

Celebrating the Ten Commandments

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Exodus 20:1-4, 7-20

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When I was at Columbia Seminary it was during your second year of Seminary that you were required to take Theology with George Stroup. Dr. Stroup is still there, although I do not know if it is still in your second year when you have to take his class. But there were thirty of us in Dr. Stroup's class, and I remember one day he told us to clear our desks and take out a sheet of paper. List the Ten Commandments, he said. Easy enough, right. Second year of Seminary, the second year of professional school for people going into the ministry. But how many of the thirty students do you think could list all Ten Commandments? And by the way, that is not a rhetorical question. I am actually asking you. There were three. Three out of thirty of us could name all Ten Commandments. Now, I am sure you all want to know, what about you, Pastor Rich. Were you one of the 3 who could name them all, or one of the 27 who couldn't? Like I said, I'm sure you all want to know, don't you?

Most of us, most of us who have grown up in the church and who are Christians are familiar with the fact that there are Ten Commandments—Ten Commandments engraved on stone tablets which Moses brought down from Mount Sinai to give to God's people after leading them out of slavery in Egypt. But while most all of us know that there are Ten Commandments, fewer of us could name them all, fewer of us still could name them all in order, and even fewer of us still could recite them all on command. But when we get in to the actual commandments, and when we think about them, we may wonder why they are so important, and why they should matter to us?

In the first place these Ten Commandments don't seem to be a complete list of the things that we believe we should and should not do. The Ten Commandments don't seem to capture the whole of what we think morality demands of us, or even the ten most important things that morality demands of us. For what do we find when we get into the actual list? Well, we find that there are prohibitions on things like murder, and theft, and lying and adultery and I think we can agree that any list about what we should and should not do should include these things. But what about torture? What about rape? What about slavery, child abuse and cruelty to animals? What about feeding the hungry and visiting the sick, and befriending the friendless.

Now maybe it isn't such a big deal that the Ten Commandments don't forbid everything that seems to be wrong or require everything that seems to be right. After all, as far as the content of the Ten Commandments go, there is much more to them than meets the eye. Jesus himself told us as much. He said "You have heard it said 'You shall not murder' and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment' but I say to you if you are angry with your brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment." He also said "You have heard it 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." So there is a lot more to these Ten Commandments than what you just see on the surface, if you dig a little deeper, you will find they cover a lot more ground than you might think. And don't just take my word for it, that is what our Lord says.

But even if we listen to what Jesus says, we run into a second problem with the Ten Commandments, and that is that for many people it seems as though no set of rules no matter how long we make them, can ever fully capture what it means to be a righteous and holy person. In Jesus' day the Pharisees had a lot more than just ten rules to follow, they had 613.

And yet even 613 rules was not enough to make them compassionate and caring and merciful. If you agree that following ten rules is not enough to make you righteous and holy, and if you agree that 613 is not enough, then just how many do you think will be enough? How many do you think will be enough before you decide that no number will be enough to give you a pure and loving heart? Before you decide the only thing that can ever give us a pure and loving heart is the spirit of God living inside us.

So, why do we need the Ten Commandments? Why are they so important? Well, to answer that, I want us to imagine what the world would be like if God had never commanded anything. What if God just made the world and left us all alone. Well, we don't really have to imagine. That was the world the Israelites actually lived in when they were in Egypt living under Pharaoh. And living under Pharaoh was living in such a way that whatever Pharaoh decreed was right and whatever he forbade was wrong. So if Pharaoh said the Israelite slaves had to make bricks without straw they had to make bricks without straw. And in a world where any one man has the power to decide what is right and what is wrong, that man is God. That man takes the place of God and it isn't just the Israelites who are his slaves, everyone is his slave.

But in giving us the Ten Commandments, what God says to us is that no human being is above morality. No human being is above the law. Whether you are a king or a pauper, if you are made of flesh and blood, you stand under God's judgment. You stand under the law. And to say that we stand under God's judgment does not mean that we will all be condemned by God, it does not mean we will be punished by God. Although all of us are sinners as we confess our sins, I promise you each and every Sunday that we all have forgiveness of our sins in Christ. But we will still be judged. Every one of us who is made of flesh and blood and who will one day die

and meet our maker sitting on his throne will one day be judged. In this life, you may be able to get away with violating all Ten Commandments. You may be able to get away with violating all Ten Commandments and even prosper for your entire life. But when the day comes that Christ returns to us, none of us escape God's judgment. None of us escape God's watchful eye.

I will have to admit to you though, that I don't like the idea of being commanded by God all the time. And there is a good reason for that. Anyone you would recognize as having the power to command you is one you recognize as having authority over you. Pets are commanded by their masters, soldiers are commanded by their generals, children are commanded by their parents. But you would not command a friend if you wanted to remain friends with that person for very long. A friendship is a relationship of equality and commands are not accepted among equals. You can try to command an equal. You can give a command. I am not saying that if you give a command your mouth will suddenly shut or no words will come out. But someone who sees themselves as your equal will not recognize your right to command them. Equals can advise, they can suggest, they can persuade, but they cannot command.

Now, I don't always like advice either. I'm not suggesting that I do. I didn't like the advice I got from this doctor I had. He had a terrible bedside manner, this doctor did. I went to this guy and he had me get on the scale and he checked my blood pressure and all my vitals and he finally said "Now, Rich, you're just in terrible shape. You need to exercise more, you need to eat less. You're just in terrible shape."

Can you believe that? I said "Now, Doc, I don't agree with that. I don't think I'm in terrible shape, I'd like to get a second opinion."

He said "Alright, I'll give you a second opinion; you're ugly too."

So, I don't always like advice, but I never like being commanded. And because I do not like being commanded, sometimes I think to myself I should be able to do whatever I feel like doing whenever I feel like doing it. Who cares about the consequences? Well, that seems like a fine idea. In fact, it always seems like a fine idea, right up until the moment, the very moment, that someone decides to do whatever they feel like doing to you. And then it doesn't seem like such a good idea. It might seem like a fine idea to lie to people, to betray people who trust you, to use people. It seems like a fine idea until someone lies to you, until someone betrays you, until someone uses you. And when I realized that, I said to myself if I think I should be able to do whatever I want but other people shouldn't be able to do whatever they want to me, then who do I think I am. Just who on earth, do I think I am? But people say that every day. And what could be more arrogant? What could possibly be more arrogant than that?

What God's Ten Commandments really represent, why they matter is because all of us, all of us rich and poor, all of us young and old, all of us from least to greatest are under God's law. And if someone out there believes that they should be more important in God's eyes than everyone else, if someone out there believes that they should matter more than everyone else, then I suppose that isn't such a good thing. But if you do not believe that, then you will see the Ten Commandments as something to celebrate, and all of God's commandments as something to celebrate.

When my father was practicing law in the state of South Carolina, there was a man he knew who was a judge named Alex Lundberg. And Judge Lundberg had a son named Pete. Now when Pete was a young man, one night he was at a party in a certain part of the state and he had a couple of beers and then a few more beers and he used bad judgment and he got behind

the wheel. Well, Pete was driving down the highway swerving from one lane to another, and all of the sudden a blue light came on behind him and the cops pulled him over, took him to jail and charged him with a DWI. Well, now unfortunately for Pete the county where he was pulled over had a judge named Roscoe McCracken and Judge McCracken was the toughest judge in the entire state—and everybody knew, everybody who was anybody knew that if you got a DWI in Judge McCracken's county you got thirty days in jail. It didn't matter if it was your first offense, it didn't matter if you were way over the limit or just a little over the limit, thirty days in jail. Well, Pete was naturally a little worried about this, but his dad, Judge Lundberg said "Don't you worry son, don't worry at all. You see, I went to law school with Judge McCracken and we play poker together and we go hunting and fishing together. We go way back, you see, so I will just talk to Judge McCracken and I'll tell him your my son and he'll go easy on you. So you go ahead and stand up there and you plead guilty and he'll ask you if you have anything to say and you just say you're sorry and then he'll go easy on you. I promise."

"Well, ok, dad, ok."

So a couple months went by and Pete's court date came up. He sat in the courtroom with his dad and just before the judge came in his dad Alex said to him, "Now remember son, plead guilty, say you're sorry and the judge will go easy on you. Well, in walked Judge McCracken with his long black robe and stern expression and he banged the gavel and called the court to order, "Will the defendant Peter Lundberg please approach the bench?"

Pete stepped up to the bench and Judge McCracken said "Mr. Lundberg to the charge of driving while intoxicated how do you plea?"

"Guilty your honor."

“Mr. Lundberg, do you have anything to say before I pass a sentence on you?”

“Yes, your honor, yes I do.” And then Pete gave his apology and everything was going as planned, but then what no one expected was what Pete said next. He said “Your honor, in addition to being sorry, might I also add that I understand that you and my father are personal friends, but I wouldn’t want your friendship with my father to give me an unfair advantage in this courtroom. Your honor, it is public knowledge that when someone comes into your court and either pleads guilty or is found guilty of DWI they receive thirty days in jail, and I do not think it would be fair to all of them or to the people of this community for me to receive anything less than the same sentence of thirty days in jail.” Well, the judge sat there in shocked silence for a moment, but realizing he could not argue with the young man, he reluctantly handed down the sentence of thirty days in jail. And just before they lead Pete away he spoke to his father and so afraid was he that his father would be angry with him but his father Alex wiped away tears and told him he had never been more proud of him. He had never been more proud of him as they took him away in handcuffs to spend the next month in the county jail. For Pete understood that it doesn’t matter who you are or who you know, none of us are above the law, and in the same way, we should know that none of us is above God’s law.

Have no other Gods before me. Do not make any graven images. Do not take the name of the Lord in vain. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Honor your father and mother. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Do not covet. These Ten Commandments are God’s law. These Ten Commandments are God’s law that stand for all generations, for all people, for all time. And let us be thankful for that. Let us celebrate that.