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Sermon

Reflections on the Ten Commandments

Exodus 20v1-17

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I started this sermon on Friday, when we had been given strong warnings of an earthquake and tsunami. Scary stuff. It seems to be a suitable time to look together at the bedrock foundations of our faith in God, our good Father.

In Jesus' time, and in the early church before the New Testament was written, the Old Testament was the Scripture that they looked to for wisdom and instruction from God. This is the part of the Bible which is called "The Law and the Prophets."

Exodus 20 contains Moses' account of the giving of the Law. The first part is what is known as the Ten Commandments and they are commandments which have not gotten outdated or been superseded.

I thought you might enjoy this story: My friend Marineke told me how her little lad had learned to count to ten at a very early age. She was proudly telling a friend, 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's next, 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? That is a mistaken idea. Listen to what God says: "I have stretched out my arms all day long to a stubborn and rebellious people". The book of Psalms tells us that "his love endures forever", and that he is "slow to anger and abounding in mercy".

I don't have time to examine each commandment in detail, but let's look at who, what and why: who gave them, what the Ten Commandments really are and why they were given. Then we'll see how they relate to Christians today.

Firstly, who gave them? God himself - the absolute sovereign over all people. So they are not just the Ten Good Suggestions. And St John tells us in his first letter, that God is love. Some people seem to think that he gave us rules to stop us enjoying ourselves. But those of us who are parents know what a delight it is for us when our children are happily enjoying themselves. We also know, that the happiness can only last if they are safe and others don't suffer from their actions. So God loves us enough to give 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.

Imagine a game of rugby where anything goes. There is no line around the field. There are no goalposts. You can stamp on someone's head if you want to get the ball. There are no off-side rules and the ref has no whistle. What a mess the game would be! Meaningless!

God has given us rules of conduct that give shape and meaning to our lives. He loves us and doesn't want us to hurt others or ourselves! He made elaborate and careful preparations for the giving of the Law. 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, fire and smoke and a mighty earthquake. The sound of a trumpet got louder and louder, then Moses spoke and you could hear the Lord answer! No wonder the people were afraid! This preparation and lead-up showed how important the 10 Commandments are.

Secondly, what are they? They are not rules to stop us having a good time, if we look carefully at the text we can see that the first three are all about our attitudes to God and numbers 4 – 10, are basically about our attitudes to others.

That is why Jesus in Matthew chapter 22 gives the two greatest commandments as "*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. It was a brilliant summary of the Law.

So, who here can recite them? Hands up. Who knows what the first three are? Well, let's look in Exodus 20.

1. Have absolutely no other gods - the Lord must be our #1.
2. Do not make a carved image and worship it – no idols allowed.
3. Do not misuse the name of the Lord – treat it with respect.

Number 4 is a sort of bridge – it ties into our attitude towards God by saying the Sabbath is holy and is for the worship of God. It is also about rest. Since a rest day out of seven is essential for keeping healthy in body and mind, it is part of loving yourself and others. When Ian and I had our dream trip around Europe in the first year of our marriage, strangely, we found ourselves getting grumpy with each other and bored with castles and other amazing things we had gone so far to see. Then we realised that we needed to take one day to rest out of each seven. After each day of rest, we enjoyed each other and the trip much more!

The Sabbath reminds us that we can't 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. That is a healthy humility that honours God. It is also carved-out time to spend attending to God and helps us to spend our lives close to him.

The last six commandments are the "relationship with others" ones. Honour your parents, don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't covet and don't give false testimony – don't lie.

We can compare this lifestyle to compound interest – our life is like a bank. If we deposit love, respect of parents, treasuring human life, generosity and being content with what we have, the balance of happiness and blessing will grow exponentially!

The opposite is true, too, that the negatives of lying, stealing, murder, disrespect for parents, God and others, all ripples out and affects our children, our children's children and so on, and the negative ripples take a lot of stopping. Think about trying to stop ripples in a lake after a stone has been thrown in. This is true on an individual, a national and a global scale. (PAUSE)

Let's think thirdly about why were the 10 commandments given? Well, obviously for our good.

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 protection to them as long as they remained faithful and loyal.

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 made us, therefore he has an indisputable right to command us.

But that is not the whole story. Don't you see what is behind all of the commandments? Remember the psalm I quoted – "His love endures forever"? These are not the words of 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!

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

Now, when the Law was given, the Israelites were on their journey from Egypt and had been brought like all Christians, out of slavery into liberty. Now we all know that liberty is not the freedom to do anything we like. Think of a bird in the air – it must obey the wind currents and the law of gravity. Liberty is the freedom to live without fear within safe boundaries. The Ten Commandments are those boundaries.

In our relationship with the Government, at present they are laying down boundaries of behaviour which are designed to stop the spread of a plague called COVID-19. They do their best to listen to health experts and economic experts and produce rules of engagement called lockdown levels, in order to give firm guidelines to NZers in the fight against this plague. If we all listened and obeyed, the spread of COVID-19 would be much less likely to get out of control.

But the commandments God has given us are motivated by His desire for loving relationships, to make us happy and make us part of a mutually beneficial way of living. If that were not enough, he personally paid for our mistakes and sins so that we can be in Christ and he in us. He expresses His life through our lives as we walk with him and as a natural outflow, we will keep his law. (PAUSE)

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 automatically result in obeying what he says. We have seen that a game without rules is meaningless, futile and not much fun.

But what if these 10 commandments were only part of the picture? It can't be true that all we need to do is follow God's rules and all will be well and we will be safe. If that were true, Jesus would never have had to come and face a terrifyingly brutal death on our behalf.

Not so long ago, I realised that the Law of God consists of the moral law and the ritual law. His moral law does not change, but the rituals associated with temple worship are no longer followed because for the Jews, there is no temple building to worship in. For Christians, the sacrificial method of worship with all its rules, was pointing towards Jesus and he has fulfilled all the requirements of the law for us. So we don't have to keep the ritual law, just the moral law.

Paul says in Galatians 3v24 "The law is our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ." He means, firstly, that when we study the whole law, we find things that point us to Christ. For example, the High Priest in the OT wore a seamless robe. Jesus wore a seamless robe on the day he was crucified – he has become our High Priest, the person who intercedes between us and Father God. When lambs were sacrificed in OT worship, they had to be spotless, that is perfect, with no blemishes. Jesus when he died for us, had not sinned. He was blemish-free. He was able to die for the sins of everyone because he had no sin of his own that would have made him subject to the penalty of death.

Trying to maintain a good relationship with God, as well as right relationships with other people is something we are going to fail at no matter how hard we try to keep the 10 Commandments. We try to be good boys and girls according to whatever set of standards we have been given, but it doesn't work. We can jump through the hoops of saving the world from climate change, being kind to people who set our teeth on edge - but it won't make us live up to God's standard of perfection. We think being as good as the next person will make us worthy of going to heaven instead of hell. When we recognise that we can't keep the law no matter how hard we try, we recognise our need for Christ.

Paul says in Romans 10, "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes [in Him]."

The idea that we have to work hard to earn God's favour is powerful for many Christians. But we don't have to try hard. We need to surrender our lives to Jesus and accept that he paid the price for our sinful ways. Believe, trust and rely on Jesus, and you will be counted righteous.

Is there anyone here who recognises that he or she cannot keep all the rules no matter how hard you try? Is there anyone who wants to trust in Christ for the first time? With every eye closed, indicate to me that you want to trust in Christ and I will acknowledge you. ...let's pray

Lord, I recognise that no matter how hard I try to keep the rules, I will never get rid of my sin without your help. Jesus, please take the heavy weight of failure off me. I trust in you to make me right before God. Come and express your life through me