that to me - can you believe that? And who do they think they are fooling? I play golf. I know what it is like to pray on the golf course; I pray on every tee, "God keep the ball on the fairway, please!", and oftentimes it is more passionate, "God, don't let me hit that house!" Or, "Oh Lord, keep it out of the trap, please." Or when I am staring at the three foot putt, I am saying, "Lord, please help it fall." Those are not prayers.

Be honest to God and to yourself. Something amazing happens to our hearts when we come into an atmosphere such as this - for in an instant it is no longer about us; in fact, it begins to stretch us beyond ourselves. It helps us to grow, develop, and mature.

Something happens in that rhythm of life - we are intended to work and to work hard, and to play and play hard. Recreation is essential, but we are created for rest and conversation with God, and God demands we set aside a day that is untainted by the world, a day that is preserved for the goodness of our souls, for when we practice that discipline of worship together as a community of faith, we are blessed.

Did you hear that Sylvester Stallone has a new “Rocky” movie coming out? Did you hear about this? He is like, 60 years old, and is getting back in the ring in the movie. I am actually going to go see it; I am so curious. And Rocky Balboa - Sylvester Stallone - has re-found his faith; did you read about this in the news? It is really an amazing story. In fact, I love this recent quote from Sylvester Stallone - remember this. “The church is the gym of the soul.” Did you catch that? “The church is the gym of the soul.” This is what Sylvester said, “I was raised in a Catholic home, a Christian home, and I went to Catholic schools. I was taught the faith and went as far as I could with it until one day I got out into the so-called real world. I was presented with temptation and I lost my way and made a lot of bad choices.” So what was it that brought him back from the brink? This is what he said: “. . . the more I go to church and the more I turn myself over to the process of believing in Jesus and to listening to his word, and have him guide my hand I feel the pressure’s off of me now.” He goes on to say, “You cannot train yourself. I feel the same way about Christianity and what the church is. The church is the gym of the soul.” Isn’t that good? That raises the obvious question - are you spiritually fit, fit for the life that God intends?

You know, people think that the Ten Commandments were designed to rob them of some measure of joy in living. Nothing could be further from the truth or from God’s heart for you. The commandments of God were established not as voluntary initiatives; they were established as parameters for life, to protect your heart and soul so that your life might be rich and full.

I heard a story about two guys in a truck, who were trundling along the road. They came to a big sign that said, “Bridge ahead - Clearance 11 feet 8 inches”. So they stopped, pulled over, got out, and looked at the truck. The trailer was marked “12 feet, 2 inches”. And they looked at each other, clearly thinking about it, and one said to the other, “Hey, I don’t see any cops around, let’s try it!” That is what we do, that is what we do! We feel as if we are getting away with something when we violate the precepts of God. In reality, we are only hurting ourselves. For life - the true richness and blessedness of life - is unlocked when God is first in our hearts, when we refuse to idolize anything but God, when we treat His name with dignity rather than disdain, and when we allow the rhythm of worship to shape our lives. I can’t help but ask, isn’t that relevant to your life? Amen.

Pray with me, please: Lord, we come to the table to more than receive; we come to the table to give of ourselves. We take the body broken that we might behold the blood shed, that we might have life. This day Lord, we renew our commitment to You; to live within the boundaries of Your love. In Christ, Amen.