

Foundations: The First Commandment Deuteronomy 5:1-7 (8/21/16)

5 Moses summoned all Israel and said: Hear, Israel, the decrees and laws I declare in your hearing today. Learn them and be sure to follow them. ² The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. ³ It was not with our ancestors that the LORD made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today.

⁴ The LORD spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain. ⁵ (At that time I stood between the LORD and you to declare to you the word of the LORD, because you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain.) And he said: ⁶ "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ⁷ "You shall have no other gods before me.

That (v. 7), friends, is "The First Commandment." And it's foundational for our faith and our lives today.

"I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please. Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don't want enough of Him to make me love a black man or pick beets with a migrant. I want ecstasy, not transformation. I want the warmth of the womb, not new birth. I want a pound of the eternal in a paper sack. I'd like to buy \$3 worth of God, please." (**Wilbur Rees**)

Blasé Pascal, the famous French philosopher and scientist, is known for his work in math and chemistry. At age 12, he had discovered the principals of geometry; and at 16, he wrote "The Geometry of Conics." He also invented a calculating machine and the theory of probability. He was a very smart man.

In his mid-thirties, Pascal became interested in religion. After much study and contemplation he reached this conclusion: "Within each one of us there is a God-shaped vacuum that only God can fill." Now, if that's true—and I believe it is--then each of us is made to seek and find and enter into relationship with God.

But the relationship must be on God's terms; and God says \$3 worth of Him is not enough. "You shall have no other god before me," He says, which means that we need much more of God. In fact, we need far more of God than any of us could ever afford!

So the relationship must be on His terms. He gets to make the laws. Once you understand the nature of these laws, though, you realize this is best—that, in fact, everything about these ancient laws we know as The Ten Commandments are for our good.

They are in our best interest. It is the love and graciousness of God that's reflected in each of these commandments. They're given by God to bring us closer to Him and closer to one another so that our lives can have direction and meaning and joy.

We are wrong, then, to separate the Old Testament from the New by saying that one is about Law while the other is about Grace. It's true that we see the fullness of God's grace in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ; but as we spend ten weeks examining these commandments, I trust we'll discover something of God's grace in each one of them.

I encourage all of us to know and value these commandments, and help those around you to value them as well, because...we want a lot of God in our lives!

1. As we begin our study, there are several characteristics I want to point out about them. The first is that the Ten Commandments are **ROOTED IN RELATIONSHIP**.

The Bible refers to the relationship between God and His people as a covenant. A covenant is a sacred promise made between two or more parties (e.g., marriage). You can have a contract without having a relationship--but not a covenant. You might think of The Ten Commandments as something like the "wedding vows" in our covenant with God.

God pledges His love and presence and protection to Israel and they, in turn, are to give God their love and their full loyalty and devotion. The Ten Commandments don't really work for people who have no relationship with God.

The power of the Commandments, then, lies not in the fact that they are laws, but in the awareness that they are descriptions of how people live in relationship with God. They are laws--but more than that, they are rooted in the very nature of our relationship with God.

2. A second characteristic is we obey The Ten Commandments as a **RESPONSE TO GOD'S GRACE**. Deuteronomy 5:6 says, "I am

the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."

Before God ever commands His people to do anything or to refrain from doing anything, He saves them; He delivers them from their slavery.

Moses didn't show up in Egypt with stone tablets and say, "If you'll agree to obey all these commands, God will deliver you from the Egyptians." Instead, he says, "God has heard your cry and has sent me to deliver you."

Only when this was done, when they were free, did God say how Israel was to respond. First God saves them, and then He tells them the rules for the relationship--but it's more about God's grace than their obedience.

Remember what happened just 40 days after they first received the commandments? They violated at least the first two by building a golden calf and then throwing a party to celebrate this.

And what did God do? Well, first, through Moses, He let them know He was angry! He got their attention--and then He forgave them, and reissued the commandments. That's grace.

They were not saved by the law any more than we are; yet at the same time, God's laws were important to them, as they are to us. The N.T. book of Romans tells us that the law is good. It can't save us--but it does describe how saved people respond to God's grace. It tells us how saved people behave.

3. Which brings us to the third characteristic of The Ten Commandments: they address the **REALITY OF BEHAVIOR**. If you were to do a nationwide survey and ask people, "Do you believe in God?" the numbers might surprise you. A huge percentage would say, "Yes, I believe in God."

But if you examined the lives of these respondents, you might find that what they profess to believe and how they live do not really connect. You can say to your spouse, "I love you;" but if you never demonstrate your love in specific, concrete behaviors, your words are empty...and likely untrue.

Faith, like love, can also be kept in the realm of theory. The Ten Commandments don't allow us to claim belief in God without

demonstrating that belief in concrete actions. They require us to affirm our faith in the daily living of our lives.

Instead of asking, "Do you believe in God?" the Commandments ask us ten questions that go something like this:

- 1. Do you honor anything or anyone above the one true God?**
- 2. Has God been replaced by something physical or material in your life?**
- 3. Have you dishonored God's name by using it in the wrong way?**
- 4. Is your work or any other activity more important than your relationship with God?**
- 5. Do you honor your father and mother?**
- 6. Do you value human life?**
- 7. Have you kept your marriage vows?**
- 8. Do you respect the rights of others?**
- 9. Do you tell the truth?**
- 10. Are you content with what you have or do you covet the possessions, relationships, and successes of others?"**

To God, our answers to these questions demonstrate what we believe, and where our hearts are, in relation to Him.

4. All of these questions point us to our **RESPONSIBILITY FOR COMMUNITY**—which is the fourth characteristic of the commandments--our individual responsibility for relationships.

The "you" (or *Thou*) in all these commandments is singular: in other words, you as an individual, and me as an individual--not just us in general. Each one of us takes responsibility for the whole community because the sins of any of us affect all of us.

Thousands were gathered to hear these commandments for the first time. They weren't addressed to the crowd, though, but to each person present. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt. *You* (you...) shall have no other gods before me."

"Yes, you, standing there by that rock, and you under that cedar tree, and you too, the one in the red turban who is thinking to himself how glad he is all these other people are hearing these commandments--I'm talking to you!" What you do, as an individual, affects the welfare of the whole community.

Every lie you tell or tolerate, every covetous thought you allow to linger in your mind, every secret lust, every act of dishonesty, every abuse of the Lord's Day—all this matters. And the only way you're going to see your community healed is if you personally take responsibility for making it a holier, healthier place.

In Mark 12, Jesus was asked which commandment is the greatest. He said, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And love your neighbor as yourself.'

Notice what the Master Teacher did: Jesus summarized ten commandments with two. Love God—commandments 1-4 are about our relationship with God. And love your neighbor—commandments 5-10 focus on our relationship with others.

Of course, in our culture, we've reduced Jesus' summary from two commandments to just one. As long as people love each other, we think that's sufficient. All we need is love—right?

But for some strange reason, we just can't get everyone to love each other. The more we try, the more people seem to only love themselves and want what's in their interest without concern for how it affects others. And they will vehemently, even hatefully, oppose anyone who gets in their way.

That's what happens when God is missing. God is love--the Creator of love, and the embodiment of love. If you eliminate God from the equation, nothing adds up to a loving relationship.

We see this teaching all through the New Testament, but its foundation is right here in The Ten Commandments. We can't have a healthy relationship with our fellow human beings without having a healthy relationship with the God who made us.

And so, God's laws begin with this: "I am the Lord your God...You shall have no other gods before me." This is where God had to begin--and listen—this was radical stuff! Having just one God was a completely new thought for these newly-set-free slaves.

The Egyptians had many gods. This is fascinating: each of the plagues that befell them was a direct assault on one of their gods. The Nile River was worshipped as a god, so the Lord God Jehovah turned it into blood. The sun was worshipped, so God hid it from sight. The first born was worshipped, and the death angel took them all.

The Israelites had been captives of this polytheistic culture for longer than any of them could remember. So when God demanded exclusive loyalty, it was a revolutionary idea. Why did God demand such complete allegiance?

Well, since only God can fully understand God's nature, and God wants us to understand that He alone is God, nothing else in life will fall into place until we get this truth nailed down: one God; our God. The Lord God who, because of who He is, gets our full love and allegiance. It's the only way for the relationship to work.

On a human level, again, it's something like marriage. When we take those sacred vows, we don't say to our spouse, "From this day forward, YOU will be my favorite." No, we say, "Forsaking all others," YOU are my ONE AND ONLY.

Now, if this is a requirement in the most important of all human relationships—marriage--how much more important it is in our relationship with God? The God who made us knows that it is impossible for us to have more than one God. He didn't waste time trying to explain this. He simply said this is His first requirement and it's non-negotiable: ONE GOD!

We struggle with this today, though, don't we? Steven Van Zandt is a musician and actor. I read something that he told a reporter in an interview with Rolling Stone magazine that seems very reflective of the times in which we live.

Here's the quote: "I am a reformed Taoist, part-time Buddhist, Hindu, animist, pagan, Jewish mystic, and Christian. I always got along great with priests and rabbis and mullahs and gurus, even though I spend most of my life constructively criticizing them."

Well...that's where many people are. You can HAVE it all. You can BELIEVE it all. Which, of course, means that it becomes very easy to dismiss it all as irrelevant—which eventually leads to moral chaos which we may be rapidly approaching.

This first commandment—ONE GOD AND NO OTHER--is so foundational to the rest. God could have begun by saying, "Take a day off each week. Be nice to your parents. Don't take what's not yours, etc. But then the obvious question would be, "Why?"

Why should we do these things and avoid those things? If there's no ultimate standard of authority outside our own whims—no God except, perhaps, US!--then it becomes easy enough to dismiss the rest of these commandments any time we want to—right?

Today there are those who want to keep the Ten Commandments out of courtrooms and other government-funded facilities. Some take that stand because they know that it is not the government's place to lend support to any one religion—as a Baptist, I get that. I understand the dangers of mixing government and religion.

But what is it that the secularists really object to? It's not the parts about stealing and murdering and lying. Everybody pretty much agrees with those laws in one form or another. They don't really mind the part about being respectful to your parents either.

The part that many opponents of the Ten Commandments can't live with is the first commandment: you shall have no other gods before me. They understand how powerful that is. They understand that if you recognize the sovereign, exclusive authority of one God, then you can't dismiss one of His commandments just because you don't feel like obeying it. If there really is only one God, then He gets to set the rules.

So what does it say about us if we bear false witness (even on the internet!), or take what's not ours, or covet something belonging to our neighbor, or break our marriage vows?

Does it not say that we need to go back to the first commandment and ask ourselves, "Have I allowed other gods to take the place of the Lord God in my life?"

Am I letting my selfishness control my actions rather than God? And what is it that's become more important than my relationship with God—Money? Success? Pride? Sex? Or what?

If we honor God as our one and only God, it won't matter whether these commandments are posted in public buildings or not. They'll be posted in our hearts; and they'll be with us wherever we go—not based on our politics, but our principles.

Our lives then will bear testimony to God—OUR GOD--the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ—Creator, Sustainer, and Savior of us all. This, friends, is foundational to everything: "You shall have no other gods before me!"