

THUNDER FROM THE MOUNTAIN

INTRODUCTION:

If it were to have happened in our day, the event would have been covered by a throng of media personnel. The networks would have held their news broadcasts from the site. You can almost hear Lester Holt of NBC reporting it this way:

The conference site is shrouded in thick, dark clouds, an ominous presence really. The thunder and lightning are constant and earthquakes frequent. The meeting is being referred to unofficially as the Sinai Summit. The conference is being held in a secluded desert hideaway at the peak of a mountain. The sessions are highly secret and top level. The security is extremely tight. A barrier surrounds the perimeter of the meeting site and crossing it is said to bring certain death.

The conference convened weeks before. The general feeling of the mass of people awaiting the results of the conference outside is one of fearful awe mixed with excited anticipation. They have seen their leader only twice since the meetings began, and then they only received sketchy reports. We don't have anything definite to report at this time. Word among the local Hebrew nomads encamped here is that their leader, Egyptian fugitive Moses, is in high level negotiation with a deity they call "Yahweh " However, our fact-checkers seriously doubt the authenticity of these reports. No one has ever seen this god. Aaron, brother of Moses, religious leader, and spokesman for the Hebrew tribes, has told us that the issues on table to be resolved are of global proportion. The result of the meeting could mean either long-term security and communal well-being or the decay and eventual destruction of the nation.

Wait, just a minute, we are receiving reports that the mysterious and elusive statesman, Moses, is emerging from the thick clouds of the mountain. Witnesses at the scene say that his face is glowing with an almost piercing glow, and he appears to be carrying two rather large objects. We would like to bring you live coverage but the unusual weather phenomenon at the mountain are interfering with our transmission.

However, this event didn't take place in our own day. It took place nearly 4,000 years ago. Thankfully, no media was there to cover it. The only records we have of this event are by the participants themselves, the words of God and Moses. Exodus 19 sets the scene this way:

(2 Slides) 16 On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. 17 Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. 18 Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a

furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. 19 As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

(Advance Slide) By the time we get into Exodus 20, we discover that it isn't from two tablets of stone that the Hebrews first hear the Ten Commandments, but from of God Himself. Chapter 20, verse 1 reads, "And God spoke all these words: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."

And so begins the most influential law code that has ever been written – the Ten Commandments. This is one of the most momentous events in history. It stands second only to such things as creation, the birth of Christ, and His death and resurrection but what do the 10 commandments mean to you?

Perhaps you have images of Charlton Heston in an Epic Hollywood rendition. Maybe you see them as something you had to memorize as a kid in Sunday School. They might be to you simpler rules for simpler times. Or you might see them as a stifling and outdated list of strict demands.

However it is my hope that by the end of this series, if not already, you'll see the Ten Commandments as life-giving words of grace that lead to fulfillment and freedom. These are ten timeless truths essential to life and society. If you already have a deep appreciation for the Ten Commandments, then I hope our study will be a refreshing reminder of our God's love and provision. If not, then I hope you will gain love for the tremendous gift God gave to the Jewish nation 4,000 years ago, and indeed to all of civilization.

We have much to learn from the Ten Commandments today. Our society has turned its back on these timeless truths, yet they are a part of the very foundation of our civilization. But we have banned them from our schools, eradicated them from our courts, and hushed them in our legislatures. **Yet, James Madison, one of our nation's founding fathers, chief architect of the Constitution, and two term President, declared this**

We have staked the whole future of American civilization, not upon the power of government, far from it. We have staked the future of all of our political institutions upon the capacity of mankind for self-government: upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves, to control ourselves, to sustain ourselves according to the ten commandments of God.

Yet today, some 235 years after Madison wrote these words 25% of Americans can tell you that a Big Mac has two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, and onion on a sesame seed bun. Only 14% can name all 10 commandments. Only 49% of Christians can even list 4 of the 10 commandments. But 78% of all Americans are in favor of the public display of the Ten Commandments. There is obviously some disconnect going on.

Next week, we will begin to look at each of the commandments individually, but this morning there are three things we need to see about all of the Ten Commandments in general.

BODY:

I. The Commandments are Timeless.

The first is that the Ten Commandments are timeless. They express eternal principles that are always relevant. They didn't come with an expiration date.

Many critics tell us that the 10 commandments are antiquated, and outmoded. They are no longer suited to modern culture. They are designed for a primitive people. However, we are scientific, educated, technologically advanced, so the 10 Commandments are beneath us.

However, nothing could be further from the truth. Just look at the problems plaguing our culture – a reckless disregard for life, rape, divorce, rampant sexual promiscuity, rebellious youth, high crime, lack of integrity from corporate board rooms to capitol hill, and you'll see that the 10 Commandments are as relevant today as they ever have been.

Far from being shackles of the past that our society needs to leave behind, the 10 Commandments are a timeless cure, the exact medicine we need. We are facing a crisis of character. A serious property crime occurs every 4.1 seconds. A violent crime every 24.6 seconds. A rape every 3.9 minutes, and a murder every 30 minutes.

According to Forbes magazine, as of April 16, we have averaged more than one mass shooting per day which is defined as four or more people having been shot or killed, not including the killer. The solution is not anything proposed by President Biden last week, no matter how you feel about those policies.

The problem goes much deeper than mere statistics can disclose. How common is it for us to fudge a little bit on our tax forms, or put a little padding in our resumes? We see nothing wrong with working ourselves into an early grave in order to accumulate earthly wealth and prestige. In fact, our culture sees this as a virtue. Meanwhile our spouses and children suffer.

Office affairs and Facebook flings are the norm, and our marriages and families are falling apart. The majority of high school graduates do not expect to be married to one person for the rest of their lives.

No we have not evolved beyond these timeless truths. It is very clear that if our nation is going to move into the future, we're going to have to look into the past to these tremendous guidelines given by God himself. The words of the great Scottish preacher of 19th century, Alexander MacLaren, said it best:

An obscure tribe of Egyptian slaves plunges into the desert to hide from pursuit, and emerges, after forty years, with a code gathered into "ten words" so brief, so

complete, so intertwining morality and religion, so free from local or national peculiarities, so close fitting to fundamental duties, that it is today, after more than three thousand years, authoritative in the most enlightened peoples. The voice that spoke from Sinai reverberates in all lands. The Old World had other lawgivers who professed to formulate their precepts by divine inspiration: they are all fallen silent. But this voice, like the trumpet on that day, waxes louder and louder as the years roll. Whose voice was it? The only answer explaining the supreme purity of the commandments and their immortal freshness, is found in the first sentence of the paragraph, "God spoke all these words..."

A second question we must answer in discussing the lasting quality of the 10 Commandments is: "As Christians are we still under the law?" The answer to this is a somewhat paradoxical "yes" and "no." The 10 commandments are a part of the old covenant, and we are told explicitly in the N.T. that we are no longer under the old covenant, but under the new covenant. Paul writes in Romans and Galatians that Christians are not under the Law. The fact is that Christians, in a legal sense, are not under the authority of the O.T. law

However, the 10 commandments are reflective of timeless, unchanging truths that are as valid today as they ever have been. They reveal to us the moral and holy character of our God who is unchanging in nature, but is the same, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. God's nature has not changed. His moral standards have not been lessened.

Rather, in the N.T. Paul writes in Rom 7:12-13 that the law is holy, righteous and good, and He says in Romans 8:4 that when we as Christians walk by the Spirit that the law is fulfilled in us. In fact, 9 of the 10 commandments are repeated in some form in new covenant. In a very real sense, the 10 commandments are timeless in nature and they still have something very relevant to teach us.

II. The Ten Commandments are Serious

A second thing we need to understand about the 10 Commandments is their serious nature. When God gave the children of Israel these words He wasn't just offering them friendly advice. These weren't options in a moral multiple choice. But they were solemn commands with tremendous significance. There is nothing here to take lightly. This has not been said more pointedly than by Tedd Koppel at a graduation address at Duke University:

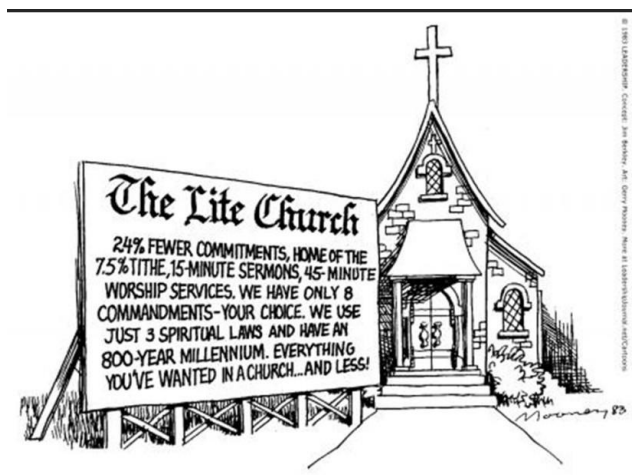
We have actually convinced ourselves that slogans will save us. Shoot up if you want, but use a clean needle. Enjoy sex whenever and with whomever you wish, but wear a condom. No. The answer is No. Not because it isn't cool or smart or because you might end up in jail or dying in and AIDS ward, but "no" because it's wrong, because we have spent 5000 years as a race of rational human beings, trying to drag ourselves out of the primeval slime by searching for truth and moral absolutes... Our society finds truth too

strong a medicine to digest undiluted. In its purest form, truth is not a polite tap on the shoulder. It is a howling reproach. What Moses brought down from Mount Sinai were not the Ten Suggestions. They are commandments. Are, not were. The sheer brilliance of the Ten Commandments is that they codify in a handful of words acceptable human behavior, not just for then or now, but for all time.

Yet today, we brush these commands aside with little thought, or we water them down to make them much more convenient. It has been suggested that our 10 Commandments today would read like this:

- Honor your father and mother (as long as they indulge whatever you want to do)
- You shall not murder (Unless you have been provoked to great anger)
- You shall not commit adultery (unless you're deeply in love, or you're just not feeling it anymore).
- You shall not steal (much)
- You shall not bear false witness (unless you're in a jam).

We've even watered the down in the church.



(Advance Slide) However, it was God's intention that these commandments be taken seriously, and that they would weigh heavily on the hearts and minds of those who heard them. If you take a close look at the scene around Mt. Sinai you can see that God took every step to insure that these commands be taken with the utmost seriousness.

First of all, the 10 Commandments were not given until extensive preparations had been made. At the beginning of chapter 19, God give Israel a solemn charge He then tells them to "ready" themselves. They had to go through all kinds of ceremonial cleansing rituals before receiving the law. This impressed upon them the serious nature of what was happening. They were to wash all of their clothes and abstain from all sexual relations

Secondly, God had them build a barrier around the mountain and they were told not to cross it. If someone did, they were to be stoned or shot through with arrows. Then there was the awesome presence of God himself. His giving of the law on Mt. Sinai was accompanied by smoke and fire, thunder and lightning, and mountain itself quaked at the presence of God. The sight was so fearsome that the text says the people trembled.

When God first spoke the Ten Commandments, His voice could be heard by all of the people. It was so powerful and piercing that the people begged and pleaded that God speak only to Moses and that Moses would relay the message, because they were afraid they would die.

It is clear that God wanted them to take all of this quite seriously. Unfortunately, they quickly forgot. And so do we. Let us not treat God's standards lightly. But let's take them quite seriously. Let us not just see the words, but the holy God who spoke them.

III. The Commandments are Positive

One other thing we need to see about the Ten Commandments is their positive nature. Since most of them begin with "*You shall not,*" we tend to see them as negative and restrictive. For every negative command there is a positive counterpart. The intent of these commands was not to restrict or stifle us. God was not a cosmic cop trying to ruin Israel's good time. Each commandment is a gift of grace. God gave these words for our own protection and provision. Each commandment either protects us from something that would destroy us, or shows the way to something that will fulfill us.

We cannot forget the overall scene here. The children of Israel have just been liberated from slavery. They are now a free people and an independent nation. They are on their way to the Promised Land where they will build their nation and grow as a people. But before this can happen God brings them to Sinai and gives them these 10 commandments.

These commands must be seen against this backdrop of freedom. They do not stifle our freedom and fulfillment, rather they are the key to it. These words form the foundation of a free and stable society. They are the key to their identity as a people. God saw these commands as being necessary for them to be a free and civilized people. Mankind has built many civilizations with many different moral codes, yet the 10 Commandments stand unparalleled in their precision and clarity. In these few words are sufficient moral principles to govern an entire nation. Our nation today has millions upon millions of pages of laws, rules, codes, and regulations and our society is unraveling at an unmanageable pace. Yet, when the 10 Commandments are followed by a people they are the strongest of cultures.

Part of the genius of the 10 commands is that they bring into a single focus man's two greatest duties: our duty to God and our duty to our fellow man. If you look at the Commandments, you will notice that the first four have to do with our duty to God and the second 6 have to do with our duty to our fellow man. Remember what Jesus said the two greatest commandments are –

to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. Love God and Love Others. That's the two halves of the Ten Commandments. Love God and love others.

These two must go together. They cannot be separated and as they are here, our duty to God must come first. If we are not in a right relationship with God, we will not be in a right relationship with other people. Part of our problem today is that we want people to treat each other right, but we leave God out of the equation. We have people killing, and raping, and robbing each other and the problem is not that they don't love their fellow man enough, the problem is that they don't love God enough.

If a nation has no love for God, then no amount of laws regulating human behavior will ever be enough> The further we get from God, the more laws we need. Journalist and author, David Aikman, spoke of a conversation he once had with former Russian president Boris Yeltsin.

Yeltsin told me in an interview that he was thinking of ways to get priests into the Russian school system to speak on ethics and morality, which prompted me to observe that it took the United States 200 years of religious freedom to drive Christianity out of schools and the Soviet Union 70 years of atheism to bring it back.

So these commands really are a gift. Woven into these 10 words is the key to a free and civilized society. In following them you have a right relationship with God, a right relationship with your family, and a right relationship with your neighbor. These aren't things to do away with, they are something to embrace.