

Central Baptist Church Fall 2022
October 16
Decalogue

KNOWING THE TRUE GOD
October 16, 2022
Tom Cowan

Let me paint two very human family pictures – you might see yourself in one of them –

Imagine -- you have a young child who has recently started school in the neighborhood – you have walked them to school for some weeks – teaching them where and how to cross the road – always watch for the DON'T WALK light -- reminding them again and again not to talk to strangers. Then one day they announce to you that they are now big enough to go by themselves. As you see them head off down the road, you hope and pray that they remember everything you told them – cross at the lights – watch for cars -- wait for the WALK signal – and don't talk to strangers.

Or perhaps you have experienced this as we have – About a month ago our 17 year old granddaughter left to study in France. So your 19 - 20 year old son or daughter has finished high school – they worked hard for a year to save up enough money to go to Europe – or perhaps they are off to university - and you took them to the airport here in Victoria – you hugged them and kissed them goodbye and now you are on your way home. As you drive home you hope and pray that they remember everything you have tried to teach them for the past 19 years -- about personal safety – personal morality – watch out for strangers - they are no longer under your eye – they are heading out on their own – and as you see the plane rise up in the sky above you – your prayer every day for the next year will be that they will remember everything you have tried to teach them.

So for our little kids heading off to school on their own for the first time or for young adults heading into Europe or university – the world is full of new experiences – confusing voices – new pressures – and above all - strangers for whom they have to be on their guard.

This was the scene some 3500 years ago. The nation which was to become known as Israel had been slaves in Egypt – then in a series of powerful miraculous events God has set them free. **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 01)** On a mountain top called Sinai God had forged them into a nation – HIS nation!

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The Lord reminds them of what He has done --

4 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

(SHOW SLIDE 02) 5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine,

(SHOW SLIDE 03) 6 you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'

Ahead of them is the promise of a new land – a land flowing with milk and honey – water from wells that they would not have to dig – fruit from trees that they would not have to plant – if you know the story -- it is a promise that is going to be delayed for 40 years as they wander around in the wilderness but that's another story.

In this new land whenever they get there – in addition to all its benefits - they will also hear the voices of strange gods that will seek to seduce them away from the one true God – they will feel the pressure to be conformed and shaped by its strange customs -- they will face the pressure for their sons and daughters to intermarry –the question is – how will they maintain their unique identity – how will they live out the distinctive characteristics of being God's holy nation? They are going to be aliens in a foreign land – how will they maintain their uniqueness? How will they stay safe?

So God gives them a “facts of life talk” – The Ten Commandments or The Decalogue which means the 10 words.

God gives these commands to a people that he has just redeemed. The Decalogue (the ten words) is not a list of rules to make daily life awkward or old-fashioned – rather at its heart it is a statement about who God is and what He is like. In this way, the spiritual uniqueness of Israel, her ethical life as a nation, her separateness vis-à-vis the surrounding nations will be broadcast loud and clear. Israel is going from one polytheistic culture (Egypt) to another polytheistic culture (Canaan). So they need to learn what a redeemed life looks like – they receive these rules for holy living so that they can live like the people of God in an ungodly land.

While we might agree that most societies would be much better off if they followed the moral direction and social thrust of the Ten Commandments – they were not originally given to make us generally nice people who don't shop on Sundays – or who don't lie and steal – or who don't commit adultery.

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Rather in the life of the people of God they are to demonstrate the reality that there can be cosmos (order) in the midst of social chaos.

The average evangelical Christian would say – we don't need them – we are under grace. However - Grace is free but it is not cheap. God calls us to be holy people just as He is holy – and these 10 words define and describe how God's people should live out of the experience of grace. They are the expression of His saving grace in his people – they are the transcript of his holiness which is to be reflected in the ethical life of the nation. It is a charter of conduct for people who are already redeemed.

1st Peter echoes the very same words and applies them to the church.

(SHOW SLIDE 04) 9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called (SHOW SLIDE 05) you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; (SHOW SLIDE 06) once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 11 Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, (SHOW SLIDE 07) to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.

12 Live good lives among the pagans

You get the picture – we are now the aliens and strangers in the world – how will we live? How did we get to where we are today?

We need to go back into history and sociology.

For many centuries, often traced back to the conversion of Constantine – Christianity had a favored and special status in world history. We call this period CHRISTENDOM. Certainly there were ups and downs – there were dark periods on the historical stage – Christians did not do everything right - but Christianity was for the most part the dominant force - in fact the only force - certainly in the West. It was perhaps the greatest force in shaping western civilization. It launched social change and geographic exploration. It was the catalyst for hospitals and education. In word and in deed Christianity made a difference in the world.

Many of us can remember back through some of the years of the 20th century. There was prayer and religious education in schools –

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There was general respect for law enforcement.

The Bible was generally accepted as true without question –even by people with no personal faith.

The judicial system was established on a Judeo-Christian basis.

We did not shop on Sundays – all stores were closed.

That's Christendom.

I am not trying to say that all of society was Christian – not at all – but there was a moral imprint that came from the tradition of the Christian faith.

Then starting in Europe about 1890 – and in North America from 1930 or so – a quiet but powerful shift started. It was a shift in truth – the Teutonic plates that were underneath the social order of society began to shift – initially these movements seemed slight and inconsequential. They moved at first at a glacial pace whereas today we are experiencing social change and moral disruption at an enormous pace.

6 headings just to help us see where these changes are rooted. I usually call these broad brush strokes. This is Philosophy 101 – and it is vital to help us understand where we are today and how we got there.

(SHOW SLIDE 08)

FROM PRINCIPLES TO PRAGMATISM.

We have moved from being people whose lives are based on principles to being people who are shaped by pragmatism. Pragmatism simply means whatever works – whatever is expedient. Truth is whatever works – whatever brings the desired results.

In pragmatism truth is essentially relativised. The real conflict between Christianity and pragmatism is the conflict between what is right and what is expedient.

When we give up principle – we move from being people who have a moral compass to people who will simply go whichever way the wind blows.

(SHOW SLIDE 09)

FROM ABSOLUTES TO RELATIVISM.

We have moved from the idea of absolutes to relativism – this leads us into the quicksand of situation ethics – the idea that things are right and wrong depending on the situation.

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(SHOW SLIDE 10)

FROM COMMUNITY TO INDIVIDUALISM

The thread of community that wove cities and groups has largely been broken as we move into greater individualism. In a culture where everyone's position is true – no one's position matters – This echoes the dark drumbeat we find in the Book of Judges – and every person did that which was right in his own sight.

(SHOW SLIDE 11)

FROM SERVICE TO SELFISHNESS

The idea of service is being eroded as the consumerism of selfishness takes over. Before we get involved we want to know – what's in it for me? What do I get out of this?

(SHOW SLIDE 12)

FROM SACRIFICE TO HEDONISM

For many people now – especially in North America – the cause is now the gospel of Hedonism – which is the word for pleasure and especially self-pleasure. Paul encountered this spirit in Acts 17 – in those days they were called Epicureans. Combining both selfishness and hedonism – we are the first society with so much to live with and so little to live for.

(SHOW SLIDE 13)

FROM MONOTHEISM TO PLURALISM

We have moved from a general belief in one God to the Siamese twins of polytheism and pluralism.

As a nation, Canada is functionally pluralistic – although it does face something of an oxymoron in its national personality. The Introduction to the Charter of Rights says:

Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God

...

The problem is that there is no practical way to define what this really means---

The Charter then goes on to say.

Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms:

a) freedom of conscience and religion;

b) freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression

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The result is that this makes Canada functionally polytheistic in religion and pluralistic in ethics. What this has meant is that for many years other world religions (such as Buddhism, Hinduism) as well as philosophical truths (such as New Age, Kabalarianism,) were at the fringe of our society. Now they have moved from the fringe to the centre – from looking through the doorway to being at the table to the extent that you have to wonder if Christianity even has a seat at the table. Today we are experiencing the almost complete abandonment of truth.

The cumulative effect of these shifts is that we are now living in a land which is filled with the strange voices of other gods. We are walking in a land which is dangerous and seductive. We are living in a land as Christians in which we are no longer the titled landowners and the spiritual residents – we have become the aliens and the strangers. We are up to our waist in a swamp of secular thinking - Dostoevsky is right – if God is dead – then everything is permissible. That's why we are in such trouble in moral and ethical issues – such as sexuality, abortion, euthanasia.

The Ten Commandments are the practical challenge of how God's people - holy people - are to live, especially in a land filled with strange gods and ungodly practices – whether that be Canaan or Canada. Jesus – if you love me you will keep my commandments.

God's starting point for his people was to know who he is. It is the same for us. We must have a tight orthodox grip on who God truly is – we must have straight thinking about God. We need to meet God afresh in the fire on the mountain and hear his voice growing louder and louder.

Exodus 20

1. And God spoke all these words: **(SHOW SLIDE 14)**

2 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

3 "You shall have no other gods before me.

Just headings for us this morning to start our orthodox grasp on who God is and from this – everything else flows.

(SHOW SLIDE 15)

HE IS THE GOD WHO REVEALS HIMSELF.

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(SHOW SLIDE 16) He reveals himself in creation – the heavens declare the glory of God.

(SHOW SLIDE 17) Romans 1:20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, **(SHOW SLIDE 18)** being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

The problem is that our culture worships creation – and does not look beyond that to the Creator.

(SHOW SLIDE 19) He reveals himself in Christ – everything we need to know about God is packed into Christ. He reveals his light – his love – his patience - That's why Jesus says – if you have seen me – you have seen the father.

He reveals himself in life each and every day. We need to learn to open our eyes and see the hand of God in our daily lives.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning – **(SHOW SLIDE 20)**

Earth's cramm'd with heaven

And every common bush aflame with God

(SHOW SLIDE 21) But only those who see take off their shoes

The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.

(SHOW SLIDE 22)

HE IS THE GOD WHO REDEEMS.

The history of Israel starts on that Passover night when God redeemed his people though the shed blood of a lamb – and they headed out into the darkness risking everything on a smear of blood on the doorposts.

He is the God who redeems us – from sin and death – all through the bold of the cross. In redemption He forgives us.

Colossians 1:13-14 (SHOW SLIDE 23)

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, (SHOW SLIDE 24)¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

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When we lower the casket of a loved one into the ground – we risk everything on the blood of the cross.

(SHOW SLIDE 25)

HE IS THE GOD WHO RECONCILES.

Col. 1:22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—

(SHOW SLIDE 26)

In 2 Cor. 5 – Paul says God has given us the ministry of reconciliation and he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

The ministry of the church in the world is the work/the ministry of reconciliation.

Remember the story of the Prodigal son – the key – the entire success in that story lies in the nature and character of the waiting Father – who watches and waits for the son to come home. The truth for us is that God is the waiting Father – waiting for us to come home. He runs to welcome us – orders a banquet to be served – puts a new ring on our finger and new clothes of righteousness on our shoulders.

The crucial point is – what we believe about God – his nature – his character – his activity – shapes how we live.

Many people see God as some kind of white-bearded Father Christmas figure who gives out annual gifts if we are good children. Or he is the big guy upstairs - Others see themselves as their own god – the sin of Eve – you shall be as God – others have no God at all – and therefore no moral compass for their lives.

Our view of God – orthodoxy or lack of it – directs our lives.

That's why his Decalogue – His facts of life talk to his people begins by calling us to have and to hold an orthodox grasp on who He is.

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He is the God of Abraham – Isaac and Jacob – He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the Shema we are told – Deut 6:4 **(SHOW SLIDE 27) Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.^[a] Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. (SHOW SLIDE 28) These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.**

God's call to his people in every age is to be radically different from the prevailing culture – in values, standards and lifestyle. That is echoed all through the Scriptures – Old Testament and New Testament. It hangs and pivots on an essential truth – having a right understanding of God.

The more that the moral stage of our culture darkens and becomes distorted – the more important it will be for God's people to stand in grace – to let grace shine -- and live out of His grace as His people. The Ten Commandments call us to a radical counter-cultural lifestyle as the people of God.

When I think about our children and grandchildren – I am almost terrified for them. I am reminded of the well-known story of David who goes out fight Goliath. Saul puts his own armor on David – gives him his helmet – probably best armor of anyone - but David says that he cannot walk around in them – probably too heavy. So he takes them off and goes and finds his own 5 stones.

I have been a Christian for almost 60 years – I have 5 degrees in philosophy and theology – I would love to put these things on my grandchildren to protect them – but they would find them too heavy for them – they have to go and find their own 5 stones to fight their own giants.

Sometimes all we can do is pray for them as they fight their own giants.

We live in changing and challenging times – they are not times for the faint-hearted or the fearful. We are again like Israel living in a land filled with strange voices and seductive sounds.

But there is another voice that calls to us – he speaks out of the fire on the mountain – his voice rises above all the clamor and din of our culture – he says – I and I alone am the Lord who brought you out of Egypt – out of slavery – out of darkness - out of

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sin – out of death. I am the God who stooped down and met you in grace at the cross.
Worship no other gods before me.

He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ calls to us – he and he alone is the one and only! His light still shines in the darkness and the darkness does not snuff it out. We are to live in such a way that our lives and our land -- is filled with His glory.