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 Various Texts
 First Message
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THE WEIGHTIEST WORDS

SERIES: RESTORING THE ANCIENT BOUNDARIES

*"You shall have no other gods before Me.
 You shall not make for yourself an idol...
 You shall not take the name of your Lord in vain...
 Observe the Sabbath to keep it holy...
 Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be
 prolonged...
 You shall not murder.
 You shall not commit adultery.
 You shall not steal.
 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
 You shall not covet your neighbor's wife; and you shall not
 desire your neighbor's house, his field or his manser-
 vant, his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to
 your neighbor."*

David Roper, in his new book on the life of Elijah, *Seeing Through*, quotes Dartmouth professor Jeffrey Hart from a recent speech, published in the *Wall Street Journal*, bemoaning the moral deterioration of our nation:

A great many things happened all of a sudden in this country in the very recent past. Without going into the right and wrong of every case, I list them objectively. Within living memory, abortion was a felony in virtually every state in the nation. Today abortion is commonplace in America. Demands that it be federally funded are alleged to be rooted in the Constitution.

Within living memory, hard-core pornography was largely kept out of sight, usually by a rough agreement between sellers and authorities. Now the hard core stuff is available on your newsstand.

Within living memory, school children recited the Pledge of Allegiance every morning, and in many schools simple prayers. At Christmas time, they sang Christmas carols. Suddenly, all of that fell under proscription.

Within living memory, homosexuals were for the most part discreet. Suddenly, we find that they demand public legitimization of their peculiarity, stage parades and demand representation in governing bodies as a legitimate minority. Is there any question that a revolution has in fact been imposed upon an

unsuspecting nation?!

We are living in an age that seems to have no moral boundaries. "G. K. Chesterton once observed that morality, like art, consists of drawing a straight line. Now no one knows where to draw the lines!"² (Roper, *Seeing Through*, 20). Leading the campaign of moral confusion today are the television and radio talk show hosts. These self-appointed priests and priestesses of our time are pushing out the outer envelope, where no value is sacred except tolerance. So we are exhorted to permit all, accept all, embrace all and love all.

Who is at fault for this deterioration of values? Is it the media? Our educators? Our politicians? An ancient rabbi once said, "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men" (Matt 5:13, NASB). That rabbi, of course, was Jesus. He was addressing his warning to Israel, because the nation had lost its savor. In 70 AD, his prophetic words came true, when Jerusalem was trampled under foot by the Roman army. Today, the church has lost its way, because we too have neglected to adorn the doctrine of God with the beauty of his commandments. We must always remember that it is impossible to reconstruct the soul of the nation without first reconstructing the soul of the church.

Throughout the summer, our pastors and elders will be preaching an exposition of the Ten Commandments, in a series entitled, *Restoring the Ancient Boundaries*. Our purpose will be first, to explain what each commandment meant when it was first given to Moses; second, how it was applied in Israel's day (from the book of Deuteronomy); third, how Jesus and his apostles understood its application spiritually for the church; and fourth, how it applies in our contemporary world.

Some of you may be asking what the Ten Commandments have to do with Christianity. Hasn't the law been done away with in Christ? you say. Aren't we saved by grace through faith, and not by works of law? This morning I want to give a word of introduction regarding the importance of the Ten Commandments (which were known in Israel as the Ten Words, or the Covenant) in all of Scripture as a foundation for the rest of the studies to come.

Some years ago, I took our family on vacation in Oregon. Following a thunderstorm one morning, my youngest daughter and I went on a walk through a

meadow. Scattered pools of rainwater dotted the grass, reflecting the blue sky and the passing clouds as in an Impressionist painting. It was a beautiful sight. I asked my daughter to look into one of the pools and tell me what she saw. She stood over one puddle and, looking straight down into the water, said, "I see mud." Then I asked her to look at the pool from a slightly different angle and tell me what she saw. "I see the heavens!" she exclaimed.

I compare those puddles to the law: what you see depends on your vantage point and the condition of the heart that is looking into the mirror (to borrow James' term). This explains why the apostle Paul said that the law killed him (Romans 7), the commandment revealed sin, provoked sin, and then condemned sin in the flesh. But that same law brought life to the psalmist of Psalm 119, "O how I love your law. I meditate on your statutes and they bring me life." While it is true that Christians are not saved through works of law, nevertheless the law is a picture of Jesus, the Man from heaven. As we meditate upon it, we are prompted to love and to heavenly things from a converted heart.

So my task this morning is to answer the question, how important are the Ten Commandments? My answer will give seven reasons for their critical importance.

1. Their manner of revelation was unique³

Exodus 19 describes the occasion of the giving of the Ten Commandments as a holy descent by God from heaven. That descent was accompanied by thunder and lightning, a thick cloud of darkness, loud trumpet sounds, and smoke and fire. The mountain quaked; the people were terror-stricken. Instant death was the fate of anyone who broke through.

This was the first time since the Garden of Eden that the holy God descended to dwell with man. William Cowper described the scene in these verses:

*Marshalling all his terrors as he came;
Thunder, and earthquake, and devouring flame;
From Sinai's top Yahweh gave the law—
Life for obedience—death for ev'ry flaw.
When the great Sov'rein would his will express,
He gives a perfect rule; what can he less?*

There were no intermediaries, no emissaries, no interpreters and no expositors on this sacred occasion. God descended from heaven, met Moses face to face, and inscribed the commandments with his very finger on two tablets of stone. There is an infinite amount of authority behind that expression, "the finger of God." The term was not used again until Jesus said, in the NT, "If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Luke 11:20). The Ten Commandments are the weightiest words ever given!

2. Their form and manner of preservation were unique

Notice that the Commandments are stated as abstract truths. Thus they are enduring, universal truths. The remainder of the law formed the specific application of these commandments for Israel while she resided in the land. The tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written were kept in the ark of the covenant, the gold box that symbolized that which lasts forever (Heb. 9:4)—a symbol of the very presence of heaven itself.

3. Their title was unique: Only the Ten Words were called *The Covenant*

While there is a Book of the Covenant (Exod 34:7), the specific word "The Covenant" (Deut 5:2, lit. "The LORD our God cut with us a covenant") speaks of the Ten Commandments and the arrangement by which God committed himself to Israel and Israel to himself (see Exod 34:28). Thus when Jeremiah spoke of a day when God would make a New Covenant with Israel by inscribing the Law on their hearts, he was referring specifically to a day when God's Spirit would inscribe the Ten Commandments on the human heart. In the New Covenant, therefore, the Ten Commandments remain as the core of our identity as Christians.

4. Their priority of place in the Canon of Scripture

The Ten Commandments came first, then came the ceremonial law (Leviticus). The order indicates that ethics must precede worship. All throughout the Scriptures it is evident that worship without ethics is valueless. This is what Jesus himself taught in the Sermon on the Mount.

(a) Worship had absolutely no value to God without ethics

The prophet Jeremiah had similar words for the people of his day, when he said: "Do not trust in deceptive words, saying, 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.'...Behold you are trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and offer sacrifices to Baal, and walk after other gods that you have not known, then come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, 'We are delivered!'—that you may do all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of robbers in your sight?" (Jer 7:4, 8-11).

Not only was the ceremonial law based on the Ten Commandments, but the prophets also were to be judged both by the content of what they said and how one interpreted what they said by the Ten Commandments.

(b) The Ten Commandments provided the basis for hermeneutics

We find the first instance of this in Numbers 12. Two prophets, Aaron and Miriam, challenged Moses' authority, and God himself answered as to where the greater authority lay. God personally intervened to settle the dispute (Num 12:6-8):

“If there is a prophet among you,
I the LORD, shall make Myself known to him in a vision.
I shall speak with him in a dream.
Not so, with My servant Moses,
He is faithful in all my household;
With him I speak mouth to mouth,
Even openly and not in dark sayings,
And he beholds the form of the LORD.
Why then were you not afraid
To speak against My servant, against Moses?”

God is saying that when he spoke through the prophets, he spoke in riddles and metaphors—in enigmatic terms. When he spoke with Moses, however, it was in a face to face encounter. Thus, if there is tension between what we understand Moses to be saying versus what we think the prophets are saying, Moses must take precedence. The clear revelation must never be overruled by what is unclear. The prophetic writings are given to evoke our imagination and to comfort the afflicted with the hope of a new world to come. But the pictures they paint can never overrule the written word; they are different modes of revelation.

(c) The Ten Commandments were the ultimate test of a true prophet

In Deuteronomy, Moses wrote about the ministry of prophets who would come after him, and how to judge a false prophet: “If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them’; you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you to find out if you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul...that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death” (Deut 13:1-5).

Since the prophets were successors to Moses, they could not violate what Moses had said. Even if the prophet could perform miracles, that was not sufficient reason to follow him; rather, moral ethics were the supreme test. Bruce Waltke comments: “That false prophet was sent to test Israel, to see if she indeed loved the Lord or if she was looking for excuse to follow after her own lusts. That false prophets could do miracles suggests there is demonic ability in false prophets. It reveals to us that the Ten Commandments have the final arbitration of right and wrong. They are given greater authority for hermeneutics than anything else.” Ethics, not signs and wonders, are the test of the true prophet. Tragically, at times I have counseled people who claimed to have been led into immorality by God’s leading through circumstances.

Twelve months ago, an individual who claimed to have performed signs and wonders told me he had had a vision about me. He said that with fear and trepida-

tion, he had to tell me that I had a hard heart. He relayed to me that a demon had told him in a vision that the demon had possession of the Morgan family for 350 years. Referring to me, the demon had said in this vision, “He is mine.” I did not have much rest that night. The next day I pondered the words of Moses and Paul. I telephoned the man and asked him, “Am I to give your word more weight than the words of Moses, who said that the iniquity of the fathers would not go past the third generation, because of his loyal love? Am I to give your words more weight than the apostle Paul, who said that in Christ, I am a new creation? If there is any hardness in my heart, it is due to my own sinful choices, not some demon that an ancestor introduced 350 years ago.”

The words of Moses take precedence over signs and wonders.

5. In the ministry of Jesus, the Ten Words are upheld

How did Jesus regard the Ten Commandments? He lived for them! He fulfilled the law. Here is what he said about them on one occasion: “Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:19). Jesus was horrified to see that religious tradition would break one of the commandments. The Pharisees challenged him with violating ceremonial laws of washing, but he retorted that they broke the commandment, “Honor your father and mother,” by urging people to withhold support of their parents and give their money to the temple instead (Mark 7:8). When Jesus held the cup of the New Covenant in the Upper Room, he declared that the Holy Spirit would write the Ten Commandments on the hearts of believers.

6. The gift of the Spirit writes the Ten Words on the human heart

In the New Testament, all fulfilled application of the commandments was broadened and heightened to a new level. Even the Sabbath is transcended; not just one day is holy, but all time is holy to God.

On the feast of Pentecost, the Jews celebrate the giving of the law at Sinai. On that occasion, as we have seen, God descended from heaven in thunder, fire and smoke, and with his finger wrote the ten words on two tablets of stone. At Pentecost, Christ having fulfilled the law, God poured forth his Spirit to write the law on tablets of human hearts. So Paul would say that his credential as a true apostle was not some written letter of recommendation; the Corinthians themselves were his living letter, because their hearts bore testimony of changed lives in conformity to the Ten Commandments (2 Cor 3: 1-6).

The pastoral epistles list the qualities required of leaders of the church, and every requirement has to do with character. There is almost no mention as to their

“charismata” gifts (except “apt to teach,” which can be accomplished through a number of speaking gifts). How do the Ten Commandments land in a potential leader’s home, in his church, and in his workplace? Elders therefore might be mediocre in gift, but they must be impeccable in character. The Church today, however, seems to major on dynamic spiritual gifts and minor on character. But it is much better for a board of elders to be mediocre in gift but impeccable in character, than outstanding in gift but apt to compromise.

Finally, what will be the result if we neglect the Ten Commandments?

7. Warnings of rejecting the Ten Words are more severe in the NT than in the OT

The writer of Hebrews describes the awe and terror of the first giving of the Law at Sinai, and compares and contrasts it to the heavenly realities the church enters into when it comes together:

“For you have not come to a mountain that may be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word should be spoken to them. For they could not bear the command, ‘If even a beast touches the mountain, it will be stoned.’ And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, ‘I am full of fear and trembling.’” (Heb 12:18-21).

But the warning from the writer of Hebrews is even more pronounced: “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant...See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, must less shall we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven...our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:22-25, 29).

So what shall we do? Deuteronomy 6:6-9

God personally come down from heaven and wrote the law on tablets of stone by his very finger. Then he descended again in the person of his Son to fulfill the law. Finally, he descended a third time, at Pentecost, to write this law on human hearts. How should we respond to these heavenly initiatives?

(a) Internalize the Word: Do not be ignorant

“And these words, which I am commanding you to-

day, shall be on your heart” (Deut 6:6). If God has gone to such trouble, we should take time to learn his commandments. Carve out time to read his word and memorize it. When I spend time alone with God, the Holy Spirit prompts me to love him and love people. This is what the Spirit does through the commandments: he prompts us to love others.

(b) Teach the Word

“And you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up” (6:7).

The word “diligently” comes from the Hebrew root for the word *tooth*. When used as an adverb in this context it means to teach incisively, so that the teaching penetrates the core of their being. Parents are to teach in this manner in all places (in your house and when you walk by the way), and at all times (when you rise up and when you lie down). So we are to internalize and teach the Word.

Finally, we are to apply the Word.

(c) Apply the Word

“And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (6:8-9).

Let the commandments inform all of your thinking and actions. And don’t merely apply them in your private world. Boldly take them into the community and make them known. Don’t apologize for these commandments. They are the very foundation that holds lives, families and societies together. These are the things that make us profoundly human—and the world knows it. Therefore, stand up for what is right, no matter what it costs.

The best way for children to learn the commandments is by parents’ modeling the truth of them. So let us get rid of the idols in our homes. Let us challenge and expose injustice or unethical behavior at work. Then we shall adorn the doctrine of our God with beauty, and the world will be attracted to the gospel.

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1. David Roper, *Seeing Through* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 1995) 19-20.
 2. Roper, *Seeing Through*, 20.
 3. Special thanks to Dr. Bruce Waltke for these first four observations in his lecture “*The Origin of Prophecy*” given at Regent College, Vancouver, B.C., Canada.