

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, March 15, 2009
Rev. John Tapscott

"COMMANDMENTS AND GRACE - Part 1"

Exodus 20:1-17

We love to sing the hymn "Amazing Grace", though sometimes we have trouble getting our minds around the concept of grace. Grace means a free gift, a gift which is unearned and undeserved, a gift rooted in the goodness and love and generosity of the giver, a free gift which meets the recipient's need.

A woman saw a young man outside shivering in the winter cold with a spring jacket, no gloves and a pair of summer shoes. She took him to the nearest men's store, and bought him the warm coat, hat, gloves and boots he needed. She didn't ask him to demonstrate his worthiness. She didn't ask that he make a contribution towards the cost. She covered it fully and he received it with gratitude, since he needed it. That's grace. Haven't we all been on the receiving end of grace at some point? Grace is at the heart of the Christian life.

At the beginning of membership classes, youth or adult, I ask, "What is a Christian?" Students often respond with something like, "A Christian is someone believes in God, or someone who follows the Ten Commandments." Now that's true as far as it goes. But I ask the question in order to point out that a Christian in the true sense is someone who trusts and follows the Lord Jesus. Christians are those who know that they live by God's grace, and that they are saved by God's grace in Jesus Christ. Paul writes in Ephesians "By grace you have been saved through faith; this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."

So what about the Ten Commandments? A boy was asked by his Sunday School teacher if he knew the Commandments. "No, I don't," he said, "and I don't have to, because my dad says they're getting rid of them anyway." Now we're not getting rid of the Ten Commandments. But grace puts the Commandments in the proper place and helps us to see them as God intends. In a way the Bible story moves from grace to commandments, then back to grace again and then to commandments once more. It's like a pendulum swinging between grace on one side and the commandments on the other. That movement takes place in our own lives as Christians. But we shouldn't think of commandments and grace as polar opposites. For there is a rather close relationship between them. This Sunday and next I am going to speak about this movement between commandments and grace. Today we are going to focus

especially on the Ten Commandments.

First this - the Ten Commandments were God's gift of grace to Israel.

God didn't give the Commandments to the Hebrews so that by keeping them they would be saved. They had already been saved. Exodus 20:1 "Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." God had already acted graciously towards Israel, setting the people free and leading them towards the promised land. The commandments were God's gift to Israel. By keeping them Israel would show the nations the gracious character of Almighty God. They would show that the Lord was indeed God. Furthermore, God didn't give the commandments to the Hebrews as a burden, but as a blessing. If the Hebrews lived by the commandments things would go well for them. If not, things wouldn't go so well. When God gave the Hebrews the Ten Commandments he was saying, "I love you. Look what I've already done for you. Now I give you another wonderful gift so you can live joyfully and productively in the new land I'm giving you. Learn these commandments and live by them. They will bless your lives."

Isaac Asimov says that during the period the Israelites were suffering in Egyptian bondage God travelled all over the world seeking people to follow His Law. He went to Arabia and said to a man there, "Would you like to follow my commandments?" The man asked suspiciously, "Like what, for instance?" God said, "One is: thou shalt not murder." The man replied, "You must be mad. My profession consists of lying in wait for camel trains, killing the merchants when they arrive and confiscating their goods. A commandment like that would ruin my whole business."

God turned away and travelled to Babylon. There he came to a merchant and said, "Would you like to follow my commandments?" The merchant said, "For example?" God said, "Thou shalt not steal!" The Babylonian said, "I am sorry. My living consists of buying cheap and selling high, of misrepresentations and dishonesty. If I cannot steal, I cannot live."

Rather discouraged God turned westward and went to Egypt. He said to an Egyptian, "How about following my commandments?" The Egyptian asked, "What are they?" "Oh," God said, "thou shalt have no other gods before me: thou shalt make a graven image." "Impossible", said the Egyptian, "look at all our gods and idols. We couldn't possibly worship only one god."

So God turned to go somewhere else, but before leaving Egypt he saw a bearded old man haranguing Pharaoh, trying to get him to set free certain

slaves. God called to him. "Moses," he said, "would you like to follow my commandments?" Moses asked, "How much do they cost?" "Why nothing," said God, "I'm giving them away free." "In that case", said Moses, "I'll take Ten."

Well, the point is that they are free. They were God's gift of grace to Israel. God was not leaving his people to wander on their own, without direction. Through the Commandments God was graciously showing his people the way, pointing the way to life.

Next, the Commandments are God's gift of grace to the whole world.

Here is another little story about Moses. Moses wasn't feeling well and was upset. He went up on the mountain to see God. "You know my life has not been easy," he said. "First my mother put me in a basket and floated me down a river. Then I left Egypt for 40 years. You remember the burning bush, the plagues, the Passover, the Red Sea, and now leading these difficult people." God allowed that, yes, He remembered. Moses said, "But I really can't handle much more, and I have this splitting headache." God looked at Moses and said, "Here, take these two tablets. That should help."

The two tablets, of course, contained the Ten Commandments. Now God gave them first to Israel and God's intention was for Israel to preserve them and spread them to the world. That's why God judged Israel harshly when they failed to keep them. The Commandments were given by God for all humanity. Through the commandments God was telling the world, "This is the structure of reality, the way the world works, so that you don't have find the way yourselves."

The Ten Commandments fall into two sections. One through four are concerned with religious duties; "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image...You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain...Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy..."

The fifth through the tenth commandments are concerned with human relationships. "Honour your father and mother...You shall not kill... You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. You shall not covet what is your neighbours."

The Ten Commandments are really the foundation, some would say, the minimum needed for civilized society. And contrary to what many people say, the commandments are not negative restrictions, but give us positive boundaries for living. When a flowing river has no boundaries, it becomes a stagnant swamp. We could not live in a society where people were freely allowed to kill one another and steal from one another. Even the prohibition against adultery

serves society's interest by maintaining a viable family life. So too, does "honour your father and mother."

G.K. Chesterton said that if a man is walking and comes to the edge of a cliff and keeps on walking, he will not break the law of gravity, he will prove it! Everyday the world news as well as many peoples' sad and confused lives prove not the error and datedness of the Commandments, but their continuing, eternal validity.

Living the commandments leads to happiness. A man who had been married faithfully for 20 years said, "Fidelity makes you happy." He'd discovered that keeping marriage vows was not a limitation on life, but a happy and secure way to live. The Ten Commandments are God's gift of grace to the whole world; the tablets we all need.

But the last point I want to make is this - that the commandments drive us back to God's grace again.

For one thing, we must depend on God's grace and God's strength to keep them anywhere close to how we should. We should never think that we can obey the commandments at all without God's help. Everyday our prayer needs to be, "Lord, help me to live in your way." And even when we do depend on God's help, we don't keep the commandments as we should. Nobody bats 1,000. Well, actually one did, but that was not you or me. We all fall short; we all sin; we all miss the mark. And for those who think they come close Jesus says that we need to keep the commandments not just in the outer sense, but in an inner sense. Not only our actions but our intentions must be pure. Even if we have not physically violated our wedding vows, Jesus says that if you look at another with lust, you have committed adultery in your heart. He also says that every one who is angry with his brother, even if it doesn't lead to killing him, is liable to judgement, to the fire of hell. Our failure to keep the commandments separates us and our Holy God. And just trying harder to keep the commandments will not save us. As soon as we think we're keeping the commandments well, a sense of pride enters in which widens the gap between ourselves and God. Spiritual pride is the most anti-God attitude there is.

Jesus once told a parable about two men who went up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee bragged before God how well he had kept God's commandments, and how much better he was than the tax collector who was praying beside him. But the tax collector stood at a distance, beating his breast, saying, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." And Jesus said that it was the tax collector, not the Pharisee, who went home justified before God.

The truth is that we go home to God, justified by God, acquitted by God, wearing the robes of righteousness, not on the basis of keeping the commandments, but by faith in the Son of God, who did bat 1,000, and who in love gave his perfect life as the atoning sacrifice for our sin. The commandments are necessary for human life, but when we really understand them, they drive us back to grace again. That's why the sign of our salvation is not two stone tablets, but a Cross on a hill. The commandments are a great and wonderful gift. But the greater and even more wonderful gift of God's love is Jesus Christ, incarnate, crucified and risen. He came to do for us what the law cannot do. He came to save us from the power of sin and death and bring us to eternal life. And that's why Paul says, "By grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God."

