

“The Core of God’s Commands”

Introduction: As many of you know one of the activities I enjoy is that of running, but about ten years or so ago I began to wonder if my enjoyment of that sport had come to an end. I wondered that because I had begun to experience a number of nagging injuries that just wouldn’t heal. I therefore found myself needing to be inactive for long periods of time, which, as my wife would attest, does nothing for my ordinarily sunny disposition! Then, at an event over at the Elementary School, I happened to run into Dr. Brian McKeon. Brian is an orthopedic surgeon and does a lot of work with Boston Celtics. He lives in Essex and our daughters are friends, so as we fell into conversation I told him about my injuries. “Are you doing core work?” he asked. Well, I had never heard of core work, I told him and so he said, “You runners are all the same. You think you can go off for several miles, touch your toes and take a shower, and you’re done. But you’re not.” He went on to explain that core work, exercises to strengthen some key areas of your body—your abdomen, lower back, and glutes—needs to be regularly done. Ignore this work and your legs will not be properly supported and the chance of injury will greatly increase.

What we will consider this morning, as we look at the Ten Commandments, can be thought of as a significant part of the core work of our spiritual life. As Moses continues to prepare the Israelites to break camp and move into the Promised Land, living and shining the light of the LORD among the peoples there, he is now getting ready to launch into twenty or so chapters of decrees and directives to govern their life together once they enter this land. All of these decrees flow in one way or another out of the Ten Commandments. The Ten, we could say, form their core. Further, when Jesus is asked by an expert in the law to name the most important commandment of God’s law, Jesus essentially summarizes the Ten, the first four which have to do with loving God and the next six with loving our neighbor, with these words (Ma. 22:34-40):

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

Thus, the Ten form the core on which our life with God, and one another, is maintained and strengthened. The Ten in fact are a gift to help us become properly trained disciples, keeping us injury free and looking good. As Moses didn’t want the Israelites breaking camp and running off into the Promised Land without knowing and understanding this core, neither does Jesus want to send us off without having a firm grasp of, and a willingness to return regularly to this core.

I. The Gift that Follows Grace

A. As we look at them as a whole today, let’s begin by considering the nature of these commandments, in particular, that they are a gift, because we normally don’t think of commandments in this way. In fact, there are, in general, three ways we can view God’s commands. One way is to ignore them all together, either because we think God is trying to take away our fun, or we think we know better. A second way is just the opposite. This way views the commands of God as what we need to do to earn God’s favor, that our moral performance is linked to what God thinks of us and whether he’ll save us or not. As Tim Keller has so succinctly put it, in the first way we seek to be Lord of our life, and in the second way we seek to be savior of our life. Both ways, the way of irreligion, and the way of moral performance, essentially eliminate Jesus as Lord and Savior.

B. But there is a third way to view God’s commands, which I would suggest to you is God’s way because it is what we see as we consider the context in which we find the Ten. And that way is to view the commandments as a gift from God which provide, not the source of our

relationship with God, but the course of it. The commandments don't provide us with the means or condition of that relationship but how we are to live it out. As we said last week, our ethics flow from who God is, and who God is flows from what God has done. And who God is and what God has done he declares firmly and clearly from the get go. Before any commandments are given, the people are to understand this: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of slavery" [Dt. 5:6]. God, in other words, had already rescued his people from slavery. This was now how they were to live in light of that rescue. The Ten were to be a gift that follows God's grace, helping them become properly trained disciples, keeping them injury free and looking good. It's one of the reasons the writers of the psalms refer to the commands as that in which they delight!

II. To Keep Injury Free and Looking Good

A. If the Ten are thus a gift, to help us become properly trained, how do they keep us injury free and looking good? They help do so by ordering our affections, revealing our need for a Savior, and showing what it means to live as a light to the nations. So first, the ordering of our affections. Consider the order of the Ten. They begin with God, and then move through work, family, life, sexuality, truth, and finally, property or our stuff. How easy it is, especially with the lure of idolatry that we've been talking about, for the order to get reversed. If we're not careful, the focus can begin with our stuff, as that which has the most importance, it usually then skips over truth and heads to sexuality . . . and never really makes it much further! If it gets to the family, the family usually becomes all consuming and God gets ignored. The problem is that when our affections become disordered, we become unhappy. Even more, we begin to hurt God, others, and ourselves.

B. So, secondly, the Ten help to keep us injury free and looking good because they show us where we have gotten off track and reveal our need for the Great Physician—our Savior—to get us going in the right direction again. As Paul describes his own experience, when he thought he was doing good through his moral performance, the commandments identified where he had indeed stumbled. As he confesses in Romans 7:7, "I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'" This becomes even more apparent when we plumb the depths of the commandments as Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount (Ma. 5-7). As the Ten reveal our sin, where we have hurt God, ourselves, and others, they drive us to Jesus, the Great Physician of our soul, who forgives us and sets us back on the road to healing through the physical therapy (if I can keep pushing this image!) of the Holy Spirit.

C. Finally, just as the purpose of our spiritual formation is not just for our own sake but also for the sake of others, the core that is the Ten Commandments keeps us injury free and looking good not just for our own health but for the spiritual health of others who don't know the God of grace. The commandments do this by helping us know how to live so that we might live well, and look good, bearing witness as a "light to the nations." This charge was spelled out when the Ten were first given to the previous generation of Israelites at Horeb, or Mt. Sinai. There, God informed his people that he had rescued them to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, meaning they were to be a people set apart ("holy") to mediate God's presence ("priests"), to the peoples among whom God was sending them. The Ten formed the core of how they were to do this. Moses was now renewing this core for the next generation because God's covenant with his people was to be ongoing with each succeeding generation.

In this regard, we might need to have fewer arguments about whether the Ten should be hanging in our schools or courtrooms and more concern about whether they are hanging in our homes and how we, as God's people, are keeping them! Certainly, the world would be a much healthier place if everyone did this kind of core work. But the primary function of the Ten was not to keep children well-behaved in their classrooms or the wheels of American democracy running smoothly! Rather, it was to train a people who, because they had been delivered and redeemed by

God, were seeking to bear witness to this God in the world. Further, all the commandments having to do with loving our neighbor are hinged with those having to do with love of God. If I'm not seeking to love God, what's the big deal about a little unfaithfulness or theft, or even lusting after my neighbor's possessions? On what grounds do these have any claim on my life?

So, for the Israelites, the Ten were to help keep them distinct, and not looking like those around them who worshipped the gods of the land and offered sacrifices at their altars, sealing those sacrifices by interacting with a shrine prostitute. It meant not consulting the sun, moon and stars for direction in life. It meant not offering one of their children as a sacrifice to the gods in order to curry their favor upon your household. As they put the core of the Ten into practice, it was to reveal a far different way of living, a way of bringing light, a way of looking good and Godly.

For us, the cultural lure is a bit more subtle, but every bit as powerful. Allowing the Ten to train us to "look good" as disciples, bearing witness to the living God, means standing against our 24/7/365 pace of life and instead worshipping and resting one day out of seven. It means not making a substitute god out of our job, or family, or sports teams. It means remaining faithful to our promises, truthful in our words, and content with what we have. Living this way will go a long way toward shining the light of the Lord on those around us.

So may we come to see the Ten as a gift from God, designed to help train us well as followers of Jesus, ordering the course of our life. May we take them to heart so that we might properly order our affections, see our need for a Savior, and as we break camp, know more of what it looks like to live as a light to our world.