

SERMON  
“The First and Second Commandments”  
Sunday, August 31, 2014

A Boston businessman notorious for his ruthlessness once announced to Mark Twain: “Before I die, I mean to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I will climb Mount Sinai and read the Ten Commandments aloud at the top.”

“I have a better idea,” said Twain; “You could stay home in Boston and keep them.”

Over the course of the next several Sundays we will be studying the 10 Commandments in detail. We will find, over the course of this series, that keeping these commandments, as Twain suggested, will be more challenging than climbing Mount Sinai and reading them aloud. Even though many of us within the church would love to see these 10 Commandments posted in every courthouse, school, and public building; we need to remember, first and foremost, that the God of our Hebrew ancestors was forging a unique partnership with a particular group of people in order to cast a vision to the world in which one could love God and love neighbor without mutually exploiting the other. The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary calls it a revolutionary social experiment.

Norbert C. Oesch in his study guide on the Ten Commandments reminds his readers that there were many different types of treaties that were drawn up in Moses’ time, but the most common type of treaty was the Hittite suzerain treaty: a treaty drawn up by a sovereign lord or a king with considerable territory. Oesch describes the treaty as such: “It was unilateral in the sense that the suzerain alone dictated the rules and the way the agreement would work; but it was bilateral in the sense that both parties had responsibilities. The suzerain was saying, ‘As long as we live in this relationship I will be your king, and I will watch over you. I will protect you from your enemies, and I will provide for you a wonderful life in my realm. But you must keep the stipulations.’”

The difference between the Hittite suzerain treaty and the covenant God was making with Israel was that for the first time in history a connection was being made between the love of God and the love for neighbor. In other words, one cannot love God and exclude their neighbor. How one relates with neighbor speaks volumes as to how one relates to God. We get it right with God when we get it right with neighbor.

Jesus hits this home when he speaks in Matthew 22:37-40: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*”

The 10 Commandments are more than just a set of moral codes by which one chooses to live; they are the precursor of Jesus Christ himself! They were given in order that Israel could demonstrate to the world how one lived in relationship with neighbor and with God Himself.

Dale Johnson, pastor of Heart of the Valley Community Church, in an article he posted on his church’s website said: “In [the 10] commandments, we come face to face with God, and face to face with ourselves. They are like a mirror that reveals to us the dirt that’s on our face. They are like hammers that smash our pride and force us to acknowledge our brokenness. They are like a flashlight that enables us to walk God’s path through this dark world without falling off any cliffs. These commandments are given not to hurt us, not to make our life difficult, but to help us.”

So let us take up our flashlight (as Johnson calls it) and began our study of the 10 Commandments.

John Wesley, the 18<sup>th</sup> century founder of the Methodist movement wrote this of the first two commandments: It concerns “*the object of our worship, Jehovah, and him only, Thou shalt have no other gods before me - The Egyptians, and other neighbouring nations, had many gods, creatures of their own fancy. This law was pre - fixed because of that transgression; and Jehovah being the God of Israel, they must entirely cleave to him, and no other, either of their own invention, or borrowed from their neighbours. The sin*

*against this commandment, which we are most in danger of, is giving that glory to any creature which is due to God only.”*

The commandments do not deny the existence of others gods; in fact, if anything, they imply the struggle each and every one of us face as we strive to place God at the top of our list of priorities. The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary says of the first two commandments, *“It insists only that other gods must receive none of Israel’s loyalty or allegiance. This command thus is keeping with Deuteronomy 6:4, which also allows for the existence of other gods, but denies them ‘air time.’”*

The challenge, however, with these two commandments is the amount of air time we give to God verses the air time we give to other gods. John Wesley wrote this of the air time we give to others gods: *“Pride makes a God of ourselves, covetousness makes a God of money, sensuality makes a God of the belly. Whatever is loved, feared, delighted in, or depended on, more than God; that we make a god of.”*

Wow! Wesley doesn’t hold back when it comes to the gods we create! When Exodus speaks of no other gods Exodus is not just speaking about the gods of harvest and of fertility, Exodus is speaking about anything that takes precedence over God Himself.

Pastor Mark D. Roberts, Senior Director and Scholar-in-Residence for Laity Lodge in Texas provides the following personal testimony in his blog concerning the commandments: *“For as long as I can remember, I have recognized only one God. I have known him in a personal way ever since I received Christ as Lord and Savior at a Billy Graham crusade in Los Angeles in 1963. Though there have been times when I have doubted God’s existence, I have never been tempted to acknowledge any other deity. Yet, I have sometimes brought other ‘gods’ into God’s presence, as I have trusted in them, honored them, sought them, and, in a sense, worshiped them. What are my other gods? Not Isis or Osiris or Baal, but financial security, family well-being, rationality, and popularity. Of course, none of these ‘gods’ are wrong in and of themselves. They can be good things, even blessings from God. That makes it especially easy for me to put so much trust in them that I displace the Lord, however slightly. God is still on his throne, but I have dragged other ‘gods’ into his presence. This is precisely what the first commandment forbids.*

*God claims first place in our lives. He requires our complete loyalty and trust. Our faith in God must not be ‘God plus . . .’ but ‘God alone.’ When we give him uncompromised allegiance and submission, then every other aspect of life finds its rightful place, even financial security, family well-being, rationality, and popularity . . . or whatever ‘gods’ you’re inclined to sneak into God’s presence.”*

The challenge that the first two commandments present us with this morning is the question: What other gods do we tend to sneak into God’s presence? Before we become so emblazoned as to post the 10 Commandments for the all the world to see; we must first really take a much closer look as to how well we live into living these 10 Commandments.

When I was in Junior High school I remember taking a rather difficult math test. Even though the teacher had instructed the class with her rules of test taking class members were caught cheating. One kid had written several of his answers on the palm of his hand, two others had devised a set of hand signals by which they would share their answers. I found their behavior detestable, that was, until I heard the teacher say, “Tim quit looking at your neighbors answers!” I share this story simply to show how easy it is for us to be judgmental, yet just as guilty of bringing other gods into the presence of God.

Norbert C Oesch tells the story of Elijah McCoy in his study guide to the Ten Commandments. *“Elijah had a boring job back at the time when steam engines pulled trains across the United States,”* writes Oesch. *“He worked on a train that stopped at every small town along the track to pick up more freight or maybe a passenger or two.*

*Whenever the train stopped, Elijah had to hop off to oil the steam engine. Then he’d hop back on, and the train would chug down the track once again. Off, oil, on. Off, oil, on.*

*Elijah soon got tired of the monotony and invented an automatic oiling system. It worked so well that before long all steam engines were equipped with his invention.*

*Then Elijah began inventing other things to make jobs easier. Other people tried to copy Elijah McCoy's inventions but only his worked reliably. His inventions became so famous that customers soon demanded the 'real McCoy — no substitute! Still today 'the real McCoy' means the real thing, not a copy.'*

*"The one who spoke to Moses and the one who speaks to us is Scripture and the one who came in the flesh at Bethlehem is 'the real McCoy.' A copy just won't do.*

Oesch concludes his story with these words: *"The one who spoke to Moses and the one who speaks to us is Scripture and the one who came in the flesh at Bethlehem is 'the real McCoy.' A copy just won't do.*

In spite of our guilt and brokenness, today's prologue to the commandments offers us hope. Exodus 20:2 says: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." God has not only brought us out of the land of slavery He has claimed us as His people. God wants us to know His love and that's why He commands us to have no other gods before Him. The First and Second Commandments are central to who we are as God's chosen people! They not only pave the way for the next 8 Commandments; they remind us to let nothing distract us from Him who truly loves us. Amen.