

Read Exodus 20:12-21

Israel stood at the bottom of Mt. Sinai as God revealed Himself to them. At first boundaries had to be drawn to hold the people back, but as they beheld God's presence in the intense sights and sounds of thunder, lightning, the ram's horn, and smoke; as they experienced God's own voice and saw what was happening to them, they trembled in fear and drew back from that boundary.

It was an overwhelming, visible experience of God, one that expresses the essence of the law. These commandments are relationship driven. God loved these people, and taught them what God expects. They respond with obedience.

This week when the elders gathered we read the story about the ascension of Jesus. One of them said, "Wow, to see Jesus ascend would certainly leave no doubt in your mind that Jesus is God's Son." The disciples essentially experienced God's very presence. That drove them to obey, and changed them forever.

Today we celebrate Pentecost, when believers experienced and "saw" the presence of the Holy Spirit coming on them to empower them for the task to which they were called. They were empowered to commit themselves fully to God.

And, Paul writes of having "seen" and experienced the Lord on the Damascus Road. It changed his whole perspective on life.

God is present, loving and teaching us, and we are accountable to live accordingly.

Now the people were frightened by this sight so they drew back from God. But Moses said, "God has come in this way to "test" you." Did that mean God showed up to put the "fear of God" in them? Not really. It means God gave a direct, intense, palatable experience to change their perspective and thus, their lives.

The law changes you because of the context in which it is given. Trying to keep the Ten Commandments as a moral code is impossible. It's much easier to follow the commands in the context of God's immense presence and love, as a response to God's love.

We respond to God's love by saying, "Lord, you are mine," (like in the Call to Worship this morning), and that is exactly where the Ten Commandments begin. If we can think like the Psalmist, "I promise to obey your words! With all my heart I want your blessings," that expresses the essence of the context in which the commandments were given. It's a love relationship between God and us. We are accountable to God to live the way God asks us, out of love.

So if someone asks you, what are the Ten Commandments? You can say, "A love relationship."

Today we look at the second six commandments. These are the ones that have to do with social justice - how we treat others. God calls us to be distinguished by love and respect for others. When we do it, people see God.

Social justice is always a central issue. We talk about how judicial officers should be selected; separation of church and state; and how laws should be interpreted; and there is a wide spectrum of opinions. We know inherently there a need for social order. That has always been the case.

Even from early on God expressed judgment, so there was a sense of justice in the world regarding good and evil. Remember the punishment

- When Cain murdered his brother
- At the time of the flood
- Against Sodom and Gomorrah

The treaties of ancient nations were ethical contracts addressing moral issues, like adultery and stealing. So the Ten Commandments were not novel ideas. But when an empire crumbled, so did its laws. God's laws are unique because they are still here and still followed. So let's examine them.

The first four concern loving God, which we discussed last week. The hinge commandment that connects the first four to the last five, which are about loving your neighbor, is **honor your father and mother**.

That seems odd. But God begins with the basics: you are here because you have parents. Therefore you must give them a place of precedence and honor. Notice the inclusion of the mother. Giving women equal recognition at that time would be highly unusual. No other ANE document would include women in this way.

6. You are not to kill: The entire command is recorded with just six consonants. Killing, slaying, or destroying one another in the covenant group for whatever cause, under whatever circumstances, and by whatever method is prohibited.

7. You are not to commit adultery: This applies to both men and women but particularly to men. Adultery was considered a grave sin by many cultures of the time. Marital integrity in the Bible coincides with fidelity toward God in not having idols. Israel's unfaithfulness in this area caused God great pain.

None of these commands can be separated from the presence and love of God. The love of God which is core in our lives flows into how we are to treat others.

8. You are not to steal: There's no justification for it at all.

These are all really simple and straightforward. God uses few words.

9. False testimony: This has to do primarily with the integrity of the legal process so that justice is done. It also means truthfulness in casual conversation. Falsehood harms relationships. That means our reputation as truthful people matters.

10. Coveting: This is the summary commandment. It means to want, take possession of, or seize someone's stuff, from the most valuable to the least. This is the summary commandment, and its violation can lead to breaking all the rest.

For instance, when David sinned with Bathsheba, it began with him walking on the roof, eyeing his neighbor's wife, and coveting her. That led David to eventually break the sixth, seventh, and eighth commandments. (See 2 Sam 11-12)

Another time an Israelite king named Ahab had this obsessive desire for his neighbor's vineyard, but Naboth would not sell it to him. King Ahab finally killed him to get it, and then lied about it. (See 1Kings 21)

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who was a Russian writer and historian wrote during his prison years in a Soviet forced labor camp:

In the intoxication of youthful successes I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel ... In the surfeit of power I was a murderer and an oppressor. It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, *but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts.* (The Gulag Archipelago 1973)

He also wrote, *"One should never direct people towards happiness, because happiness too is an idol of the market-place. One should direct them towards mutual affection. A beast gnawing at its prey can be happy too, but only human beings can feel affection for each other, and this is the highest achievement they can aspire to."*

Are you directed towards mutual affection, that is to care about others? Be so directed, as God admonishes us. God's laws are all about relationship; God's relationship with the people and people's relationship with one another. The law can never simply be reduced to a moral code.

Jesus astounded his audience during the Sermon on the Mount when he talked about the law as being an attitude of the heart. He said,

- "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment (Mt 5:21-22);
- Regarding adultery He said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Mt 5:28);

Jesus illustrated loving your neighbor with the story of the good Samaritan, teaching us that in God's eyes, it's right to reach out with compassion to help others even at great cost in time and money.

So let's summarize. What does it mean to love our neighbor? It means we are respectful to our parents, faithful to our spouses, satisfied with our possessions, truthful always. We honor life and we generously give, even at great cost.

What happens when we follow the law the way it's meant to be followed, from the heart?

It means "I am third." Have you ever heard that saying? It originated with Gale Sayers, one of the greatest running backs to ever play football. But one season he tore every ligament and muscle in his right knee, with little likelihood he would make a comeback. He thought his life had ended. A teammate, Brian Piccolo, who was actually dying of brain cancer befriended Sayers and helped him recover from his injury.

Now these two were of a different race, and in 1967, it was amazing that they became close friends. With Piccolo's encouragement, Gale Sayers made his comeback in the NFL and was nominated for being the "the most courageous player." He accepted the award by simply saying, "I accept this for Pic." Later that week, Brian Piccolo died. Their story is told in the movie *Brian's Song*.

Sayers and Piccolo both lived out "I am Third." It means God is first, others are second, and you are third. That's essentially the meaning of the Ten Commandments. When believers live them out, not only do we find great purpose and blessing, the world beholds God.

AMEN