

THE STRUCTURE OF LOVE

Scriptures: Exodus 19:1-8

My wife Nadine has a book of offbeat children's songs, one of which is called "Rules." The whole song is a series of don'ts: "Do not jump on ancient uncles, do not talk to average mice, do not wear a broom to breakfast, do not ask a snake's advice." The song goes on to talk about not smoking cigars on sofas or dancing on velvet chairs, and the last line concludes with these words: "And whatever else you do do, it is better you do not."

That is how many people see the Ten Commandments: "Don't do this! Don't do that!" Tony Campolo, a sociology professor from Pennsylvania, tells of growing up in a church youth group where their whole philosophy of life was summed up in a little rhyme: "We do not drink or smoke or chew and don't go out with girls who do."

If you understand nothing else about the Ten Commandments, I want you to understand this. The Ten Commandments are not just a series of Don'ts. The commandments are not a set of rules meant to bind us and make us miserable. They are the charter of freedom and the declaration of purpose for people who have just been set free from slavery.

In Exodus 19, leading up to the Ten Commandments, the Lord says, "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." This refers to the story of Moses and the exodus—how God sent plagues on the Egyptians until they released the Israelites from slavery and how God parted the Red Sea so they could escape. The Ten Commandments are not the requirements we must pass in order to be saved. The people of Israel had already been saved. They had already been set free. The commandments were the snapshots of how this new life of freedom was supposed to look.

You will recall that in April 2003 an entire nation was set free from a tyrant. Saddam Hussein, who by all accounts was a violent, brutal, and repressive dictator, was overthrown and driven from power. Do you remember the scene? Crowds of jubilant Iraqis pulled down Saddam Hussein's statue and celebrated in the streets. The joy of freedom was palpable. Even those who opposed the war in Iraq had second thoughts that day.

But as people were celebrating, something ominous began to happen. There was widespread looting. Repressed militia groups began arming themselves. Almost from the beginning there was jockeying for power, people eyeing the homes, the territory, the oil that had been controlled by others. Very quickly the situation spiraled into violence and chaos.

I don't mean to oversimplify a complex situation. But can you see what it would have meant to the people of Iraq if their liberation had been accompanied by the Ten Commandments? How different the life of that country might have been if on the day of their freedom everyone had taken a solemn vow not to steal, not to kill, not to covet. Can you imagine how different Iraq would be today if on the day of their liberation every Iraqi had stood in a solemnly assembly and declared, "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do"? That is exactly what the Lord asks of the people of Israel on the day of their liberation from Egypt.

Unfortunately, the Israelites did not keep these commandments any better than the Iraqis, and they suffered many of the same problems. But that is not the fault of the commandments. The commandments are meant to be a blessing to us. God tells us not to have other gods—whether it is money, sports, career, possessions, or status—God tells us not to worship any of these others things, because sooner or later they will disappoint us. They will let us down, and God wants something better for us.

The same is true with the other commandments. God tells us to keep the Sabbath, because there is more to life than work. God tells us not to commit adultery, because there is more to life than sex. God tells us not to covet because there is more to life than keeping up with the neighbors. God prohibits these things not to stifle us but to set us free for something better.

Further on in Exodus chapter 19, in verses 5-6, the Lord says,

Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.

The Ten Commandments are not only our charter of freedom, they are our mission statement—our declaration of purpose. They are given not only to bring blessing into our own lives but to make us a blessing to others. That is what it means to be a priestly kingdom. All of us, the whole church, are meant to be priests bringing God's blessing to others.

Let me show how this applies to the Ten Commandments. On the inside pages of the insert this morning I have printed Martin Luther's explanations of the Ten Commandments from his *Small Catechism*. Martin Luther's numbering of the Ten Commandments is different than the numbering we normally use. I will say more about that in the sermon two weeks from now. But for now I want you to notice something striking about Martin Luther's explanation of the Ten Commandments. Even though most of the commandments are worded in the negative, Martin Luther gives a positive spin to each of the commandments. Each negative commandment is given a positive implication which I have underlined. When a commandment says, "Don't do this" or "Don't do that," it implies a world of good things that we can do.

As an example, look at commandment number 5 on the insert: "You shall not kill." What does this mean? "We should fear and love God, and so we should not endanger our neighbor's life, nor cause him any harm." That is the negative side of the commandment: "Do no harm." But notice what comes next: "But (we should) help and befriend him in every necessity of life." Our entire mission to others is wrapped up in this commandment. Hunger relief, shelter for the homeless, medical care, even feeding and caring for our children is wrapped up in this commandment. It is not just about avoiding murder; it is about serving one another in love.

The same is true for commandment number 6: "You shall not commit adultery." What does this mean? "We should fear and love God, and so we should lead a chaste and pure life in word and deed, each one loving and honoring his wife or husband." It's great if you don't have an affair. But the commitment of marriage is really more than that. It's about each one loving and honoring each other. Think about that: Honoring each other!

My favorite explanation is number 8: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” Luther starts out with the obvious: “We should not tell lies about our neighbor, nor betray, slander, or defame him.” With that much we would all agree. But notice how much further he goes. “But (we) should apologize for him, speak well of him, and interpret charitably all that he does.” Imagine what it would do to your relationships if you tried to put the best possible spin on the stupid things that your neighbor does, or your co-worker, or the kid at school. Imagine if instead of griping about other people you tried to understand their actions in the kindest way possible. That does not mean you have to agree with their actions or condone them. But it does soften your attitude toward the other person, because suddenly you are trying to put yourself in their shoes, to understand the situation from their background and experience.

Jesus was once asked, “Which is the greatest commandment?” He replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. ... And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Some people draw from this the conclusion that we don’t need the commandments. To quote the Beatles, “All we need is love.” But Jesus did not say that. Earlier in Matthew’s gospel Jesus says, “Do not think I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have not come to abolish but to fulfill.” The Ten Commandments are not superfluous to love. They are the structure of love. They guide us in how to act in loving ways toward other people, even when we don’t feel loving toward them. And as we will discover in the coming weeks, they can make life better for all of us.

- Ken Onstot
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