

# “An Anchor that won’t Drag”

Exodus 19:1-6, 16-19; 20:1-3 <sup>1</sup>

Well, what did you think when you saw that the summer sermon series was going to be “the Ten Commandments”? Did you perhaps feel as the little boy whose mother asked him, “How many commandments did God give to Moses?” He quickly replied, “Too many!”<sup>2</sup>

With that little boy, how many of us secretly think of God as the enemy of joy and celebration, hearing in the Commandments something like the famous—but probably fictitious—mother who said, “Find out what the baby’s doing . . . and make him stop”?

For some of us, perhaps, God is rather like a life preserver thrown to a drowning person. God can indeed be such a life preserver, but one can’t be drowning all the time. Sooner or later we make it back to shore, and then what? Most of us might discard the life preserver at that point; and if our relationship with God is based more on fear than on love, we might just discard God as well.<sup>3</sup>

I’m afraid that some of us have forgotten the truth of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which boldly begins with the affirmation that “**The chief end of [humankind] is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.**”<sup>4</sup> We’re often in danger of forgetting that God is not only a preserver of life, but a source of joy as well. Indeed, God is the Source of all pleasures. Throughout all eternity, God has been joy and light and laughter and love, and when God lived among us in human flesh, that’s what God was like in space and time as well.

Joy Davidman, who in her last years was the wife of C.S. Lewis, lamented that we’ve reduced the Good News out of Nazareth to a somber list of thou-shalt-not’s: “We’ve turned the Decalogue from a thrilling affirmation into a dull denial; yet there was the sound of trumpets in it once.”<sup>5</sup>

The biblical story had begun with the revelation that there is one—and only one—God, but this knowledge was forgotten at some point between the Garden and the Flood. In those ancient days, people believed that every force in nature was a god: the sun, the moon, the stars, fire, trees, rivers, the sea, wind, storms, and sexuality all were worshiped—often vigorously.

Those old gods fought among themselves. They loved and hated without reason, and they demanded both unspeakable bribes and meaningless flatteries. While they were worshiped, moral law was impossible, for what pleased one deity would offend another. Everyone knew that the universe was a wild and chaotic thing, a jungle of warring powers: wind against water, sun against moon, male against female, life against death.

There was a god of the spring planting and a god of the harvest, a god who put fish in the fisherman’s nets and a god who specialized in childbirth. There was at best an uneasy truce among all these, and at worst, there was war . . . and then there came the reminder about the true character of God that appears in this morning’s text. The God revealed at Sinai was an almost unimaginable being – a single, unitary Being, Creator of heaven and earth, not to be bribed with golden images or children burned alive; loving only righteousness, demanding one’s

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on June 14, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Sandy Y., Bowmansville, Pennsylvania, in “Life in Our House,” *Christian Parenting Today* (March/April 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Joy Davidman (wife of C. S. Lewis), *Smoke on the Mountain: An Interpretation of the Ten Commandments* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> <http://learns scripture.net/catechisms/WSC/>

<sup>5</sup> Davidman, pp. 14-15.

heart-felt and complete allegiance. And the moral law of the Decalogue given on that mountain became a shining rainbow bridge stretching between Earth and heaven.<sup>6</sup>

I'd be surprised if you've heard the Ten Commandments described as a love letter, as a tender, heartfelt message from the very hand of God, but to see the Decalogue in this way may be the very best way to understand it.<sup>7</sup> Sadly, I suspect that most people don't hear love in the Ten Commandments at all, hearing instead the clank of chains and the rattle of padlocks.

They hear God saying, "If you mess with me, if you step out of bounds, I'll fry you like a bug landing on a transformer." And this response plays right into Satan's plan – the same plan he's had from the beginning. Satan tells us, in a thousand different ways, "God is a prude. God is a killjoy. God is a harsh old man with a long, gray beard and bushy eyebrows who doesn't want anyone, anywhere, to have any fun – ever."<sup>8</sup>

From time to time in ordinary life, we hear about a set of very old love letters that has been discovered—I heard about one on NPR last week—and in order to really understand those letters, we have to know something about the context out of which they were written. I think it's possible—even likely—that we've missed the love in the Ten Commandments because we haven't paid sufficient attention to the context out of which they were given.

A summary of this context is found in Exodus 19:3-6: *Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and **how I carried you on eagles' wings** and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'* These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

Or to say that in a different way: "Moses, before you give the people these commands, before anything else, will you please remind them that I bore them here on eagles' wings? Remind them that I heard their cries. I saw their tears; and I came down to buy them back out of slavery. Remind them that I made a way for them across the sea where there was no way. I opened up a spring for them, a stream of fresh, sweet water gushing over the parched desert floor. I swooped down and I bore them to myself on eagles' wings. Please remind them of these things." Can you hear the love in those words?<sup>9</sup>

Like Israel in Egypt, we, too, were "*without hope and without God in the world*" (Ephesians 2:12). But then, in Christ, God swooped down and picked us up and gave us everything that we needed. And now God sustains us and keeps us every day of our lives. And if we lose sight of that, we can't see anything at all.<sup>10</sup>

The truth of the matter is that love doesn't always look the way we'd expect it to look. It isn't always dressed for dinner. It isn't always pretty or frilly or soft. It might even be written in stone. Love might even show up as Ten Commandments.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Davidman, pp. 21-22.

<sup>7</sup> Ron Mehl, *The Ten(der) Commandments: Reflections on the Father's Love* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 1998, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Mehl, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Mehl, pp. 16-18.

<sup>10</sup> Mehl, p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> Mehl, p. 34.

The Ten Commandments may seem to shout at us in **BOLD, CAPITAL LETTERS**, but this is because God's heart lunges toward us as God sees us, spiritually blind and unheeding, racing toward the edge of the cliff: *"Stop! Stop! Turn back! Turn around! Don't go that way! There is sorrow ahead! There is death ahead! Come back to me!"*<sup>12</sup> (Ezekiel 33:11).

The Bible tells us that God wrote the first set of these Commandments with "God's own hand" (Deuteronomy 5:22), because there are some things in this sin-damaged world of ours that are so shattering and devastating to our brief human lives that God doesn't want us to have to learn them by bitter experience. So God has given us a Book to guide us and protect us.

God knows that there will be times in each of our lives when we will find ourselves in lonely places, in dark places, in tight places, all alone, and that we'll wonder, "What should I do now? What does my Father say about this? What's God's heart for me in these matters? How does God feel about me now?" And in love, God has already answered those questions.<sup>13</sup>

Although God gave Moses *Ten* Commandments on Sinai, those ten basically have to do with only two things: Commandments 1-4 have to do with our relationship with God; and Commandments 5-10 have to do with our relationships with one another. Jesus would, in fact, later summarize that Law in this very way: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'* *This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'* *All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments"* (Matthew 22:37-40).

We tend to think of the Ten Commandments as a lofty and unattainable ideal, but here's another way of thinking about them. This is what God says:

1. No matter what anybody else tells you, there really is only one God, and I am He.
2. Read my lips. You're going to end up being really unhappy if you worship another god besides me.
3. A person's name represents who they are. I respect your name, and I expect you to respect mine.
4. I'm giving you one whole day off every week. Enjoy!
5. I've given your parents the responsibility of raising you. They really do have the authority to do that.
6. Don't kill each other.
7. Don't do sexual stuff you know you shouldn't be doing.
8. Don't take things from each other without asking.
9. Tell the truth.
10. You may like what your friends have, but get your own stuff.

Is that really so hard?

And so, with this preamble, we come at last to the First Commandment: *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. **You shall have no other gods before me**"* (Exodus 20:2-3).

The First Commandment doesn't merely ask us to agree that there is one God. Nearly everyone agrees with that. The First Commandment requires that we must actually have only one God.

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<sup>12</sup> Mehl, pp. 44-45.

<sup>13</sup> Mehl, 26.

So who or what would you say that your god/God really is? I submit to you that your god/God is that person, that thing, that goal, that cause for which you are prepared to give the best of your time, your strength, and your activity. Your god/God is that which is most important and most central in your life.

And I'm sorry to say that from the Garden of Eden to this very moment, we ourselves are the gods we're most inclined to put in the center of things. The great preacher G. Campbell Morgan once said that "There are [many people] today of whom it may be said that they worship themselves with all their heart and with all their strength and with all their mind, and themselves only do they serve."

Do you know how to tell whether your attitude toward yourself is breaking the First Commandment? Jesus actually gave us a test for just this purpose. It goes like this: "*No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money*" (Matthew 6:24).

"Money" represents material things, and Jesus knew that material things always present the greatest challenge to our love for God. Being materialistic means that we're devoted to our own pleasures, our own interests, and our own priorities more than we're concerned about what God is concerned about.

A person trying to serve two masters is always half-hearted. That's what the term means. And anything we desire, anything we love, anything we struggle to gain or to achieve will eventually turn to ashes in our mouths, minds, and hearts if we don't put God first. As I've said several times already, God didn't give us these Commandments in order to *forbid* love, joy, exuberance, and celebration. God gave us these Commandments in order to make love, joy, exuberance, and celebration *possible*.

The year was 1974, and it was a very pleasant afternoon to be arriving in Jamaica. The USS CONE (DD-866) was pulling into Montego Bay for some R & R between training at Guantanamo Bay and gunnery practice at the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, and I was looking forward to some time away from the sweltering engineering spaces.

For reasons I no longer remember, we were required to "anchor out" rather than tying up at one of the piers. I wasn't on watch, so I went up to the bridge to watch the anchoring procedure, which we didn't do very often.

I do remember, though, that the Officer of the Deck had a difficult time setting the anchor. While it's actually the weight of the anchor chain that does most of the work in holding a vessel at anchor—seven times as much chain is let out as the depth of the water—the anchor itself has to dig into the sand in order to fix the position of the chain. We finally did come to anchor, and we had some fine adventures after that.

Now when ships drop anchor, the anchor usually falls on sand; but very occasionally, the anchor will find and grip a rock, which is far better. An anchor set in sand can sometimes drag in a strong wind or a strong current, and the ship attached to that anchor may then find itself broken apart against the rocky shore.

The Bible asks, "*For who is God besides the LORD? And who is the Rock except our God?*" (Psalm 18:31). And the Bible affirms that "*We have this hope [this Rock] as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure*" (Hebrews 6:19).

The same God who spoke the Ten Commandments later told us that "*Anyone who listens to my teaching and obeys me is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't*

*collapse, because it is built on rock. But anyone who hears my teaching and ignores it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will fall with a mighty crash” (Matthew 7:24-27).*

So how's your anchor this morning, my friend? How's your foundation? Does your life have an anchor that won't drag? Does your life have a foundation that won't collapse? Are there any changes you need to make?