

*“A Letter to Our Children”*

Exodus 20:1-17

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Then God spoke all these words:

<sup>2</sup> I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; <sup>3</sup>you shall have no other gods before me.

<sup>4</sup> You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. <sup>5</sup>You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, <sup>6</sup>but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

<sup>7</sup> You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

<sup>8</sup> Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup>For six days you shall labor and do all your work. <sup>10</sup>But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. <sup>11</sup>For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

<sup>12</sup> Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

<sup>13</sup> You shall not murder.

<sup>14</sup> You shall not commit adultery.

<sup>15</sup> You shall not steal.

<sup>16</sup> You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

<sup>17</sup> You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Dear Ones,

I thought of writing this letter to you a few weeks ago when my oldest child, who is four years old, was sitting with me in worship. “Psst, psst,” I heard, “Mom, why are we praying again?!”

Throughout the centuries, children being raised in the faith, have probably, like my child, asked their parents at one time or another – “What’s so great about the 10 Commandments? Why do we have to hear them, learn them, memorize them again?! Well, to put it simply – because it’s in the Bible...multiple times. Yep, God gives the 10 Commandments to the Israelites through Moses not one, but two times. The first set of tablets, written by God’s very hand, were destroyed and God was gracious enough to make them and give them to the people again. This list of words spoken by God has been around

for thousands of years. And if you haven't already, you'll probably memorize it sometime in your lifetime. Because they are that important, especially now.

As a smart man named Mr. Janzen put it, "the gods are alive and well and they are many."<sup>1</sup> This, my dears, is unfortunately true. Because we are human, we have this nasty tendency to let other people and things and places become little "gods" in our lives. Over time these things become important to us. And they occupy our time and they require our money and they demand our attention. And suddenly, they become MORE important than God. This is what the Bible means when it quotes God as saying, "You shall have no other gods BEFORE ME." This commandment and the second are almost the same.

We often think of worship as sitting in a pew in our beautiful and familiar sanctuary. But that's not all worship is. Worship is devoting your life and your heart to God. It can happen inside the sanctuary walls and outside of them. When something takes us away from the goal of worship, takes us away from devoting our lives and hearts to God, it is known as an idol. And idols are not good. When the Israelites received the 10 Commandments the first time, the story we just heard about, they got tired of waiting on Moses.

You see, he was up on the mountain, talking to God and getting the commandments. And the people became nervous and frustrated and bored from waiting. So, they gathered up all of their precious possessions. Things in our time like wedding rings and watches, antique heirlooms and grandmother's necklace and grandfather's college ring and great-grandma's silver from the china cabinet. They got all of these things and the put them into the fire and heated them up until they became liquid and then turned them into this really cool golden calf. They put all of their energy into this and they were so excited when it was done. But when Moses saw it, he called it what it was – an idol – because it had distracted them from the worship of and devotion to God.

Have you ever gotten really mad? Like, really angry with your mom or your dad or your little brother or sister? Or maybe a friend at school? And when you were so very mad, did you ever call someone whom you love a bad name? You know the kind of names I'm talking about. Names that aren't their real names.

Names that you know, the moment they leave your mouth, aren't right? Well, that's like making wrongful use of God's name. It's not a good thing to do. It's not the right thing to do. It's wrong and hurtful and disrespectful. And, unfortunately, there are people in this world who do that. They disrespect God's name by the things they say, by the things they claim. And you might be tempted to do the same at one time or another. But don't – it won't make you feel good about yourself in the long run and it will inevitably weaken your relationship with God.

I don't know about you, but I ALWAYS look forward to the weekend. As a kid, I loved school, but there was something special about two days at home – endless hours to play outside, staying up late to watch movies, entire days spent with my family, play dates or outings with my friends. Well, let me let you in on a little secret. We don't have weekends – Saturdays and Sundays – just because. They are part of our tradition, our

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<sup>1</sup> J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 144.

heritage, as people of faith. God commands us to have a sabbath day. A sabbath day means spending time with family and friends, enjoying God's creation, slowing down and doing things a little differently. Resting your body and resting from your regular routine. And doing all of these things with God in mind. That's how you make something holy. Any ordinary act can be holy if you do it with God in mind. Reading a book, planting flowers, taking a bike ride, having a cookout with neighbors.

Parents. You either love them or you hate them. Am I right? There's not much in between. Making your brush your hair before school – hate them. Buying you ice cream after school – love them. Making your keep to your curfew or bedtime – hate them. Giving you the bike or car you've been dreaming about – love them. Limiting your screen time – hate them. Getting you a new puppy – love them. Clearing out the attic and showing up at your house with all of your old toys – hate them. Taking their grandchildren for a long weekend so that you can enjoy time with your spouse – love them. As people who love God, our relationships with our parents are supposed to be more than what I just listed. Our parents are a gift to us from God. They, with God's help, made us who we are. For better or for worse. And because we love God, we love them. We honor them. Even when its hard. Even when they frustrate us or annoy us or embarrass us. Respecting them, honoring them, caring for them will keep them in our lives longer and that will bless us. That will help us, even into adulthood, to continue growing into who God is calling us to be.

Dear ones, in your lifetime, you have seen too much violence. And I can't tell you how sorry I am that that is the case. You shouldn't be afraid to go to school and parents, you shouldn't be afraid to send them. You shouldn't be used to active shooter drills. I know that the 10 Commandments say, "Thou shall not murder," and that's a much bigger thing than just school shootings. But school is your world. And school shootings are a problem. And just like murder is a lot bigger thing than just school shootings. Murderers are more than just the people who hold the guns. Because we are God's people, we live life differently. We take responsibility for the ways we have disobeyed this commandment by the things we have done and the things we have left undone. As you age in years and wisdom, you'll realize that the way the world works is quite complicated. Somebody in a big city can make a decision that affects and hurts another person who lives across the country or across the world. Actions and inactions have consequences. You know about consequences. Your teachers and your caregivers enforce them. Consequences can be positive and negative. They can affect you and they can affect others. But no matter whom they affect, consequences matter to God. And God weeps. God mourns. God is sad when murder happens. When murder becomes normal. And I even think God is angry when we do nothing to stop it.

Adultery. It's a big word and it sounds like an adult word because it is an adult word. But, no matter our age, adultery has seeped into our society and become accepted and normal. This is not right. Adultery is made to look cool and okay in movies and shows and online. And it does not honor God and the rules he gave us to follow. Adultery involves breaking something that is precious. It involves breaking the family.

This doesn't mean that God doesn't have compassion for those who are involved, that he won't forgive and make whole families that have been broken. But God commanded this so that we wouldn't have to deal with the hurt that adultery causes. Because we're not regular people, we're God's people and God wants better for us.

When I was in the third grade, my mom took us to the soda fountain after school. It was called McCallum's Prescription Shop and it's a lot like the Pickwick Pharmacy. After our candy and cherry cokes, my mom told us that it was time to leave. But I was busy playing with some of the toys on the shelf and I didn't want to leave. So, I waited until the very last minute. Until my mom has started the car and was about to honk the horn before I dashed out to the parking lot. Shortly after we got on our way, I realized that I had taken the toy I was playing with – a beautiful and brightly colored top, one of those things you spin on the ground or the table. I told my mom and she immediately whipped the car around, heading back to McCallum's. We were late for some appointment, but mom said returning the toy and apologizing for stealing it was the right thing to do. Stealing can be a big deal like ransacking another's home while they are out of town, or it can be less of a deal by accidentally taking a small toy from a soda shop. But stealing something of any kind – a possession or even an idea is wrong. Because at the heart of the act, stealing is about taking something from someone else. Something they worked for. Something they put effort into. Something that mattered to them. Something that was ultimately given to them by God. It is never right to take from another person just to make ourselves feel good.

Lying is another thing I had a run in with in elementary school. Well, let's be honest...preschool and elementary school, and middle school, high school, college, and adulthood. It's one of those sins I find myself susceptible to and you might also. At its core, lying is about protecting yourself with no regard for how it affects others. I lied when I was five years old and my brother was two, blaming him for the broken window when my mom came into the room. I lied in second grade when I cheated on guessing how many beans are in the jar activity.

I knew the answer and pretended like I didn't and won the game. I lied in middle school when I told a friend that I hadn't gossiped behind her back. I lied in high school when I told my parents I was spending the night at a friend's instead of camping at the county park. Remembering these instances doesn't make me feel good. It makes me feel ashamed. No matter how innocent some of these seem now, they weren't good. They caused my parents unnecessary worry, they hurt my friend, they betrayed my brother. Bearing false witness is lying. It is not telling the truth in order to protect yourself or hurt someone else. And that is not the way of God. When Jesus comes later in the Bible, he tells us that he is the way, the truth, and the life. The truth is important and should always be told.

We all have things that we want. And maybe we're the only ones who know this. Maybe we've never told anyone about our want or desire. But if that want or desire is ruled or motivated by jealousy, it is wrong. If you only want something because someone else has it. If you complain to God or your parents because a friend has a nicer whatever than you, it sucks the life right out of you. It takes the joy out of living. And it zaps good intentions. Coveting...wanting something someone else has...being insanely jealous of

another person does not bring you life and it taints the life of your community. It also fails to acknowledge the things God has given YOU. The blessings and goodness that abound in your life.

Jesus was a person of faith. He was God's son and part of the Jewish people, those who were originally given the 10 Commandments. When he was asked in his lifetime which commandment was the most important, this was his response –

“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 yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”<sup>2</sup>

Dear Ones, that's the goal of the 10 Commandments – to help us love God better and to help us love our neighbors better. Because we are God's people, this is how we are supposed to live. Because we are God's people, we hold his commandments in our minds and we write them on our hearts. We remember them and work toward them every day. Sometimes we might find ourselves saying, “The 10 Commandments AGAIN?!” Yes, the 10 Commandments again and again and again and again – when you're 4, 15, 41, 77 and 90 - until God's kingdom finally comes on earth. Amen and Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 22:38-40