

GODLY GUIDANCE

EXODUS 20:1-17

Teaching five and six year olds can be a challenging responsibility. That's what one Sunday school teacher discovered when she tried to teach her class about the Ten Commandments. After she had explained what it means to honor your father and mother, she asked, "Is there a commandment that teaches us how we should treat our brothers and sisters?" One the youngsters, the eldest child in his family quickly replied, "Thou shall not kill."

The Ten Commandments! Once upon a time just about everyone could name most of them. In fact, a lot of children were taught to memorize them. They were frequently posted on the walls of school rooms, in court houses, and places of worship. In fact, they are inscribed on the doors of the Supreme Court building in Washington, D.C. along with Moses who is depicted in the apex of the frieze which adorns that building. It would seem, therefore that the Ten Commandments are an important part of our cultural history as a nation, and indeed they are.

But long before they became a part of our spiritual heritage in America, they played a very important role in the creation of another nation, the nation of Israel. They were the foundation upon which God was going to build a nation which would hopefully learn how to love and honor the Lord and one another. They were core principles and values which would unify the people of Israel as they prepared to enter the Promised Land. So let's take a look at each of them and then seek to discover how they apply to our lives in this day and time.

The first four have to do with our relationship to God. They can be summarized in this way. First, our relationship with the Lord must take precedence over all others. Nothing and no one, divine or otherwise should claim our allegiance and devotion above that which we ascribe to One who delivered us from slavery in Egypt. Second, there isn't anything down here on the earth that can accurately portray and describe who God is. Therefore, don't make any images of God or select something that He has created and then worship it. Third, don't use God's name carelessly. It is to be revered because it expresses who He is. Fourth, set aside one day each week that is devoted to the Lord so that you can worship Him and rest from all of the work in which you have been involved during the other six days.

The next six have to do with our relationships with one another. The first one deals with our families and is a reminder that children should honor and respect their parents, because they can learn a lot from their mothers and fathers that will help them to have longer and happier lives. The second forbids the taking of another person's life without just cause. For example, you can't murder a person because you don't like them. Third, do not enter into sin by violating God's sexual standards, especially involving another man's wife. Marriage is a sacred bond between a man and a woman and it should not be defiled. Fourth, do not steal that which does not belong to you. It's another person's property and you can't take it because you want it. Fifth, don't lie, especially when you are called upon to testify in court. Always tell the truth. Finally, don't be the kind of person who is consumed by the desire to possess what others have. It could very well lead you to break some of the other commandments such as theft, murder, or adultery.

Now if you give serious consideration to these Ten Commandments, you will discover that they are the basis for creating a stable and secure society where people can live in a harmonious and safe environment. Being rightly related to God creates the kind

of atmosphere that promotes right relationships among His people. For example, if the Lord holds a position pre-imminence in a person's life that individual will be less likely to place his trust in the things of this world and thus will be less likely to be guilty of covetousness. The Ten Commandments are also unique in the way that they are stated. That which is forbidden is limited to that which is prefaced by the words, "Thou shall not." If they were expressed in a positive format, "thou shall," then the listing of those things which are permitted would go on and on forever. Finally the Ten Commandments are like the Constitution of the United States. They expressed the broad principles which were to govern the lives of the people of Israel. The Book of the Covenant, Exodus 21:1-23:19 and other passages of Scripture added later in the book of Leviticus, for example, are like the laws passed by Congress. They were specific applications of the Ten Commandments, arising out of the various issues and concerns that would develop among God's people.

The Ten Commandments and those additional laws which grew out of them were a stroke of genius. In fact, they were divinely inspired, and those who studied them quickly came to that realization. That's why they are praised throughout the Scriptures, especially in the book of Psalms. In the second half of Psalm 19, for example, the law of the Lord is described as being perfect, trustworthy and righteous, more precious than gold and sweeter than honey. And Psalm 119, the longest of the psalms, goes to great lengths to declare the importance of knowing and keeping God's law. Verse 105 in Psalm 119 declares, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." In other words, you will not lose your way in the darkness or stumble as you walk down the road of life if you have the law of the Lord to guide you.

Now to be perfectly honest, the people of Israel did not always treasure what God had given to them. They forsook the law of the Lord and they paid a very steep price for doing so. In fact, Moses warned them of the consequences of disobedience just before he died. In the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 30, verses 11-18, he informed them that they have a choice to make between life and death. If they were true to the Lord and obeyed His commands, they would prosper. If they did not, just the opposite would occur. In fact, they would lose the very inheritance that God was giving to them, the land of Canaan. And unfortunately, that's precisely what happened. They were sent into exile by the Babylonians and forced to live in a foreign land for 70 years. Then and only then did they finally realize that the law of the Lord, including the Ten Commandments was important. In fact, when Jesus delivered His Sermon on the Mount recorded for us in Matthew 5:1-7:29, He was actually basing much of it upon the Old Testament, including the Ten Commandments. He was taking the law given to Moses and raising it to a new level of spiritual understanding.

So the belief in a divinely inspired set of laws given to us by God continued to be embraced not only by the Jewish people, but also by Christians. Gradually, beginning in the Middle Ages the law of the Lord set the standard of moral behavior and governmental law for Western civilization, especially what it known today as English Common Law. And one of its champions is a man by the name of Sir William Blackstone. Between the years of 1765 and 1769, he wrote a series of books entitled *Commentaries on the Laws of England*. His books were a down to earth exposition of the laws of England, and they were based upon the Scriptures, especially the Ten Commandments. They became the text books for those wishing to be lawyers both in England and in the United States. The founding fathers of our nation relied upon them, and they became instrumental in the principles of law and order which govern our country today. They were required reading in many American law schools well into the twentieth century.

But what about today? Except in church, the Ten Commandments and, in fact, most if not all of the laws of the Lord have been either forgotten or totally disregarded. For example, when Clarence Thomas was being confirmed to sit on the Supreme Court, he was

ridiculed because he believed in natural law, a set of principles established by God at the creation of the universe similar to the physical laws which govern the forces of nature. In other words, in America today, there are no divinely inspired guidelines for moral behavior.

Let me share several examples with you. When I was a little boy every store except for drug stores and restaurants were closed on Sundays. It was a legal statute in the state of Virginia known as the "blue laws." It was based upon the fourth commandment of the Ten Commandments. Today, of course, just about the only store that is closed on Sundays is Chick-fil-A. Likewise, sexual misbehavior was not condoned on television or anywhere else. People still adhered to the idea that adultery was a sin. Not so any more.

I could go on and on, but let me just simply ask this question. What would happen in America if the citizens of this nation decided to really observe and abide by the Ten Commandments? Jails and prisons would close. Families would be reunited. Crime would become almost non-existent, and prosperity would reign throughout the land. Instead, just the opposite is taking place. Little by little our nation is sliding into chaos because there are no longer any generally accepted standards for our moral and legal behavior. We have rejected both God and His laws, and if things don't change, we will go down the same road as did the ancient Israelites and receive the same consequences that they experienced. We need a moral and spiritual revival in this country, and we need it sooner than later. Or as the psalmist said so long ago, "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord."