

“The Other Lost Commandments”

Exodus 20:1-17

The Story Chapter 5 – New Commandments and a New Covenant

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Years ago I used to stay up late and watch Saturday Night Live ... usually when I was desperate for sermon illustrations. One of the comedians who made an occasional appearance on the show was Father Guido Sarducci, the gossip columnist for the Vatican Newspaper. One of my favorite sketches is entitled, “The Missing Commandments.” It goes something like this:

You probably studied the Bible and you know the true story about the Ten Commandments. Moses went to the mountain and got these two tablets with the commandments on them. He came down and found his people worshipping a cow. Something like that. Well Moses was so mad he threw down the tablets and broke them. Then, what he did was – he tried to remember them, make them up again. And Moses was an old man, he was in his 90s, he was grumpy, he had a chip on his shoulder because of the “Cow Incident.” All he remembered was the negative commandments: “Thou shall not kill, thou shall not steal, thou shall not commit adultery, etc...” But a lot of the commandments he forgot were more like advice. They were nice things. For example, the eleventh commandment was “Wait a half hour after eating before you go swimming.” You probably thought this was just something your mother told you. It was a commandment. Another one: “Whistle while you work.” You probably thought Disney made that up but he really stole it from God. Another commandment, a great one: “When you use Q-tip just go around the outside of the ear. Don’t poke it in.” Here’s another one: “It’s okay to eat chicken with your fingers.” You thought that was from Colonel Sanders but it’s really a commandment. It just shows that God is a regular guy.¹

Many people ask me, “How can I know God’s will?” “What does the Lord want me to do?” Wouldn’t it be great if God spelled out the “Top Ten Things He Expects of Us”? Kind of like a David Letterman Top Ten List? Well He did. In fact His Top Ten List is so great it’s carved in stone. Even now, more than three thousand years after Moses first brought them down from Mount Sinai, the Ten Commandments are still making news. Judges and town councils debate whether they should be publicly displayed. School boards across the nation wonder if tacking them on bulletin boards in classrooms will stop the violence. To be honest, I’m not sure that spreading them across every chalkboard and courthouse lawn will do much good. God intended His list to be posted in the soul. “These commandments that I give you today,” Moses announced, “are to be upon your hearts” (Deuteronomy 6:6). Sadly, that seems to be the last place where you will find them.

¹ Don Novello – “Breakfast in Heaven: Father Guido Sarducci”

George Gallup, who spoke here at Woodside in 2009, did a survey some years ago which confirms that while 8 out of 10 Americans consider themselves Christians, only about half could identify the person who gave the Sermon on the Mount and fewer still could recall five of the Ten Commandments. More importantly, Gallup discovered that the commandments left almost no impression on the lifestyle of believers. "We find there is very little difference in ethical behavior between churchgoers and those who are not active religiously," Gallup announced. "The levels of lying, cheating, and stealing are remarkably similar in both groups."²

More and more there seems to be one commandment the majority of Americans prefer: 'Just do your own thing so long as you don't hurt anyone.' Perhaps that's why we resent the intrusion of the Ten Commandments. They are absolute rules which seem so out of place in a sea of relativity. A few years back, a nationally known figure said this at the Duke University Commencement.

We have actually convinced ourselves that slogans will save us. Shoot up if you must, but use a clean needle. Enjoy sex whenever and with whomever you wish, but (use protection). No! The answer is no. Not because it isn't cool or smart or because you might end up in jail or dying in an AIDS ward, but because it's wrong, because we have spent 5,000 years as a race of rational human beings, trying to drag ourselves out of the primeval slime by searching for truth and moral absolutes. In its purest form, truth is not a polite tap on the shoulder. It is a howling reproach. What Moses brought down from Mount Sinai were not the Ten Suggestions.³

Who said those words? Billy Graham? No, it was Ted Koppel of Nightline. And the graduates and their parents gave him a standing ovation.

When God's Top Ten List first debuted, instead of a standing ovation, there was fear and trembling (Exodus 20:18). It is three months since the rag-tag band of Israelite slaves made their dash for freedom. They are far from the clutches of Pharaoh and the comforts of civilization. Living on manna and quail, marching across waterless wastelands, fighting off raids by the Amalekites, they are weak and battered strangers in a strange land. But their most terrifying challenge is yet to come.

At the foot of the austere mount called Sinai, they come face to face, for the first time, with God. Imagine the pyrotechnics. Jagged lightning stabs the peak. Booming thunder rolls on endlessly. Dense ominous clouds wreath the mountain and block out the blinding desert Sun. A blaring horn sounds a note that grows with ear-splitting intensity. The whole mountain lights up like a fiery furnace as the ground beneath their feet trembles violently. And so do the people. The Lord their God has come. For the first time they meet the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who set them free.

² Quoted in Erwin Lutzer, *Pastor to Pastor*, p. 76.
 Ted Koppel, quoted in *Bits & Pieces*, April 30, 1992.

Out of the smoke and fire a tiny figure appears. After a private audience with the Lord, Moses returns to present to the frightened masses the very words of God. The Ten Commandments are the foundation of the covenant between the Lord and His people. What is a covenant? It is a special agreement between God and the Israelites. The Lord made a covenant with Abraham which He passed down to Isaac, then Jacob, and now to their descendants. A covenant is like a constitution laid down at the birth of a nation. Between nations we call it a treaty. Business people call it a contract. Usually there are two parties in the deal. Sometimes they are equal partners. With the Ten Commandments, though, God is clearly the greater party. To keep up their end of the relationship, the Israelites agree to obey these ten rules. Critics accuse God of laying a heavy burden on these newly freed slaves. Yet the Commandments are not a ball and chain. They are a gift of life and freedom. John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism, says there are three uses for God's Law.⁴

First, the Ten Commandments *Bring Order to a Chaotic World*. They punish criminals and protect victims. William Barclay once wrote that it is impossible to build a nation without laws. The Ten Commandments "changed the people from being a rabble and a group of slaves into being a nation."⁵ Four of them focus on our love for God, the remaining six tell us how to love our neighbors. Yet some may complain that eight of the ten are so negative. Too many "Thou shall nots" In Hebrew, each of these actually begins with the word "No." Yet this establishes the outer boundaries for a healthy community. Within these borders there is freedom. But step over the line into murder, adultery, theft or idolatry and the nation begins to decay and collapse into chaos. Leslie Flynn says,

The Ten Commandments may seem narrow, but so does every runway on airports around the world. Yet no passenger wants the pilot to miss the narrow runway and land a few yards off the mark in some field or waterway or row of houses. The narrow ribbon of pavement is really the broad way that leads to a safe, comfortable landing. So the seemingly rigid (Ten Commandments) are a guide to happy, fulfilled living.⁶

Unfortunately, we do break these boundaries and miss the runway. That's why the second purpose of the Ten Commandments is to *Point Us to Salvation in a Sinful World*. Calvin said "The law is like a mirror ... just as a mirror shows us the spots on our face" so the law show us our weaknesses and sins.⁷ I am amazed how many times I hear Christians say that if you lead a good life you will go to heaven. Friends, lets make one thing clear: if we could reach heaven by leading a good life, then God would not have sent His Son to die on the Cross. The Ten Commandments prove to us that every human sins and breaks God's law.

⁴ John Calvin, The Institutes of the Christian Religion Book II, Ch. VII. I have reversed Calvin's first and second uses of the Law.

⁵ William Barclay, The Ten Commandments, Westminster John Knox Press, c. 1998, p. 4.

⁶ Leslie Flynn, Now a Word from Our Creator

⁷ Calvin, Book II, Ch. VII, 7.

Perhaps you are thinking, “Well I’ve never murdered, committed adultery, robbed anyone or worshiped an idol.” Yet Jesus Himself, in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), teaches that even our angry, lustful, coveting thoughts and desires break God’s law. Confirmation Sunday reminded me of a game I used to play with the Confirmation class called, “How to Get to Heaven.” Each good deed is assigned several positive points but every sin subtracts points. If, after adding up their positive actions and subtracting their negative misdeeds they reach a thousand points, they can go to heaven. Usually they start off pretty optimistic ... until they hit the list of sins. Not only do none of them earn a thousand points, the whole class together can’t reach that mark. In fact most of them wind up with a negative number.

But then I say, “If I offer you a thousand points free of charge, would you take it?” “Of course!” they reply. Well that’s what Jesus did for us on the Cross. If you remember nothing else friends, remember this: Jesus did not come to earth to teach us how to be good so we could go to heaven. He came to earth to save us because we will never be good enough to reach heaven. The mirror of the Ten Commandments gives us an honest evaluation of ourselves. The commandments remind us we cannot save ourselves. Thank God Jesus did.

Third, the Ten Commandments *Teach Us How to Live in God’s World*. The Lord saved Israel from Egypt, carried them on eagles’ wings, claimed them as His treasured possession, and made them a holy nation (Exodus 19:4-6). Jesus saves us from sin. In His eyes we are a precious lamb, a buried treasure, a lost coin, a long lost child come home. You can’t do anything to make Him love you more because He already loves you unconditionally and completely. You can’t add a single ounce to the salvation He won for you. So why should you follow God’s Top Ten List? Just to say “Thanks” for all He’s done. It’s our way of loving Him back. And it’s the way God created us and intended us to live in the first place. Life goes better when we love God and our neighbors.

In the summer of 2000, 51 million people tuned in to watch the climax of the first season of Survivor. In the end, through clever alliances, blatant lying, and frequent backstabbing, Richard, the corporate trainer from Rhode Island, won the million dollars. In a Newsweek poll before the results were announced, 62% in a poll said he was the one person they did not want to win. Yet Richard replied, “I’m happy with the way I played.” And most agree that his cut throat tactics were best. In 2006, it was revealed that Richard failed to declare his winnings, among other earnings, in his tax return and was sentenced to 51 months imprisonment. Perhaps that makes for good television. But is that the way God meant us to live?

Let me tell you a real tale of survivors. Most of us have heard the story of the *Mutiny on the Bounty*. In 1787, the *Bounty* a British ship left England for the South Seas. Their mission was to establish a colony and bring back Breadfruit and other trees. It took ten months to reach the islands and six months to establish themselves among the natives.

Yet when it was time to return home, the sailors were so in love with the island and the native women they rebelled. The mutineers put Captain Bligh and a few loyal

men in an open boat and set them adrift. Miraculously, the captain survived and returned with an expedition to punish the rebels. Fourteen were captured and imprisoned in England.

But nine escaped to another island where they set up a colony. Unfortunately, they sank down to the dregs. They learned to distill whiskey from native plants. Drunkenness, disease and murder took the lives of all the native men and all but one of the British sailors. The only one left was John Adams. The women and children looked to him for some way to survive. And the key came from a dead sailor. Among his possession, Adams found a Bible. In all his wild sea-going life, Adams had never read the Bible. Now he began to devour it and take it to heart. He shared its truth and taught the Scriptures to the women and children. The whole island put their trust in Jesus Christ.

Twenty years passed before a ship found that island, and when it did, they discovered a community unlike any other on earth. The people were living in decency, prosperity, harmony and peace. There was nothing of crime, disease, immorality, insanity or illiteracy. How did this happen? Because they took God's commandments to heart. They lived by God's Top Ten List.

So I ask you brothers and sisters: in your home, at your school, in your business, in your neighborhood, in this church – are we going to live Rich's way or John Adam's way?

