

The Ten Commandments

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 20th Sunday after Pentecost, October 17, 1993. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Matthew 22:35b-40

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

How do we know what's right and wrong? One way to know is to learn the rules. When we were children our parents taught us rules. We learned that we shouldn't wipe our mouth on our sleeves. When we said, "ain't", mom or dad would say, "There ain't no such word as ain't". They taught us all kinds of rules. We also learn rules from our school teachers. One rule says, "Put your name on your paper." I know a brilliant young student who got a "0" on an otherwise good paper when he forgot to put his name on it. We learned that if we follow the rules we got better grades. Playmates teach us rules. Take baseball, for example. One of the rules is that we get only three strikes and we're out? Why not four strikes or two? Those are the rules.

There's a lot to be said for rules. Rules make life easier. They make games more fun. Without rules life would be a lot more dangerous and frustrating. But rules need to be interpreted and applied in various situations. Sometimes it's not so easy to decide which rule applies. Rules are like maps. Suppose you're going to visit a friend in a little town in Western Pennsylvania - a town you've never been to before. You use a map. A map makes getting to where you're going a lot easier than traveling without one. But you have to interpret the map. Sometimes you wonder whether a certain thin black line on the map stands for the narrow road you just passed. Should you have taken that road? You discover that it's not enough to have a map, you have to know how to use it. And we still have to

interpret and apply the rules in whatever situation we find ourselves. Rules are like maps.

For example, when the Nazis demanded that the parents of Corrie Ten Boom tell them where Jews were hiding, Mr. Ten Boom said he had no idea. His minister counseled him to follow the rule about telling the truth and turn in the Jews. But Mr. Ten Boom thought of the rule, "Thou shalt not kill". "If I tell the truth I'll be responsible for the death of innocent people." Mr. Ten Boom had to decide which rule was the right one to follow in that situation. He told a lie. I believe he did right. So rules need to be interpreted and applied in various situations. And sometimes it's not so easy to decide which rule applies.

There are all kinds of rules. Let's list some of them. There are institutional rules. Institutions don't work without rules. Clock in by 9 a.m! Wash you hands! Wear a hair-net! If you break them, you might get fired, but they aren't moral rules. There are common sense rules like "look before you leap". It may be prudent to pay heed to these rules but they aren't moral rules. There are personal rules. I know an alcoholic who has a personal rule never to drink alcohol. She doesn't try to force everybody else to follow her rule. We get into real trouble when we try to impose our personal rules on other people. There are rules that govern society, like speed limits. Most of these rules are good and our lives wouldn't be as safe without them but they aren't moral rules.

In fact, some rules are immoral. I remember taking a Sunday ride when I was a very young boy. We were on route 896. I pointed to a small school on the left.

"What school is that?" I asked. "That's where the colored children go", my mother said ("Colored" was the acceptable term in those days). "Why don't they go to school with us?", I asked. And my mother said, "I don't know. It's just a stupid rule." Some rules are stupid. They're worse than stupid. They're immoral and they need to be changed. Most of us can think of other bad rules that need to be changed. And Christians need to take the lead in changing bad rules.

But how do we know when a rule is moral? *Christians and Jews believe that the Moral Law is contained in The 10 Commandments given to God while ago. I was referring to the Ten Commandments.* Moral rules come from God, *on Mt Sinai, on two tablets of stone.*

These are rules which all of us ought to follow all the time. "Sin" the Westminster Shorter Catechism says, "is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the Law of God. We believe breaking these rules always carries harmful consequences. These are rules upon which all other rules should be based.

Jesus tells us that the Moral Law can be summarized in two sentences. Love God! Love your neighbor! Just as we show love for a spouse by forsaking all others, we show our love for God, by renouncing all other gods and cleaving only unto the One who delivered Israel from Egypt and raised up Jesus from the dead. We don't believe that all gods are created equal. We believe that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is God alone. We believe that when we worship and love false Gods we get ourselves into a lot of real bad trouble.

We also show love for our neighbor when we obey these rules. Love without any rules can be destructive. Some of us grew up in the sixties where a lot of us tried to love without rules and often found it destructive and hurtful. A love that

never says "No!" is a love that soon ends up hurting somebody. On the other hand, rules without love are just as bad. Rules alone are not enough. Some of us grew up with a lot of rules but little love and we're still trying to deal with the damage it caused. Suppose the best thing you could say about your mom and dad were that they did a pretty good job of obeying the Ten Commandments. But there was never a good night kiss! Never a long warm hug! Never a sigh that told you how much they really cared about you. We need more than rules. We need rules and love.

None of us keep the rules perfectly. Take the sixth commandment, for example. "Thou shalt not kill." Probably none of us has ever killed another person. But the Bible makes it clear that a lot more is involved in obeying this commandment. The **Westminster Larger Catechism** summarizes what the Bible says. It says that this commandment requires that we do all we can to preserve our own lives as well as those of others. It talks about a moderate use of food and drink. It forbids provoking words, oppression, and whatever tends to the destruction of anyone's life. The speed limit may not be a moral law, but if we put the lives of others at risk through reckless driving we're breaking this commandment even when we don't actually kill anybody.

None of us keeps any of these commandments very well. When I was a boy, I made model airplanes. Each time I built a plane I resolved to follow the plans exactly so that it would look just like the beautiful plane pictured on the box. But I was never able to. Maybe the wing warped a little bit or the silk span covering the

wings got wrinkled. It never looked exactly like the picture on the box. But the plane still flew and, even though it wasn't perfect, I got great enjoyment out of seeing something I built actually fly. The Law of God is like those plans. The Ten Commandments sketch out a plan for building a life that works and in which we can take pleasure. None of us follows those rules completely but the more closely we lovingly follow them, the closer we come to fulfilling our purpose in life - and that's pleasurable.

When we think seriously about the implications of The Ten Commandments we become aware of how much we need the Lord Jesus Christ. When we break any of these Ten Commandments in thought, word or deed we need to confess our sin to God in prayer, and claim the forgiveness God offers to us through Jesus Christ. We also need to repent. That's usually the hard part. If you're like me, you find yourselves confessing and repenting of the same sins over and over again.

I've found one thing helpful when I've confessed and repented of a sin for the thousandth time. I remember my baptism. When we joined the church as an infant we were baptized. The water of baptism is a sign that we can't wash away our own sin, only Jesus Christ can. It's a sign that God accepts and loves us for the sake of Christ even when we feel helpless. Nothing we do wrong can get God to love us less than he did when we did things right. Baptism also reminds us that we belong to the family of God. We have brothers and sisters who want to help us if we let them. Brothers and sisters who will not condemn us when I sin. We need to find a fellow Christian whom we can trust not to blab and talk about what we're

struggling with. God doesn't intend for us to try to follow these commandments all by ourselves. God has placed us into God's family to help and support us.

When I've failed to keep the commandments it also helps me to come to the Lord's Table. The sacrament of Holy Communion reminds me that Christ died for sinners. We might be ashamed of ourselves and our sin, but Christ isn't ashamed to eat and drink with us. Because of God's grace and love in Jesus Christ, we don't have to try hide our sins from God or explain them away or make excuses for them. We can confess them openly and honestly because we know God is gracious.

One final word. I find hope in the Ten Commandments. These commandments are not just rules. They're also promises. God says there's coming a day when we shall not worship any false god. We'll cease being workaholics, and take time to rest. We shall no longer hurt or kill. "A day is coming", God says, "when I will put my law in your hearts and write them on your minds and you'll love me with all your heart soul strength and mind and you'll love your neighbor as yourself." I long for that day. I'm looking forward to that day. I'm going to do all I can to work and pray with God's people until I see that day come.

Let us pray: Merciful God, in Jesus Christ you do not call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Draw us away from the easy road that leads to destruction, and guide us into paths that lead to life abundant, that in seeking your truth, and obeying your laws, we may know the joy of being a disciple of Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.