

Transcript of Sermon By  
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Rome, Georgia  
February 21, 2010

## **The Law Limits**

### **Exodus 20:1-21**

#### Meditation Text:

The commandments are not guidelines for humanity in general. They are a countercultural way of life for those who know who they are and whose they are. Their function is not to keep American culture running smoothly, but rather to produce a people who are, in our daily lives, a sign, a signal, a witness that God has not left the world to its own devices.

—from *The Truth About God* by Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon

This is the first Sunday in Lent and Baptists have not always observed it, but our church does. This is the season in which we think about Christ's sacrifice as we move towards, Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and eventually towards Easter. It is the time when, traditionally, Christians have thought about discipleship, the sacrifice of Christ and, therefore, what it might mean in our own lives.

The worship themes as we move forward during these weeks are focused on passages of scripture that speak about what it means to obey, to follow, and to be a disciple. What is it that God, through Christ, teaches us that we must somehow take into our hearts if, indeed, we would want to say with faithfulness that we are following Jesus Christ?

Today, we look at the Ten Commandments. Surely, the Ten Commandments will be a part of what it means to be a follower of God. In thinking about it, I would think that the three passages of scripture that most people would know about whether they go to church or have never been to church, would be The Lord's Prayer, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, and the Ten Commandments.

There is a pattern that we follow in many fields. If you are a golfer, you can pick up the spring issue of *Golf* or *Golf Digest* and somebody will have a story such as "Ten Commandments to a Better Game."

If you go hear a motivational speaker to help you with your sales, the speech might be entitled, “The Top Ten Commandments to Increase Your Sales in a Down Economy.” It will include things that we all know about.

First Baptist is sponsoring a marriage retreat next weekend. We could conceive “Ten Commandments for a Happy Home and Effective Marriage.” All of these things are nice because it reminds us that the real Ten Commandments have influenced us to think about ten rules, ten guidelines, or ten things that would help us do right in whatever field it might be. There is a problem, I think, however, in that all of these things, other than the Ten Commandments, have a degree of flexibility. If you hear a motivational speaker give a talk on “The Ten Commandments of Effective Sales in A Down Economy,” you will go home thinking, *I would have probably taken out No. 7 and added this.*

If somebody gives you advice on “Ten Ways to Have an Effective Family Life,” you might think, *I would never have said Nos. 3 and 4. I would have put in this instead.* We come to it believing we could modify it and make it our own. *If I had ten commandments on this, I would put this in.* It does lead us sometimes to that old terrible preacher joke about the ten suggestions. We believe that sometimes we can pick and choose out of the Ten Commandments just as easily as we can change somebody else’s commandments about something else.

The Ten Commandments are actually repeated twice in the Old Testament—once in the Book of Exodus and once in the Book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy actually means *the second giving of the law*, and before the children of Israel go into the Promised Land, Moses repeats the law. Everything they have been given on Mt. Sinai, Moses repeats to the people so there is a second telling of the Ten Commandments.

It is also interesting to note that on Mt. Sinai, the only part of the law that God gives directly to the people is the Ten Commandments. Once they have heard these, they say, “No more. You go up on the mountain, Moses, and let God talk to you. Then you come back down and tell us what he said.” They were so overwhelmed by all of this.

Today, I want to give you two ways to think about the Ten Commandments to help you understand why God has given them to us. They are rules and guard rails. If you have ever tried to play a game without some common understanding of how you are going to play the game, the game is impossible.

I remember being in the sixth or seventh grade and we were playing backyard football. One kid had a great yard. It was long with a driveway on each end that made perfect goal lines. The street was on one side and hedges were on the other. You could very clearly tell where out of bounds was. One day we were playing, and this one kid took the ball and ran across the street. We all stopped because who is going to tackle somebody in the street. He ran up the street, cut back across, and went across the goal line.

We said, “You are out of bounds.”

He said, “Who said what was out of bounds?”

“You just know what’s out of bounds.”

“Nobody said what was out of bounds.”

So the game ended at that point because we could not agree on whether or not he should just be able to know what is out of bounds. Have you ever played in a game like that where somebody makes up the rules as you go and you think, “You can’t play this game. There are no rules here.”

The rules help us live together. Rules provide a way of common understanding of how we are going to do this. How can we really have community, neighborhood, church, family, or nation if there are not some standards that we all agree to? This is the way we work.

Rules do one other thing. Rules anticipate problems. If you go to the swimming pool and the sign there says, *No glass containers*, why is that? It is hard; it is concrete. People who go swimming are barefoot. If you have a glass container and you drop and break it, somebody is going to cut their feet. This is trying to anticipate a problem. We are not going to let you bring glass in here because we want everybody to be safe.

I remember a few years ago when I was working out and going into a big locker room. There was a big sign that said, *No cell phones*. I thought, “Why can’t you use your cell phones in here? What’s the problem?” Dumb me, I had not realized that because of the advance in cell phones so that now you can take pictures with cell phones, people were in the locker rooms taking pictures of people when they did not know it and it was creating a lot of problems. This was anticipating a problem. You don’t do this. The law puts limits, as rules put limits, on certain things and activities in life. If you don’t put the limits on it, it becomes chaos. Instead of taking things for granted or not knowing whether or not we can trust other people, the Ten Commandments become the basic rules by which God’s people live so that we can understand what we expect from each other. We can anticipate how we act towards each other. We can anticipate problems and not get into them. It limits what we do for the good of everybody. Can you imagine what it would be like if nobody obeyed the Ten Commandments? What kind of crazy, terrible, and evil world would that be? It puts limits.

That’s rules. Now, think about guard rails. Today is a pretty day and you might go out for a ride. Notice where guard rails are on the road. Guard rails are not everywhere but they are where there might be a drop off. If you are on a hill or a mountain, there is a guard rail to stop you from going off. If you go across a creek and there is a bridge, it stops you from going off. If there is a sharp curve, there will be a guard rail to keep you from going off there. The guard rail is there to stop us from potential danger, and it is there to limit damage. And that’s what the Ten Commandments

are like. They are guard rails to stop us from going someplace we don't want to go. If we go there, there is going to be damage and destruction.

Let me use an illustration from one of the commandments. Let's talk about using the Lord's name in vain. I never really understood this until a few years ago. Language is destined. The language that we use shapes our future. This is why, as parents, there is certain language that we don't want our children to use. Hopefully, we don't use this language ourselves and, clearly, we don't want our children to use it. We know that if you start to use certain language, certain types of attitudes and behaviors begin to follow after it. Whatever you think of as using the Lord's name in vain, if a person were to start saying that, what does that mean about the direction we are headed in our relationship with God? Does it mean that God's name is not something we revere, that God is not a title or the name of someone to whom we pray and that it is a curse word, an oath, a throw-away word, or something that is used randomly? Where are we headed? Language is destined. When we use the name *Jesus* like people use the name *Jesus* when they hit their hand with a hammer or something like that, what direction in our relationship with Christ does that push us? Does that push us toward a relationship or does it somehow make us callous to the relationship that we are now leaving behind?

Think about the Ten Commandments as guard rails and that they are there to stop us from going someplace. If we go there, we will fall off the cliff, we will run off the road, and hurt ourselves. The Commandments are there to limit damage, to limit where we might go, to keep us in the road so that we are on the path with Christ.

The Commandments are rules and guard rails. In both cases, they are trying to provide us a safe place where we can be together and a place where we can be confident that we are operating and living as the people of God should. It limits damage to my own life and it limits what I might do to damage your life and the same thing in return.

We hear discussion today about where the Ten Commandments should be posted. This is where Jeremiah says the Commandments should be posted: “‘The time is coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, with the house of Judah. It won't be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I look them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,’ declares the Lord. ‘This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people. No longer will each say to a neighbor, *Know the Lord*, because they will all know me, from the least to the greatest,’ declares the Lord.”

Jeremiah reminds us that the proper place for the Commandments to be is in our hearts and in our minds. Here is a test you can take. We have already talked about them. You heard them when the scripture was read this morning. Now see if you can write them down in order. Sometime today, see if you can write them all down and write them down in order. We claim them in the authoritative way in which God would lead God's people but yet I dare say not many will get them all nor will we get them in the right order.

The Ten Commandments seem so logical. Who would not want to not murder, to not lie, to not commit adultery? Who would not want to keep all these commandments? Surely, these are universal principles. But I tell you, all you have to do is turn on the television for 15 minutes and they are not universal. People do not all agree that this is the way life should be led. It is for God's people to write them on their hearts, to know them in our minds, and for us to live them as to demonstrate to the world that this is the kind of life that is possible, if we trust and follow God.

The truth is that none of us will ever perfectly keep them all. The Pharisees in Jesus' time believed that if everybody in Israel would keep all the Commandments perfectly for one day that the Messiah would come, and they never thought it happened because they could not conceive that everybody would do it. We are sinners; we fail. But the point is that this is the direction of our lives. This is the commitment of our living, not that we immediately begin to excuse ourselves so that we don't have to live up to it, but so that we are always living up to it. What would it say to the world if God can make a people who live like this?

One other thing about the world and the Commandments—The first part is God speaking to the people. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of bondage in the land of Egypt." It all begins with what God has done. It all begins with "because God has done this, I will live this way." To think that people who don't have a relationship with Jesus Christ would find this binding upon their lives is foolish for us. The whole table of Commandments is tied to loving God. The whole table of Commandments and living this way and limiting our life is to recognize that God loved the Israelites enough to bring them out of slavery. God loved us enough to save us through the cross of Jesus Christ. Therefore, this is how we live. The Commandments go absolutely nowhere without loving God first.

How about a challenge to learn the Ten Commandments? How about a challenge to put them in our minds and write them on our hearts so that they might ever be before us and so we will be reminded of the kind of people God needs in this world. Would it have an impact on the world in which we live? You know it would.

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