

Pastor's Message – 10/8/23

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Philippians 3:4b-14

Psalm 19

Take a pencil or pen and your bulletin insert and make a list of as many of Santa's reindeer as you can remember. Feel free to sing the song if you need to. Now list the states that immediately border Wisconsin. And their capitals. Finally, without looking, list the Ten Commandments.

We might think that there are only Ten Commandments, but, over the years, Jewish rabbis, after careful study of the Old Testament, actually came up with 613 commandments. The Ten Commandments are actually only representatives of the two foundational categories of Israelite law, namely, correct worship of God and correct relationships with others. To assume that all of Israelite culture is summed up in only these ten is to mistake the scope of Israelite law. All of life under the covenant -- economic life, dietary customs, clothing customs, marriage customs, inheritance rights, legal issues, medical treatments -- all of these and many more aspects of life were to adhere to God's instructions.

But for our purposes, ten is enough, and we can focus on the list of the Ten Commandments. But the current form, the form we heard today, is even wordier than the original Ten Commandments. In these 10 "words," or "things," as they are called in Hebrew, are some of the primary tenets of the Israelite religion. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the Ten Commandments is their essential brevity. It could be argued that every theological discourse and every God-directed thought since the day these commandments were received has been a commentary upon them. They make up the bedrock of human faithfulness. Yet these laws are presented so straight-forwardly that they seem almost simplistic.

We can think of the Ten Commandments as being two pictures, instead of one. After all, tradition tells us that God used two tablets of stone to deliver the commandments to Moses. They can really be broken down into two major divisions. The first division, consisting of commandments 1-4, concerns how human beings relate to God. The second division, containing commandments 5-10, deals with how humans relate to one another.

In his theological masterpiece, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*,

the Protestant reformer, John Calvin, wrote that “God has so divided his law into two parts, which contain the whole of righteousness, as to assign the first part of those duties of religion which particularly concern the worship of his majesty; the second, to the duties of love that have to do with men.”

Worship of God's majesty. That's picture one. And love of one another. That's picture two. They are equally beautiful, equally innovative, and equally well-crafted. No doubt Jesus had this two-frame approach in mind when he said that the greatest commandment called us both to “love the Lord your God” and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:36-40). There's the divine element in the Ten Commandments in that they're given by God, but there's also the human element because they're about our connections to each other.

Some people may chafe over rules and commandments, but in the Ten Commandments God has given and established boundaries that create safety when it is needed. He creates standards for living which establishes a climate for relationship: a climate of grace in which God comes to His people, speaks to us directly and expresses the grace of love. Rather than focusing on the Ten Commandments as “Law” and the “thou shalt not” aspect, we can instead see them as positive and life-giving. The Ten Commandments transformed a band of fugitive slaves into a nation and entrusted them with God's promise of life. The Ten Commandments continue to set up safe boundaries for life and serve as the foundation for many of the legal systems of the Judeo-Christian world.

But focusing on the Ten Commandments and the Law of God to the exclusion of spiritual growth and a relationship with Christ can hinder our witness of the place of God in our lives.

There is an old story about a bandit in the Far East who was badly injured and taken to a Christian mission hospital. Having received excellent care in that Christian hospital, he decided he would never again rob a Christian. Word got around about his resolve; therefore, when he tried to rob someone that person would profess to be a Christian. How could he tell who was really a Christian? The man went back to the mission hospital and asked the question. The missionaries said that anyone who was a Christian ought to be able to recite the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments. Henceforth, before robbing people this man would ask them to make these two recitations. If they couldn't

do this, he robbed them.

This may not be the best criteria for judging whether or not someone is a Christian. There are mean-spirited people who can quote the facts of scripture, but they don't know the Master of relationships. John Wesley said there were a lot of Christians who were “almost Christians” who may have had the appearance of Christians, did the things that Church folk did but, at their essence, had no more of a relationship with God than their non-Church-going neighbors.

People can and do lift up the Ten Commandments as the foundation for living but fail to live the spirit of the Law. Obeying those Laws earns us no additional favor or merit with God; the Law of God is about our sanctification, i.e., becoming holy, and not our justification, i.e., being saved. There is a necessary tension between law and gospel, reminding us that we know we are people of faith if we live as people of faith.

Our reading from Philippians suggests that the Philippians were troubled by legalists—misguided Jewish believers who insisted upon circumcision. Paul himself tells us that he had been among the strictest observers of Jewish laws, yet he counted his attainments as rubbish (verse 8), when compared to his relationship with Christ. Righteousness, he continues, is not found in our observation of rituals or rites; righteousness comes through faith in Christ (Philippians 3:9). The customs of the faith community were not a reliable standard for measuring righteousness. Circumcision was not enough. Observing the letter of the law was not enough.

People with their eye on the prize—the call of Christ to perfection don't claim to have it all together, forget the past, strain toward God's future, and keep their eyes on Christ's calling alone. Everything else is distraction, destruction, or as Paul calls it in Greek, “skubala” (which the KJV quite accurately translates “dung.”)

“Knowing” Christ and the power of his resurrection means more than mere intellectual belief but connects more deeply to the Old Testament idea that knowledge of God is based primarily on God's self-revelation. It's not knowledge *about* God but a vital personal relationship *with* God that Paul wants to promote to the Philippians — a relationship that requires giving something up in order to get something better. Paul saw himself as wrapping up and tossing aside his own “righteousness” which “comes from the law”— not that the law was invalid, but that the

law on its own could not eliminate the black mark of sin or the stickiness of self-righteousness.

Our goal as Christians, as disciples of Christ and as God-fearing people, is to commit ourselves to attaining the goal of being in Christ and having Christ in us. So, we put aside the distractions that may keep us from “knowing” Christ, “Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (vv. 13-14). Anything in life other than knowing Christ is just so much skubula: so much trash.

So, what are the things that stop us in our tracks and make us realize that it is only in Christ that we have meaning and future? What is our awe? Psalm 19:1 says, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmaments showeth his handiwork...” The whole earth is God's textbook... Rocks have no words, nor do cells have syllables, yet their message can be read anywhere... Even the fiery stars,... By them we come to understand our place... Let all that I learn and all that I do be acceptable to You, LORD of all life.

Earlier in his Letter to the Philippians, in 2:1, Paul writes, “If you have any encouragement, if you have seen any sharing of the spirit, if you have realized any compassion...” and we do. Unfortunately, many of us are praise procrastinators. We don't stop to acknowledge God's awe-inspiring work as often as we should. And when we do, we often are simply going through the motions.

The sun burns with praise for God, and so should we. It plays its awesome, life-giving role in the welfare of the solar system -- as we should, too. Instead of getting bogged down in the life-sapping, energy-depleting, anxiety-producing hassles of day-to-day existence, let's open our eyes to the invigorating, inspiring and incredible activities of God's glorious creation, a creation that has thrived for not thousands but billions of years.

Like the sun, let's run our course with joy, and give life to people around us. As good and faithful creatures, our acceptable words and meditations are those that are offered to God with gratitude, contentment, energy, imagination, intelligence, and love. While we are shouting our praise, we turn ourselves over to the God who loves us enough to give us limits that we might turn to Him as our salvation. Turning to God is the way to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and to attain the prize of the heavenly call of God.