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A Chapel Sermon on Exodus 20:1-17

James Bollhagen

The text for this morning is a very small subject—the Ten Commandments. Why, with the ten minute limit set for chapel sermons, I can spend a whole minute on each of the commandments.

Now, to get a handle on this subject, it would be so easy to talk generally about the broader subject matter and to wax systematic, talking, for example, about the “three uses” of the Law. But as *rule* I try to *curb* that tendency and instead try to *mirror* the text itself.

I admit it may sound rather unsystematic and in violation of systematic categories, and it may seem to be pedantic or even childish and yet at the same time bordering on unorthodoxy, but the point I want to make is: the Ten Commandments are *good*. The Ten Commandments are *right*. The Ten Commandments are the best things we can do. They are important; they count for something; they matter. They can bring to those who heed and obey them temporal blessings; things can go well with you, and you can live long on the earth. The Ten Commandments are basic to the godly life. *And*—the Ten Commandments are all of these things to the *redeemed* people of God. They are all of these things for you and me—yes, *especially* for you and me.

I feel constrained to say this because the Ten Commandments have been given a bad name, even in the church. You yourself, when you heard the Scripture reading, may have thought to yourself: “Oh, boy, the Ten Commandments! What in the world is the preacher going to do with *those things*?”

Periodically people in the church try to get rid of the third use of the Law for the sanctified life, as though the commandments are to be shunned and avoided like the plague, as though they are something ugly and hideous. And along with this, some try to dispense with the subject of sanctification altogether. We studiously avoid saying a single word about it. Ministers and

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students of the Word, your Word is a whole lot thinner when you eliminate the sanctified life from its pages. Even the apostle Paul is about half as thick when you eliminate sanctification material from his letters.

What usually happens is that we lump all the commandments into the one word "Law," and then we say about that one word: "I don't like it; I want only the Gospel." The result is that we never get around to looking at what the Ten Commandments actually say. In so doing we demonstrate that we are hopelessly confused about *both* Law and Gospel.

The Ten Commandments were given within the context of grace. Prior to giving them, God had already chosen Israel as his people. He had already tucked them away as his precious possession. He had chosen them by grace from the time of Abraham. Immediately after giving the commandments, God gave the people instructions for building an altar. On that altar they were to offer burnt offerings to maintain their fellowship with God through forgiveness, as well as peace offerings for the continued enjoyment of that fellowship. When Moses could not believe how God could forgive the people for making the golden calf, God showed himself to Moses as "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness."

It is precisely *this God*, just named and described, who, with all the forcefulness the people could endure, spoke the Ten Commandments. This is his will. This is what he wants. What goes on in the life of his redeemed people before they get to heaven *matters* to him. It is important to him, important enough to name specifics—*ten* specifics; important enough to roar them; important enough that God continues in the next chapters with a host of specific applications of the commandments (all the while assuming that the Promised Land already belongs to them).

It is precisely the beauty and importance of the Ten Commandments that make our sins against them so grievous. The more we see the commandments are good and just and right, the more we will see how horribly we have missed the boat by failing to do them. Remember something that is so simple: when

we confess our sins, we are not saying that we have a problem with what God wants in his commandments; we are saying that the problem is entirely with *us*. The Small Catechism says: "Here consider your station according to the Ten Commandments." There is absolutely no question about who is right and who is wrong when we make the comparison. The call to each of us is: "Examine *yourself!*" Examine yourself, not according to some generic concept of "Law," but according to each and every specific one of the Ten Commandments.

Violations of the Ten Commandments are a terrible thing. It was a problem so acute that God marshaled all the forces of heaven and earth to cure the problem. It took the Son of God himself to live the beautiful life we could not live, as he did the will of his Father. It took the Son of God himself to pour out his lifeblood on the cross—a terrible price for a beautiful righteousness.

Living in the forgiveness won on the cross, what then shall we do? The answer is seen in the scriptural aftermath of God's giving of the commandments. The very same question was asked when, much to Moses' surprise, God forgave the people for making the golden calf. God's answer? "Cut two tablets just like the first ones!" If the commandments were good and right when they were first given, they were good and right for the people now.

As the commandments were first given at Sinai to the redeemed people of God, they are given to the redeemed people of God today. They still count for something in the everyday life of God's people today. Why, with the commandments in heart and mind, the child of God might even have a "Table of Duties," as did Dr. Luther. Love is rejoicing in what is right, and love is the fulfilling of the Law, namely, the Ten Commandments.

Now—to be sure—living under the grace of God as we do, the performance of the commandments does not count for our salvation; it never did. As Israel was destined for the Promised Land long before the commandments were given, we were elected to eternal life long before we even had the chance to keep or break the commandments. By the grace of God, the safety of our own necks is never in question. That means that in

thanksgiving to God we can pay all our attention to *him*. We pay attention to him by paying attention to what he wants. And what he wants is the Ten Commandments. In short, it is precisely because the commandments do not count for our salvation that they *do* count in the heart-of-hearts of the redeemed.

The problem for us (the problem is *always* with us) is that the commandments at least sound pedantic to us, as I mentioned earlier. As we remember that we are forgiven sinners, they really should not sound pedantic to us, but they do. And we treat the commandments as though they are something childish. For many Lutherans junior confirmation class will be the very last time in their entire lives that they take a serious look at each of the Ten Commandments. Like Pharisees and Pietists and Pentecostals we feel like we have graduated from the commandments and have moved beyond them to bigger and better things.

However, in moving on to more “advanced” Christian living, we have a way of violating the very fundamentals of the commandments. A stewardship program, for example, may wind up lacking any of the common decency espoused in the commandments. Or, and as much as I love our liturgy, we have to beware of rigidly insisting on bowing and kneeling in the proper way and at the proper time and all the while not giving two hoots about what the redeemed do with their bodies on Monday through Saturday. Or, we seek to create for the laypeople all sorts of church busywork that is clearly not commanded by God, and thereby we drag the people away from caring for their families, something that plainly *is* commanded.

In the confession of sins and the reception of forgiveness, we realize that the Ten Commandments are pedantic only for those who are children. Instead, we continue to pray as the redeemed children of God:

Make me walk in thy commands;
‘Tis a delightful road.
Nor let my head or heart or hands
Offend against my God. Amen.