

**Exodus 20: 1-17**  
**I Corinthians 1: 18-25**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**  
**March 11, 2012**

Back in the 1980's there was a wonderful movie starring Burt Reynolds which Reynolds is misdiagnosed with a terminal illness and decides to take his own life. Toward the end of the movie Reynolds decides to drown himself in the ocean. Once in over his head he begins to sink. At that moment he realizes he doesn't want to die. In his struggle to get to shore he begins making promises to God.

He begins by saying, "God, if you get me in safely I will give half of my money to you. A bit closer to shore: "If you get me in safely I will give 10% of my money to you. As he begins to sense he will make it to shore, Reynolds says, " Lord, I know I promised you money, but if you get me in safely I will follow the Ten Commandments: I won't steal, I won't lie, I won't....*I'll learn the Ten Commandments!*

I begin this way because while we all consider the Ten Commandments to be foundational for human society in general and people of faith in particular. They do not just trip off the tongue. Even as I was writing this sermon I tested myself. After two failed attempts I got them; but certainly not in the right order.

Why are the Ten Commandments important? Someone will say, "Isn't it enough that God commanded them and we should obey God?" True. Yet as the great confessions of our church teach, God created us with "reasonable souls." That is we are not created simply to obey God but to understand why God commands as he does. We are meant to honor not only the letter of the commandments but the *spirit*, that is, their underlying purpose as well.

Indeed this is precisely Jesus' point in the Sermon on the Mount where he says, "You have heard it said...*but I say to you...*" Jesus is not contradicting the Law but completing the Law by exposing its spiritual purpose.

It is a fundamental teaching of Jesus and of Christian faith that God is a God of love, indeed the essential quality that makes God *God* is that in God love and power are completely united. God's power *is* love. Therefore when God gives the Israelites the Ten Commandments it is out of love. These are not the whimsical decrees of a petty tyrant. These are the commandments given by the creator of the universe for the welfare of his beloved children.

We see this in the fifth commandment: "Honor your father and your mother, *so that* your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." (Ex. 20:12) In other words, the delicate web of relationships which is the strength of society is sustained by respect for parents. Totalitarian governments can and do impose order by force. But free societies depend on free association which begins with mutual respect in our primary relationships.

Every one of the Ten Commandments has a similar spiritual and love inspired purpose. Indeed in the Larger catechism which is associated with the Westminster Confession provides an impressive exposition of the Ten Commandments which integrates the stated meaning of these commandments with Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Each commandment begins with a statement of the duties and benefits of obeying the Law.

This is so important! Why? Because it teaches us that the Ten Commandments are not a list of behaviors to avoid in order to "be good" or to avoid punishment. They are given to us

to be *embraced*. As a gift of God's love we are to receive them as a precious inheritance to be treated with respect and gratitude.

In our Reformed theological tradition the Law has three uses. The first is to restrain our self centered, fearful, angry, jealous, greedy, arrogant inclinations from harming others. The second use is to recognize that we are incapable of completely governing ourselves by these commandments by our own will power. Sooner or later, and in my case it is usually within five minutes of waking up in the morning, I realize I am already full of fear and resentment which I am ready to spring upon the world which is going to be lucky enough to encounter me. That, by the way, is the reason I spend time in the morning with scripture and in prayer. It is not to will myself into a better place, but to come before God and beg for help.

This friend, is in fact the second use of the Law: that by God's grace it leads us not to self condemnation but to the love of God revealed in Jesus who is able to do for me what I cannot do for myself. For some it may be necessary to be convicted of just what a miserable excuse for a human being we are in order to be awakened to God's grace in Christ. But most of us struggle with our awareness of our failures, regret and shame that we do not need a preacher to remind us. But we do need to be directed to the hand of love which is extended in Christ to lead us to a new life where we are not defined by regret but by that God in and through Jesus Christ has not left us to wallow in the muck of sin but has offered a way to a new identity based on our relationship with Jesus and his righteousness, not our own.

In the 1970's and culminating in the 1980's there was a movement which stressed the importance of self-esteem in helping people to feel better about themselves. There was much that was and still is good about this concept. But there were and are important limitations. The limitations are illustrated by an ad for Direct TV which tells us to dump cable tv.

It goes something like this: Your cable goes out. When your cable goes out you feel bad about yourself. When you feel bad about yourself you go to a self help lecture. When you go to a self help lecture you feel better about yourself. When you feel better about yourself you go to Las Vegas. When you go to Las Vegas you lose everything and end up on the street. Don't end up on the street. Get rid of cable.

The point is this: feeling better about ourselves is just that—a feeling and feelings come and go. When the good feeling we have is confronted by a trauma, unless there is a strong foundation upon which we stand we will be knocked for a loop. Unless we have internalized a strong sense of God's presence and guidance we will be washed away by a flood of pain and may never come back to a that sense of wholeness. This is precisely the point of Jesus' teaching about the house built on sand as opposed to the one built on rock. Jesus distinguishes between the ones who hear his commands and do not obey them and those who hear and base their lives upon those commandments.

In short the ultimate purpose of the Ten Commandments is that they become internalized. And this in the Reformed tradition is the third use of the Law. God's commandments are so a part of us that we obey them as a matter of course. And when the storms of life come we are not swept away.

At the risk of sounding overly conservative evangelical, I suggest that much of society's problems stem from a failure to take the Ten Commandments to heart. In particular we have fallen away from commandment #1: You shall have no other gods before me. Yet I do not believe that a society can legislate the Ten Commandments. We see over and over again how the attempt to control human beings leads to greater occasions of sin. Witness our experiment with prohibition and our severe criminalization of drug use.

The answer it seems to me is not to try to control behavior by imposing a moral code no matter how good and beneficial it is. Our calling is to point to the one through whom we are redeemed from our sin and brought to new life. God in Christ does not want to reform us. God wants to give us a completely new life! God has done this in and through his son, Jesus Christ who fulfilled the Law completely—even suffering the Law’s ultimate punishment—the death penalty. We now can claim Christ’s faithfulness and the power of his rising from the dead. We now can understand that we stand in the light of Christ’s righteousness and that our lives now have a completely new basis for life. We are free from the sting of the fear of death and eternal punishment. We are safe in the firm and tender palms of God’s hands.

And now we get to live the new life and share it with others. Amen.