

The Decalogue, God and Us
Feb. 6, 2011
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:

Bill Tammeus is an elder at Second Presbyterian Church in Kansas City and the former faith columnist for the Kansas City Star. His church recently called a new pastor and the traditional role of offering a “charge” to the pastor at his installation fell to him. Tammeus had this to say:

You must remember that essentially you have only two jobs here.

First you are to help people meet – and then follow – Jesus Christ. Second, well, there is no second. The first job is big enough

This job means you must preach the gospel of grace. Then you must help people respond to the demands of that grace. So they need to understand that you are not preaching what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.” Oh, the grace is free. But it is costly because of what it requires of us as we live lives of gratitude. Don’t let us forget that.¹

I’ve heard a few charges to newly installed pastors. That one does an unusually good job of striking at the heart of the matter, for pastors and for all who would follow Christ.

It’s been said that the Christian life can be summed up as the pursuit of answers to two questions: Who are we? And, what are we to do? As Christians we look to the life of Christ for the answers to both questions. But we shouldn’t look to Christ exclusively, especially when it comes to the story of God and God’s people in scripture.

We are people of the New Covenant in Christ. But that does not mean that we should pack up the Old Covenant in a box and stow it away in the attic. To the contrary, the Old Covenant, the Law, in its purest form the Ten Commandments, can and should be formative for us, taken, of course, in the light of Christ. With that in mind, we will take the next three Sundays or so to consider how the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, shape us as Christians in the 21st Century.

¹ As quoted in the Jan. 24, 2011 Presbyterian Outlook, p. 23

* * *

It's OK to admit what many of us "do" with the Ten Commandments, the ways that we sometimes, consciously or subconsciously, relegate them to a lesser role in our faith walk. We make them into a rote memory exercise, trying to see if we can remember all ten, sort of like remembering the capitols of the fifty states. Or perhaps we associate them – even a bit dismissively - with more extreme fundamentalist views of faith advanced by those who would paint them on the wall in city council chambers. At the very least, we consider the Ten Commandments a list of rules whose use is solely for practical application in our lives, like bright lines painted on the ground, lines over which we know we should not step.

None of those ways of thinking about the commandments is quite the right answer, though.

What, then, *is* a good Presbyterian to "do" with the Ten Commandments?

The father of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, proposed two thoughts. First, he said the Ten Commandments convict us of our sin. By that he means that they define what is sin and the specific ways we fail God and each other. Second, Luther said, they constrain evil. By that he meant that the commandments name evil and, by naming it, inform us how we are to fight against evil.

His colleague in the Reformation John Calvin offered a slightly different take, one that might resonate a bit more with us Presbyterians. We heard this view in Bill Tammeus' charge to his new pastor as he spoke about God's grace.

Calvin proposed that the Ten Commandments show us *how* we are to respond to God's love and grace, they locate God for us amid the ambiguities and gray areas of this temporal plane. They tell us how we are to be *with* God in this life. Let me unpack that for a moment.

The God we worship is a covenantal God, a God who has chosen us to be in covenant relationship. God expressed that desire in the Ten Commandments because the commandments provided a language that the people of ancient Israel could understand. If you or me were to strike a two-way deal today, we might shake hands or have lawyers draw up some papers. But in the days of the ancient Hebrews, the practice of making covenants defined almost all of life – religious, civil and other relationships.

In the covenant between God and God's people, the first part is God's statement of who God is ... and part of the Divine Identity is expectation. God is the God who chose to love us and we played no part in that transaction other than to be on the passive, receiving end. Thanks be to God. At the same time, that act, that self-expression of our creator and parent God, indicates who God is to us, now and always.

It goes hand in hand with a clear expression of what we are to do in life, an imperative if you will, a "must", a non-negotiable that is also part of God's identity and our identity as God's chosen people. The indicative (God's declaration of who God is) and the imperative (how we are to live as God's people) go together, they are inseparable, they form the complete covenant agreement.

And thus, by being given this clear understanding, we are set free. We are liberated. The law defines how we are to be *with God*, how we *can* be with God, how we can *receive that gift!* To unpack this even more, let's take a look at the first four commandments.

* * *

We find the words of the commandments in two places in the Old Testament. First, in the book of Exodus, as part of the account of how God ransomed captive Israel and gave Israel the covenant. The second occurrence of the commandments comes in the book of Deuteronomy, the second telling of the Law hundreds of years later that the Hebrew people used to remember who they were and whose they were.

In Exodus, we read how Moses gathers the people of Israel after he has come down from Mt. Sinai to deliver the news of God's gift of guidance. Recounting his divine encounter, Moses says:

Then God spoke all these words: 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 God's before me. (Ex. 20: 1-3)

This is the first commandment (just in case any of you needed a reminder) and in it we see how God states both God's identity and the identity of God's people at the same time. God reminds God's people who liberated them and then states the part of the bargain that falls in the hands and on the hearts of God's people: "You shall have no other God's before me."

Do you remember the somewhat sappy scene toward the end of the movie Jerry McGuire. The Tom Cruise character is trying to win back his wife. He enters the room, says "Hello", and makes a speech about how they belong together. She cuts him off, saying, "You had me at hello."

God may have had the same idea - that the people should not have needed elaboration about God's identity and theirs. God begins with the words, "I am the Lord your God." As with the movie, God should have "had" the people at that first succinct statement, "I am." As if God were saying, "I am, and, frankly boys and girls, you should know the rest of how it is supposed to work between us."

(As a father, I admit I have my moments when I want just a few authoritative words to be all my children need hear to know my will. I hope that doesn't mean I have a God complex. Besides, it almost never works that way. Sometimes our dogs respond to my one-word commands, like "Sit" or "Eat." I guess I will have to be satisfied with that.)

In the case of the first commandment and the nation of Israel, God is gracefully patient. God reminds the people how they were saved from slavery in Egypt. So, it naturally follows, God told Moses, "No other gods, only me."²

That leads us to the second commandment about having no idols before God. We often move from this commandment to think about all the idols we have in our lives – money, sex, power, drugs and alcohol, achievement, work and stuff. Indeed, all those things and more get between us and God. But the Creator's point here is broader. Some translations of the original Hebrew use the word "image" instead of idol, and that idea drives deeper.

When we make up images of God, we are only trying to limit and domesticate God. To the most devout Hebrews, it would not do to even reduce writing about God to the letters that spelled Yahweh. Even that amounted to a diminution of the God who is invisible, immortal, sovereign, truly inconceivable to our small minds. God is neither male nor female, but the best of both and more. God isn't a white-haired grandfather nor is God glimpsed in a snow-capped mountain, but some of both and more. God is in and yet above all things.

We should just leave it there. When we don't, when we create idols or images that distract us in small or large ways, mental or otherwise, we only offend God and put limits on what God may yet reveal. We are not to try to control or tone down God into something we can hug like a teddy bear or stand in the corner of our lives, within sight

² Translation from The Message

but not before us. Sorry, it just doesn't work like that. We dare not attempt, even if only in our minds, to encroach on or fence in God's vast power and freedom to be God. That is the least we can do for the God who give us our own freedom.

The next two commandments fall in line with the first two. They tell us more about who God is. "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God" is actually a very clear expression. We may often restate this commandment as "Don't take the Lord's name in vain," as a few translations have it. But this is about more than just how we curse. The key word here is how we "use" or "misuse" the Lord's name. And, again, the point is about the power and the sovereignty of God.

Think about it this way. God is not a means to an end. God is not a tool for our use. God is an end, a final destination, a power and a presence in the universe.³ So, if we misuse the name of God we are only trying in yet another way to domesticate God, to employ God for our agendas. It doesn't work that way. To be sure, we are not to use God's name when we curse. But it is a far deeper sin when we throw God's name around as if our Creator is ours to direct and order around.

Then the fourth commandment about keeping the Sabbath holy further informs us about the terms of the covenant between us and God. The separation of the Sabbath as a day of rest is a very real and tangible way we can be with the God who has claimed us. We rest in order to recognize the priority of God in our lives.

As one commentator writes: "This God is not a workaholic; Yahweh has no need to be more secure, more sufficient, more in control or more noticed."⁴

So, the commentator is saying, neither should we. We're just not that important. We really can't work our way into being masters of the universe. We have six days to do the things we need to do in life. At least one day is for resting in the reassuring, grace-padded arms of our creator and for giving thanks.

* * *

In closing, a recent edition of the Christian Century ran a cartoon that comes to mind. It showed Moses standing on a boulder and holding the two tablets of the Ten Commandments up in his arms as he looked out at a large crowd that had gathered.

Toward the back of the crowd, one man raises his hand and, using today's corporate lingo, asks Moses, "What's the takeaway on all of this?"

³ Point made in The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary on this passage

⁴ Ibid

It's true that we sometimes want to do that with scripture. Find the bottom line. Boil it down to a worksheet or 7 easy steps, 5 principals for living or a tagline for a bumper sticker or a billboard. But what happens to those kinds of things? They end up in a drawer, forgotten, or wadded up in a ball and thrown in the trash or faded beyond readability

The Ten Commandments remind us that the story of God with God's people is far, far more than a check list or a rule book. The commandments form the language of a promise made by a God who give us one hundred percent love and loyalty and asks only that we do the same in return by living lives that hold up our end of the bargain.

And that, folks, is the deal of a lifetime.

Thanks be to God. Amen.