

TOP TEN

Wild (Part 9) | Exodus 20

Is there anyone here who does not know the name, **Taylor Swift**? Any Swifties here today? For those who've been living in Antarctica without Internet service, Taylor Swift is, arguably, the best-known music artist and pop cultural figure of our time. Her music singles, concerts, and now concert films have shattered records everywhere. She is the first musician to achieve billionaire status based on her songs and performances alone. Her *Eras Tour* has contributed an estimated \$4.4 billion to the U.S. economy and she's giving a boost to the NFL these days too! Numerous publications have cited Taylor Swift as one of the greatest songwriters of all time. In fact, I bet that if we were to do a Karaoke of any one of Taylor's Top Ten songs there would be many here who would be able to mouth every word.

Here's an interesting question: Would you be even more impressed, if you knew for certain, that Taylor's Top Ten would still be known and influential all across the world, 3500 years from now? What do you think the chances of that are? I think: Not high. As great as Taylor is there is only one Being whose Top Ten enjoys that kind of longevity and impact, and we're going to explore today.

To set our conversation in context, let ask you another "Do You Know" question. How many of you know the name, **Joy Davidman**? Not too many. You might know her better by her married name: *Mrs. C.S. Lewis*. To his deathbed, the famous author of the Narnia Chronicles and so many other books always claimed that he had married UP intellectually – that Joy's was the truly brilliant mind. For my money, Davidman's book, *Smoke On the Mountain*, might just be the greatest treatise ever written about the most enduring and influential Top Ten ever recorded – and by that I mean, the Ten Commandments.

Early in her book, Joy gives us an incredibly important historical frame. She describes the mindset that dominated the world at the time that Moses and the children of Israel arrived at the foot of Mount Sinai. We often have a hard time imagining just how different the world was before the Judeo-Christian mindset changed it and left us with so much we take for granted today. Listen to how Joy Davidman describes it.

*"Everyone knew that the universe was a **wild** and chaotic thing, a jungle of warring powers: wind against water, sun against moon, male against female, life against death. There was a god of the spring planting and another god of the harvest, a spirit who put fish into fishermen's nets and a being who specialized in the care of women in childbirth; and at best there was an uneasy truce among all these, at worst a battle. Now along comes a fool [Moses], an insignificant tribe of desert wanderers [the Israelites], and shouts that all these processes are one process from a single source, the obvious many are the unthinkable One!"¹ And monotheism is born.*

Davidman goes on to explain how utterly transforming to human history monotheism was. Talk about a change in ERAS: *"The belief in one God slew a host of horror."* No longer did people have to live in fearful service to *"malign storm demons, evil jinn of sickness, blighters of the harvest, [or] unholy tyrants over life and death; belief in God destroyed the fetishes, the totems, the beast-headed bullies of old time"* that so many had spent their lives fruitlessly trusting and trying to appease. Belief in the one God who revealed himself to and through Moses *"laid the ax to sacred trees watered by the blood of virgins, it smashed the child-eating furnaces of Moloch, and toppled the gem-encrusted statues of the peevish divinities halfheartedly served by Greek and Rome."*

Davidman goes on to point out that people in ancient times lived in something like we might call today the Marvel Universe, but with way more Villains than Avengers. *The old gods fought among themselves, loved and hated without reason, demanded unspeakable bribes and meaningless flatteries.* And this is the really important part, Joy underlines: ***While they were worshiped, a moral law was impossible, for what pleased one deity would offend another.***

This is the danger of our time too. It's why, like Israel, we need to look up at the MOUNTAIN. WE need to recognize a God greater than the god of any one tribe or theme... greater than any party or passion or personal interest... greater than Russia or Ukraine, Israel or Palestine, America or China. We need to LIFT our vision and the vision of our children and friends toward the God so much greater than all the petty idols yammering for our allegiance, twisting our character and dividing us up. For only then might we give ourselves to a moral law and spiritual grace that could unite us.

Our ancient forebearers were subject to this same distraction and destruction. But, as Davidman writes: ***Then came the knowledge of God.*** *An almost unimaginable person – a single being, creator of heaven and earth, [who could] not be bribed with golden images or children burned alive; loving only righteous [holy too]. A being who demanded your whole heart... **With that concept a God-ordered universe was envisioned, and [people] set about accepting the moral law of the Decalogue.*** We call it the Ten Commandments but the Greek term for it literally means the "Ten Life-Giving Words or Principles." Joy Davidman calls the Top Ten – *"a shining... bridge stretching between earth and heaven"*² -- with the potential to shape new kinds of culture and to point the world toward a new kind of kingdom.

While our boys were growing up, Amy and I posted a framed version of the Decalogue next to the sink in our boys' bathroom, praying it would SINK in! A member of our church donated a wood-carved list of God's Top Ten that we've posted on the wall near the entrance to our Oak Brook Sanctuary. But if you haven't reflected on them lately, turn to Exodus 20 and hear what God says to his people. In respect for God's Law, I invite you to stand up, as able, wherever you are and read this text with me, responsively. I'll read the italicized words and you read the boldfaced ones.

*And God spoke all these words: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. **You shall have no other gods before me.** You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God... **You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.** Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns... **Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.** You shall not murder. **You shall not commit adultery.** You shall not steal. **You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.** You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."*
This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please be seated.

So what does this really mean for us? I'm mindful that entire sermons or series could be devoted to each of the Top Ten. Jesus' most famous teaching – the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) – was basically a whole commentary on the deep meaning of the Ten Commandments. When Jesus was pressed by a religious leader to tell him what the Greatest Commandment was, Jesus boiled it down to this. He said: **Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself** [or as you'd want to be treated yourself] (Mat 22:34-40). As you can see from that chart, you can think of the Decalogue as a helpful picture of some of the basic ways that we practice Jesus' Greatest Commandment. If I'm out-of-step with any of those TEN, then it's harder to say I'm really in-step with the Major Thrust of life as Jesus viewed it. How's it going for you and me in those areas?

I'm aware that most of us have been exposed to so much religious legalism that we have this tendency to think of the Ten Commandments as these burdensome laws. We need to remember that when God gave the Decalogue to his people, he offered them as life-giving principles to LIFT them up – so all would go well with them in the land. If I had Taylor Swift's artistic gifts and could distill the Decalogue into just TEN WORDS, this I think would be the ten that describe THE GOOD LIFE that God wants for his people. If I could put these words to music and come up with some dance moves, I could go viral! Maybe YOU should work on that!!

The first word is **WORSHIP**. God calls us to be uniquely committed to Him – to knowing and serving him first. He is our source, our savior and our sustainer. Exalting and enjoying God is the central purpose of our life. If we forget that, then we've forgotten whose we are, who we are, and what life is all about. Is God #1 for you?

The second significant word is **IMAGINATION**. Whether it is pornography, celebrity, or idolatry, it is easy to be captivated by images. Even our concept of God can harden into a convenient, self-serving image. Where are you and I accepting some paltry substitute for the glory of discovering the WILD God whose fellowship is the solution to the God-sized vacuum within us all?

The third word the Decalogue suggests is **REVERENCE**. The explicit idea here is to pay attention to where we are trivializing the “name” of God, which is to say his essence. The Israelites after the time of Moses wouldn’t even use God’s proper name (Yahweh – I am who I am) out of concern that they might use it too lightly. How have you or I gotten comfortable with saying the name “God,” not even thinking seriously about the fact that we are invoking the most beautiful reality in all the universe?

The fourth key word in the Ten Commandments is **SABBATH**. It strikes me as a word that was once central to our life, never done perfectly, but that we’ve all but forgotten in America today. God has designed us to rest regularly in Him. We wants us to do this as a way of remembering that we are NOT the Masters of the Universe and our ability to really master anything effectively is directly related to whether we are well rested or related to Him. Where will you take your next Sabbath?

The fifth word is **HONOR**. The invitation to honor our mother and father (or any other “elder”) is a call to recognize in humility and gratitude our place in the chain of grace. If we’re unable to acknowledge the debt we owe to those who carried the baton before us, how then will we ever be able to acknowledge the debt we owe to God?

The sixth word is **LIFE**. Amidst this vast, cold, dark cosmos we inhabit, the miracle is life. The politically incorrect truth is that no one has a right to life and no one has a right to choice. Life and choices are the staggering gifts of God that must be preserved and protected and never taken wantonly. The unborn life, the disabled life, the impoverished life, the refugee life, the life of those caught up in the machine of war – all are precious to God. Where and how are you and I acting as champions of life? What more could we do... what more of our “rights” could we sacrifice to restrain the spread of murder and advance the cause of life?

Then there is the seventh word: **FAITHFULNESS**. God is a covenant-keeper. He calls us to make covenants and stick with them, even when it gets very hard. Throughout scripture, God models this extra-mile commitment to human beings. Where are you demonstrating extra-mile commitment right now? Who are you enduring when it would be natural to give up? Conversely, where have you indulged yourself and forsaken the commitment you once made? What would it look like for you to stop the adultery and get totally back in the game?

The eighth commandment is as simple as the word **BOUNDARIES**. We must not take what isn’t ours. It’s not just that we are not to steal in the obvious sense. This

commandment also extends, I think, to not taking more than our fair share from the planet our descendants will inherit, or from the corporation or organizations we head up, or from the government funds that are linked to our grandchildren's future. Genesis 3 reminds us that it was the failure to respect reasonable boundaries that turned the garden of creation into a jungle. Where are you or I in a sense stealing rather than stewarding and how could we do better?

The ninth word is **TRUTH**. There is a lot of debate and spin today around what constitutes "truth." We're all tempted to categorize and slot other people or to shade the storylines of life in ways that are favorable to us. But God calls us to not give false testimony. Even a half-truth is a half-lie and a half-lie isn't the truth at all. God calls us to learn what IS, not what we'd like it to be or have heard that it might be or what works for our side's conventional story. Jesus says he is the Truth, the Lord of Reality. Therefore, well-researched facts are our friends, even when they aren't comfortable or convenient. What are the issues... Who are the people... Where you need more Truth so that you do not give false testimony?

And the tenth word is **CONTENTMENT**. I don't think you will be surprised by the biblical assertion that envy eats us. Covetousness blinds us to the good we already have. It drives us into debt we can't afford, for things we don't need, to impress people we don't really like. Covetousness wrecks our capacity for the very neighborliness that ensures that everyone has enough. How can we be more content and less covetous?

Is there more to the meaning of the Ten Commandments than this? Is there even more to God's holy vision of the good? Yes, there is. But if we could start just here, with this definition of THE GOOD LIFE... If we elected officials on the basis of their commitment to these virtues... If the heads of companies and organizations made their resource decisions on the basis of these values... if we instructed our children and lived ourselves on the plumbline of this vision... We could help build a better world.

So, how long has it been since you and I have compared our character and conduct to God's timeless Top Ten? Do you mainly LIP-SYNC the song or are you LIVING it? Let me close by saying this: You are needed. The time is now. Be the Voice, the Visionary, the practical Validation of the Lord and Life all of us seek.

¹ Joy Davidman, *Smoke on the Mountain: An Interpretation of the Ten Commandments*, p. 21

² Ibid, p. 22.