



## *Round Hill Community Church*

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### **Sermon: March 22, 2009**

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#### **A Rule for Life, Robert B. Culp**

Exodus 20: 1-17

From the time they were generated atop Mt. Sinai, people have come to understand the Ten Commandments in a variety of ways. St. Augustine said “The law was given in order that grace might be sought.” Whereas Ronald Reagan remarked, “I have wondered at times what the Ten Commandments would have looked like if Moses had run them through the U.S. Congress.” Years ago H.L. Mencken mused, “Say what you will about the Ten Commandments, you will always come back to the pleasant fact that there are only ten of them.” And back in the 1500’s, Martin Luther proclaimed, “Anyone who knows the Ten Commandments perfectly knows the entire Scriptures” ... quite a lofty claim indeed!

It’s been said that when Moses went up the mountain, he was Moses the liberator ... the liberator of those long-time heirs of God’s promise to Abraham which had kept the people of Israel going for many years. Theirs was the promise of descendants as plentiful as the stars in the sky, a special relationship with God, and a land flowing with milk and honey. The people themselves were living proof that the first part of that promise had come true, they were living by the grace of the second part, and they were now traveling through the wilderness toward the last part of the promise. But somehow ... something was missing, and it was this something that Moses had gone up to the mountain to get.

Having gone up the mountain as a liberator, he came back down as Moses the lawgiver, holding in his arms the two tablets on which were written the law God had given him for the people of the promise. Such laws were short and to the point, quite unlike the laws being passed by Congress these days containing thousands of pages. There were ten of them – four “Thou shalt’s” and six “Thou shalt not’s” – and they covered every aspect of the people’s relationship with God and with one another. They contained no fine print, no ambiguous clauses, and absolutely no language concerning bonuses.

If the people had been confused at all about the shape of their life with God, those questions were now addressed and answered. The covenant between God and his people was right there, blasted into stone, for everyone to see.

But it was a profound change from their covenantal understandings from the past. God had made rainbow promises to Noah, and had asked nothing in return. God had promised Abraham and Sarah countless descendants and the land of their sojourning, without any strings other than their trustful following. But now, quite suddenly, the indicative of God’s grace-filled “I shall” promises is followed by God’s imperative laws of

“Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not.” In other words, the covenant with Moses and his people now involve obligations. As one commentator puts it, “Chosen people are expected to behave in chosen ways, and for the first time in the history of the world, formal religious law comes into the picture.”

These ten commandments are not basic guidelines for humanity in general, but they reflect a counter-cultural way of life for those who know who they are and whose they are (with the commandments prefaced by the words, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”). The function of these ten commandments is 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. The commandments not only constitute Israel and the church, but they also critique us in our common life. So, they are both a gracious reminder of who we are, as well as an abrasive prod to be who we ought to be.

But before the Ten Commandments are about us and our expected behavior, they are about God. We know someone by the way that person speaks. And we know the true and living God because this God has refused to stay aloof, unconcerned, or quiet. Our God could have remained on Mt. Sinai, hidden in the clouds, not saying a single word, transcendent in all God’s majesty and mystery. Instead, God called Moses to him and had him write down what would please God, and in his speaking we came to know something of the nature of God.

For this is a God who frees a captive people and tolerates no rivals such as Pharaoh or the Pentagon, a God who does not leave us alone to stumble about aimlessly in the wilderness or along Wall Street, but graciously gives us the law “for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive.” The sort of God who would give us the commandments is also the God who would give us Jesus.

Moreover, the commandments signal to us the powerful message that this thing between God and us matters, and it matters a great deal. Indeed, God needs us, and is enlisting our help in reclaiming a lost and forgetful creation. In many respects, the saving of our world depends on the keeping of our end of the agreement in matters of how we behave sexually, how we handle property, and how we watch our words, and how we live our lives.

Although it is clear in our Scripture lesson this morning that we are being addressed in the plural as a community, a nation, and a people, each commandment is put to us in the second person singular – “you.” A claim is being made on each one of us, and God is not speaking to us through any intermediary. Rather, this God is speaking directly to us in simple and clear words, addressing us where we live amidst the real everyday issues of property, sex, speech, and human interactions.

This is a God who loves us in a fashion that wives and husbands love one another in marriage, and God gets jealous for us. The relationship between God and us is not one of abstract, high-flown principles and ideals ... but is a relationship between a God who loves and a people who are loved enough to be told how and when and where to return that love. The sort of God who would give us commandments is also the God who would give us a savior born to parents who were nobodies in a tiny village in an occupied land ... and born to set us free.

But also the Ten Commandments are an affirmation that, thankfully, God has not done everything that needs doing in this world, but has left plenty for us to do as obedient and faithful followers of his. God – having been creative, faithful, and just – now gives us the means to act in a similar fashion. God needs us to do what needs to be done in this world. In fact, God is bold enough to believe that we ourselves can be instruments who can bring life out of death, order out of chaos, and light into the midst of darkness. Whenever we are obedient, it is called worship. And where we work Monday through Friday thereby becomes an everyday altar upon

which we place the transforming sacrifices of love and compassion, mercy and justice.

One commentator writes, “These commandments were given to Israel after their liberation from slavery, right after they had entered the wilderness, as a gift to the redeemed. However, that they were given these directives was a powerful sign that Israel was still being redeemed, and was still on the way. Exodus, therefore, keeps on happening among those who follow the Lord in faithful and obedient ways. The commandments are terse, concise, not having much detail. And that means there is much room for us to ponder and to argue concerning their application in our lives today, lots of space for us to keep growing in our grasp of what it means for us to be faithful, and still room for us to explore and discover afresh what God is saying to us in our world today.”

Thus, the commandments serve as a vitally important means by which we learn to bend our lives toward the way and will of God ... which is not a bad definition at all for our life of faith. They serve as ten rules of the covenant God made with Moses, ten commandments that describe a life worth living. All of them are limits of one kind or another – the lovingly-drawn boundaries of a creator committed to remind us creatures of our size – but they describe not only the conditions of the promise God has made, but also define what the promise is all about in the end.

It is as if God is saying to us in these ten words: “Here is a rule of life that truly works. Sink these ten sturdy posts in the center of your camp, hang a tent on them, and together you may survive whatever wilderness through which you may pass. Ignore them, and you will flirt with your own downfall and perhaps destruction. So, guard your precious life together, and guard your precious life with me. Here are ten rules that will help you do just that. Please accept them as a gift from me to you.”

I don’t know about you, but here is a God I can believe in, and whom I can trust, for this is both the God of the promise and the God of the law, whose divine will for our obedience does not preclude his divine wish for our love. Indeed, the Lord is our God who brings us out of whatever bondage may be ours and bears us on eagle’s wings, even though at times we may earn God’s wrath and break God’s heart. But this God keeps covenant with us, whispering into our hearts every single day, “I love you still, and always will, no matter what.”