



A Guide to the Good Life

SERIES: *Turning Point: Start Fresh/Stay the Course*

"I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain. Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day. Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, that your days may be prolonged and that it may go well with you on the land which the LORD your God gives you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, and you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field or his male servant or his female servant, his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Deuteronomy 5:6-21).

This morning we're looking at what are commonly called the Ten Commandments. All of us have heard of these, although I'd bet not all of us could name them. According to one study, more people remember the ingredients on America's favorite hamburger than the Ten Commandments. Kelton Research conducted a poll of 1,000 people to determine basic knowledge of the Ten Commandments. Eighty percent knew that a Big Mac had two all-beef patties and 62 percent knew that it had pickles. But less than 50 percent could remember just seven

of the Ten Commandments. Further polling revealed that more people could remember the names of all four of the Beatles rock group than all Ten Commandments.

This is even true in church. I heard of a pastor who asked the congregation one Sunday morning to name the Ten Commandments. Different people called out different commandments, but they only came up with nine—one was missing. As it turned out, it was the seventh commandment about adultery. In the second service, the pastor began his message the same way. In an effort to avoid what happened in the first service, a man who had been in there said rather quickly, "You Shall Not Commit Adultery." Everyone laughed at how quickly he responded, and then his wife said out loud, "Mister, when we get home you're going to have to explain why you thought of that commandment first!" Fortunately, the pastor explained to her what had happened in the first service and got him off the hook.

If you grew up in the Catholic church like I did you had the advantage of having to memorize the Ten Commandments at a young age. That was a good thing, but the bad thing was they were used as a threat. To break a commandment was called a "mortal sin." I was taught if you broke one of these there was no hope at all for you. You were going to hell. I wonder if this is why so many people are put off by them today. They think the Ten Commandments stand for all that's negative about religion. Maybe that's why some people don't want them posted in our courtroom or classrooms.

All of this boils down to one question: what's the role of the Ten Commandments in our lives today? This morning we'll see they're much more than a threatening list of do's and don'ts. In fact, the Ten Commandments are more like a guide; a guide to the good life. As Moses begins his second sermon in Deuteronomy 5, he wants the people of Israel to remember these guidelines before they enter the Promised Land. As we've seen, he wants them to live; he wants things to go well for them. Today we're not going to look at each individual command. That will come in January when we launch our new Millbrae site. Today I want to say five things about the Ten Commandments as a whole that shows us how they really are a guide to the good life.

I. The Ten Commandments are foundational.

The first thing is that the Ten Commandments are foundational. We're going to see as we go on in Deuteronomy that there are a lot more than just ten commandments. There are literally hundreds of commandments. There are ceremonial laws about how Israel was to worship and there were civil and judicial laws about how they were to govern

their nation. But there is a distinction between these civil and ceremonial laws and what we call the moral law. The moral law of God is seen here in the Ten Commandments and they were meant for God's people for all time. That's why it was only these ten that were written on stone tablets by the finger of God and placed in the ark of the covenant and later in the Temple.

Do you recall the story of the rich young ruler? He came to Jesus and asked, "What must I do to obtain eternal life?" Jesus said, "If you wish to enter life, keep the commandments." Then Jesus quoted several of them: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother..." Now there is a lot more that goes on in that conversation than meets the eye, but for now I just want you to see that Jesus affirmed the Ten Commandments as foundational not just for Moses' day but for his day and for our day.

Honestly, I think this why there are ten commandments and not seven or twelve. Have you ever wondered why there are ten? Well, how many fingers do you have? How many toes do you have? Don't count them! This was a device to help people remember and memorize these ten principles of being in relationship with God. They were considered so foundational that God wanted even children to be able to recall them.

II. The Ten Commandments are rooted in the nature of God.

The second thing I want you to see is that the Ten Commandments are rooted in the nature of God. People don't realize the Ten Commandments say just as much about who God is as they do about how he wants us to live our lives. In v.6 before a single commandment is given Moses says, "**I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.**" What does that say about God? He's a powerful God. He's a God who saves. And he's a personal God. Throughout this chapter he refers to himself as "the Lord YOUR God." Moses calls him "the Lord OUR God." In the first three commandments we also see that he's a unique God. As a matter of fact he's the one and only God. He'll have no rivals. In v.9 we see that he's a jealous, passionate God. In v.10 we learn that he's a God of steadfast love. In the command about murder we see that he's a God who values life. Why should we value human life? Because God is the creator and sustainer of life. In the commandment about bearing false witness we learn that he's a God of truth. Why are we supposed to tell the truth? Because he's a God of truth. All these commands are rooted in his nature.

Now think about this: you and I are made in the image of God. In some way, we reflect the nature of God. So when he tells us to live this way, even when he tells us NOT to do certain things, he's really just telling us how to live a way that's consistent with his nature and the way he made us to live. As a matter of fact, Romans 2 even says the law is written on our hearts. Every person on the planet instinctively knows these things are right. So when we live this way things work better for us, for our families, and for the communities in which we live. It's like if you go to the doctor and he tells you that your cholesterol is sky high and

you really have to change your eating habits. You can go off and ignore his advise and keep eating the wrong kind of food. No one will arrest you or give you a fine or put you in jail. They won't have to. Sooner or later you'll pay the price. You're much better off taking his advice. It's the same with the Ten Commandments. That's the motivation he uses in the fifth commandment about honoring your parents. He says in v.16, "**Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, that your days may be prolonged and that it may go well with you on the land which the LORD your God gives you.**" It's the same thing with all these commandments. God says, "Listen, this is a reflection of who I am and I've created you to reflect my image to those around you and when you do that life really works better." They really are a guide to the good life.

III. The Ten Commandments are a balanced unity.

The third thing I want you to see is that the Ten Commandments are a balanced unity. Together they're like an airplane. It's one craft, it's a unity, but it has two wings. If you take one of the wings off it won't even make it off the runway. The Ten Commandments are like that: they're one but they have two balancing wings.

There are several ways we see this balance. We see it in the fact that they combine the vertical and the horizontal. In the first few commandments the focus is on the vertical. First and foremost you're designed to love God. Nothing is to get in the way of that. No one, no thing is to take the place of God in your life. That's the vertical. But the latter half focuses on the horizontal. You also need to love your neighbor as yourself. You need to look out for his rights. Your neighbor has the right to a day of rest. Your spouse is your neighbor and she has the right to your faithfulness. Your neighbor has the right to his personal property so don't steal it. Your neighbor has the right to truthful representation in court so don't bear false witness. You can see there is a balance between the vertical and horizontal.

There is also a balance between the inner and outer. The outer is obvious: Don't steal. Don't murder. Stop working on the seventh day. Don't carve an idol. Don't lie. Don't sleep with someone else's spouse. All these have to do with our outer behavior. But there are two commands that go much deeper than that. The first commandment: you shall have no other gods before me. We saw last week how we do that. We make good things into ultimate things. And that's a heart issue. But this inner focus comes out even more so in the tenth commandment. He says, "**You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, and you shall not desire your neighbor's house...**" Try that one on! You live in a two bedroom fixer upper that never gets fixed because you can't afford it. You're invited over to someone's house and the yard is perfectly manicured. You step in and the entry way is bigger than your master bedroom. It's beautifully furnished. Not a thing is out of place. How do you do that without desiring your neighbor's house?

Here is where we can see how these commands are a unity; they're interdependent. If you're keeping the first commandment about having no other gods in your life, then the issue of coveting your neighbor's house will take care of

itself. Do you follow me? Coveting comes as a result of making good things like a house into an ultimate thing. You see, the outer always flows out of the inner

This means we can't pick and choose which commandments we keep and which we don't keep. They all hang together. I think this is what James meant in the New Testament when he wrote, **"For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all"** (2:10). Why? Because they're all interdependent. This is not a test where you get an "A" for getting nine out of ten right. A lot of people today say something like this, "Well, I don't really believe in God but I try to live by the Ten Commandments." You can't separate the two. You just took one of the wings off the plane! Or someone says, "Of course it's not right to steal. But I don't have to keep the Sabbath." But look at what God says about the Sabbath. He says in v.14, **"But the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you."** Do you see what he's saying? "It's not just for you, but it's for those who work for you, even your animals. If you don't give them a Sabbath you're also breaking the eighth commandment because you're stealing something from them. You're stealing their right to have a day of rest. And not only that, you're making work into an idol!"

This was the problem with the young man who came to Jesus and asked, "What must I do to obtain eternal life?" Jesus said, "You know the commandments." The young man said, "I've kept all these things since I was a boy." But he had this sense that something was still missing and so he asked, "What am I still lacking?" And Jesus said, "Go and sell your possessions and give the money to the poor." In an external way he had kept the commandments. He didn't steal. He didn't kill. He never bowed down to a wooden idol. But deep in his heart he had made his possessions into an ultimate thing and the Bible says when he heard this statement he went away grieving because he owned much property.

IV. The Ten Commandments are impossible to keep.

This leads me to my fourth point. The Ten Commandments present us with a problem. The problem is that when we really understand the Commandments we see that there is no way we can keep them. The problem is seen down in the second half of this chapter. Moses reminds them what happened after God gave them the Commandments. Look at vv.23-26.

"And when you heard the voice from the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes and your elders. You said, 'Behold, the LORD our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire; we have seen today that God speaks with man, yet he lives. Now then why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the LORD our God any longer, then we will die. For who

is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking from the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived?'"

The problem is these people were frightened by God. They've seen and heard something of the glory and holiness and greatness of God. Remember what we said about fire: it's beautiful but it's dangerous. They know that no one can see God and live. Deep down they know this law reflects the nature of God and they know how short they fall. The bar is raised way too high for them. This is also seen down in v.29 where God says, **"Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever!"** This is God expressing a deep longing ("Oh that") for them to have a heart to fear him and keep his commandments so that they could enjoy the good life. But he knows they don't have what it takes.

And this has always been the problem. The law tells us what to do but it doesn't give us the power to do it. We're like a 1975 Ford Pinto trying to race in the Daytona 500. We can't keep up. This is what Jesus was trying to get the rich young ruler to see. This is what the Apostle Paul realized when he came to his own spiritual crisis. He said in Romans 7:14, **"For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin."** Paul was a Pharisee whose whole life was based on trying to keep the law. But Paul came learn he couldn't do it and that the law was never meant to make us acceptable to God. That's why he said in Gal.3:11, **"No one is justified by the law before God."** Instead, the law was given as a kind of mirror to show us the dirt on our face that needs cleansing. The law shows us the dirt in our hearts; it shows us our sin. Martin Luther called the law a big ax which is meant to chop down the stiff necked beast of self-righteousness in all of us.

V. The Ten Commandments point us to Christ.

And this leads to the fifth thing about the Ten Commandments. It's the solution to the problem: they point us to Christ. They show us our need for a Savior who will cleanse us. Again, we see it right here in the text. After being scared to death by the fire of God and the law, the people says to Moses in v.27, **"Go near and hear all that the LORD our God says; then speak to us all that the LORD our God speaks to you, and we will hear and do it."** What are they saying? They're saying, "Moses, you be the one who goes before God for us. You hear what he's saying to us and then bring us the message." In essence, they're saying, "Moses, you be our prophet; you be our mediator." In doing this Moses prefigures or foreshadows the person and work of Jesus. We need a mediator just like the Israelites did. And we have a mediator who not only speaks to us for God but who cleanses us from all the blemishes the law reveals. That's what the cross was all about. It was Jesus, the one person in all of history who kept the Ten Commandments inside and out, taking our sin upon himself and experiencing the Father's judgment so we could be forgiven and set free.

If you're one of those people who still believe that you really can keep the moral law of God then you need to hear this. Deep in your heart you know you can't live up to it. The good news is that God knows it too and he's made a

way for you to have a relationship with him apart from keeping the law. That's why Jesus came. John wrote, "**The Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ**" (1:17). Grace is God accepting us just as we are, not because he doesn't care about sin but because our sin has been paid for. And now he sees us in Christ. He gives us Christ's goodness and righteousness and God accepts us on that basis.

It might have crossed your mind, "Well then, now that we have Christ we no longer need the law. We no longer need the Ten Commandments. Once we figure out we can't keep them and we turn to Christ we're done with all that law business." But that's not how it works. The law is still our guide to the good life. A long time ago a Puritan writer named Samuel Bolton put it this way, "*The law sends us to the Gospel, that we may be justified, and the Gospel sends us to the law again to inquire what is our duty in being justified.*" When we turn to Christ something more happens than just our forgiveness. When we turn to Christ we become a new creation. We actually get a new heart because God sends his Spirit into our life. It's like God fashions our heart in the shape of the law so we can keep it not by our own self effort but by the power of the Spirit.

That's why God gave the Ten Commandments, not to surrounding nations, but to his people. These were laws for people who God had already called and redeemer. That's why he starts out in v.6, "**I am the the Lord your God...**" These weren't laws they had to keep in order to get redeemed and earn the right to be God's people. God didn't take them out of the land of Egypt because they kept the Ten Commandments; they were to keep the Ten Commandments because the Lord had already rescued them. It's the same with us. God has rescued us from slavery to sin and now as his redeemed people he calls us to live the law from the inside out.

CONCLUSION

Do you see now how the law is our guide to the good life? It's foundational. It reveals how God designed us to live in a way that reflects his nature. It brings life into balance. And it leads us to Christ.

This sermon will find you in one of two places. Either you're at the point where the Ten Commandments are directing you to Christ and the Gospel or you're at the point where the Gospel is directing you back to the Ten Commandments. Let me say something to the second group first. Let the Gospel turn you back to the Ten Commandments. Let me encourage you to mediate on these commandments in a fresh way. As a follower of Christ, what areas of your life does this reveal that you need to bring back into alignment with God? Are you honoring your parents? Are you keeping one day in seven as a day of rest and worship? Is a covetous spirit eating away at your inner peace?

If you're in the first group, if you've been trying to live this way apart from Christ then let the Ten Commandments reveal your sin and drive you to Christ and the Gospel. All you have to do is say, "I give up. I can't do it. But I believe that Jesus did it. And I believe Jesus died to set me free."