

“Commands With Promise” Introduction

I’m beginning a series on the Ten Commandments. In the coming weeks, we’ll look at each commandment individually. But before we do, I’d like to just present an overview of the series in today’s message. I’ll say something about the *moral climate* today, and also look at the *purpose* of the Ten Commandments, and of God’s laws in general.

The Moral Climate Today. Dr. Wallace Fisher, who gained national prominence as pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Lancaster, wrote a book on the Ten Commandments entitled *Stand Fast In Faith*. He begins the preface to his book: “Over the last fifty years, time-honored values of Western society have been wiped out or transmuted beyond recognition. Old and respected guideposts have been swept away. People have given allegiance to false gods, subscribed to inhuman philosophies, been mesmerized by illusion-making psychologies, and have turned to the occult for help. The results of these conscious and unconscious flights from personal and social responsibility have disabled persons and disrupted society.” He writes, “The plea of this book is that we face up to this awesome loss of moral constancy in the Western world.” He then suggests the Ten Commandments as a place for the church and the world to turn.

Dr. Fisher’s book was published 1978. 42 years ago! Since then, I believe we have gone further down the path that has taken us away from time-honored, traditional, Judeo-Christian values.

Fewer people in our country believe in moral absolutes. “Relativism” is a word that describes how a lot of people see things. “Relativism” is the view that there are no fixed, God-given absolutes of right and wrong.

Chuck Colson, in his book *The Body*, wrote how one day his wife Patty called him to the TV. “Chuck, come down here, you’ve got to see this.” She had flipped to a talk show program. This particular program featured a panel of mothers who had decided that since their teenage kids were going to have sex anyway, they would rather them do it at home. One mother was describing the neat little code system she and her daughter had arranged: a green tag on the bedroom door meant that Mom should stay out, sex in progress! The other panelists nodded approvingly. (*I mean, how cool! How modern! How tolerant!*)

Relativism has for some time been the prevailing view in colleges and universities. But now this view has seeped beyond TV talk shows and the college campuses and has infiltrated every aspect of Western culture.

Several years ago the Barna research group surveyed a number of Americans around the question of moral absolutes. They updated that study in January of this year. Basically, it is telling us that only about 1 of 3 American adults believe in moral absolutes (34%-35%). About two-thirds (65%) of all Americans agree either strongly, or somewhat, that “every culture must determine what is acceptable morality for its people.” Two-thirds of American adults either believe moral truth is relative to circumstances (44%) or have not given it much thought (21%). By the way, 3 out of 4 *Millennials* (those who are now 23-39 years old) agree strongly or somewhat with the

statement, “Whatever is right for your life or works best for you is the only truth you can know”.

Those figures represent the population in general. In addition, *46% of those attending evangelical churches* said that moral truth is dictated by the individual! *48% of those who said they are born again* agreed that moral truth is dictated by the individual!

Craig Vincent Mitchell, instructor of Christian ethics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, commenting on similar findings a few years earlier, said, “The fact that only 35 percent of all Americans believe in moral absolutes provides some frightening insight into our culture and the future of this country.”

As moral absolutes are being discarded, what’s taking their place? The Barna research people maintain that the “morality of self-fulfillment” is the new cultural norm. David Kinnaman, President of Barna Group, says, “The highest good, according to our society, is ‘finding yourself’ and then living by ‘what’s right for you’”. “There is a tremendous amount of individualism in today’s society, and that’s reflected in the church too...we find that many Christians are using the way of Jesus to pursue the way of self. . . . while we wring our hands about secularism spreading through culture, a majority of churchgoing Christians have embraced a corrupt, me-centered theology.” The late Dr. Francis Schaeffer, historian and Christian philosopher, commenting on the moral vacuum he saw, once said, “Modern man has both feet firmly planted in mid-air.”

A city school teacher brought a rabbit into the classroom. The children were delighted with it and asked all kinds of questions. Finally one of the children asked if it was a boy rabbit or a girl rabbit. The teacher was a bit flustered, and finally admitted, “I don’t know.” One little girl said, “We could vote on it!” I would propose that this is how many of us today decide on what’s right and what’s wrong: let’s vote on it!

This is the climate in which we hear the Ten Commandments today. Donald Coggin, when he was Archbishop of Canterbury, looking at the moral chaos of the 1970’s said, “A sick society can become healthy only when it starts living by some rules again. There’s a lot to be said for the Ten Commandments.”

Now the Ten Commandments are part of the Law of God, given to us in the Old Testament. ***What’s the purpose of the law and commandments? What function do they serve, for Christians, and for people in general?***

In traditional Christian understanding the Law serves at least 3 functions. First of all, ***the law preserves the order of creation.*** God has created an orderly universe. Just as there are laws of science and physics to govern the natural world, there are moral laws to govern life and human relationships. The Ten Commandments are among God’s commandments that preserve the order and integrity of human living.

So you want to dismiss or trivialize the Ten Commandments? How would you like to live in a

society where the Ten Commandments are totally ignored? Where there is no regard for the sacredness of life, and no restraints against killing people? Where there is no respect for private property, and anyone is free to steal what is yours without any consequences? Where no one is faithful to their vows of marriage, and there are no children growing up in homes where a mom and dad stay committed to each other for life? How would you like to live in a world where no one told the truth? And everyone was forced to work every day – 7 days a week? That’s not a pleasant scenario, is it? Sometimes we want the *benefits* of living in a humane and orderly world – but want to be free of the *responsibility of keeping* the moral laws that foster a humane society.

So, the first purpose of God’s law is to preserve the order of creation.

A second purpose of God’s law is that the law shows us our sin and our need for God’s mercy and grace. Now this is the opposite of how a lot of people view the Ten Commandments. Many people think that if we just live a good life and try to keep the commandments this is all God asks of us. This will get us into heaven. But here’s the reality: *None of us* can fully keep the Ten Commandments - at least not as Jesus interpreted them. I think we’ll see in the coming weeks that *nobody* can obey the Ten Commandments completely!

The Bible says that the purpose of the law or commandments is to make us aware of our sin! Romans 3:20 says, “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.” In other words, the commandments show us what sin is, and the commandments expose our own sinfulness. Romans 7:7 tells us: “I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’”

Rather than *being saved* by keeping the commandments, the commandments make us realize *that we need a Savior!* The commandments can *reveal* the evil and moral shortcomings in us, but they can’t *free us* from these sins – *only Christ can do that!* In Galatians 3:24 it says the Law was our “tutor” or “custodian” – someone put in charge of a youngster – to eventually bring us to Christ! *So the law shows us our sin and our need for God’s mercy in Jesus Christ.*

A third purpose of God’s laws is that they provide a standard of obedience. I said a moment ago that none of us can keep the Ten Commandments fully. However, *it’s important to strive to keep them.* Why? Because the *commandments reveal God’s will for us, and how we can obey God.*

We see this when we look at the setting in which God gave the Ten Commandments to Israel (Exodus 20). *Before God even gave the commandments,* God had *already* chosen Israel to be His people, for a mission to the world. He made a covenant with them to be their God. He established a relationship with Israel out of His sheer mercy. Now He delivers them from slavery in Egypt. Exodus 20:2 says, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” At this point they are out in the wilderness, a motley group of just-freed slaves! And the question is: How are they supposed to live as God’s people? What is involved in obeying God? *So God gives them the commandments as a guide.*

The Ten Commandments and all of God's laws serve same purpose for us. None of us are saved by trying to keep God's laws. We're saved by trusting Christ and His sacrificial death for us and our sins. But once we're saved by trusting Christ, the commandments help us understand how to live as God's people. The first 4 of the 10 commandments show us how to love God and relate to God. The last 6 commandments show us how to love our neighbor and live responsibly in society. God hasn't left us in the dark. God's laws and commands are a *reliable guide* to show us how to obey God and love God!

So, God's laws (including the Ten Commandments) serve at least 3 functions: they preserve the moral order in creation and society; they show us our sin and our need of a Savior; and they give us practical, specific guidance on how God wants us to live as His people.

So much for an introduction to the Ten Commandments. Next week we will look at the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3).

Perhaps you may be thinking that this series of messages on the Ten Commandments are going to be a real drag! A couple of months of listening to a whole bunch of "thou shalt not's...". No thanks, you say!

All I can say is, give it a shot! There is great wisdom embedded in the Ten Commandments. These commandments shed light on just about every major issue we face in today's world - as an individual, as a country, as a world community.

I call this series of sermons, "Commands With Promise." And I believe they are!

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September 13, 2020*