

SERMON: God's Top Ten: The Secret to Life

SCRIPTURE: Exodus 19-20

SERIES: *Ten Stupid Things People Do to Mess Up Their Lives*

SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus

DATE: June 7, 2009

I grew up in conservative churches all my life, and then I attended Bible college and seminary for eight years, but I was well into my first pastorate here when I realized a rather startling fact: I had never in my entire life heard a sermon on the Ten Commandments! In trying to understand the reason for that strange omission I concluded that it had a lot to do with the dispensational background of the churches and schools I attended, a background that tended, on the one hand, to preach grace to the exclusion of law, and on the other, to focus on human commandments about smoking and drinking and dancing at the expense of God's commandments.

I decided right then I would preach the Ten Commandments, which I did—to my own great benefit. I have preached them several times since, and every time it has been a powerful and profound and convicting experience. Let's turn in our Bibles to the passage where the Commandments are first given, Exodus 20:1-21. You will notice that most of them are stated very succinctly with the exception of the 2nd and 4th—the ones on idolatry and sabbath-keeping:

And God spoke all these words:

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

"You shall have no other gods before me.

"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

"Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

"You shall not murder.

"You shall not commit adultery.

"You shall not steal.

"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to

your neighbor."

When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."

Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning."

The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

Let me share with you a little modern-day parable. Today is the day! You've finally gotten the new car everyone has been raving about, and she is a beauty! You climb in, put on your seatbelt and turn the ignition. As you start down the road, you notice the dash has no instruments—no speedometer, no fuel gauge, no battery meter. Then you notice the car doesn't have any headlights or turn signals, and the glass is tinted almost to pitch black, including the windshield.

It's a little unusual, but the salesman gave you a great price. And besides, the car has a magnificent stereo. Every kind of music to fit your taste is reproduced in perfect quality. And the mirrors in the car are specially designed and placed to reflect only your best features. Never mind the fact that you can't see where you're going—you calmly ignore the occasional honks and screams and thumps under the wheel—those are other people's problems, not yours.

Sound ridiculous? Of course it is. But this little parable is actually a pretty good reflection of the current state of society. There is no moral consensus at the beginning of the 21st century because people have largely rejected the moral compass and the ethical boundaries God has provided. They will decide for themselves! They don't need anyone telling them how to live! They don't need anyone telling them what truth is.

In the absence of any accepted objective criteria for right and wrong, concepts like empathy become the supreme moral guide of our day. We will interpret God's laws with empathy. For example, the Bible may say that homosexual behavior is wrong or that taking innocent human life is wrong, but when we put ourselves in the shoes of a person with same-sex attraction or a woman with an unwanted pregnancy, empathy drives us to interpret God's laws to fit the situation.

Oh, we're not ready to deny the existence of God or the need for morality. Not yet, at least. It's just that truth doesn't begin with God, it begins with us. What's right is what we want; and God can accommodate himself to us if He wants; if He doesn't, then too bad for God. That may sound a little crass, but in fact it's not too far off from the way most people live from day to day. Every now and then, they may have moments of anxiety when they sense the disturbing pointlessness and aimlessness of life as autonomous beings. But they can get rid of that feeling with another new car, better sex, a bigger home, or more booze.

The fact is, friends, every society and every individual needs a moral core to survive. Without objective standards of morality, the social fabric unravels and destroys everyone (slowly or

quickly) in a chaotic orgy of self-realization. So where do we go to find a moral baseline, a set of behavioral standards that is bigger than our own ego? We find them in the Ten Commandments. They are a summary of God's perfect will for his creation, a reflection of His own loving and holy character. God's Law gives us *the* way of life. We ignore it at our own peril. We obey it to our happiness and eternal fulfillment.

We will need some orientation to these commandments to put them in proper perspective, and that is why I have chosen to do an introductory sermon this morning. Over the next ten weeks, we will look at each commandment, one at a time, in great depth. And our whole church will be doing this—Children's Ministry as well as adults. Which leads me to encourage our parents to give extra attention to Moses' instructions immediately after the Ten Commandments were delivered: "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deuteronomy 6:6-7).

I was so moved last Sunday with our Kindergarten class, which not only quoted the Ten Commandments, but also said the 66 books of the Bible and recited an 18-verse Psalm. Their teachers got all that out of these 5-year-olds in just a one-hour class on Sunday mornings over the last nine months. Imagine how much we as parents could do if we would take Deuteronomy 6 seriously!

I want to ask and answer three questions this morning. And the first is this:

Why is it important for us *today* to pay attention to a code of laws over 3000 years old?

The Ten Commandments were given nearly fifteen centuries before Christ. Can they possibly still have relevance for people in the twenty-first century *after* Christ? In answering that question it might be well to notice when God gave these commandments, He didn't go through anyone. He didn't even ask Moses, the great prophet, to write them down. He spoke directly to the people out of the cloud and wrote the commandments down Himself, in stone, so there would be no possibility of anyone screwing them up or misunderstanding them ever. That is how seriously God takes these commandments. And that is an indication of the kind of authority they are supposed to carry in the lives of God's people.

Interestingly, the only other time we read of God writing anything is when Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dirt in the presence of the woman taken in adultery and her accusers (See John 8:1-11). I can't prove it but I'm personally convinced He wrote the same thing His Father wrote on Mount Sinai 15 hundred years earlier. You will recall that after writing on the ground Jesus stood up and said to the woman's accusers, "He who is without sin, let him cast the first stone." As they compared their own lives with the totality of what was written on the ground, every last one of them found an excuse to slink away into the darkness.

Furthermore, when God gave these commandments He intentionally displayed His glory with thunder, lightning, smoke, thick darkness, and loud trumpet blasts. God was not just flexing His muscles, but was providing an object lesson to the effect that He is holy, awesome, transcendent

and supremely powerful. This is the God who created everything there is and who ordered the laws of the universe according to His own perfect will—not just the physical laws, but also the moral and spiritual laws.

There are probably many reasons one could offer as to why it is important for us to pay attention to a code of laws over 3000 years old, but I would like to mention just two, one relating to man and the other to God.

1. There is an ethical vacuum in government, business, schools, churches, homes, and the lives of many individuals that cannot be adequately filled by anything other than God's law. I don't need to recite the evidence of this ethical vacuum because if you read the papers or listen to the news at all, it's obvious. But every once in a while some really startling example appears that demonstrates the extent to which our society has lost its ethical moorings. Several years ago a young man I know worked on a congressional committee in Washington, D.C. He told me about a bill before Congress that would make it a felony to destroy a certain kind of turtle egg because it belongs to an endangered species and the egg represents a potential life. Yet the leading Congressional sponsors of that bill were strongly pro-choice on abortion. This is not just an inconsistent ethic—this is morality turned on its head. It's perfectly alright to end the life of a human baby but a felony to destroy a turtle egg!

Last Sunday while we were in worship, just a mile away from where you are sitting, a man violated the sixth commandment against murder and used as his excuse the fact that his target had violated the sixth commandment. Oh, I know the rationalization he used—that the murder he committed would prevent further murders by the original murderer. But that's exactly what that is—a rationalization. As we will see in six weeks, the Sixth Commandment forbids killing in private vengeance. I also know the rationalization used by the doctor's supporters in labeling him a saint and a martyr. After all, they say, what he did was perfectly legal. Well, the state may consider the taking of innocent human life legal, but that doesn't make it moral.

I have no desire to rub salt in the wound that was sustained by the congregation of Reformation Lutheran Church. That was undoubtedly a traumatic experience for them. However, I think the public statement from that church bears careful thought: *“Our congregation strives to be a safe place for all people. We deplore the violence that took place within the walls of our church. Further, we reject any notion that violence against another human being is an acceptable way to resolve differences over any issue.”* I agree entirely, but isn't it amazing that this statement does not view the 60,000 babies aborted in that clinic as human beings, too? How is it that violence against them is acceptable?

Once again we see how society at both ends of the political spectrum has lost its ethical moorings. The resultant crisis in our society demands a return to the basic moral law of God.

A second reason why it is important for us today to pay attention to the Ten Commandments relates more to God.

2. The Ten Commandments play a dominant role in God's Word, both Old and New Testaments. The entire Decalogue is found not only in Exodus 20, but also in Deuteronomy 5. In addition the word “commandment(s)” is found over 300 times in the Bible and as many as half of those references are probably to the Ten Commandments. Listen to these statements from just one Psalm (119):

*Do not let me wander from Thy commandments.
 Do not hide Thy commandments from me.
 I shall run the way of Thy commandments.
 Make me walk in the path of Thy commandments.
 I shall delight in Thy commandments.
 I shall lift up my hands to Thy commandments.
 I believe in Thy commandments
 All Thy commandments are faithful.
 Thy commandments make me wiser than my enemies.
 I love Thy commandments above gold.
 I longed for Thy commandments.
 Thy commandments are my delight.
 All Thy commandments are truth.
 All Thy commandments are righteousness.*

But the emphasis on the Ten Commandments is not limited to just the Old Testament. Nine of the Ten Commandment are specifically repeated in the New Testament, with the only exception being the requirement to worship on Saturday. Even at that, the Sabbath principle remains intact; i.e. the principle of one day in seven for worship and rest. (It’s just that the day no longer has to be Saturday, as I hope to demonstrate clearly to you in a few weeks).

Jesus Himself took the Ten Commandments seriously and unconditionally. In His meeting with the rich young ruler in Matt. 19 He quoted them as the basic instruction for the way of eternal life. He contrasted God's commandments with the traditions of the elders. And His Sermon on the Mount is essentially a commentary on the Ten Commandments.

The conclusion I would draw, then, is that since the world is in an ethical crisis, and since God has revealed His answer to that crisis in no uncertain terms in both the OT and the NT, we need to pay attention! Friends, we may have advanced scientifically, medically, economically, militarily, and in many other ways, but we haven't advanced one iota morally. Nor will we, until we return to the basic moral law of God.

Why did God give these Ten Commandments? I want to offer four reasons:

1. To reveal His standards. When you buy anything that has to be put together or involves electronic parts it almost always comes with a manual. I hate manuals, in part because they are usually written by some computer geek or engineer who can't write plain English. So I generally just try to figure it out, often wasting more time than it would take if I just read the manual.

A great many people seem to follow my bad habit with manuals when it comes to life in general. God has written a manual, but they try to figure it out on their own. The really foolish thing about that choice is that God's basic moral manual is written in very plain English. Well, actually in plain Hebrew, but in any language the Ten Commandments are plain and simple—no one who reads them can plead ignorance or ambiguity. We may not like what we read, but we can't help but understand the difference between right and wrong.

Just this week I came across a copy of the Ten Commandments posted on the wall of a church in East Tennessee. I think it illustrates my point:

The Ten Commandments for Mountain Folk

1. *Just one God*
2. *Put nothin' before God*
3. *Watch yer mouth*
4. *Git yourself to Sunday meetin'*
5. *Honor yer Ma & Pa*
6. *No killin'*
7. *No foolin' around with another fellow's gal*
8. *Don't take what ain't yers*
9. *No tellin' tales or gossipin'*
10. *Don't be hankerin' for yer buddy's stuff*

Now that's plain an' simple. Y'all have a nice day!

Some people view the standards God has laid down in the Ten Commandments as the principal tool of a Divine Spoilsport to make sure we don't enjoy life too much. They are, in fact, the exact opposite. They are road signs to the good life. I agree with Dallas Willard who has stated that “The written law that God gave to the Israelites is one of the greatest gifts of grace that God has ever conveyed to the human race.”¹ In fact, on the day he brought the Commandments down to the Israelites, Moses asked them, “What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?” (Deuteronomy 4:8).

So beneficial are the standards God revealed in the Ten Commandments that I believe the extent to which any person—believer, atheist, agnostic, or pagan—observes and obeys these commandments determines in large part the degree to which that person lives a happy, healthy, fulfilling, and productive life. Observing them won't get the person to heaven but sure will make life here on earth better.

2. To reveal our sin. The Commandments are like a mirror that shows us our inability to keep God's law. They make it painfully clear that even though we know we should be reverent, faithful, loving and honest, we're none of those on a consistent basis. As Paul wrote in Romans 3:20, “the more we know God's law, the clearer it becomes that we aren't obeying it.” (NLT) Most people, certainly most Christians, are willing to admit to being sinners. But admitting sin in the abstract is easy compared to acknowledging it in the concrete. The Ten Commandments force us to face specific moral failures. No one can honestly look at these Ten laws and say with

a straight face that they are innocent of sin.

3. To define the ethic of love. Both the OT and the NT teach that man must love God with every part and fibre of his being, and that he must also love his neighbor as himself. Why didn't God just stop there? Why didn't He just give us the principle of love and spare us all the negative rules? Many liberal theologians, in fact, claim Jesus did just that. They reduce the Ten Commandments to the ethic of love (it's called Situation Ethics). After all, they ask, what did Jesus say in Luke 10:25-28?

"On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' 'What is written in the Law?' he replied. 'How do you read it?' He answered: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' 'You have answered correctly,' Jesus replied. 'Do this and you will live.'"

There you have it. The expert in the law didn't quote the Ten Commandments. Rather he summarized the law by quoting the Great commandment to love God and love people. And Jesus gave His approval.

Yet this is the same Jesus who a few chapters later in Luke 18 confronted the rich young ruler and quoted the Ten Commandments to him. The only conclusion I can draw is that there is indeed an ethic of love, and it *would* be sufficient *if* we would live by it. But God knows our tendency to rationalize our behavior and convince ourselves that even the sinful things we do are motivated by love. So He not only tells us to love but through the Ten Commandments He defines what the loving thing is. And, friends, the loving thing, according to God, is *never* to commit adultery or lie or steal or covet.

4. To lead us to Jesus Christ. The Ten Commandments condemn us and humble us and break us to the point that some are ready to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only possible answer to our sin problem because He, as God in human flesh, lived the perfect sinless life that each of us is commanded to live but doesn't. He took the wrath of God for our sins on Himself when He died on the cross. All of God's holy judgment on sin was poured out on Jesus, so that sinful people like you and me can receive forgiveness of sins and, more importantly, a heart transplant—a new heart that loves God and wants to honor and obey him. This is why Paul follows up his statement that through the law we become conscious of sin by adding (Romans 3:21-24),

But now God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law (perfectly, i.e.), as was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago. We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are.

For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins.

Our response to all this should be praise and thanksgiving to God, who has taken away the penalty of the law through his Son, Jesus; we should humbly accept this free gift of new and

eternal life by faith in Jesus Christ.

Well, we've looked so far at why the Ten Commandments are important today and why God bothered to give us such a concise, specific moral code.

What is the nature of the Ten Commandments?

1. They are timeless, universal, intuitive, and immutable moral principles that cannot be broken with impunity. They are timeless; i.e. they are as relevant and practical today as they were the day they were written. They are universal; i.e. they apply equally well to the Middle East or the Western Hemisphere, to industrial nations or Third World Countries, to the rich or common laborers, to men or women, adults or children, leaders or followers, clergy or laity.

I also believe they are known intuitively by all mankind. The notion of intuitive knowledge is a very debatable topic. The dominant view in our day is that human beings are exclusively biological, and it is nurture, not nature that determines what they believe and how they respond. However, Romans 2:14ff makes it clear that God's commandments are written upon the hearts of every human being. That suggests that everyone knows instinctively that it is wrong to lie, steal, murder, or worship idols. Only those who have been tampered with by Satan or have seared their consciences with a long pattern of sinful behavior dare to claim they feel no remorse when they break these laws.

These are also immutable laws of the universe which simply cannot be violated with impunity. As someone has said, "You really cannot break the Ten Commandments; you can only be broken by them." Whenever any of the Ten Commandments are violated, the result is deterioration of family and social life, corruption of national life, and chaos in personal life.

2. They are as descriptive as they are prescriptive. By this I mean that the actions condemned in the Ten Commandments are not wrong because the Bible forbids them; rather the Bible forbids them because they are wrong. God is here describing for us the basic moral fabric of the universe which He established from the very beginning. The law of gravity doesn't forbid you to jump out of a 3rd story window; rather it describes the physical nature of this universe and the chaos that results if you ignore it. So also the Ten Commandments describe the moral nature of the universe, and the spiritual and social chaos that results when we ignore God's law.

Of course, the Commandments do also prescribe (or proscribe) certain behaviors. These are *not* Ten Suggestions or Ten Good Ideas— they are the inflexible patterns for life in this world, and they have authority simply because they are given by the Highest Authority there is. If we want to live our life in harmony with the God of the universe and with the way He has ordered reality, we must humble ourselves before His commandments.

3. Eight of the Ten are stated negatively but each one has both a positive and negative aspect. For example, the command to "not bear false witness" includes the implicit

requirement to “be honest,” and the command to not misuse the name of the Lord your God entails the requirement to always give honor to God's name. Of course, the positive ones also have a negative aspect. “Honor your father and your mother” demands that we not show them disrespect.

The reason the commandments are mostly stated negatively is because God knows us intimately, and He knows how prone we are to violate the boundaries He has set up. Every parent knows it's not enough to tell our children to play safely and be nice; we have to tell them, “You may not play in traffic; you will not run with scissors; you shall not hit your sister over the head with a Tonka truck.” Fourthly and finally,

4. They fall into two sections: reverence for God (1-4) and respect for man (5-10).

When Jesus approved the summary of the commandments of God as “love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself”, I believe He was actually making a reference to the two sections of the Ten Commandments. The first four speak of our relationship and obligations to almighty God. The other six deal with our relationships with one another. Both are critical to the good life.

Conclusion. Friends, God's Law is a powerful force, a lot like fire. Handled properly, it will warm our hearts, light up our way, and keep us safe from danger; but when mishandled, it can destroy everything in its path with relentless fury. So we need to approach these commandments with respect and try to understand their nature and purpose so that we can derive maximum benefit from our study of them.

I close with reference to an old deacon who was embarking upon his first trip to the Holy Land and told his pastor that he was going to take a side trip to Sinai, walk up to the top of Mount Sinai and recite the Ten Commandments. Said his pastor, “I can tell you something better than that. Stay home and keep them.” Not a bad suggestion. Your very life may depend upon it.

i. Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 211.