



**Exodus 20:1-17** *And God spoke all these words, saying, <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 a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, <sup>6</sup> but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. <sup>7</sup> "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. <sup>8</sup> "Remember the Sabbath day, to 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. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. <sup>12</sup> "Honor your father and your mother, 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 his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.*

## **The Ten Commandments: Consider the Source**

### **I. They are given by the Holy God**

### **II. They are given by the Savior God**

I believe it was General Douglas MacArthur who first said, "Rules are made to be broken." It's a popular phrase that's often repeated, especially in sports, I find. But I'm not sure most people are as comfortable just outright *breaking* the rules as they are *bending* the rules, so that they can do what they want and still claim innocence. "Driving 20 miles per hour over the speed limit—that's breaking the rules, plain and simple—but driving 5 over? That's sort of that gray area in which no cop is going to pull you over, so is it really that bad?" That's the type of logic the everyday person uses as they go about life *bending* the rules, so that they don't overtly step across them.

When it comes to the Ten Commandments, "bending the rules" is the normal approach. Really, this is done with two wildly different tactics. A person may "bend the rules" by minimizing God's Law into the easily attainable requirement of just being nice and good and not intentionally hurting others. You hear people often saying, "I'm not perfect, nobody's perfect, but I'm a good person." The meaning being that if God checked their records, they would be good enough to pass the smell test. But this is just taking the Ten Commandments and lowering the bar all the way until it's easily surpassed by just about everyone. That is one common approach in *our* day.

The other approach to the Ten Commandments that involves "bending the rules," appears to be quite the opposite. It's called legalism. It's the approach where you take a simple, blanket statement by God and explain it with lots of different supplementary rules. This was the popular approach in Jesus' day, and it's still popular today too. For instance, we might consider the Third Commandment: "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it Holy." This is a matter of the heart, showing us that we ought to gladly hear and learn the Word of God. We ought to be able say together with King David, "***I was***

*glad when they said to me, 'Let us go into the House of the Lord.'*" (Psalm 122:1) But then the legalistic approach takes a law like that—by the way, this is what the Pharisees were very good at—they take that law and then create a checklist of requirements. By Jesus' day, keeping the Sabbath Day holy meant a person wouldn't cook, wouldn't start a fire, wouldn't carry anything in public, wouldn't wash any clothes, wouldn't walk over a half-mile, and so on. On the surface, that sounds like it's bending the law to make it more difficult! But in reality, the result is the same. It's taking a Law of God, "bending the rules," so to speak, in order to turn it into something that is *actually* achievable, because it is far easier to check off a list of requirements than it is to fix your heart. So, whether you're watering down God's Law into some general, easy-to-keep principal or breaking down each commandment into a list of demands for you check off as you go throughout the day—either way the result is the same—"if God looked at my record, He would see that I've passed the test."

How I wish that it wasn't so easy for even us to fall into these traps. It's easy to compare ourselves with one another and figure that we're doing alright, "I know I'm not perfect, but certainly God is much happier with me than He is with *some* people." We use the relativistic approach of justifying ourselves on the basis of other people's sins. But it's easy for us as Christians to fall into the legalistic thinking as well, "I go to church a majority of the time, I always give my offerings, I can check off those boxes! I'm doing pretty good!" We turn God's will into a list of things for us to do, and so long as we abide by them, we figure we're in God's good graces. We must avoid this type of thinking, and instead take some time to **Consider the Source** of these commandments.

Lest we get the idea that God is a doting grandfatherly-type, that might punish us from time to time, but generally just chuckles and ruffles our hair and is happy knowing that we're trying our best, let's take a look at how God presents Himself in our Scripture readings today. Then, we will find that God is holy and that He cannot abide in the presence of anything that is less than holy. In our Gospel reading, we saw just how serious God is about His Word and His house. The temple and its sacrifices were to reflect what Jesus was Himself: God's dwelling place on earth. And what did He find in the Temple? A total irreverence for the Word of God side-by-side with profiteering. And Jesus, filled with righteous anger, and unwilling for those people to even be *in* the Temple, made a whip and drove them out. That ought to give us a good picture of how God feels about us when we don't take His Word and His commandments seriously.

In the verses before our sermon text, before giving these commandments to Moses and the people, we find the Lord announcing His presence as He descends on Mount Sinai with fire and a thick cloud of smoke; we're told there was thunder and lightning and loud trumpet blasts, and the people trembled in terror as the mountain itself shook. And then God gave to them His holy Law. Do you think God was trying to give off the idea that He would be ok with bending the rules or just be happy if we simply tried our best? Certainly not!

As seriously as God takes His Word, that ought to clue us in to how serious these commandments are for us. They're not recommendations, they're not suggestions, these are God's commands. And all we need to do is look at the very first commandment and see that we stand condemned already. **"You shall have no other gods before me."** As Luther rightly explained it in his catechism, "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things."

Do I really fear or respect God above all things? Clearly not, when I very often would rather be doing anything else other than spending time meditating on God's Word. Do I love God above all things? Clearly not, especially because Jesus explained the commandment this way, **"Whoever loves father or**

***mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.***" (Matthew 10:37) Yes, we often love our family more than we love God. And do I really trust in God above all things? Clearly not, as I regularly turn to anything and everything for help and support and encouragement before I ever think about turning to the Lord for such things, and my days are littered with anxiety and worry and discouragement as I put my trust in so many things besides God.

And anywhere we look down this list of Ten Commandments, we see our sin in plain sight. When we consider our resentful and hateful thoughts, God tells us that means we are as good as murderers. (cf. 1 John 3:15) When our imaginations are filled with lust, Jesus says we are adulterers. (cf. Matthew 5:28) We lie, we slander, we don't respect authority, we don't really care too much to listen to God's Word outside of perhaps maybe an hour on Sunday, we speak without love, we are guilty of all of it!

Many of you probably know the name Cecil B. DeMille, the famous American film director, who made many films including *The Ten Commandments* with Charlton Heston. Well, DeMille was right when he said, *"We cannot break the Ten Commandments. We can only break ourselves against them."* And so it has happened, in our desire to bend God's law or to simply ignore God's law, our lives have broken, our relationships have broken, we have broken. And we stand before a holy God cannot abide with anything less than holy. Therefore, by rights we ought to be shaking and trembling at these Words, we ought to be driven out of this house of worship.

But before we cover our heads and run, let's again **Consider the Source**. We have seventeen verses before us this morning, the last fifteen of them are God's Law being shared, the first verse is just an introduction to alert us to the One who is speaking, and then sandwiched right there in verse two is the context which changes everything. ***"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."*** The truth is that the source of this law is the God who loves us, the God who has saved us.

For that reason, broken though we are, the words of the Psalm 51 are true, ***"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."*** (Psalm 51:17) Or consider Psalm 34, ***"The LORD is near to the brokenhearted, And saves those who are crushed in spirit."*** (Psalm 34:18) Yes, we do stand broken before a Holy God, and yet He also identifies Himself to us as the one who saves. And it's very important to keep that truth at the forefront of everything, just as it is located at the forefront of our text.

Let's think about the children of Israel to whom God was first speaking these words. About 700 years before this, God had spoken to Abraham and told him, ***"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great. . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*** (Genesis 12:2-3) His promise was that He would bless the whole world by sending a Savior through Abraham's family tree. But the promise was spoken to just one man. A couple hundred years later, God reiterated this promise to Abraham's grandson, Jacob. Jacob who constantly was breaking his life upon the law of God, and yet God promised him still, that through him, all the families of the earth would be blessed, and that God would not leave Him. We read about that last week in our Old Testament reading from Genesis 28. (10-17) But still God spoke these things to just one man.

That one man then had twelve sons. Those twelve sons immigrated down to Egypt with their families, now a family of about 70 people. While living there, they grew into a people of several million, and then they were put under task masters and enslaved by the Egyptian Pharaoh. Their plight was great, their days were filled with struggle. The promises made to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob must have seemed to be just fairy tales, as 400 years went by and the people remained still in Egypt. And then

God visited them. With the ten plagues, God flexed His authority and released His people from their bondage. He led them through the waters of the Red Sea and slammed the waters down on the heads of the armies pursuing them. He kept them safe as they journeyed through the wilderness, and now He descended upon Mount Sinai not to speak with *just* Abraham or Isaac or Jacob, but to speak to all of them as His special people and He as their Savior.

Do you see how **Considering the Source** now changes how these commandments are to be perceived? Yes, they come from the Holy God, whom the people rightly trembled before. But they also came from the Savior God who loved them and already set them free. And He did not free them from bondage in Egypt only to enslave them to Himself with a set of cruel dictates. He was the God who ***“brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,”*** so that they could be His children. Seeing the love behind all of this, first and foremost, now paints all of these commandments in a totally different light.

Just like any of us as parents set down rules and commandments in our households for our children—not to be cruel, not to withhold pleasure, but to protect and to guide—so God gives His people these loving commandments. And we can see the wisdom then in all of them. In the first three commandments, God is protecting His relationship with each of His children, encouraging us to make Him our #1 priority just as He made us *His* #1 priority. Making God and His Word the focal point of our lives is the key to a peaceful life, as everything else then just falls into place. In the next seven commandments, God is protecting each of His children’s relationships with one another. A quiet and peaceful life in this world may be had by following these commands: honoring your parents, avoiding hatred and foolish squabbles, fleeing from lust, maintaining faithful relationships with spouses, avoiding idle gossip and slander, being content with what we have. This is a Father who wants what is best for His children.

But just like children, the Children of Israel rebelled thinking these rules were too harsh, and we follow along in the same. We receive this love from God, we resent it. Like undiscerning children, we set our minds and hearts on doing the very opposite of what our Father intends for us and enslave ourselves once more to our sin. And so, God showed Himself again to be the Savior God who frees us from slavery. Once more, He descended upon a mountain, a mountain that was covered in darkness, a mountain that shook with His presence. That was the Mount of Calvary, where Christ the Son of God broke His life upon the cross.

Yes, our Holy God cannot stand in the presence of anything less than Holy, but He desired for us to stand in His presence. So, taking our place upon that Mountain, Christ set us free from the guilt of our sins, making us to be holy. And as Jesus declares, ***“if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”*** (John 8:36) So if I have been redeemed from my bondage, which I have and so have you through the waters of baptism, if I’ve been called out of this world, and we have through the waters of baptism and by the Holy Spirit, then these commandments are simply what our lives will look like.

Chief of them all being the first, “You shall have no other Gods.” Have no other Gods? How could I possibly have any other God than the one who redeemed me, who called me by my name and made me His own. How could I serve or love or trust in anyone else than the God who sought me out when I was a stranger, who set me free from my sin and guilt, who has made me holy to stand in His presence, and who has lovingly given me the guidance for a peaceful life. Consider the Source of these commandments: He’s your Savior, who loves you very much. Amen.

***“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*** (Philippians 4:7)  
Amen.

Pastor Sam Rodebaugh  
3rd Sunday of Lent  
March 7, 2021