

“I Am the Lord Your God”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20

So, Debbie and I met at Princeton Seminary, and started dating by the middle of our first year. I finally got up the nerve to ask her to marry me in December of our second year. And we decided to go ahead and get married right before the start of our third and final year of seminary.

And Debbie and I had a plan. We set our wedding for August 31st, and had decided to go to Mackinac Island in Michigan for our honeymoon. Now, we were poor seminary students, so we did not stay on the Island itself, but rather on the mainland and took the ferry over. In fact, if you want to hear a funny story, ask us sometime about the “honeymoon” suite we stayed in on the mainland!

Anyway, to do what we wanted, we needed to raise about \$900 for the trip. Like I said, we were poor seminary students. In May, we worked in the catering department the week after graduation, and we estimated that would bring in about \$600 total. That still left us \$300 short of our goal, though.

There was a prize given at Princeton, and I think at other Presbyterian seminaries, called the Samuel Robinson Award. The award was \$300, and it was given to any student who could memorize the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Now, I don’t remember exactly whose idea it was, but I have a vague memory that someone said to me, “Honey, you would be great at that! If you memorized the Catechism, then we would have what we need to go on our honeymoon.” Somehow, the task fell to me to memorize the catechism, all 107 questions and answers.

You will be happy to know that we did get to go on our honeymoon as we had planned, probably because I had a good and motivated coach! But it was a little daunting. And when Debbie and I went back this past May for our twentieth-class reunion at Princeton, we went in the classroom where I took that test. And it sure did bring back some vivid memories. Twenty-one years ago, about ten of my classmates joined me, with a professor at the front of the classroom. And he just started asking a question from the catechism, and randomly went around the room for each answer. I remember distinctly being asked question number 49, which is: “Which is the Second Commandment?” And the answer was this:

“The Second Commandment is, ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing 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” (Book of Confessions, 7.049).

At the end of the day, I felt like I had earned my \$300!

Now, there are a couple of reasons I share this experience with you. The first is to highlight the fact that so much has changed in the past two generations. I’m sure there are many of you, if you grew up in the Presbyterian Church, that learned for memory the Westminster Catechism as a child. It was part of the curriculum which you learned in Sunday School, and many folks have told me about the recognition they received when as a child they completed their catechism class. Today, it takes a cash award for seminarians to consider learning for memory the Catechism. It’s not at all taken for granted that children or adults learn the catechism, and the basics of faith which are in it, and we must find new ways to teach lessons from the past.

The second reason I share this with you is that, as part of the Westminster Catechism, the Ten Commandments are given great attention and detail as a theological foundation for Christian discipleship. The Catechism begins that section with the question: “Where is the moral law summarily comprehended?” Answer: “The moral law is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments.” Then, “What is the sum of the Ten Commandments?” Answer: “The sum of the Ten Commandments is: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind; and our neighbor as ourselves” (7.041-7.042).

If that sounds familiar, it should. Jesus said these very words when asked what is the greatest commandment. And in this sentence is the summary of the Ten Commandments as they speak to our relationship with God, and with one another. The first four commandments speak to how we are to honor God: no other gods, no graven images, not to take God’s name in vain, remember the Sabbath day. The last six commandments speak to how we are to reflect our love for God in our relations with our neighbor: honor your father and mother, don’t kill, don’t commit adultery, don’t steal, don’t covet, don’t bear false witness. In this story from Scripture, we are given a guide by which we are to live in faith to God and with one another.

David Wells writes: *The Ten Commandments are a gift to those who have been set free, showing them how they can keep their freedom. They are not an assault course, a barrier to be overcome in order to gain freedom. Freedom is a gift from God, not something that can be earned by years of striving. The commandments are not a prison in which God places his people, a straitjacket to prevent them from getting above themselves. God has done what Israel could not do for itself - he has*

given it freedom in the crossing of the Red Sea. He now gives his people a second gift – the means of keeping that freedom. In the process he shows them who he is and what freedom is.

The commands end where they began. God has brought Israel out of slavery; who could ask for anything more? God has given us life, purpose, heritage, destiny, gifts, truth. Yet we still compare ourselves with our neighbors and want what they have – Israel's perennial mistake. Without God, they could have goods and gratification; but they could never be holy, and they could never be free (David F. Wells, "God Spoke These Words," *The Christian Century*, March 15, 2000: 301).

The boundaries by which we are to live our lives of freedom must reflect our understanding that we cannot be holy on our own; we need others. We must honor God not by worshiping our possessions, but by honoring one another. We must respect God not by judging and excluding others, but by treating others with the respect we would want.

The Ten Commandments are not just guidelines for us as individuals. They are guidelines for us as the Body of Christ to be in a right relationship with our God. We are to honor God, not honor our accomplishments. We are to worship God, not worship our talents or performances. We are to love one another, and in so doing we love God. We are called to model maturity in our behavior, and in so doing show the commitment our Lord expects from us.

There's a house up on 79th Street, close to where we live, that has a big marble monument in the front yard. The first few times I passed by it, I really didn't pay attention to it. But one day, when I had to slow down for traffic, I looked at it and realized it was the Ten Commandments. It's very similar to other physical reminders of these laws of God that we've seen in public places around the country.

Is that the answer? Is that what we need to do more of? Make these commandments more visible? Build more monuments, or do direct mail flyers, or send everyone we know a text every day that includes the Ten Commandments? Paste them over Facebook or Twitter or Instagram? I mean, I guess that's an option, and perhaps you think that would make a difference in the world.

But I suppose I take a different perspective. These commandments are more than words on a page, or etchings on a stone tablet. They are commands for how to live in the light of God's love. They are actions to live out in community. For me, when I see them being enacted by others, then I am more inclined to emulate them in my own life.

In the face of great responsibility and stress, when I witness a civic leader choosing to take a day of rest, then I am reminded of the importance of remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy.

When I witness an individual who has great material wealth, but chooses to live simply and give most of those riches to those in need,

then I am reminded of the importance of not making any graven images to replace the Lord our God.

In the face of incredible human loss of life at the hands of man with an arsenal of weapons in Las Vegas, not only am I reminded of the command to not murder, but also of the insatiable goodness of the human race to help, care, and love in the face of evil – to love our neighbors as ourselves.

The Ten Commandments are not meant to be memorialized on stone tablets or written on walls. They are meant to be written on our hearts, our minds, our souls. Someone may read the commandments in a public place, but reading them is not the same as experiencing them. I promise you that the moral law will stick with someone when they are shown kindness, are given respect, and are loved for who they are, and then are told to do the same to others. That is when the moral law is written on people's hearts, and is promptly spread in God's name.

I've always found it interesting that eight of the Ten Commandments are written in the negative: "You shall not do this or that." Perhaps they were written that way so that we would not be confused. But I also wonder if it might be helpful to consider how those negatives can be thought of in the positive.

Instead of, "You shall have no other gods before me," think, "We shall honor and serve our living, loving God." Instead of, "You shall not make an idol," think, "We shall worship our Lord who is too great for human images or statues." Instead of, "You shall not steal" or "You shall not commit murder," think, "We shall honor and respect our neighbor and his or her belongings, and we shall honor and cherish life, for it is a gift solely from our God."

The Commandments are not meant to live on a page, or be idolized on stone tablets or as writing on the wall. The Commandments are meant to live in our hearts, in our actions, in our faith. As we move through the events and scenes of our life, may we reflect our faith in God through the relationships we make with our fellow brother and sister, giving praise and glory to the one, triune God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.