

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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Exodus 20:1-17

March 15, 2009

We probably don't read the 10 commandments enough in church. They appear every once in a while in the lectionary readings, but as you might expect, the commandments occupy a larger place in the consciousness of our faith and the scripture than you would think only reading them every once in a while.

It's understandable why we might not read them. They are kind of long and our attention span is fairly short. They are in the Old Testament and we like the New. They are full of 'thou shalt not's,' and we like love. They are what they claim to be: law. And we prefer grace. What's more, they have the potential to make us feel kind of guilty. Some of us are guilty of breaking some of the commandments as we speak. More of us are guilty of breaking the spirit of the commandments as Jesus taught them, teaching that it's not just the letter of the law, but the spirit behind them. So it's understandable why we might be reluctant to invoke the 10 in worship too often. And yet, Martin Luther, the 16th century reformer, claimed this, "Anyone who knows the 10 commandments perfectly knows the entire Scriptures." If Luther is right, we definitely don't read the 10 commandments enough.

I think Luther is partly right to say: Anyone who knows the 10 commandments perfectly knows the entire scriptures. In one sense, he means that to know the commandments you have to know the rest of scripture. The rest of scripture helps you understand the commandments. On the other hand, it also means that if you know the 10 commandments, then you have such keen insight into the rest of the Word of God. In this sense I don't think he went far enough. It's a little bit like that old TV game show *Name that Tune*. Luther suggests that to know the 10 commandments perfectly is to know the entire scriptures. I challenge him, that to know just one commandment perfectly is to know the entire scriptures.

The first, Exodus 20:2-3. "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."

Think of all you know if you know that one verse perfectly.

You would know that everything rests upon "I am the Lord your God." Everything—commandments, instructions, encouragements, corrections, salvation, the past, present, and future—come out of relationship. I am the Lord *your* God. God is establishing his identity as tied to the people of Israel who are owned, called, and therefore accountable to their God. God was always about relationships. The very earliest descriptions of God's activity in the world God created describe God making humans with whom to have friendship. God delighted in that relationship and was and is heartbroken when we break it. And it's always us that breaks it. God is faithful and just, the same yesterday, today, and forever. It's we who are changing, we who turn aside from the Lord our God. What God wants is more of that relationship.

If you knew this one commandment, you would know all that God is willing to do for the sake of the relationship. God of the scriptures is a God who acts, who has done things. To identify God is to identify God with what God has done. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt." For the people of Israel, assembled there at the foot of Mt. Sinai, this was an important identifier coming from the thunder and smoke on the mountains. "Oh, you are that God." We saw that way back there. This voice coming from the heavens is from the same deity.

They had seen some pretty amazing stuff. You know what happened. The story picks up at the end of Genesis. The little tribe that would grow to become Israel relocated willingly to Egypt to escape a terrible drought. Things went well for them for a while, but then leadership changed in Egypt; a new pharaoh came to power and he didn't care for these foreigners living in his land. So, he put them to work, made them slaves, took away their place of privilege and forced them to build his buildings and monuments. This lasted generation after generation for 400 years. Israel, the chosen people of God, the people who were to live in a land promised to their forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, were living as slaves in a foreign land.

Then it all changed. Chapter two of Exodus begins the story of the life of Moses, this mumbling, stumbling fellow that God decided to use. So God finds Moses and tells him to go to pharaoh's palace and tell him to let my people go. Moses wasn't too sure of this, but he came around and followed through on it. Pharaoh's reaction was predictable. But God's will would not be turned aside, and He sent plagues on Egypt, eventually taking the firstborn sons of everyone in the land except for the people of Israel who had been told to sacrifice a lamb and smear some of the blood of the lamb on their doorposts. When the angel of death came, it passed over the homes that were covered in the blood of the lamb. This is where the Jewish celebration of Passover comes from, of course, and why Christians later would describe those saved by Christ as washed in the blood of the lamb.

Pharaoh finally let the people escape. But then changed his mind, sending his chariots and horses to chase the fleeing slaves. Israel was caught between the approaching armies and an impassable sea. That's when God parted the sea so they could cross and closed the waters back on the armies of Egypt. They were out of Egypt. They were on dry ground. They were safe. They were free.

So God says, remember all of that? I'm the one who did all of that for you. That wasn't your own strength, cunning, and ability. It wasn't Moses, though I used him to do it. That wasn't Ra, the sun god, or Baal, the Canaanite deity. That wasn't Jupiter, the Roman god, that wasn't Apollo, the Greek god, that wasn't Artemis, Zeus. It wasn't Ishtar, Marduk, or Gilgamesh. It was Me. I am the one who brought you out of the land of Egypt. And as I told Moses, I am the God of your fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It's Me. It's always been Me. And I'm still here with you today. My name is "I Am."

Some people say that the Bible is a manual for living or a textbook. There are surely parts of it that read those ways. Some detailed instructions for performing religious ceremonies and information about what to believe and how to live. But manual

and textbook are poor metaphors to describe what this is. It's a narrative of the engagement of a people with their God.

Who is this God? The one who created, who called, who redeemed, who incarnated, died, and rose again.

Who are these people? The people were Israel, called to be the people through whom God would reach the whole world. Then to one man, Jesus, through whom God invited the whole world to himself. The church as the congregation of followers of Jesus. The God who said let there be light, who said I will put a rainbow in the sky as a sign of my promise to never flood the earth again, the God who said let my people go, and who said, "I am the Lord your God" is the same God who raised Jesus from the dead and called the church into being.

By telling the story of God's relationship with the world, the Bible gives us a story. Of prime importance in our story is not the kind of work we do, how much money we have, what kind of car we drive, or even whether we are Bears or Aggies or Longhorns, Texans or Americans. Our story is about, through Jesus, being the people described in this story. Created, sinful, broken, rescued and redeemed, called and sent. We are those set free to new life.

God brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. God is a redeeming God. The same sort of God who would go to the trouble to rescue all these people from a fate that was not to be theirs is the same sort of God who would take on flesh with all of its dangers and problems to show us how to live. The same sort of God who would endure death that we might have life. This God will have a family, even if the price is quite high.

If you knew this one commandment you would know that God pays a high price for us, but that God is jealous of what He has bought with so high a price. The thing about people is that the chief danger doesn't come from outside. God's not so jealous that someone or something else will come and snatch his people away from him. With people the chief danger comes from inside. We wander. We aren't patient. We aren't faithful. We don't remember well. We get confused about what is most important and we choose things that are easy over things that are the best. That's what most of the rest of the 10 commandments are about. Choose honor over hatred, choose reconciliation over murder, choose faithfulness over lust, choose respect over jealousy, choose an unseen God over things that are seen.

The God of the exodus from Egypt makes his point quite clear. You shall have no other gods before Me. I've bought you. I've earned you. You are mine. Israel's God commands. Walter Brueggemann calls command the "defining and characteristic marking" of the true God. Command-obedience is the organizing characteristic of communication between God and people. And that's hard for us to swallow.

We are people who largely believe that the chief defining characteristic of our existence is freedom. Look at the bumpers on the road, "The power of freedom." Even our religion adopts it, suggesting that being a Baptist comes down to precious freedoms.

This is the backbone of capitalism and democracy, the air we breathe. But the testimony of Israel is that slavery can come in many guises.

Sometimes slavery looks like Pharaoh who ordered the people to work for him and his purposes. Sometimes slavery looks like an economy that says, "Fashion has changed since last year. Throw out your perfectly good clothes and buy new ones. Buy this kind of beer to go to these kinds of parties. Buy this car to get this girl."

The issue is not shall we live under an external command. The question is which external command will have its way with us. William Willimon puts it this way, "Israel knew the burden of imperial, governmentally sanctioned command. The Exodus was not the achievement of unrestricted, boundless freedom, for such freedom is a modern fiction. The Exodus was not liberation. It was about an exchange of masters, the false for the true."

You shall have no other gods before Me. An exchange of masters, the false for the true. Nothing could better describe what Jesus was all about.

People whose lives are touched by Jesus are usually people who have their lives reordered. Things that were very important became less important. Things that were on the fringe come to the very center. Jesus reshuffles our decks when he comes in our lives, saying things like "No one can serve two masters God and money." Things like "Seek first the kingdom of God and all of this will be given to you as well." Things like "If you have a grievance with your brother, leave your worship for a moment and be reconciled and then come back." Things like "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Things like "If anyone would come after me, let him take up his cross and follow Me."

Only when we worship do we come face to face with our terrible inclination toward all sorts of false idols that claim our time, energy, emotion, and commitment and give us nothing in return. Our redeeming, commanding, relationship-loving God demands all we have. And in return gives us life.

To know this commandment is to bring all of our other allegiances and tendencies into judgment. Our jobs and 401ks, our houses and possessions and lack thereof, our goals and fears. To have no other gods before the God who rescued and redeemed us is to have all that other stuff fade to the background. All that stuff is still there, but it's been demoted. It's not the most important or most determinative thing. It's been subjugated to its rightful place as part of our lives, not the main part of our lives. And that's where it all belongs.

If we just perfectly knew the first commandment "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. Have no other gods before Me." Just imagine all we would know. Just imagine who we would be.

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