

"COMMANDMENTS - GOD AND US"

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Exodus 20:1-11

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Do you still know the Ten Commandments? All of them? In order? When did you learn them? As a child? In Sunday School? In Confirmation or Covenant Class? They are an amazing group of phrases. In Hebrew they are known as "The Ten Words" and in primitive Hebrew form, they were very brief phrases - each commandment only two words long.

Today and next Sunday, commandments will be the subject of the sermon. Maybe I should have set aside 10 Sundays, using a Sunday sermon for each one of them. That seemed a little too long a period of time to me, so I settled on two Sundays.

The reason that two sermons seemed about right is that commandments come in two kinds. The first four speak to religious duties or to the way God expects us to keep Him first in our lives. The last six commandments speak of moral duties or how God wants us to treat each other. Even though the commandments were given to Moses and the Israelites in Exile, that long journey from captivity in Egypt to the Promised Land, they have become a world document. They would not be out of place even if they were found in the New Testament.

Lutherans and Roman Catholics have a slightly different order to the commandments. You are in harmony with all other Protestant denominations.

The first two are a lot alike. The first commandment says, "You shall have no other gods before me," and the second says, "You shall not make for yourself a graven image."

When Moses told the people what God had said, they could understand immediately. They were surrounded by people who worshipped many other gods. So it seemed natural that God would warn them not to be attracted by these other gods who were worshipped in nations they passed through or came near. But there is an even more profound truth expressed in these first two commandments and that is that no one can worship more than one god. A god cannot be God if he has to step down from his throne once in awhile to make room for another god to reign. There is not, nor can there be, a place for a second, third or fourth god.

The Israelites, even though temptation once in awhile seduced them to make those graven images, understood that God had to be the One and Only. I wonder if we do! We have so many allures to resist.

Money is so powerful. It can buy so much that makes us happy - for a moment. It can buy insurance to keep us well, safe and secure. Pretty soon, however, it gets to be so important and so essential that whatever one has, it just doesn't seem like enough. I'm amazed and surprised at the men who play baseball for a living. Isn't 3, 5 or 4 million

per year enough even if one can play for only five to ten years. When the baseball days are over, there could be a modest job somewhere to help out. What's wrong with working for a living?!

There are other allures out there. Sex is one. An unbridled and unrestrained search for conquest elevates promiscuity to a level that takes God off the throne and reduces his force in our lives.

Drugs (illegal) are an insidious allure also. How sad that Brent Moss is throwing away an All-Star and lucrative career in football as a result of experimentation or peer pressure with tough-to-resist drugs. It must be terrible to have that Pandora's box opened. Recovering addicts tell us that every day the struggle goes on to stay clean. Man. I don't want that kind of terror in my life.

When the time comes, and it probably will to us all, that a seductive voice makes an offer that will be hard to resist and which seems to make sense, make sure that the bottom line is not "church, religion, God and righteousness may be OK with squares and old fuddy duddies but here is something for people moving into the 20th Century. BEWARE. The road back may be like the road Brent Moss is having such trouble travelling.

"You Shall Not Take The Name of The Lord Your God In Vain." How wise this commandment is. Fearing that they might blaspheme God's name wrong and fearing the familiarity that might offend God, Israelites resorted to the word "Adonai" when speaking of God. The word has come to mean Lord. The name Jahweh did not pass their lips.

I've always wondered why people now find the blasphemous use of the Lord's name helpful to them. Is it a way to impress others? Is it a way to shock another person to get his or her attention. Is it just a sign of an ignorant person whose vocabulary is the size of a two year old's? To speak the sacred and holy name of the Lord in a profane way seems like splashing paint all over the altar or communion table - or swinging a sledge hammer at the cross or writing dirty words on the walls of this church or on this pulpit. Or like turning over tombstones in a cemetery. The person who finds this language attractive is not doing anything to protect her/his faith and which is all too often so fragile. What comes out of one's mouth tends to reveal what is inside the person's head and heart. Blasphemy becomes a boring habit that indicates impotence and weakness. The trouble is that we have to listen to it.

"Remember the Sabbath Day To Keep It Holy." Our forebears saw the wisdom of this more than we do. If you are as old as I am - or almost as old- you can remember that the Christian Sabbath was a pretty quiet day. Not much, if anything, was open for business. The day was pretty quiet. Families were together; more than likely at home or maybe spent visiting grandparents or cousins. Those were wonderful experiences. Of course, we went to church - and Sunday School, too.

God saw the wisdom in a Sabbath rest and that's why He included it in the "Ten Words." He is well aware of the erosion of even strongly held religious convictions during a stress-filled week. "Enough is enough," He says. "It's time to pause, put your mind to matters that get short-shrift during the week and concentrate on some religious thought." If we would do this, we could face the week with energy and hope. Going to church is a must, of course. An act of worship gives one a center for one's life and gathering with other believers fans the flame of our faith. Staying away allows the flame of our faith to flicker, fade, and maybe even go out.

We often complain about Blue Monday. Why should we? Monday should be the best day of the week, with all the preaching, praying and singing of the day before. We ought to concentrate more on how we spend the Sabbath. We will find out why this commandment seemed like a good idea to God.

It was to Moses that God gave these commandments. We have to believe that Moses did, in fact, speak with God and that He heard them. We have to trust that he remembered them correctly and that the two tablets of stone on which they were inscribed were copied just the way God intended. I am inclined to believe they are for real - an authentic word from the Lord. When all ten of them are obeyed, the world becomes close to Eden again. "Oh Lord, help *us* be what *You want* us to be and help us to obey Your commandments. Amen."