

September 1, 2013 -- 10 Commandments - 1st Commandment -- Communion

“You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me: Part 2”

Exodus 20:1-3; Romans 11:25-12:1; Luke 2:1-14

Last week we spoke of the truth claims the First Commandment, *You shall have no other gods before God*. If you remember, the difference between human laws and spiritual laws is that spiritual laws always carry an implicit opposite to the stated law. The implicit opposite of the First Commandment is, *You shall worship, praise and glorify the One True God*.

If we have no other gods before God, and therefore only worship, glorify and praise Him, it seems we should be reflecting a faith life of joy, exaltation and love. For many of you, the 10 Commandments could have been called the 10 Threats. Breaking them meant judgment, condemnation and perhaps even damnation. For some of you, the 10 Commandments were preached to you in this negative way. This is not wrong, but with so many things in faith and religion, we go too far. We err on the side of reaction, rather than the side of grace and reason.

But there is a good reason the 10 Commandments might seem like judgment and condemnation, and it is really quite an ingenious insight of the Reformation founders. Luther and Calvin and many of the Puritans of the late 1600s had a surprisingly deep psychological approach to the 10 Commandments and to Christ. Very simply, whenever the 10 Commandments seem to you like the imposition and judgment of the Law of God, it is an indicator to you that you are not aligned with the One True God in your life. Whenever you feel held and embraced by God's Law, you are worshiping, praising and glorifying God, and therefore aligned to the will and desire of God.

By having no other gods before God and worshiping, praising and glorifying God alone, we align ourselves with the desires and mind of God. When we fall out of that alignment, our relationship to God seems like judgment, seems like condemnation. This is why I say we, all of us, almost never make it off the first commandment. Just determining where we are worshiping, praising and glorifying God can take an entire lifetime.

The reason the 10 Commandments, the Law, seem like judgment, like shackles, like a huge hurdle to some of us, is what Paul is trying to solve in Romans 11. In Romans 11, Paul is trying to resolve a difficulty: if Jesus is the “New Law” and the “New Covenant”, are the other covenants of God invalidated? Many in Paul's time and beyond suggested the rejection of the God of the Old Testament for the God of the New Testament.

Paul suggests something rather profound, though. God cannot revise, renege or reject former covenants and promises. God would be wishy-washy and capricious if that were true. So the issue with regard to God's covenants cannot be a problem with God. Rather, the problem lies with us.

*“For from God and through God and for God all things are. To him be the glory forever. Amen”*, Paul says. The problem isn't what God has done or is doing. The problem is our approach to God, our alignment with the will of God. Paul's answer is that God is the sole reality which defines the world and defines us. All we can do, since we cannot know the mind of God is to live as a bodily n to the One True God. This, Paul says, is *“our spiritual worship”*. In other words, our only and chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. Our reaction to what God is doing is the issue and tells you far more about the state of your soul than it does about what God has done.

Glorifying and enjoying God forever is the foundation of the Westminster Confession, which was written for the Church of England in 1646. The Congregationalists adopted the theological questions of the Westminster Confession in The Savoy Declaration of 1658. As Congregationalists, we inherit the theology of the Westminster Confession.

The very first question of the Westminster Catechism, which is the teaching document of the Confession, is: *“What is the chief and highest end of mankind?”* The answer is: *“Mankind's chief and highest end is to glorify God and fully enjoy God forever.”*

Think about that for a moment and reflect on your own faith life. Is your faith life a glorification and enjoyment of God and all God has provided? Or is your faith life defined by fear and avoidance? A life of faith is one of glorification of God and enjoyment of God.

Do you hear the 10 Commandments as a threat, an instrument of fear to keep you from God's judgment and condemnation? If so, do not reject the 10 Commandments or God. That is not the problem. The problem is your alignment with God. Somewhere, your praise and worship and glorification and enjoyment of God in the basic, simple activities of your life have become disconnected from the grace and love of God.

The 10 Commandments call us to accountability to God and one another. I have always believed that the advent of Jesus Christ is the highest call to personal responsibility the world has ever known. This is why following the 10 Commandments are difficult. It hurts to take responsibility for your relationship to God, because in doing so, you begin to see all the places you are out of relationship with God.

In this sense, the 10 Commandments push us to Christ in our failure to maintain them. It is not whether you actually build an altar and make the sacrifice to another god. The mere act of putting anything before God is

an act of idolatry and a worship of another God. If you are anything like me, you do this all the time. Every day, in one way or another, the First of the Ten Commandments judges and condemns me. I cannot do it. I have never been able to do it. Sure, like the Pharisees of Jesus' time, I create all kinds of machinations and justifications to rationalize why something might, just for right now, might be more important than my worship, glorification and praise of God. How can any of us do this on our own? If my salvation and forgiveness is dependent upon my own work, then I have already failed a thousand times a thousand. I am driven to stand helpless before Christ by the First Commandment.

The “*living sacrifice*” Paul speaks of is the constant need to go before God and repent of putting other things before God, to give those idols over at the foot of the Cross, then turn around, start over again, and seek again to find the enjoyment of our relationship with God.

Christ and the 10 Commandments, the Law of God, stand before us like a great road marker. Before them, they simply give us the choice. As we said last week, we simply do not know as much as we think we do. If we are really seeking God, we realize, at that road marker, we don't choose. Instead we get down and pray before God to choose for us. Christ determines the state of our soul, not us. All we know, all we can know, is how we experience the finality of Christ.

Knowing that, is Christ a threat to you? Is Christ a judgment against you? Or is Christ a balm, an assurance, the pillar of love and the objective reality of the joy of God in the world for you?

In the presence of God, most of us are like the shepherds in the field at the birth of Christ. We are filled with fear. We fear the judgment of God. We fear a future under the care and oversight of God. But look at what the angels say to the shepherds in Luke: “*“Do not be afraid. I am bringing you good news that will be a great joy to all the people. Today your Savior was born in the town of David. He is Christ, the Lord.” (Luke 2:10-11)*. God’s work in the world is always this: to eradicate fear and to bring good news that will be a great joy. God’s commandments are for our greater joy, not our eternal judgment. Remember Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus in the Gospel of John? Jesus tells him after he says, “*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whosoever believes will not perish but have eternal life.*” He says, “*God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world..*”

If that is true, why do so many of us feel judged? Why do so many identify Christianity and Christians with judgment? I think it is because *we* are out of alignment with God. We are not fulfilling the implicit part of the First Commandment - to love, worship and praise the One True God with joy forever. Jesus says the reason he came was so that the world might be saved through him. The judgment is not darkness, but rather light. Our fears

are really an indicator of what is implicit in the coming of God's light through Jesus Christ - that many of us love the darkness more than we love the light. (John 3)

How do we perceive God's presence in our life? How do we try to fulfill the commandments of God?

Throughout Scripture, but especially in the New Testament, we are called to live out of God's joy and love. God is the one who is responsible for judgment on others and on ourselves, not us. Can we make the living sacrifice of that part of ourselves that needs to be in control of what God alone can control? Can we allow God and God's Son Jesus be the only light to our praise and worship of God? Our answers to those questions, our reactions to the light of Christ and God's commandments, say far more about the state of our souls than they do about the 10 Commandments and Jesus Christ.

1 Thessalonians 5 says,

*"For you are all children of the light and of the day; we don't belong to darkness and night. ... For God chose to save us through our Lord Jesus Christ, not to pour out his anger on us. Christ died for us so that, whether we are dead or alive when he returns, we can live with him forever. So encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing."*

Remember the Westminster Confession: our chief end is to live as children of the light, to build up one another to the glory of God. This is a joyful opportunity. And if we embrace it, the rest of the 10 Commandments simply flow out of this First Commandment to worship, praise and glorify the One True God. Following and obedience are the outcome of praising, worshiping and glorifying God. Following and obedience are not handcuffs and bonds which hold us down...well, they are if we are not worshiping, praising and glorifying God. Then, our experience is one of condemnation and judgment.

We were talking about this in Bible Study and Deanna told me something Jean Brookwell used to say about the 12 Steps in AA. Jean used to say, *"If everyone took the first step (I acknowledge that I have a problem and am helpless before it), the rest of the steps would not be necessary."* The same is true here; if everyone truly engaged the First Commandment, the rest of the commandments would not be necessary. If we have no other gods before God and if we worship, praise and glorify God alone, then we need go no further. The rest of the Commandments are merely guideposts and indicators for when we have fallen away from the First Commandment.

Jesus tells us he is *"the light of the world"* (Jn 8). In His light, we are able to see the shadows and darkness of our lives. His light reaches back and illuminates the 10 Commandments in such a way that they point only to Him, since it is through Christ that we know God and it is through Christ that we know we are saved to

worship, praise and glorify God. We are seeking a better world, and God tells us it begins by not letting our worship stray from God, not praising other idols above God, by not taking for ourselves the glory which belongs to God. The first commandment is the lens which magnifies the guiding light of Christ into the deepest parts of our lives. So take the risk of examining your reactions to God's commandments upon you. Are you judged by them, or are you embraced by the love of God. Let us worship, praise and glorify God always so we might know God's love through Jesus Christ. Amen.