

Introduction to Ten Commandments By Ray Silverman

Lesson: Exodus 20:1-17

Sermon: This is a series of sermons on what most people agree are the essential teachings of every faith. We often hear people refer to these teachings as “the only thing that is really important.” Or they say, “If people just lived according to these teachings, we wouldn’t need all those different religions.” Whether people call themselves Unitarian, Baptist, Buddhist, Jewish, Mormon, Methodist or Catholic, they usually agree on one thing, and that is: if people would just stick to this simple, straightforward set of essential teachings, we would all be better off.

What are these essential teachings? What is this universal code of ethics, recognized by all religions everywhere? It is the Ten Commandments, a divine guide for living; the Ten Commandments, which contain the essential teachings of every faith; the Ten Commandments which teach that there is one God who is to be loved and revered, that parents are to be honored, that we should not kill, commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet. This is the sum and substance of all religion. Emanuel Swedenborg writes, “The Ten Commandments contain everything relating to love to God, and everything relating to love towards the neighbor.” [AE 1026:3]

When we consider the whole manner in which the Ten Commandments were given, we are struck with the feeling that they must be very special indeed. When God descended onto Mount Sinai to give them, the whole mountain trembled, the sky flashed with lightning and shook with thunder, and smoke belled up from the top of the mountain like the smoke of a great furnace. The people themselves were not allowed to go up the mountain, or even to touch its base, or they would surely be put to death. Only Moses would be allowed to ascend. He would receive two tablets upon which the Lord Himself had written the divine message, a message written with the finger of God. And the holy tablets of stone upon which were written the Ten Commandments would be placed in the tabernacle, in a secret, interior room called the Holy of Holies, in the golden box called the Ark, upon which sat two cherubim, facing each other. It was there, in the Holy of Holies, that the Ten Commandments of God’s testimony would be kept, in the golden box, in the darkness, under the protective golden wings of the two cherubim. For God had said, “In the ark you shall put the testimony that I will give you ... and there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you.” [Ex. 25:16, 22] In all of this there is a feeling of great wonder, mystery and awe.

The giving of the Ten Commandments ushers us into a world of divine authority and holy power, where God Himself comes to us, to comfort us, and guide us, and bless us. When God came to earth again, 1500 years later, as Jesus Christ, He reemphasized the supreme importance of the Ten Commandments. “He that has My commandments,” Jesus said, “and does them, it is he who loves Me.” [John 14:21] Jesus is here referring specifically to the Ten Commandments which He gave 1500 years previously on Mount Sinai. We might wonder why it was so essential for the commandments to be given with such a grand display and in such a miraculous manner, especially since all these laws were already known, even before their promulgation from Mount Sinai. It was not as if mankind never knew that it was wrong to kill, or lie, or steal. These same essential truths were well-known for centuries in all the kingdoms of the earth, and even in Egypt, the land from which the children of Israel had just come. These were the laws of civil justice everywhere. They had been in force from the beginning of creation. But the miraculous promulgation from Mount Sinai awakened something that had long ago been forgotten—that these were not merely civic laws for the purpose of maintaining order in society. More importantly, they were divine laws, given by God Himself, for the purpose of blessing man with eternal happiness.

In this regard, Emanuel Swedenborg writes, “The reason the Ten Commandments were promulgated by Jehovah and were, moreover, written by His finger on tablets of stone was that they might be not only the commandments of civil life, but also the commandments of heavenly life, that is, of spiritual life. In that case, to act against them would be not only to act against men, but also to act against God.” [TCR 444] To say, “I refuse to do this or that evil because it would harm a person or break the law,” is one thing; but to say, “I refuse to do this or that evil because it is a sin against God,” is entirely different. When Potiphar’s wife tried to get Joseph to commit adultery with her, he did not say, “I refuse to do this because your husband will be furious,” nor did he refuse to do it because it was contrary to Egyptian law. Rather he said, “You are his wife. How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?” [Gen. 39:9] Joseph refused to commit adultery not because it would offend Potiphar, and not because it was against the law of Egypt. Joseph refused to commit adultery because adultery is a sin against God.

The Ten Commandments as given in the book of Exodus, chapter 20, begin with a seven-word preface, which is often overlooked when the commandments are recited, but those seven words are all important. They set the tone for all that follows. They make it abundantly clear why these commandments are so very important. They let us know just who it is who is speaking to us – not some human lawgiver, no matter how enlightened; not some prophet or sage, no matter how wise; but God Himself, for we read: “And God spoke all these words, saying...” It is God Himself who speaks to us through the Ten Commandments. “And God spoke all these words, saying...” It is God who first of all reminds us of the great deliverance He has performed in our lives. “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” [Ex. 20:2]

It was the Lord God who had freed the Children of Israel from their hard bondage to the Egyptian taskmasters. It is the Lord God who frees us from all states of servitude to sin, to suffering, to self-pity, and anger and lust and greed. He frees us from the inner tyrants that would dominate us and have us do their bidding. He has miraculously brought us out of the land of

Egypt, out of the house of bondage. He has lifted us above the material plane of existence with its rollercoaster succession of joys and sorrows, gains and losses, victories and defeats. He has lifted us on eagles' wings into a perception of life in a higher dimension, a dimension of selfless love and perpetual peace, a dimension of joy that does not subside and faith that does not waver. "You have seen," He said to each of us, "what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself." [Ex. 19:4] As each of us stands before the mountain of God, ready to receive the Ten Commandments, it is first of all necessary to remember that it is He who has delivered us and brought us to this place today so we can hear His word. "I have carried you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself."

Each of us, in our own way, is called to reflect on who we were at one time, how each of us like sheep had gone astray, and how the Lord in His tender mercy miraculously brought us out of bondage, out of selfishness and sin, and led us to the foot of His holy mountain. Without Him leading us every step of the way, we would be servants of sin. Without Him protecting and guiding us at every moment, we would be lost. Without Him, we would never have found our way out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, and through the desert. To open ourselves to receive the Divine Commandments, we must first of all acknowledge that the Lord God has Himself brought us to the point in our spiritual lives where we can fully receive these profound truths. We have not come to this mountain of ourselves, but the Lord has brought us here. He has led us every step of the way.

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." This is the divine preface to the holiest set of laws ever given to mankind. It is true that the world would be a much better place if everyone simply lived according to the commandments, but the accumulated evidence of world history sadly testifies that people do not live according to the commandments. It is true that the Ten Commandments comprise the essential teachings of all the world's great religions, and yet the world as a whole has yet to appreciate the fullness of divinity that lies stored up in these apparently simple commands. In promulgating the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai with the voice of thunder, in writing them with His own finger, in causing the mountain to smoke and quake and the people to tremble, the Lord reminds us that what He is about to give us is most holy, that these commandments must become living principles of daily conduct, not because they make sense – though they do; not because they will bless our life and the lives of others – though they will; but because our God, who loves us and has delivered us, has spoken them. "And God spoke all these words." It is God Himself who, from His own lips and through His own finger, has given the commandments to man.

And he asks us to prepare a place for them, a tabernacle like the large tent the children of Israel were to build, but this tabernacle will be built in the human heart, an interior place called the Holy of Holies. It is there that we are to receive the commandments as God gives them to us, regarding them as most holy, as words of spirit and words of life. The Ten Commandments are not the ideas of man, not the products of highly-involved human reason, but rather the words of our Divine Father, who has already redeemed us and prepared us for this moment. It is He who has brought us to this moment in time, He who yearns to fill us with the blessings stored up in these wondrous teachings. "These words which I am giving to you this day," He says to each of us, "will bless you. These words will lift you and fill you with life. These words I speak to you so that My joy may be in you, and your joy may be full." [John 15:11]

And God spake all these words, saying,

I am the Lord thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them, for I, the Lord thy God, am a jealous god, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me, and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments.

Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy; six days thou shalt labor and do all thy work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God. In it thou shalt not do any work; thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor the stranger that is within thy gates, for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day, wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

Honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.

Thou shalt not kill.

Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Thou shalt not steal.

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor's.