

“Breaking Bad”

Exodus 20:1-17

Breaking Bad: God’s Commands for a Better Life Week 1. No other gods

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July 1, 2018

In 2013 the Guinness Book of World Records declared it the most critically claimed Television show of all time. *Breaking Bad* is the story of Walter White a high school chemistry teacher diagnosed with stage III lung cancer. Worried about how his family will survive when he is gone, White, played by Bryan Cranston, turns to an illegal solution. He creates a lab to cook and sell crystallized methamphetamine. So begins a journey from light to darkness, from innocent family man to major player in the drug underworld. The term “Breaking Bad” is a southern cliché. It means to ‘raise hell,’ ‘go wild,’ ‘defy authority’ and break the law. White’s transformation into an evil drug supplier is so complete by the fourth season the writers couldn’t stand him. I’ve never seen an episode of the show but I bet it breaks every one of the Ten Commandments.

In our summer series we’ll use this cliché in the opposite way. God gave us a tool to break bad, to stop evil, to prevent our slide from light into darkness. It’s called the Ten Commandments. Many ask me, “How can I know God’s will?” “What does the Lord want me to do?” It’s all contained in the Ten Commandments. Even now, more than three thousand years after Moses first brought them down from the fire and smoke of Mount Sinai, the Ten Commandments are still making news. There have been 8 court cases going all the way up to the Supreme Court which demanded the removal of Ten Commandments monuments from courthouses and statehouses. Planting them on the courthouse lawn is fine. But God intended His list to be posted in the soul. Moses announces, “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.” (Deuteronomy 6:6). Yet that seems to be the last place where you will find them. A YouTube video shows how people on the street have no trouble naming ten celebrities, ten stores or ten beers yet they are embarrassed when they barely name one of the Ten Commandments.

Pollster George Gallup, who spoke here at Woodside in 2009, confirms that though 80% Americans call themselves Christians, only about 50% can identify who gave the Sermon on the Mount and fewer still can recall five of the Ten Commandments. Gallup says the commandments make 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. The levels of lying, cheating, and stealing are remarkably similar in both groups.¹

¹ Quoted in Erwin Lutzer, Pastor to Pastor, p. 76.

Increasingly the one commandment the majority of Americans faithfully obey is ‘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 out of place in a rising tide of relativity. When I attended my son-in-law’s graduation at Duke University last May, I was reminded of another Duke Commencement speaker who said this:

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.²

Who said those words? A conservative talking head? No. Quite the opposite. It was Ted Koppel of Nightline. The graduates and their parents gave him a standing ovation.

The Ten Commandments didn’t receive a standing ovation when they first debuted. It was more like fear and trembling (Exodus 20:18). The rag-tag Israelite slaves are free from the clutches of Pharaoh yet far from the comforts of civilization. Marching across waterless wastelands, fighting off attacks by Amalekites, they are weak and battered strangers in a strange land. Yet their most terrifying challenge is ahead.

At the foot of the austere mount called Sinai, they come face to face, for the first time, with God. Imagine the special effects: jagged lightning stabs the rocks, booming thunder rolls. Dense ominous clouds wreath the mountain plunging the desert into darkness. 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.

Out of the smoke and fire a tiny figure appears. After a private audience with the Lord, Moses presents to the frightened masses the very words of God. The Ten Commandments are the foundation of the covenant between the Lord and His people. It is a special agreement between God and the Israelites. The Lord made a covenant with Abraham which He passes down to Isaac, then Jacob, and now to their descendants. A covenant is like a constitution for a nation, a treaty between nations, a contract between businesses. Usually there are two parties in the deal. To keep up their end of the relationship, the Israelites agree to obey these ten rules. The Commandments are not a ball and chain. They are a gift of life and freedom. These commands lead to a better life.

First, the Ten Commandments *Bring Order to a Chaotic World*. They punish criminals and protect victims. William Barclay writes it is impossible to build a nation without laws. The Ten Commandments “changed the people from being a rabble and a

² Ted Koppel, quoted in Bits & Pieces, April 30, 1992.

group of slaves into being a nation.”³ Four of them focus on our love for God, the remaining six tell us how to love our neighbors. Yet some 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.” These establish the outer boundaries for a healthy community. Within these borders there is perfect freedom. But step over the line into murder, adultery, theft or idolatry and the nation collapses 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.⁴

Even Vincent Gilligan, the creator of *Breaking Bad*, who is not a religious person, feels an internal need to show that actions have consequences.

If religion is a reaction of man, and nothing more, it seems to me that it represents a human desire for wrongdoers to be punished. I feel some sort of need for Biblical atonement, or justice, or something. I like to believe there is some comeuppance that karma kicks in at some point, even if it takes years or decades to happen. My philosophy (is), 'I want to believe there's a heaven. But I can't not believe there's a hell.'⁵

Christian philosopher J.P. Moreland was speaking in a dorm room with a University of Vermont student. The student told him, "Whatever is true for you is true for you and whatever is true for me is true for me. If something works for you because you believe it, that's great. But no one should force his or her views on other people since everything is relative." With this, Moreland unplugged the student's stereo and started to leave. "Hey, what are you doing?" the student protested, "You can't do that." Moreland replied,

You're not going to force on me the belief it is wrong to steal your stereo, are you? When it's convenient, people say they don't care about sexual morality or cheating on exams. But they become moral absolutists in a hurry when someone steals their things or violates their rights. That is, they are selective moral relativists.

Interestingly, a few weeks later this student became a follower of Christ. Moreland adds this could be a great new evangelistic method called, "Stealing Stereos for Jesus."⁶

We all need boundaries and so does society. After all we do break these boundaries and miss the runway. That's why the second purpose of the Ten

³ William Barclay, *The Ten Commandments*, Westminster John Knox Press, c. 1998, p. 4.

⁴ Leslie Flynn, *Now a Word from Our Creator*

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breaking_Bad

⁶ Paul Copan, "'It's All Relative' and Other Such Absolute Statements: Assessing Relativism," *Enrichment Journal*

Commandments is to *Point Us to Salvation in a Sinful World*. John Calvin, the Father of Presbyterianism, says, “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 if you lead a good life you will go to heaven. Let’s make one thing clear: if we could reach heaven by leading a good life, God would not have sent His Son to die on the Cross. The Ten Commandments prove everyone sins and breaks God’s law. Perhaps you are thinking, “Well I’ve never murdered, committed adultery, robbed anyone or worshiped an idol.” As we’ll find out in this series, Jesus teaches that even our angry, lustful, coveting thoughts and desires break God’s law.

Back when I taught Confirmation, I played a game with the 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. Most of them wind up with a negative number.

Then I say, “If I offer you a thousand points free of charge, will you take it?” “Of course!” they reply. That’s what Jesus did for us on the Cross. Please remember this: Jesus did not come to earth to teach us how to be good so we can go to heaven. He came to earth to save us because we will never be good enough to reach heaven. The Ten Commandments prove 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 the Ten Commandments? They are the way we love God back. They’re the way God intended us to live in the first place. They lead to a better life.

If you listen to our culture, the way to maximum happiness is maximum freedom and unlimited choices. In his TED Talk, "The Paradox of Choice," secular psychologist Barry Schwartz claims this doesn’t work. Schwartz points to his local supermarket as an example—a place that offers 175 different kinds of salad dressings. Even our personal identity has become a matter of choice. All these choices, all this freedom actually makes the pursuit of happiness impossible, even miserable. Schwartz ended his talk by pointing to a picture of two fish in a fishbowl as he said:

The truth of the matter is that if you shatter the fishbowl so that everything is possible, you don't have freedom. You have paralysis. If you shatter this fishbowl so that everything is possible, you decrease satisfaction. Everybody needs a

⁷ Calvin, Book II, Ch. VII, 7.

fishbowl. The absence of some metaphorical fishbowl is a recipe for misery, and, I suspect, disaster.⁸

Let me tell you a tale of people who found themselves without a fishbowl. Most of us know the *Mutiny on the Bounty*. In 1787, the *Bounty* a British ship left England for the South Seas 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.

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.

Twenty years passed before a ship found that island, and when it did, they discovered a paradise as close as you can get on earth. The people were living in decency, prosperity, harmony and peace. There was nothing of crime, disease, immorality or illiteracy. How did this happen? They took God's commands to heart. They lived by the Ten Commandments and God's Word.

So I ask you brothers and sisters: in your home, at your school, in your business, in your neighborhood, in this church – do you want to break out and do bad or break bad and Please God?

⁸ Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ* (David C. Cook, 2016), pages 137-140