



GOOD SHEPHERD

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A God-Ordered Life

Exodus 20:1-17

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Today we are going to look at the Ten Commandments. I think most people simply think of them as a list of “shalt nots” – the biggies in terms of our behavior before God and one another. And they do carry a moral imperative that Jesus not only upholds but magnifies. But I want to look at them from another perspective; it is not counter to the commandments as a moral code, but in addition to it. That additional perspective is that God gave us the commandments to bless us, to improve our lives, to foster lives of peace, joy, and healthy community.

Covenant Document

I realize that most often we look at the Ten Commandments as a list and consider each one as a self-contained unit. But the Commandments function as a whole, as a legal and moral whole. The Ten Commandments are a formal part of the ancient ritual called a covenant. They are not a list of behaviors by which one does or does not go to heaven. Rather, they are part of the blessings and curses of the covenant. They are part of God’s promise to be Abraham’s God and for Abraham’s descendants to be God’s people. They are the list of how to enjoy that relationship (or not).

There are several covenants recorded in the Bible, but at heart each is God graciously reaching out toward humanity and offering to intervene and help in the human condition. So God promises Noah never to send another flood – God makes a covenant. God promises Abraham that he will give him land, children, and blessing – God’s initiative and God’s name on the line. God promises David that he will establish his throne forever. Those are covenants. Human beings are a part, but God is the initiator and the faithful covenant-keeper. After the slavery of Abraham’s descendants in Egypt, and God’s rescuing of them through Moses, God re-establishes the Abrahamic covenant with Israel and gives them the Law, including the Ten Commandments.

If you look at the Ten Commandments as a whole, you can see the way they describe an order to life – a pattern of living in obedience to and relationship with God. And it is that ordered life, understood in Scripture as a *blessed* life, which is in view for all who would trust God.

A God-Ordered Life

The first three commandments describe a God-ordered life with God alone as priority, vision, and worthy of worship, love, and service. They speak of God alone in the highest place, the place of worship, love, service, and obedience. Nothing is to take God's place or even compete. It is the supreme and sole priority of God in our lives that orders all the rest of life. So these commandments speak to idolatry and worship, to obedience and disobedience, to service and to selfishness.

The fourth commandment (Sabbath) describes a God-ordered life in terms of work, rest, and time. Often you will hear the commandments sub-divided into the first four about God and the last six about human relationship. But the Sabbath commandment bridges between. Most importantly, it speaks not just of one day in seven, but of all seven days. It marks out our time as all belonging to God, subject to the commandments already given. And part of ordering our life under God is to not to over- or under-prioritize work, rest, or the balance between the two. Issues of work, recreation, family time, personal time, exercise, health, rest, and worship are all addressed in this commandment. It is a prime example of how the Commandments bring order and structure to our view of time and life.

The fifth commandment (parents) describes a God-ordered life in terms of home and family. So submitting our lives to God's leadership and worship not only affect our use of time, but also our relationships. The commandment to honor parents is more than respecting mom and dad. It requires something of children, but also of parents. It gets at all of family life, from respect to obedience to communication to how parents and children should relate throughout life.

The sixth through ninth commandments describe a God-ordered life in terms of our neighbors, not taking from them selfishly, but loving them selflessly. Murder, adultery, stealing, and lying all take from those around us. Their inherent selfishness breaks the first commandments and the community implications breach what Jesus will later call "love of neighbor." In these commandments, we see that God's design for humanity is not just individual and internal, but societal and missional. Indeed, you do see in the Ten

Commandments what will be lifted up clearly in the New Testament, that the greatest commandments are love of God and love of neighbor.

The tenth commandment uniquely points towards a New Testament perspective, where we must even guard our interior thoughts, guarding against temptation and the sinful attitudes that lead to sinful actions. This aspect of the Ten Commandments is often overlooked; we think of the Ten as major crimes or sins of commission. But here we see that continued longing for what we don't have is itself sin. Is this not Adam and Eve's original sin in the Garden?

So I wanted to give you a broad enough overview to see the effect of the Ten Commandments taken as a whole. What God holds up to us in these Commandments is a picture of life ordered according to God's wisdom, justice, and love. I have compared the Law before to a parent's rules for children. You may play in the yard, but not in the street. It is not only the rule, it offers safety, security, and in the extreme, even life over injury or death. So also, the Ten Commandments are not rules to hamper us, but rules to protect us and to set us free.

Out of Order

I can't see how anyone who spends any degree of time considering these commandments and being honest can conclude anything other than, "My life is out of order!" Remember this clearly: keeping or breaking the Ten Commandments isn't about salvation. Breaking them doesn't take you out of consideration; keeping them doesn't purchase you a ticket to Heaven. Rather, they form a description of what a God-ordered and blessed life looks like. They are an *invitation* to enjoy God's blessing. To the extent that we experience that, we begin to get a sense of how good God's word and will are for us. To the extent that we fall short and live in disarray, we realize just what was lost in the Garden.

Like children, we may well be frustrated by the limitations imposed by the Commandments. But as we grow in faith and trust in God, the Law-giver, we may see how life-giving and life-protecting the Commandments are. Even as we see our failings and as we break the Commandments, we are offered the opportunity to rediscover God's wisdom and love toward us.

Commitment and Consecration

I chose this text today because today is a day of commitment and consecration. We are asking for your pledges to the church, but those are just one aspect of a God-ordered life and I want to remind you of all that God designs and desires for you.

As we take an honest and realistic look at life and the human condition in the light of the Ten Commandments, we should feel challenged to look at the way your life is ordered. From the first through the tenth, the Commandments challenge us to ask what God's place is in our lives. We are challenged about how we use our time and treat our family. We are confronted and challenged about how we treat our neighbors (reminded by Jesus that neighbor includes our enemies!). And we are not let off the hook with externals only, but are challenged even at the point of inward desires.

And here's the fine point I need to make one more time. These are not rules by which we can measure and ask, "Am I good enough?" The answer is no: I am dead in sin – *dead in sin*. The Ten Commandments are already an example of God coming after us, to breathe life and hope into us – to offer us boundaries and a home and a place of safety in a fallen world where we are already at play in the street. God is already initiating His rescue plan. So our attentiveness to the Commandments at once shows us how lost we are and how God is already coming to find us through His Word.

God's Law cannot save from death, but for those living in the ashes between Eden and the End, the Commandments offer a temporary shelter in the present world, with all the hope of a God who is coming to save us from death itself. Amen.