

*Don't Forget the One Who Started It All!*

Series on the Law

Exodus 20:1-17; Matthew 5:17-19

January 25, 2009

**Exodus 20:1** Then God spoke all these words: <sup>2</sup> I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; <sup>3</sup> **you shall have no other gods before me.** <sup>4</sup> **You shall not make for yourself an idol,** whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, <sup>6</sup> but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. <sup>7</sup> **You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God,** for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. <sup>8</sup> **Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.** <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor and do all your work. <sup>10</sup> But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work-- you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. <sup>12</sup> Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. <sup>13</sup> You shall not murder. <sup>14</sup> You shall not commit adultery. <sup>15</sup> You shall not steal. <sup>16</sup> You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. <sup>17</sup> You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

**Matthew 5:17** "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come **not to abolish but to fulfill.** <sup>18</sup> For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Regulations and laws – who likes laws and laws, do's and don'ts, and *thou shalt not's*? Do laws help us or restrict us? Doesn't Christianity seem to some people as nothing more than *rules and regulations, judgment and*

*being judgmental, punishment and no fun and little freedom to do anything that is fun? Isn't this **law stuff** the reason why folks often point the finger at Christians and suggest that we are **hypocritical**? The story goes about a policeman who saw something wrong in the car ahead. The officer pulled over the car with his lights flashing and approached the driver. So, the driver is befuddled. He wasn't drinking and hadn't been speeding? "What was the matter, officer – what did I do wrong?" The said, "I followed you and observed your behavior – blasting out everyone with your loud radio, being rude to someone ahead, who didn't move fast enough through the light. Generally you were acting out of character with some foul and offensive words." Then the police officer said, "I thought you must be driving a stolen car." "Why," asked the driver. To which the police officer responded, "Because you were acting so rudely and disrespectful, you could not have been the owner of this car with a bumper sticker that says, "**Honk, if you love Jesus.**"*

The officer spotted what most people spot right away in our actions that betray our words. He saw "**hypocrisy**" – the most dreaded word to the Christian faith!

With the exception of the Cross, I would imagine that the most **familiar symbol** of our faith is the **two stone tablets** with the Roman

numerals I-X inscribed. This past Monday when our pastors gathered for worship at Crenshaw UMC in Blackstone, I looked up above the choir and the pulpit and saw the beautiful stained glass circular window. The focus was on Jesus holding in his hands in front of him the two stone tablets representing the **Ten Commandments**. Why is Jesus portrayed in this way holding this symbol of the Old Covenant? It is because Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come **not to abolish but to fulfill.***” (Matthew 5:17 NRS)

The **Ten Commandments** are part of what is called the **Torah** in the Jewish tradition. We refer to the first five books of the Christian Bible as the Torah, the books Moses, and, Moses is also called the “**Law Giver.**”

Lay along side of this thought about the figure of Moses as the **Law Giver** and the **figure of Jesus**, as the **New Moses**. Our Savior presents to the masses early in his ministry the ***Sermon on the Mount***, which is probably the best known body of teaching in Christianity. Jesus appears like Moses going up on a mountain, sitting down and teaching about the new ways of looking at the old laws and regulations. Jesus even went so far as to **claim and affirm his Jewish faith** very clearly and profoundly when he said in Chapter five of Matthew, “***Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.***” (Matthew 5:17)

That is a huge statement – Jesus has **not come nor has he intended** to end, to replace or to destroy the law and the prophets! Even more dramatically Jesus says that **he has come to fulfill the law!** What does that mean? How does that impact you and me?

In these next two weeks, I want to have us think seriously about the Ten Commandments of God and what they mean to us today. We need to ask, “*Are they are important and why we need them and how we will use them in our daily lives?*” If we believe in Jesus as our Lord, then we will have to come to grips with the Laws of God to guide us along our journey.

I am going to divide the sermons on the *Ten Commandments* into two parts. Today, **part I**, is about the first four Commandments. These four focus on our relationship to God as our **creator** – *the one who started it all!* Then **part II** next week is about the last six of the Ten Commandments. These focus on our relationship with each other.

## II

**Part I** of the commandments is broken down into 4 subsections. They all point to a focus on God as our creator, the source of all life. I try to think of some memory device to remember them. The best I can do is to take a letter from each group and use them creatively – **NOG NMI NWU RS**.

<sup>3</sup> you shall have no other gods before me

You shall not make for yourself an idol (4)

<sup>7</sup> You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God,

<sup>8</sup> Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy

These are the “*core values*” that provide the guide to the moral foundation of the many regulations found in the other books, such as **Leviticus**. Torah means *guide*. It is taken from a word that derives from archery. The Torah is like someone taking aim on a target. The target is the **Wisdom** of God – how we **love** God and our neighbor. **Righteousness** is hitting the target and **transgression** is missing the target.

**Core values** recognize the relationship of God to each of us as human beings. We are the divine creation, children of God. We are **not gods**, nor can we make God or shape God to our own desires and liking! **There is only one God**. That is the central core value. How do we honor this God at the very center of our being?

These four commandments focus on **how we honor God** and see our place in this relationship. **FIRST**, we **recognize the real God**. We worship and trust only that one God. This is the *shema* spoken every week in a Jewish temple, <sup>4</sup> **Hear**, *O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.* (Deuteronomy 6:4) My father was an alcoholic. The **bottle** was his

**god.** The addict's addiction controls everything. The god of the addiction makes you lie, steal, cheat, and hurt everyone around you, including yourself. There are many gods that want our loyalty. Can you name them? Money, sex, food, prestige, and power are examples, just to name a few. The **Wall Street** crash of the giant financial wizards speaks volumes to us of that truth. Recently, we saw one CEO who lost his job on top of the financial world. "Merrill Lynch CEO John Thain **spent \$1.22 million to redecorate his office** last year while the company slashed jobs and fought for its survival... Area Rug: \$87,784

- Pair of chairs: \$28,091
- Pendant Light Fixture: \$19,751"

(<http://www.bloggingstocks.com/2009/01/22/merrill-lynch-spent-1-22-million-redecorating-for-john-thain/>)

Or, consider the auto manufacture CEO's who came hat-in-hand to Congress for billions of dollars of "bailout funds," but extravagantly flying in on their private jets. We have seen more than we can stand or comprehend in this **greed** culture. But, lest we point the finger at someone up there in the glass ceilings, remember the admonition of Jesus in chapter 7 of Matthew.

*"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged... <sup>3</sup> Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? <sup>4</sup> Or*

*how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? <sup>5</sup> You **hypocrite**, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye. (Matthew 7:1-5)*

Here is that warning about “***hypocrisy***” again that plagues anyone who dares to name themselves “***Christian.***” Be careful. God is the ultimate judge, not you, not me.

Creating divinely powerful images and swearing oaths to use the name of God frivolously or without merit is too common place. God becomes a casually, insensitively, negligible utterance. The divine name is often reduced down to saying so easily and so frequently, “***O, my God.***” Then, if you text a lot, like many of us, of which I am equally guilty, you might just use the initials **OMG.**

Just how sacred is this name of God? In the Gospel of Matthew, for instance, the Kingdom of Heaven is used instead of the Kingdom of God where it is used in the other Gospels. This is a book written to Jewish Christians, who knew the commandment – **not to use the name of God wrongfully.** Matthew in deference to this sense of the holy did not use the divine NAME. He substituted the indirect reference to the name with the word, “**heaven.**”

How do we **honor God** in our daily work lives? This is the big question for us. “***Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.***” This is meant to be a day of rest from our labors and to recognize that God is the source, the one who **started it all** and will finish it. As we hear in the book of Revelation, Jesus is the **Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.** (Revelation 21)

I can remember the day, when stores were closed on Sundays. That was a result of the “**Blue Laws.**” Can you remember those times? It was nice to visit and to relax. This also provided more opportunity to worship in church. Even today *Chic Filet* and *Ukrops* stores close on Sundays. Guess what? They still are capturing much of the market without being open on Sundays. In a world that is driven toward success and accomplishment, taking a **Sabbath day** is **not acceptable** to one with a compulsion to have more and more. Plus, employers demand employees to work on Sunday. It becomes and is a vicious cycle. The truth is that **we need rest** and the **Sabbath** was created as much **for us**. We do not have to keep producing to live and to survive. We have enough. Our problem often is that we want more than we need and we cannot tell the difference in what is enough and what is too much.

But, the Sabbath law, as important as it is to the biblical roots, can be twisted and badly abused. Rules can take over and drain the life out of the holiness and joy of the Sabbath. Jesus spoke harshly of criticism when he did the work of healing and doing “good on the Sabbath.” I remember when I couldn’t play cards, go to the movies, dance or do anything on Sunday. It became a day of rules that were not all that helpful. We looked for ways to sneak around the rules.

So, today is the day to remember God as the **one who started** and will **finish** all things. It is a time to celebrate and a time to find joy and peace in body and in spirit. The Sabbath is a **time of refreshing and renewing**. This sets the tone for the rest of our days of labor. We know that in the end, God’s Sabbath is to put us at rest from anxiety and fear, because we acknowledge God as the source of life, hope, and peace. We **see God’s work in the creation** and in the life of all God’s children. *“This is my Father’s world, and to my listening ears, all nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres.”* You sang this often to the joy of God who started it all in creation.

*O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder  
Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made.  
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,  
Thy power through-out the universe displayed.*

*Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee;  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!  
Then sings my soul, My Savior God, to Thee:  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!*

*When through the woods and forest glades I wander  
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;  
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur  
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze:*

This is the **starting point** for us today. We **need to know God** as divine, as our **creator**, as our Lord. This sets the tone for the moral ways we live out our life in relationship to each other. We **begin** with **loving God** with our mind, our soul, our heart, with all our being. This is the **beginning of wisdom** and the path to life. I invite you to **believe** in this one holy God who is revealed to us today in Jesus Christ. He is the Word of God made flesh, dwelling with us full of truth and grace. (John 1:14).