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October 9, 2011
Exodus 20:1-20

“The Ten Commandments”

Alright everybody, it's quiz time. What are the 10 Commandments?

1. *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.*
2. *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 . . .*
3. *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.*
4. *Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work.*
5. *Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.*
6. *You shall not murder.*
7. *You shall not commit adultery.*
8. *You shall not steal.*
9. *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*
10. *You shall not covet your neighbor's house, you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave or ox or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*

Congratulations! You named them all! You are in the minority of Americans, who can recall

Or, if they can't name them all, can you name the 7 ingredients in a Big Mac or all of the Brady Bunch's children's names?

Congratulations! By not being able to name them all, you are now a part of the majority of Americans, who recalled the seven ingredients of a McDonald's Big Mac hamburger and members of TV's "The Brady Bunch" more easily than the Bible's Ten Commandments.

A survey by Kelton Research found 80 percent of 1,000 respondents could name the Big Mac's primary ingredient -- two all-beef patties -- but less than six in 10 knew the commandment "thou shalt not kill."

Less than half of respondents -- 45 percent -- could recall the commandment "honor thy father and mother" but 62 percent knew the Big Mac has pickle.

Bobby and Peter, the least recalled-names from the Brady Bunch, were remembered by 43 percent of respondents -- topping the 34 percent who knew "remember the Sabbath" and 29 percent recalling "do not make false idols."

Two weeks ago the Huffington Post, which seems to be my main source of news these days, reported that the ACLU is suing a southwest Virginia school board for posting the Ten Commandments, contending that the display violates the Constitution's guarantee of separation of church and state.

The school board removed them last year, but voted in June to re-hang the biblical texts as part of a display that includes other U.S. historical documents.

We're going to get back to the subtle nuances of the VA case in a little bit, but I think it's fair to say that the VA case is not unique. There have been other cases filed either supporting or rejecting the display of the TC in public buildings. On both sides there are strong feelings about the TC which can lead to heated exchanges.

These exchanges tell us a lot about how people view the TC *or view the people who embrace or reject them*. On one side are people who think they're better off left in the past. The overarching criticism from this group seems to be that the commandments no longer apply to them, so why post them? They don't believe in the God who delivered them, therefore they don't subscribe to them. For the sake of argument, I'm going to go out on a limb here, and say that for some of these people the TC are a burden; they're nothing more than moral rules that limit their choices and constrict their right to have a good time; imposed by repressed religious types who live to throw a wet blanket on other people's fun.

On the other side of the argument are people who think the TC should be posted prominently. For them, the TC are the very foundation of our nation's legal system. These people may not be able to recite them all, but they know with all certainty that everyone should be following them all. For the sake of argument, I'm going to go out on a limb here, and say that some of these people are religious legalists who tend to beat people over the head with too many rules interpreted too literally and applied selectively.

If you find yourself in one of those camps, I'm going to challenge you to rethink your assumptions. Take what you think you know about the commandments and set it aside, at least for the next few minutes, and listen for the word of God as it comes to us today.

The first thing you need to know is that God didn't give Moses the TC in a vacuum. God didn't plop them down and say, "OK, you all obey these laws now, you here?" And Moses didn't decide one day to climb Mount Sinai and then just happened to meet God at the top, who conveniently had the TC written on two stone tablets, just like in the movies.

As you know, it's been a long journey for the Israelites to get to Mount Sinai. They've walked the streets of Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, and hiked the wilderness to get there. They've witnessed the killing of all Egyptian firstborn sons and the annihilation of

Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea; they cried out to God to get them out of Egypt and to free them from slavery, and then they cried out to God to give them food and water. And every time God heard their cries, God came to their rescue. Every time the Israelites needed help, God saved them. Every time, without fail, God responded to their requests.

So after all this time, God says to Moses, "Bring the people to me. They've seen what I've done; they know I am faithful. It is now time to formalize this relationship. They will be a holy nation, and I will be their God, and together we will do great things."

It's like God and the Israelites have been courting one another. Dating, if you will. Some of those dates have gone really well, some of them have been a little bumpy, but for the most part, each party likes each other and now they want to formalize the relationship. They want to move on to the next big step.

In other words, it's time to make this thing legal. The biblical term we use for these sorts of pacts is covenant; a covenant is a promise that is binding on all parties. Covenant is the word used in our marriage ceremonies; the liturgy speaks of a man and woman coming together to form a covenant with one another.

With regards to this story in Exodus, God and Israel are coming together to form a covenant, a partnership. And that partnership is going to be governed, or guided, by a set of rules called the Ten Commandments.

Most good partnerships are governed by a set of rules. Sometimes those rules are written and sometimes they're not. In good partnerships, everyone agrees to the rules or at least agrees to revisit the rules if they're not working.

Back in chapter 19, everyone agreed to the rules and that was before Moses climbed the mountain to get them. God told Moses "I'm going to speak these words to you, and I want the people to obey them. Understand? And Moses went back to the elders and reported what God said and the elders said, "We understand." And what you have are the Ten Commandments.

Now, when you begin to understand that this is the context of the TC, you start to learn that they aren't meant to be taken as a condemning message-a list of "you won't do this, you won't do that, you must obey me."

Instead, we begin to learn that the Ten Commandments are a gracious set of rules, given by God, because God loves the people and wants them to be a Holy Nation; and the people accept the TC because they love God, and they know the TC will give form and structure to that relationship.

Now, in order for relationships to work, they need rules-guidelines-but they also need love. If you have a relationship of only rules and no love, it's destructive; if you have one with only love and no rules, it's chaos. The two go hand-in-hand. This is why, with the TC, you can't remove the love from the commands, and you can't remove the

commands from the love. You need both in order for the relationship to work and to make sense.

Which gets me back to the subtle nuances of the Virginia lawsuit.

The lawsuit was filed on behalf of a high school student and his or her parent who does not subscribe to them and, therefore, feels uncomfortable with having them on display. And, as the furor in the case grows, they worry they will be ostracized because of their beliefs, or lack of belief, as the case may be.

On the other side there are angry parents and students, one of whom said, “There’s a lot of Christ present in Giles County, and if you don’t like it, you can go somewhere else.”

Neither side can see the love in the commandments. Both view them as laws meant to constrict a relationship, not enhance a relationship.

Interestingly, the one voice of moderation in the debate seems to be the Baptist minister who hung them in the first place. Back in 1999, he asked the school superintendant if he could hang the Ten Commandments because he thought it would be a good idea if kids saw the commandment “thou shalt not kill”. You might ask, why that one commandment? Well, what happened in 1999? Columbine. After 11 school shootings in two years, the minister thought maybe it would be good for the kids see the commandment “thou shalt not kill.” The motivation to hang them was love, not law . . . he didn’t want to see kids shoot other kids. Is that all that bad? I don’t think so.

The problem comes when we use them to point out other people’s shortcomings, or failure to live the life we think they should live, or use them to abuse other people.

When in reality the commandments were given by God to help the people flourish, lead full lives and respect one another and the earth

You know, almost as soon as God gave Moses the tablets, God told Moses to hide them away in the Ark of the Covenant, never to be seen again. Israel was supposed to keep the tablets well-hidden because Israel was supposed to keep them in plain sight. Well how can one do that, you might ask?

Consider two examples. The first command, “You shall have no other gods before me,” is not just good for God, it is an act of love for my neighbor. Why? Because it is good for my neighbor for me not to make money or power my god; it is good for my neighbor for me to maintain the gracious, forgiving Yahweh as my God; it is good for my neighbor that my God is the Creator of all people and all nations.

Second example:, the 10th commandment: certainly it not good for my neighbor when I covet his or her belongings, because coveting is destructive. Coveting is an undisciplined individualism that tells me I can have whatever I want, whenever I want it, even if it

comes at the expense of my neighbor and God's creation and ends up with an economy teetering on the brink of collapse.

I think it's time to stop worrying about where the TC are posted and instead live them to show people that we are committed to a better world. Because when you think about it, all Ten Commandments are simultaneously ten ways to love God and ten ways to love your neighbor. And that equals ten ways to make a better world.

Is that all the bad? I don't think so. So maybe it's time to rescue them from the current cultural war and put the love back into the law.

Amen.