

"Contracts and Covenants"

March 4, 2018

Exodus 20: 1-17

¹ Then God spoke all these words: ² I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³ you shall have no other gods before me. ⁴ You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. ⁷ You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸ Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰ But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work — you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore, the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹² Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. ¹³ You shall not murder. ¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵ You shall not steal. ¹⁶ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷ You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.



Today we begin with a pop quiz. Before you get all sweaty palmed, this is just between you and God. Here are the Ten Commandments in an abbreviated version.

Please think about the past week, the past

year, your entire life. Have you failed at maintaining any of these commandments? Perhaps a better question is if there are any that you have not violated or thought about violating? After all, Jesus did say that if we look lustfully at a woman we have committed adultery with her. I suppose that same idea applies to all the commandments. Lord help us. Let us pray.



- Pop Quiz:
1. No other gods.
 2. No idols.
 3. Don't misuse name.
 4. Keep Sabbath holy.
 5. Honor father and mother.
 6. No murder.
 7. No adultery.
 8. No stealing.
 9. No false witness.
 10. No coveting.



As we think about the Ten Commandments or any of the other six hundred plus rules that eventually came to represent the Law, we are destined to fail. We have all done work on

the Sabbath that did not honor God, we have all looked at the latest and greatest cell phone or car or boat or dress or house and wanted one ourselves. We have all shared in gossip that was not true and we have all cursed now and again. If we are human, we have failed to keep the Law. For many of us, we fail multiple times each day. But God knew we would. He created us as imperfect creatures. And because of that, God promises to deliver us, to forgive us, to redeem us, to provide for us, and to be our Lord and Savior. In return, God asks that we follow His commandments. He asks even though He knows we are serial Law breakers. But we have hope because God is faithful, no matter how good or bad we are at keeping His commandments. God always upholds His part of the covenant relationship.



Why did God choose to enter into a covenant relationship with us instead of using a contract? It would be far easier just to wipe us out each time we broke enough of the rules and to start all over again than it is to continue to see us struggling along. But the first covenant covers us there – never again will God destroy the earth. And wouldn't it be easier just to create a better creature, a super human that could better abide by God's laws? Yes, maybe it would be. But the second covenant covers us there – God will be our God and we will be His people. Thankfully both of these are everlasting covenants.

But ultimately, I think God choose a covenant because He knew full well who He was dealing with. A contract is something we are familiar with. A contract is a formal agreement based on mutual assent. Contracts work well for employment situations and business transactions. Each partner does or gives as much as is required and in the end a mutually satisfactory result is had by all. In a contract the primary beneficiary is me or us. It is all about getting out what I put in and maybe more. If our counterpart falters or defaults, the contractual agreement can be broken. We are done and we have no more commitment or involvement. Imagine for a minute if the first covenant was a contract. In not too many years the lawyers would have come calling, our planet would be wiped out once and for all, and God would have created a new world someplace else. That thought makes us feel about as good as that image of a contract imposed over the bread and wine makes us feel, doesn't it?



But from the very beginning, God's agreement with mankind has been based not in contract, but in covenant. Yes, God does expect us to love and obey, to work to advance God's kingdom here on earth, and to love and care for one another.

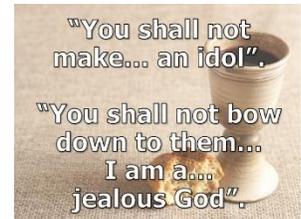
But our failure to meet expectations does not affect God's commitment to us. Our mistakes and our inability to uphold our end of the covenant does not affect God's commitment to us either. From our earthly perspective, this does not make sense. Contracts are governed by the rules of bargaining. Covenants are governed by the irrational but eternal rules of love. It is quite a difference.

Our scripture passage today centers around the Ten Commandments. We often look at the Ten Commandments as a list of rules, as a list of do's and don'ts. But really, at their core, the Ten Commandments are all about relationship. Initial glances may lead us to think they are about behavior. They are only to the degree that our behaviors influence our relationships. The first four commandments deal with our relationship with God. These four commandments also reveal much about who God is and what God desires from us.

Before we get to the actual Ten Commandments, our passage opens with a reminder: "*I am the Lord your God*". This is a true fact and it conveys God's authority. The first commandment flows out of this place of authority: "*You shall have no other gods before me*". God is the only one we are to worship, the only one we look to for all we need, the only one who provides and guides.

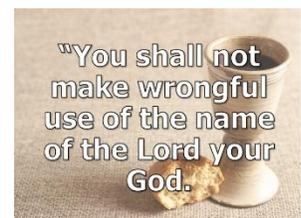


This exclusivity leads into the second commandment: *"You shall not make for yourself an idol... You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God"*. Initially, when we think of idols, we think of little statues carved from wood or stone. But this commandment is so much bigger than that. In this way it ties back into the first. The truth is you and I can have many other idols or gods in our lives. From the beginning, God knew this would be a struggle. It reveals itself first in the Garden of Eden and has been present ever since. Adam and Eve wanted to be equal to God in knowledge, so they succumbed to temptation and ate the forbidden fruit. Sin entered the world and humanity has struggled with the power of sin ever since.



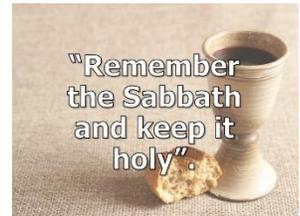
For many of us, our biggest idol is self. We struggle with elevating our own desires and wants above God's will for our life. But self is certainly not our only idol. In addition to self, we have lots of other idols or gods that we struggle with. Other idols or other gods can be the desire for power or position or recognition, the accumulation of possessions, the need to be in control, the emotion of pride, the withholding of our time, and on and on. Each of these things can quickly become idols as they easily become things we worship or pursue or place ahead of our one true God.

The third commandment prohibits the misuse of God's name. It reads, *"You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God"*. With this commandment we typically think of cursing when we get cut off in traffic or when we hit



our thumb with the hammer. It is this, but it is also much more. It can be using God's name to try and help ourselves, to meet our own selfish desires. It can be times when we pray selfish prayers – prayers that align more with our will than with God's will or His purposes in the world. And misuse can also be a failure to use. Sometimes we fail to turn to God when we should whether for our daily bread or for protection or for healing or for strength. Sometimes we do not come to God in prayer, calling on His Almighty name. In this light, because both are ultimately about trusting in God, the third commandment leads into the fourth commandment.

The fourth commandment reads, "*Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy*". With this commandment, God calls us to mirror what He did in creating the world. God knows our need for rest. God created us and knows that we function best when we have had adequate rest. Being rested allows us to have the energy to live a productive and vital life. Part of this commandment is also to set aside a day to worship and to connect to God. I think God knew the busyness of life would always be something we battled, so God designated a day to worship and be in connection with our God.



This fourth commandment, as do the other three, ultimately asks us if we trust God. Will our trust allow us to fight the drive to succeed, to counter the need to always work, to control the desire for a little "me time"? Can we simply rest and trust in God? Can we set aside one day to rest in Him, trusting that God has our back, that all will be alright once the week resumes?



As we transition to commandments five through ten, we shift from our relationship with God to our relationship with each other. These are our interpersonal commands. These commandments are like rules to govern our behavior, but

even more so they are intended to help us best live in relationship with one

another. The first of these commandments is an action we

are to take: "*Honor your father and your mother*". The

remaining five are prohibitions, things we are not to do. We

should "*not murder... not commit adultery... not steal... not*

bear false witness... not covet". Just as honoring our mother and father is

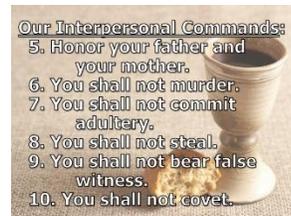
sometimes a challenge, whether we are young or old, so too is it sometimes not

always easy to avoid things like gossip, jealousy, envy, and lust. Just as God

intended for us to get rest because He knew it was best for us to do so, He also

wants us to best live in harmony with each other. This is the essence of these

last six commandments.



As a whole, the Ten Commandments are about being in covenant with God and with each other. Whether the first commandment or the sixth or the tenth, at the core of all the

commandments is God's desire for us to live in the best relationship we can

whether with God Himself or with each other. At the core of this desire is love.

Remember, a covenant is an agreement that says, "I love you no matter what".

To be clear and to understand the depth of God's love for us, God made these

covenants with the full understanding and appreciation of our strengths and

talents and faith and also with a full understanding of our imperfections, failings,

and inabilities to always succeed. Just as we know what we are getting into when we decide to become a parent, God also knew what He was getting into with us. God understood that no matter how clear the rule is explained, no matter how detailed the expectation, there is often failure. So, in our relationship with God, imperfection is understood. Yet love and grace continue to endure. An old Jewish proverb says that when God created the world, He foresaw all the sin that humans would commit against God and against each other. It also says that the only way God could continue was to decide to forgive the world before He created it. Thank God that He made that choice.

That is love. To illustrate love, I want to share a selection from an article I read this week about the relationships that God desires for us to have through Him and with one another. Our relationships must be based totally on love. This sense of love is what drew us to God initially and it is what draws people to the faith. As a community of faith and as Christians living in the world, we are expected to show love for one another in ways that stand out from the rest of the world. As the old hymn goes, *"They will know we are Christians by our love"*. The increasing reality for us as Christians is that we are a minority in the world. This article that I am sharing comes from that perspective. From the article, hear what love looks like when it is lived out in the world:

It's common for minority groups to experience a "collective consciousness." There's just an undeniable sense that we need each other. I watched as my parents opened our home to families who needed a place to live. When a member's close relative died, it was customary for other church members to attend the funeral, even if it meant driving hours to do so.

When my own grandmother passed, I remember seeing leaders from my church in the pews, mourning with us. I observed Romans 12:15, which says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep," being lived out. Though the physical, emotional, and monetary needs were often great, God provided for His people through His people.

I love the closing last line: *"God provided for His people through His people"*. This line is a great embodiment of what it means to be the people of God. Just as a covenant is based upon the irrational but eternal rules of love, so too are our relationships with God and with one another. It is our love of God that leads the way in our love for each other. As the article stated, we come together to meet the physical, emotional, and monetary needs that arise. Just last week we celebrated the complete funding of the stained-glass window project and we rejoiced in the Blue Bucket collection for 2017 that helped both with projects here in the church and out there in the community. But our provision is not always monetary in nature. Sometimes it is in providing space for a Christian group like the Classical Conversations group to use our church on Tuesdays. Sometimes it is in the emotional and spiritual support we offer to one another during times of loss or during an illness. The loving covenant relationship that we find within the church is a beautiful thing to behold. It has been ever since the early church period when the Jews and Romans marveled at the way that the believers in the early church shared life together. The article I just shared begins with these words: *"There's just an undeniable sense that we need each other"*. In a way, this is the heart of our covenant relationship with God and with each other.





As I close, I want to again remind us that all people are God's people. We cannot choose to just love those who love us and who are just like us. The love that we have through our relationship with Jesus Christ must go forth into the all the world. To illustrate what this could look like, I want to close with a story from chapter two of our What Makes a Hero? book.

One day after work, Julio Diaz decided to take the subway to a favorite restaurant. Along the way, he met a young man brandishing a knife, demanding his wallet. Julio willingly gave him the wallet and as the young man ran away, he called out and told the young man to have his coat too. The young man was shocked. He made his way part way back to Julio and asked, "Why? Why do you offer me your coat"? Julio shared that it was cold out and that if the young man was going to be out there all night robbing people, perhaps he needed the coat too. Julio then said, "Look, if you are willing to give up your freedom for a few dollars then you must really need the money. So, take my coat too". It was then that Julio asked, "Would you like to come eat with me"?

Julio had right to fight back or to even react with violence. But instead he offered to give, to feed, to love. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Julio was able to turn a man who was breaking some commandments – he was closing in on murder, he was stealing, he was coveting what Julio had – into a man who came to see love instead. Just as the Ten Commandments are all about our

loving relationships, so too is our role as disciples in the world. As we live out the love that is at the core of our covenant relationship with God, may everyone we meet experience and come to know the love of Christ in us. May it be so. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) Which of the commandments concerning your relationship with God demands your most attention? How will you grow in your obedience?
- 2) Who do you know that needs to experience your “I love you no matter what love”? Pray for the Spirit to work to allow that to happen.
- 3) In what ways do you feel God calling you to live out the love of Christ that is in you? It could be at the church, out in the community, or both.