



Human beings have always been preoccupied with building walls. In the first century, the Roman emperor Hadrian built a 75-mile wall across Roman Britain. In the 1870s, Argentina built a line of trenches and watchtowers called the Zanja de Alsina to protect Buenos Aires from invasion by indigenous peoples. The Berlin Wall went up in 1961, dividing East from West for almost 30 years. In 1975, South Africa built a 3,500-volt electric fence dubbed the Snake of Fire to keep the civil war in Mozambique from spilling over into the frontier. In the middle of the night in August 2006, Italian officials constructed a steel wall around Via Anelli, a run-down neighborhood known for drug trafficking and prostitution.

Walls don't just divide us, they make us ill. After the Berlin Wall went up, East German psychiatrists observed that the Berlin Wall caused mental illness, rage, dejection and addiction. The closer to the physical wall people lived, the more acute their disorders. The only cure for "Wall Disease" was to bring the Wall down. Sure enough, in 1990, psychiatrists noted the "emotional liberation" felt after November 9, 1989 when the Wall finally fell. Thousands of jubilant Germans climbed the Wall, wept, and embraced each other atop the concrete, and proceeded to tear the Wall down with joyful abandon.

After the Fall of Adam and Eve, a wall between God and man was erected. This wall divided us—sinful man from a holy God. Here's the question I want us to consider this morning: How can a holy God have relationship with sinful people? Does God still want a relationship with us today? When we pick up *The Story* this week, it's been about 45 days since the Israelites were set free from bondage in Egypt. They are now camped around a mountain in the desert, Mt. Sinai. Moses goes up and down the mountain several times to meet with God.

God wants to come down and be with his people; he wants to break the walls that divides them, but, for that to happen, three things must be worked out. Israel needs a Law, God needs a place to live, and God requires sin be atoned for by the shedding of blood. That is what we are going to look at this morning—the Law, the Tabernacle, and the sacrificial system.

**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" (Exodus 19:3–6).**

God insisted that his people must live by a set of guidelines. In order for God to be with his people, he first wanted to define his relationship with them. Israel is no longer a small tribal family. They are a huge nation of freed slaves in desperate need of a set of guidelines to follow. Yahweh, not Pharaoh, is their new king and he has a set of demands he wants his people to know. God met with Moses at Mt. Sinai to give him a written expression of his will for them both individually and as a nation. There is a word God uses in Exodus 19:5 that is really important, it's the word *covenant*. I want you to see how the law was given in the context of a covenant.

A covenant is an agreement between two groups that involve promises on the part of each other. God first made a covenant with Noah saying that God would never destroy humanity again with a flood. The sign of that covenant was a rainbow. God made a covenant with Abraham and promised his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. The sign of that covenant was circumcision.

Finally, God cuts a new covenant with Israel, through Moses. The sign of that covenant is the law. God says that this new relationship is a covenant. And right from the beginning, God says, we are going to make promises and commitments to one another. And as long as we uphold these then our relationship is good and solid. But if you, my nation, violate the covenant, it's like violating a marriage and the relationship can be broken. There will be hurt and pain and the whole thing can fall apart. So I am making this covenant with you, Israel, through Moses. I am choosing to unite myself with you. I will be your God and you will be my people. Then God describes the basic idea of the covenant, and he defines that relationship very specifically.

God lays out the three ideas that are to define this nation that he is creating and the covenant he is making with them. He says first, "I've carried you on eagles wings." God uses a beautiful metaphor of loving compassion, protection, strength, and watchfulness. Do you know how an eaglet learns to fly? Momma eagle takes all the feathers out of the nest and makes it really uncomfortable. The eaglets, since they don't like being in the nest anymore, jump out and fall hundreds of feet down until momma

eagle swoops down and grabs them with her talons. She then flies high into the air and drops them again. After several trips like this, the eaglets learn how to fly. Sometimes what seems to be misery is God teaching us how to fly. I bet God, through pain and suffering, is teaching a few of you to fly this morning.

In addition God says to Israel, “you will be my treasured possession.” God says you are extremely valuable to me, you are mine, and no one else can have you. You will also be a “kingdom of priests.” You will live a life that is set aside to worship and serve me. You will minister to the needs of the people. That is what priests do and that is what you will do as my people. In all this, God says, you will be “a holy nation.” The word *holy* means set apart and different. Unlike all the other nations that surround you, God says, you will seek holiness by imitating me and that will set you apart. Other nations will look to you and see me.

Right from the very beginning God says, here is a special covenant relationship we are entering into. I will be your God, you will be my people. I will guide, lead, protect, provide, and watch over you. That’s my promise. In return, you will be my servants, my priests who pursue holiness. And from there God lays out further how he wants Israel to live within this relationship. He gives them the Ten Commandments:

**And God spoke all these words: “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.**

**“You shall not make for yourself an idol...**

**“You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God...**

**“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.**

**“Honor your father and your mother...**

**“You shall not murder.**

**“You shall not commit adultery.**

**“You shall not steal.**

**“You shall not lie...**

**“You shall not covet...**

**(Exodus 20:1–17) (edits mine)**

Notice that the law was given within the context of God’s gracious relationship with Israel. He says, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of slavery.” In other words, even before I’m giving you these laws, I’ve delivered you and I’ve made you my people. I didn’t bring you out of slavery to put you under a whole new kind of slavery to the law. God already had a loving relationship with his people before he gave them the law. Grace comes before law.

The Ten Commandments are given as boundaries of God’s relationship with his people. Boundaries are good. Boundaries are helpful. Boundaries protect life and relationships. Can you

imagine driving across the Golden Gate bridge without an exit or an entrance, without speed limits, yellow lane lines, side rails, pedestrian gates or center cones? No! That would be insane. We can safely drive across the Golden Gate Bridge because there are boundaries and laws that protect us and give us freedom to enjoy the drive. The Ten Commandments do the same with our relationship with God. What is God like? What does he want? We don’t have to guess any longer.

I want you to notice that the Ten Commandments can be categorized in two ways—our relationship with God and our relationship with others. Commandments 1–4 concern Israel’s relationship with God. They deal with our vertical relationship with him. Another way to look at the first four commands are four ways to love God. The first commandment is to worship God and God alone. The second is similar but different. The second commandment is concerned with worshipping the true God falsely, no idols. The first command is about worshipping the right God, the second is about worshipping the right God the wrong way. The third commandment—don’t take God’s name in vain—simply means, don’t misuse his holy name. And the fourth command is to take a sabbath, to rest and renew our souls. All these are ways to nurture and keep our relationship with God solid.

Commandments 5–10 concern our relationships with others. They deal with our horizontal relationships. They are six ways to love our neighbor. #5—Honor your father and mother. Our love for God is expressed first within the context of our own family. #6—Don’t murder. Finally a command most of us have never broken. Oh, until we read Jesus’ interpretation of the commandments, *“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment”* (Matt. 5:21–22a). The reality is that we are all murderers.

#7—Don’t commit adultery. I doubt there is a person in this room who hasn’t in some way been confronted with the pain of adultery. Again, we are all guilty of this one too. Jesus said, *“But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart”* (Matt. 5:28). #8—Don’t steal. We steal because ultimately we don’t trust a God who provides. #9—Don’t lie. Israel can’t have healthy relationships or community without truth telling. Lies damage relationships and destroy community. #10—Don’t covet. I can’t even walk through our church parking lot without coveting! We covet when we set our hearts on anything that’s not rightfully ours.

There you have it, a quick overview of the Ten Commandments. Each commandment can also be stated positively: Worship God alone. Worship God rightly. Use God’s powerful name correctly. Rest once a week, it’s good for your soul. Honor your parents and you’ll be blessed. Be a life giver. Be pure. Be generous. Be a truth teller. Be content.

Each of the Ten Commandments also reflect the character and nature of God. For example, why should we not lie? Because God is a God of truth. He's never lied. Why should we not steal? Because God is a God who constantly gives and is generous to his people. It's all about relationship with God and with others.

Moses goes back up the mountain and God gives him even more guidelines for the people to follow—the book of the Covenant. In all there are 613 laws that God gives Moses and all of them are targeted at pursuing holiness. That is the basic ethic for Israel. So, how did Israel respond to God's ten ways to live free and the rest of the law? *“When Moses went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws, they responded with one voice, “Everything the Lord has said we will do”* (Ex. 24:3). They said, we are all in, God! After the people confirm they want to enter into this relationship with God, Moses goes up the mountain again. The commands are written on two stone tablets to keep so that Israel will never forget them. God then reveals something revolutionary to Moses.

God wanted a place to stay—The Tabernacle. God wants Israel to make a place for him to live so that they can worship him. God says:

**“Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. 9 Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you” (25:8-9).**

In order for God to dwell with his people, he needed a place to live. The tabernacle would become God's earthly dwelling from the time of Moses all the way to king David. The tabernacle was a portable tent that could be moved along with Israel as they wandered in the desert. To understand the importance of the tabernacle, let's go back to the Garden of Eden.

When Adam and Eve were created, there was no need for a special place for God to live. They enjoyed intimate fellowship with God in the garden. The Fall however, destroyed that relationship and alienated Adam and Eve from God. A spiritual wall went up and they could no longer easily enter into his presence. After the Fall, people could come before the Lord but only at specifically designated locations. These altars were built at the high places so that the head of the family, (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) could worship God. But now, the people of God were a mighty nation. So God commands Moses to build a tabernacle so that he might be approached in worship.

The design of the tabernacle and the materials used all pointed to the presence of a holy God in the midst of Israel. The tabernacle area was divided into different parts: a courtyard, a Holy Place and a Most Holy Place. God would dwell in the “Most Holy Place” and no one could see God's face. Only the High Priest could enter the Most Holy Place once a year, on the Day of Atonement, on behalf of the people. Outside of the camp of Israel was the area for Gentiles and the unclean. The tabernacle demonstrated, more than anything else, that God was with Israel

as they journeyed through the wilderness and as they settled in the Promised Land. God's presence was seen in a cloud during the day and fire at night.

What happened inside the tabernacle was also deeply significant. God required a way to restore fellowship between a holy God and a sinful people. Our sin nature keeps us separated from God. Sin must be dealt with, covered, and atoned for. How did God tear down that wall? The sacrificing of animals becomes institutionalized in the priestly sacrificial system so that sin could be constantly atoned for (covered). For the presence of God to live among his people God institutes holy people—priests; holy places—altars and the tabernacle; and holy acts—sacrifices. Priests, holy places and sacrifices are all really strange to the Christian experience. But in the Old Testament, these people, places and actions were extremely significant. They were the core of Old Testament worship.

You might be thinking, what's the big deal? Since Adam and Eve, God has not been living with his people. He has been interacting with people but not living with them. God's mission, the whole point of The Story is to rescue, redeem, and restore his creation to what it was. Here he is taking steps to restore relationship with his people, to bring down the wall that divides. He says, I am going to come and live among you again. But you have to understand that this idea of God living among them is totally new to the Israelites. It's a whole new idea that actually scared them. They were terrified of this powerful God:

**“When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die” (20:18-19).**

Now God wants to live with them? So this whole new idea would rock the Israelite's world.

During all this time, Moses was on the mountain talking to God and God is talking about how he is ready to move in with his people and live among them. God is laying out all the groundwork for this special covenant relationship but Moses ends up being up there for a really long time, like 40 days long. Since he's been gone so long, people start asking questions. Where is Moses? Is he ok? Is he ever coming back? What should we do? We kind of miss Egypt. The food out here stinks. Then something terrible goes wrong:

**When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.”**

**Aaron answered them, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are**

wearing, and bring them to me." So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt" (32:1-4).

And just like that the Israelites break the first two commandments.

Before we jump to criticize them, remember the Israelites lived in Egypt for 400 years. And Egypt was a culture of many gods so the idea of multiple gods is familiar and comfortable to them. Yes, Yahweh saved them from slavery in Egypt and has been leading and providing for them in the desert, but all of that happened through Moses. Moses had been the sole mediator between God and the people. Now Moses is gone and in their thinking God is gone too. So Aaron makes a calf, which is symbolic of strength, leadership, and divinity in the ancient world. And he says, here you go, here is a god that will lead you so you'll never be alone. Israel didn't actually believe the golden calf was a god but that through it, they could evoke God. That is why God forbids idols because he wants us to go directly to him. Psalm 106:20-21 gives us more insight into why Israel did such a detestable act:

**They exchanged their glorious God  
for an image of a bull, which eats grass.  
They forgot the God who saved them,  
who had done great things in Egypt,**

They forgot God. Isn't it amazing how quickly we forget God? That's why throughout the Scriptures we are constantly told to remember. That's why we gather, to remember.

The rest of the story is pretty crazy. Moses comes back down and a party is happening that would make the people who attended Woodstock blush. In anger, Moses smashes the stone tablets. He takes the calf, melts it down, and makes people drink it up! Does this satisfy you now!? He turns to Aaron and asks how he could let this happen. Aaron gives the lamest excuse ever, "I just threw all the gold in the fire and boom, out came a calf!" Moses looks at him like, do you think I'm an idiot? Things get more out of control and a riot breaks out. The people who are found most guilty are executed. God will not be with a rebellious people. But Moses intercedes for them and says, "I know you are mad at them for breaking our covenant with you, but they are **your** people." So God says, "Ok, my presence will go with you." God says, I will lead you by my presence. I will not abandon you. I will stay with you. Moses goes back up the mountain, gets a new set of stone tablets and they get to work on the tabernacle. Exodus ends with the glory of the Lord filling the tabernacle exactly one year after Pharaoh released the Israelites from Egypt.

I want to end by asking the question, So what? What does all this mean for us today? Here's the big idea: God established the law and dwelt in the tabernacle, all to be with his people. God still wants to be with us today. All of the Old Testament symbols for God's presence on earth were temporary. They all pointed to the coming of Jesus Christ, God's own Son, who, "*became flesh and tabernacled for a while among us*" (John 1:14, edits mine). The ultimate purpose of the Law was to lead us to Christ. Jesus fulfills the ceremonial laws. Jesus is our great High Priest and his blood once and for all atones for (covers) our sin (Hebrews 10:1-18). With the blood of Jesus on the doorframe of your life, you are forgiven and given direct access in the Most Holy Place. Now, through the Holy Spirit, we are the new tabernacle. The church is not a building, the church is us and we are the place where God resides. Paul said, "*Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?*" (1 Cor. 3:16).

Just as the presence of God filled the tabernacle, the Holy Spirit fills us. God is still with us today! We are called by God to be a kingdom of priests. We represent God in the world. And one day Jesus will return and dwell with us forever in the new heavens and the new earth. Do you see? God has and will do anything short of sin to be with you! Whatever it is you are going through, whatever decisions you need to make, whatever dumb things you've done, if you are a follower of Jesus, he is with you!

Here are a few questions I want you think about this week. Write down whatever grabs your attention:

Am I seeking to do my part to ensure my relationship with God is as close as possible?

Am I following his commands and direction?

Am I seeking healthy relationships, loving others the way they would want to be loved?

Do I invite God to dwell fully in my heart and life?

How might I celebrate his presence in me and communicate with him more freely and more often?

Do I live with an absolute, rock-solid confidence that all of my sins have been atoned for through Jesus' death on the cross and glorious resurrection?<sup>1</sup>

Do I believe and live like Jesus is always with me?<sup>2</sup>

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

<sup>1</sup>Randy Frazee, *The Story*, Adult Curriculum 31 Sessions

<sup>2</sup>I'm indebted to both Longman's *Old Testament Essentials* and his *Introduction to the Old Testament*

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