

"A Design for Life"
Sermon Series on the Ten Commandments - Introduction

Rev. Dr. Peter B. Barnes

First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC

September 9, 2018

(Ex. 19:1,16,17,20; 20:1-21)

Introduction.

Mark Twain once told the story about a man he knew who had memorized the Ten Commandments. The man told the famous author that his ambition was to go to the Holy Land, stand on the top of Mount Sinai, and recite the Ten Commandments out loud. Mark Twain thought about that for a moment and then replied, "Have you ever thought about just staying home and trying to keep them?"

This morning we begin a new series of sermons on the Ten Commandments, and some people may wonder why we would devote 11 Sundays over the course of this Fall to an ancient code that some people think of as old fashioned and out of date? However, as you'll see, the Ten Commandments are not archaic dos and don'ts. They are actually basic principles, like axioms in geometry or the laws of nature, which have proven to be foundational for life, both personally and for society. As Joy Davidman has written, "...it is on the thunderstone of these Tablets that Western civilization has built its house. If the house is tottering today, we can scarcely steady it by pulling the foundation out from under."¹

This morning as we begin our study of the Ten Commandments, there are two matters I would like you to consider with me today: 1) the historical context of the Ten Commandments; and 2) the Gift of Grace in the Ten Commandments.

I. The Historical Context of the Ten Commandments.

If you study the context in which the Ten Commandments were given by God, you'll discover they were given to Moses and the people of Israel shortly after their exodus from Egyptian slavery around 1400 BC. For three months Moses led the people through the wilderness, and they complained bitterly about the lack of food and water. God provided for their needs, but they still complained. Having seen the ten plagues, having witnessed the Red Sea rolled back, you would think they would have been humbler toward God and his servant Moses. But no. It took something more.

It was into this context that God gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments. Exodus 19:16 says, "*On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled.*" God was going to do something new and

dramatic in His relationship with the people of Israel, and it would mark a new beginning to the nation's understanding of itself and its God.

If you look closely at the structure of the Ten Commandments, you'll discover a very particular pattern. And a study of ancient Near Eastern history shows that there is a strong parallel between the structure of the Ten Commandments and that of the Hittite treaties of this same period in the Middle East in the 15th Century BC. I think it's interesting that God chose to reveal Himself to the Israelites in terms they could understand and relate to through the structure of legal contracts that were common in their day – a covenant between the ruler of a larger kingdom and the people of a smaller one.

In the Hittite treaties of this time and in the Ten Commandments you'll see that there are five components of the covenant. **First**, there is a **Preamble**, which introduces the king and his titles. In the case of the Ten Commandments it reads, *"I am the Lord your God" (20:1)*. **Second**, there is the **Historical Prologue** which emphasized the benefits conferred to the vassal peoples. We see this in 20:2 which says, *"who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."* **Third**, the treaty records the **Stipulations** of the contract. In the case of the Ten Commandments, the stipulations are the commands which are specified in vv. 3-17.

The **fourth** component of the treaty was the **Provision for Preserving the Contract**. Usually both parties kept a copy of the covenant, but in the case of Israel, the nation kept both copies. This has led some scholars to conclude that the two tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written were actually identical, and they were the two copies of the same covenant. And the tablets of stone on which the covenant was written were kept in a special container called the Ark of the Covenant. The **final** component was a **Listing of gods as Witnesses**. For the Hittites, they listed their pagan gods, but for the Israelites who worshipped the one, true God, the Lord swears by Himself, for He could swear by no one greater.

I find it fascinating that the structure of the Ten Commandments parallels the Hittite covenants that were prevalent at this time in history in the Middle East. God chose to use a tool common in their culture as a means for revealing Himself to the people of Israel in a way they could understand and relate to. Throughout biblical history God accommodated people out of love.

The word "covenant" isn't a word we use very often in everyday speech. It's a word that appears in wedding ceremonies, legal contracts, and home owners' association rules and regulations. It means, "A formal, solemn and binding agreement." The word comes from Latin, and it means "a coming together." In Scripture the word "covenant" has a very important place in the history of salvation. But the covenant into which God entered with the people of Israel in Exodus 20 wasn't supposed to be a cold lifeless contract between the King of a

large kingdom with the people of a vassal nation. Instead, it was intended to be a covenant of love.

Forty years ago, last Sunday, my late wife Lorie and I stood at the front of the sanctuary of the Highland United Presbyterian Church in New Castle, PA, and we exchanged vows and made solemn promises to one another as we were united in marriage. We promised to love, honor and cherish each other, for better or for worse, in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, until we were parted by death. Through the 38 years of our marriage, Lorie and I tried to be faithful to the covenant of love which was established that day. We certainly didn't do it perfectly, and there were many times when our covenant was sorely tested. But by the grace of God we built a life, raised a family, and tried to learn what sacrificial love was all about.

The covenant which God established with Moses and the people of Israel in Exodus 20 was intended to be a covenant of love like that. And even when the Israelites failed to keep their end of the bargain, God still kept His and He never gave up on them. And God doesn't give up on any one of us either today. Have you experienced the covenant love of God?

II. The Gift of Grace in the Ten Commandments.

As Christians we talk a lot about how we are saved by grace and not by works. Our salvation doesn't depend on our obedience to the law, but rather on what Christ did for us on the cross. Indeed, the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 6:15 that we are no longer under law but under grace. But what does that mean as far as having an obligation to submit to God's will as written in His Word, like, for example, in the Ten Commandments? Do we still have to do what God says in these Commandments, or are we free to live as we please because of grace? The answer is – if we want to live a flourishing life, absolutely. Let me explain.

When I moved to Winston-Salem almost six years ago, I bought a Subaru Outback from Flow Motors. And when I purchased this car the dealer gave me a little book that is called an *owner's manual*. And in that manual, I read that I am supposed to change the synthetic oil in the car every 7,500 miles. Now the people who wrote the instructions about maintaining my Subaru didn't put this requirement in there to make my life miserable. Quite the contrary. They want me to be happy with my car. They want it to perform well for many years and thousands of miles, and they included the maintenance schedule in order to ensure that my car will run in tip top shape for a very long time. They designed the car, and they know what it takes to keep the car running well.

Now, as the owner of the car it is my right to decide, "I don't want to put synthetic oil in the crankcase every 7,500 miles. Instead, I'm going to put orange juice in it!" And as the owner of the car, I am perfectly free to do just that.

However, if I do I will soon discover that my car won't run very well for very long. The engine will be ruined. I would be wise if I gave heed to what the people who designed and built my Subaru suggest if I want my car to run well and last a long time.

The same is true with the Ten Commandments. They are axioms of life, and they are a gift of grace given by a loving Creator. He made us, and He knows what leads to human flourishing. And as we study the Ten Commandments over the course of this fall, you'll discover the wisdom of what they offer and what a gift of grace they really are. The Ten Commandments are an affirmation that God loves us, He wants the best for us, and He wants to be in relationship with us. They affirm that life is sacred, sex is sacred, and the family is sacred. They declare that honesty is a virtue which should be cultivated, that a person's word should be as good as their bond, and that envy and desiring what someone else has will always leave us empty and wanting.

Let me say a bit more about the law and the gift of grace and how they relate to each other. Just a moment ago I quoted the apostle Paul about how we as Christians are no long under the law. But to be "under" the law doesn't refer to obeying it, but rather our *relying* on it (see Gal. 3:10-11). When we think we can win God's approval through our moral performance or our obedience to the law, it becomes a crushing burden and we are living "under law." But when we learn that Christ has fulfilled the law and done everything needed to win our salvation, then we can become secure in God's love, and we will in gratitude want to know and delight in the One who has done this for us.

How can we learn to delight in God? By turning to the law! Paul puts it this way. He says that even though he wasn't "under" the law any longer (as a way to earn his salvation), he was now freed to see the beauties of God's law as fulfilled in Christ, and he now tries to do what it asks as way of loving his Savior.

It's in the pages of Scripture, and in the Ten Commandments, that you and I can learn more about who God really is and what pleases Him. It's also a way to learn more about ourselves and how we can come to terms with the disordered loves and character flaws with which each of us battles. We see how far short we fall from the kind of life that pleases God, and we see our need for a Savior. But it's also in the law, and specifically the Ten Commandments, that we see what it means to truly love God and love neighbor. As you will discover, the first three Commandments deal with our relationship with God, and the last seven address our relationships with other people.

Notice in the story of the Exodus that God first rescued the people of Israel from Egypt, and then He gave them the Ten Commandments. Keeping the Commandments isn't what saved them. God had already done that. God didn't first give the law to them and then deliver His people. No, first He delivered His

people, and then He gave them the law. So, you can see that we're not saved *by* the law. Instead, we're saved *for* it. The law is how we can best order our relationship with God, not the way we merit it. It's the way we can express our love and devotion to Him, not the way we earn His love.

Conclusion.

Let me give you a picture of what this looks like in life through a metaphor. The late author Elizabeth Elliott tells a story of an experience she had many years ago, and she writes, "High in the mountains of North Wales in a place called Llanymawddwy, lives a shepherd named John Jones with his wife Mari and his black and white dog Mack. I stood one misty summer morning in the window of their farmhouse watching John on horseback herding the sheep with his dog... Mack, a champion Scottish collie, was in his glory. He came from a long line of working dogs, and he had sheep in his blood. This was what he was made for, this was what he was trained to do...."

"Do the sheep have any idea what's happening?" I asked Mari. 'Not a clue!' she said. 'And how about Mack?' I can't forget Mari's answer: 'The dog doesn't understand the pattern - only obedience.'"

"...In that Welsh pasture in the cool of that summer morning, what I saw was far more than blind obedience. I saw acted out... two creatures who were in the fullest sense 'in their glory.' A man who had given his life to sheep, who loved them and loved his dog, and a dog whose trust in that man was absolute, whose obedience was instant and unconditional, and whose very meat and drink was to do the will of his master. He never stopped wagging his tail. 'I delight to do thy will,' was what Mack said, 'Yea thy law is within my heart.'"²

Is that the desire of your heart today? Do you want to delight in God's will this morning? Be honest. To follow Christ means that we will glory in His will and that we will seek to know it in order that we might do it. Many years ago, there was a movie made about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. In the film King Arthur opened every meeting of the Round Table with this prayer, "Lord, grant us the wisdom to discern the right, the will to do it, and the endurance to see it through."

May that prayer be ours today as we seek to live in the light of God's grace and in discovering the meaning and purpose of the Ten Commandments which He gave to the people of Israel, and for us, as a covenant of love. They are a design for life given by God for our well-being. Amen.

¹Joy Davidman, 16.

²Elizabeth Elliott, "The Glory of God's Will" in *Declare His Glory Among The Nations*, 129-131.