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## Sermon

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### ***A Lenten Reflection on the Ten Commandments***

**Exodus 20:1-17**

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The following true story tells us how some people nowadays think about the Ten Commandments: A friend told me once how her little lad had learned to count to ten at an early age. She was proudly telling someone, who then said to Ben: "Show me how you can count to ten." So Ben started off: "1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9..." "What comes after 9, Ben?" she enquired. After a pause, Ben said, "Smack!"

Is that how God is with us? Counting up our sins and failure to obey his laws, waiting to whack us when we inevitably fail?

To really understand the 10 Commandments, we must look at who, what and why: who gave them, what the Ten Commandments really are and why they were given. Please turn to your Bibles at Exodus 20v2.

Firstly, **who** gave them? "I AM" - the God who miraculously led them out of slavery, God himself - the absolute and undeniable sovereign over the world. So they are not just the Ten Good Suggestions. This truly is "He who Must be Obeyed" speaking. Some people seem to think that he gave us these strict rules to stop us enjoying ourselves. But any parent knows what a delight it is when our children are happily enjoying themselves. But we also know that the feeling of happiness can only last if they are safe and others don't suffer from their actions. So he gives us these boundaries and instructions so we can be safe and not hurt others. To operate in a different way will bring damage and pain to us and to others - spirit, soul and body.

He loves us and doesn't want us to hurt others or ourselves! It is a VERY high priority for him. He made elaborate and careful preparations before giving the Commandments. If we look in chapter 19 of Exodus, just before today's reading, we see Moses receiving instructions to warn the people not to go near the mountain where God would be. We see thunder and lightning, a very thick cloud over the mountain, then fire and smoke all over the mountain and a mighty earthquake. The sound of a trumpet got louder and louder, then Moses spoke and they could *hear* the Lord answer!

No wonder the people were afraid! The Lord was setting the stage for giving something REALLY important and they needed to be in awe. And he is not here showing himself as a cosy, grandfather-type figure. Every sense would tell them not to get near this God – nearly deafened by a very loud sound of trumpets, seeing the dense cloud over the mountain, smelling and tasting the smoke as the fire descends over this huge mountain, feeling the violent earthquake. This is a demonstration of “HOLY, HOLY, HOLY is the LORD God Almighty!”

So **what** are the commandments God took so much trouble to reveal? If we look carefully we can break the list into two parts- the first four are about our attitudes to God and the others are basically about our attitudes to others.

As a confirmation that the New and Old Covenants come from the same source, Jesus<sup>1</sup> says the two greatest commandments are, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength” and then “Love your neighbour as yourself”. He says all other commandments stem from these two and will be fulfilled, if you obey these two.

Therefore they are important despite our being New Covenant people. Let’s look at them.

1. Have no other gods before me - the Lord must be absolutely our #1.
2. Do not make a carved image and worship it – don’t let any man-made thing take the place of our God, who is Spirit.
3. Do not misuse the name of the Lord – treat it with respect and honour. Do not use it to validate your own good ideas. Ps 138 says God has exalted His name and His word above all things

Number four shows us a practical way to honour the Holy One. “Keep the Sabbath Day holy” means each seventh day is for the worship of God but it is also about rest. A rest day out of seven is essential for health in body and mind. The Seventh Day Adventists emphasise God’s truth that the Sabbath is important. That church excels in this area. Resting instead of working on the Sabbath reminds us that we can never do everything; that there will always be more to do; that we don’t have the capacity to fix everything and that we need God. It shows a healthy humility that honours God.

The last six commandants are the “love your neighbour” ones. First, honour your parents. You can honour someone even if he is not perfect. I think about the example of Noah’s sons. The oldest one, Ham, found his father lying naked in a state of drunkenness. He went out and started telling his brothers about it, probably laughing at his father, but the two younger fellows went into their father’s tent backwards, holding a large garment up between them and they covered him with it, choosing not to look upon their father’s nakedness. Shem and Japheth did not pretend their father had done a good thing, but the respect they showed their father earned them a blessing and Ham, who dishonoured him, earned a curse over his life.

Then comes “don’t murder, don’t commit adultery, don’t steal, don’t covet and don’t give false testimony.” Anyone here whose life has been touched by murder or adultery, had their belongings stolen, been the target of jealousy or lies, knows these things are evil and bring only pain and destruction. They can be glamourised by the television but actually, all those activities are ways of partnering with the devil.

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew 22

Here we think of Jesus' words, "The thief comes only to kill, steal and destroy."<sup>2</sup> He is warning us that wherever we see theft, destruction, lying and death in our lives it is sourced in Satan's work. Jesus' way of operating is to bring life, truth and blessing to us and to others through us.

And commandment number 9 about giving false testimony says "do not lie" because basically lying is partnering with the devil. Jesus says the devil is a liar and is the father of lies.<sup>3</sup> The use of truthful testimony honours what God has done in your life. Testimony brings fruit according to its kind. It has been known for people to be healed of a certain disease, just by hearing another person tell how they were healed from it and believing God for the same.

Whom are you partnering with? In your thought life, do you follow the Lord's pattern: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things"?<sup>4</sup>

This is not to say that we must ignore all evil and let it go on, but our major focus should be on good things. Then instead of spiraling down in our thoughts and therefore our mood, we will be inclined to go up.

Our challenge for this Lent is to look at what kind of stones we are throwing into the lake of life. What kind of ripples are going out from our behaviour, our ways of speaking to others? Are we speaking encouraging words to people or are we dwelling on their faults? Are we respecting our parents by not judging them? The truth is we cannot know all the factors that cause the way they are. Often people have been twisted by surroundings that they are powerless to alter.

I wonder if you noticed in the reading the bit in the second commandment about God visiting the sins of the fathers on the children up to the third and fourth generation? Did you think it contradicts all I have been saying about the love of God? Well at the time these commandments were written, a normal household would consist of three or four generations. The sin of idolatry was likely to infect them all just by the power of someone modelling it. But did you also notice the amazingly generous blessing promised to thousands of generations of those who love him and obey his commandments? Maybe this is God using a small stick and a large carrot to get us donkeys going in the right direction.

We can also compare it to compound interest. Imagine starting to make deposits into the bank of your family relationships. You put in love, respect of parents, treasuring human life, generosity and being content with what you have, What will grow? The balance of happiness and blessing will grow exponentially! Same with a garden. Plant good things and good things will grow. The opposite is true, too, that the negatives of lying, stealing, murder, disrespect for parents, for God and for people in general, all ripples out and affects our children, our grandchildren and so on, and the negative ripples take a lot of stopping. It's like trying to stop ripples in a lake after a stone has been thrown in. This is true on an individual, a family, a national and a global scale.

Thirdly, why were the 10 commandments given? Well, they symbolise a covenant. The way they are written is in the form of a covenant that was common at the time; a conditional covenant, between a great King and his subject kings. It was conditional on the response of the lesser kings and demanded their total allegiance. The great King would promise to protect the lesser, as long as they remained faithful and loyal.

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<sup>2</sup> John 10v10

<sup>3</sup> John 8:44

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 4:8

So we see in verse 2: "I AM the LORD your God". He has the authority to expect our loyalty and faithfulness because of who he is. He is the source of our very existence. He redeemed us from the enemy with a huge price. Therefore he has an incontestable right to command us.

But that is not the whole story. Behind all of the commandments is the love of God. Read Psalm 136 and see how many times David says, "His love endures forever"? These are not words about a distant God who sits up in heaven writing rules to keep his creation in order! These are the words of a God who longs for relationship - a two-way relationship! He loves us and wants to protect us from what we would do to ourselves and each other, if we were allowed to write the rules.

We are taken into relationship with him by our choice to commit all our allegiance to him. I remember when I first shifted to England, I was longing for friends to ring me up, to show that they cared. When people first come to a new church, they long for someone to talk to them, to be interested in them as people. We are made in the image of God and that longing is like a shadow of the longing in God's heart for us to respond to him.

We have seen this morning that God is the absolute and undeniable sovereign over the world and that he has the right to lay down the rules.

We have seen that he exercises this right on the basis of love and that our proper response is to love him, which will always involve obeying what he says.

We have seen that our need as we plan our days is to partner with God, who loves us and wants to do mighty works through us. He calls us to take up our cross and follow him. As we walk through Lent together, as we take up our cross and follow Jesus, what does it mean in daily life?

Perhaps it is that we live fully. Live as if we were going to die. That sounds contradictory, but to carry one's cross means that one is walking towards very imminent death. Think of the "Make a Wish" foundation. Children who have terminal conditions are given the chance to step into their dreams, something big they wanted to see or accomplish in their lives. They are living as if they were going to die soon and they try to accomplish things that they value highly.

I have been at the bedside of dying people and no-one ever says "Oh I wish I had spent more time at the office." They say things like, "I wish I had tried to be reconciled to my brother." Or, "I wish I had treated my wife better." Or "My hands are empty. I wish I had invested my time inviting other people to know Jesus."

Today is the only day we can live. The past is gone and the future is not here yet. Let us not be anxious, but walk with Jesus, and partner with Him in the family business. It might be taking the plunge to pray for someone to be healed. It may be giving a word of encouragement. It may be fulfilling a promise you made ages ago and haven't quite gotten around to doing.

Let's partner with Him in our marriages, our business life, our thought life. The unimportant falls away as we carry our cross. We let go of burdens that are not ours to carry; we let go of shame that Jesus has already paid to wash away; we resolve to treat others as we would like to be treated.

This Lent, let us pray daily: "Lord, show me how I can partner with you today."