

“Christianity 101: The Ten Commandments”
Exodus 20:1-21 and Matthew 22:34-40

Palisades Community Church
February 1, 2014

In my time, I have logged hundreds of thousands of miles on the network of interstate highways lacing the landscape of the U.S. Any road warrior would agree that a dominant feature of expressway travel is the relentless, sensible, indispensable signage on the right and left, and sometimes overhead--sometimes rather subtle, but sometimes flashing boldly. The road surface that disappears under foot, and the passing scenery that pleases the eye, are context for the journey that must depend upon basic guidelines for its successful conclusion. These might be thought of as “signs along the highway of life”. Ignore them at your peril.

“No Passing Zone”...“Emergency Pull-off”...“Service Plaza Ahead”...“Turn On Lights”.

Signs along the highway generally fall into three categories:

Many apply to “lane” usage, which is about optimal positioning: “Stay in your lane”...“Merge left”...“Lanes shift ahead”.

Many apply to “speed”, which is about optimal control: “Speed radar enforced”...“Be prepared to stop”.

Many apply to “advice”, which is about optimal travel: “No services this exit”...“Caution: falling rock”...“Weather advisory”.

In the Christian tradition, passage on the spiritual highway is similarly guided by basic instructions that must be observed if progress is expected towards successful conclusion. Few would disagree that the Ten Commandments—the “Decalogue” in the Book of Exodus—constitutes dependable guidance for the walk as companions of Jesus.

Figuratively speaking: “No Passing Zone”...“Stay in Your Lane”...“Be Prepared to Stop”.

Of course, there are those detractors who point out that many people of faith—Christians and Jews alike—treat the “Ten Commandments” more as “Ten Suggestions”. And there was

the Sunday Schooler who was asked by the teacher to list the Ten Commandments in any order in which he chose. He quickly and confidently responded: “4...8...2...6...5...9...3...7...10...1!”

More seriously, any consideration of the Ten Commandments must at least reference the present-day difficulties surrounding their display on public property, as that raises the Constitutional issue of the separation of Church and State: A court in Oklahoma is currently determining whether, since a monument to the Ten Commandments graces the grounds of the State Capitol, the placement of a statue of a goat-headed pagan idol, proposed by Satanic Temple worshipers, must also be allowed.

The crude but crucial tablet that was ostensibly carried down from Mt. Sinai by Moses a few thousand years ago—later imitated on a Hollywood film stage by Charlton Heston—is comprised of ten guidelines in two categories:

The first four spiritual “road signs” pertain to the ideal relationship of humans to God: worship no other gods...make no idols...do not speak of God in vain... keep the Sabbath.

Spiritual “road signs” five through ten pertain to the ideal relationships among human beings: Dishonoring your parents...or murder...or adultery...or stealing...or lying...or covetousness—any such behavior can detour one’s journey.

Distinguished biblical scholar Patrick Miller, in a volume that is, for all practical purposes, a Ten Commandment study guide, claims that the unparalleled importance of the Decalogue is evidenced by the fact that it is given twice—originally in Chapter 20 of Exodus, and then repeated in Chapter 5 of Deuteronomy 5. And its unparalleled importance is evidenced equally by the fact that it is given by God directly to the people (“face to face”).

This is not unlike the “road signs” along the expressways of life: Important information appears repeatedly, on multiple signs, so that the message communicates. And the important information is directed “in your face”, so to speak, by the presiding highway authority.

Not long after the Mt. Sinai revelation, the prophet Joshua reminded the Israelites how to stay on the safe path, as recorded in his 22nd chapter: *“Carefully follow the commands and*

teachings that the Lord's servant Moses gave you. Love the Lord your God; follow his directions; keep his commands. Be loyal to him, and serve him with all your heart and soul."

To quote the scholar Patrick Miller: *"Repetition, placement, highlighting, divine authorship—all serve to tell the community of faith that here is the foundational word for your life as God's people. All you need to know is given to you in these Ten Words. They may be summed up succinctly (as in the Great Commandment of the New Testament), and elaborated in great detail (as in the hundreds of legal codes enumerated in subsequent Hebrew Scriptures), but they are a sufficient guide for one's life with God and neighbor."*

(Matthew 22: 35ff) *A lawyer asked—to test him: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him: "' You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as your self' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."*

An individual's relationships to God and to neighbor may be the more obvious focus, but then there is the congregation's corporate relationship to God and to neighbor. Might those "road signs"—those guidelines for the individual traveler—might they also apply somehow to a church...to a community of disciples striving to be faithful to Jesus? Might a congregation experience the benefits of obeying the posted instructions, on the one hand, or on the other hand experience the inherent liabilities that result from ignoring the posted instructions?

As individual travelers, and as a community of the faithful, we cannot treat the posted instructions as mere suggestions if we expect to successfully progress toward the realization of God's purposes. We must rather, as Joshua warns and Jesus reaffirms: *"Carefully follow the commands and teachings that the Lord's servant Moses gave. Love the Lord your God, follow his directions, and keep his commands. Be loyal to him, and serve him with all your heart and soul."*

Twice in my lifetime, I have followed that network of U.S. highways to Yosemite National Park. The sheer granite cliff “El Capitan”, rising 3200 feet from the floor of Yosemite Valley, has long been an ultimate challenge for BASE jumpers. BASE jumping is an activity whereby a participant jumps from a fixed object, with only a parachute to break his or her fall. Due to numerous deaths and injuries, a law was passed prohibiting BASE jumping in the Park. Jan Davis, at 60 years of age, was among jumpers protesting the restrictions by proving that the sport is safe. Her chute failed to open. The BASE jumpers knew the law, but deliberately chose to defy it. As her husband filmed her jump, Jan Davis paid for that disobedience with her life.

The “Decalogue” in the Book of Exodus is dependable guidance for our walk as companions of Jesus. Such commandments teach the sojourner of the ideal relationship to God, and the ideal relationship to other human beings. The Teacher not only advocated for these laws, but embodied them himself.

In the course of a lifetime, the road surface that disappears under foot, and the passing scenery that pleases the eye, are context for the journey that necessarily depends upon these basic guidelines for the successful realization of God’s intentions.

The guidelines might be thought of as “signs along the highway of life”.

Ignore them at your peril.