

# Ten Commandments

A sermon by the Rev. Mark D. Pendleton  
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This Sunday the Glenview New Church begins its third spiritual program of the “church year” that began last September. Our first program was titled, *Living Courageously* and it was based on the powerful story of Elijah the Prophet. Our second program was titled, *The Story of Christmas* and it dealt with how the Lord can be born in each one of our lives as a spirit of good will and good action. And our third program is titled, *Rise Above It: Spiritual Development Through the Ten Commandments* and it deals with the ten universal laws (or ten universal pathways) to a happy and productive life.

Well, it makes sense that this program would come next in the lineup of our spiritual programs for the year, because these laws (or these pathways) teach us exactly *how* we can live a truly courageous life, and they teach us *how* the Lord can be born into our lives as a spirit of genuine kindness and charity toward the neighbor.

So today, let’s begin our look at the Ten Commandments. To do this we go back to the story of Moses’ life when Jehovah appeared to him in a burning bush on Mt. Horeb (also known as the Mountain of God or Mt. Sinai). You may recall that Moses was tending the sheep of his father-in-law Jethro on Mt. Sinai when Jehovah God met him. At that time Moses’ people—the children of Israel—were slaves in Egypt, serving in hard bondage under Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. When Jehovah God met with Moses He said to him:

“I have surely seen the oppression of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey. Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring My people the children of Israel out of Egypt.” [Moreover God said to Moses] “I will certainly be with you. And this shall be a sign to you that I have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.” (*Ex 3:7-8,10,12*)

We all know that Jehovah God kept His word to Moses. He rained down ten plagues on the Egyptians until Pharaoh was forced to let the people depart from that land. Then Jehovah led them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and on through a series of four challenging experiences in the wilderness until they arrived at Mt. Sinai, now fully prepared to meet the Lord and to be given the Ten Commandments.

The rest is more history:

- We know that the Ten Commandments were carved into two tablets of stone by the finger of God, and that these facts about them underscored their value, importance, and longevity in our own lives.
- We also know that the Ten Commandments were placed in a golden ark which rested in the most holy place in the Tabernacle—the Tabernacle being a tent of worship that stood at the center of the camp of Israel throughout their forty years of wandering in the wilderness.
- We know that throughout their journey and on into the Holy Land the presence of the Lord in those Ten Commandments, in that ark, caused miracles to happen for the children of Israel, and that it allowed them to win a number of great battles.
- And finally, the Ten Commandments and the ark took up the central place in the temple at Jerusalem, the capitol city in Israel.

All of these things help us understand why the Ten Commandments were the most precious, revered, and holy possession that the children of Israel had, and also how it was that the Ten Commandments lay at the center of their entire culture.

Well, we know that this story in Scripture is a story about each one of our lives; and it's a story that begins and is played out over and over again—each time we find ourselves in a particularly challenging time in our lives. Jehovah's calling out to Moses from the burning bush is a picture of how the Lord calls to each one of us from a place of Divine love; and when He does, His words to us are words of comfort and hope:—

“I see the oppression you're under right now, and I have heard your cry. I have come to deliver you, and to bring you up from this place to a good and large land—to a land flowing with milk and honey.”

That's the Lord's promise to us, and the Lord keeps that promise by reminding us of His ten universal laws—the Ten Commandments. These are the Ten Commandments which He spoke to the children of Israel in the wilderness. They are the same Ten Commandments which are repeated in the New Testament Gospels, and also in the writings of Paul. They lie at the heart of religious culture in the Jewish and Christian faiths, and more silently in many other faiths and moral codes throughout our world. The Ten Commandments are the universal code by which the Lord leads each person to new and better places in his or her life—to a land flowing with milk and honey.

Well, if we look at the Ten Commandments from the New Church perspective, there are no less than *forty-six* major lines of teaching about the Ten Commandments in general. This means that there are many things we could say—just about the Ten Commandments *as a whole*, not to

mention the things we could say about each one individually—which show us how central they are to all of life.

For example, several of the more interesting and practical things that we know about the Ten Commandments as a whole are that they are a summary of the entire Word of God; that they are a summary of all the evils that we can ever experience in our spiritual or natural lifetimes; and that by the law of opposites they are a summary of everything good, wholesome, and true that we can experience as well. In other words, there is nothing hurtful in life that we can hope to avoid, and nothing good in life that we can hope to gain, that is not located under one of these commandments, or that can't be accessed and either avoided or gained by means of them.

We also know that the Lord has seen to it that the Ten Commandments, or laws like them, exist in every faith and in every culture in the world, such that everyone knows that it's wrong (for example) to murder, to commit adultery, to steal, and to bear false witness against your neighbor. So for these reasons we're told the Ten Commandments are the underlying basis of all true religion, and one of the two major links that tie all of humanity together in true and genuine harmony (the second link being a belief in God).

And finally, let me repeat one thing that was said in one of our readings for today, and that is, without civic laws in place that match the last seven of the Commandments—civic laws against murder, adultery, stealing, bearing false witness against our neighbor, and seeking to dominate people and things in the world around us—no country can continue to exist. In other words, any country on earth that fails to have and enforce laws that forbid these evils will gradually erode and ultimately fail. But the reverse is also true: Where a country has and upholds laws that forbid these evils, it will be able to thrive and prosper in good and legitimate ways indefinitely.

But enough of these interesting generalizations about the Ten Commandments, because what makes these universal laws really valuable and appealing is what they can do to transform human lives and to change the face of human culture.

To begin with, then, think of what your life would be like if you followed, say, the last seven Commandments to the letter: If you didn't murder or maim anyone physically; if you didn't commit adultery with someone else's spouse; if you never took *anything* that doesn't belong to you; and if you never coveted the life or possession of others around you. And think of what the United States of American would be like if everyone lived these very same laws to the letter: If there was no murder or maiming in our country; if no one committed adultery; if no one stole anything; if no one ever lied in ways that cause harm; and if no one eagerly desired what rightfully belongs to others. What kind of place would our country be if all these things were true of all of its people, all of its politicians, all of its workers—everyone in its population.

In the words of Scripture, our country would be well on its way to being a good and large land—a land flowing with milk and honey.

But in the New Church we know that there is so much more to be gained from these Ten Commandments than what they teach on a literal level. Because, like everywhere else in the Word, these Commandments have different levels of meaning that reach more and more deeply into human morality, into the human spirit and psyche, into our spiritual relationships with others, and into our individual relationship with the Lord.

Take just one example: The commandment against murder. On a literal level that commandment teaches us not to murder or maim another person's body. On a deeper, emotional level it also tells us not to entertain feelings of resentment, feelings of dislike or hate for others, and intentions to get even or get revenge. On a moral level it tells us not to murder another person's good name and reputation—which we call character assassination or malicious gossip. On a still deeper level, it tells us not to attack or hurt the good and true things that another person believes, cares about, or holds sacred or dear, especially by means of critical or sarcastic remarks or thoughts.

This particular Commandment also balances our perspective by telling us that we all “blow it” at times. These are times when we may fire back at someone or fly off the handle about something, and we think we have all of our facts straight, but later we find out that we didn't have our facts straight; so we simply blew it.

This commandment also teaches us about a difference between what we might call “bad” anger and “good” anger or zeal. At times, something good or true that we genuinely care about may come under fire or attack; and when it does, our genuine love for that thing may bristle or flare up in an effort to protect and defend—much like a mother bear protecting her cubs. When that love flares up and defends, it can look just like the hateful and destructive forms of anger, but it's not like them, because at its core it is genuine love.

These balancing teachings are part of the commandment on murder, and they are important to a healthy perspective on other people around us, and even on ourselves, as we strive to keep that Commandment in the ways that we live.

And finally, the commandment against murder tells us not to be angry with the Lord without a good reason, and not to knowingly and willfully hate Him.

But wait...we're not finished yet!...because by the law of opposites, this commandment *also* teaches us about all of the good things that accrue to our lives and spirits when we shun the evil of murder in its different forms—things like:—

- Love for others and for the Lord

- Good feelings and benevolent thoughts toward others, and also toward the Lord
- True kindness, a charitable spirit, and genuine support for what is good and true in the neighbor
- A spirit of reconciliation
- And zeal and passion for what is good and true in life

All of these things , and more, are things that accrue to us, and that we can court and welcome into our lives, as part of the commandment on murder.

Coming full circle, what would your life look like if you took all that we now know about the Commandment against murder and incorporated it into your life over, say, the next five years, such that at the end of five years you were a person...

- Who didn't murder or maim another person's body
- Who didn't entertain feelings of resentment, feelings of dislike or hate, or intentions to get even
- Who refused to gossip or to cut down another person's good name or reputation
- Who was unwilling to be critical, hostile, or sarcastic toward the things that other people truly believe, care about, or hold sacred or dear
- Who had a balanced perspective on other people and yourself—knowing that we all “blow it” at times, and that zeal and passion for the protection and defense of what is good and true are desirable qualities in life
- And who was unwilling to be rashly angry with the Lord?

...AND IN ADDITION, what would your life be like if you were a person who, at the end of five years, other people would describe as:—

- Loving
- Kind
- Compassionate
- Understanding
- And genuinely supportive of the good and the true in others, and in the world around you?

What would your life be like under the influence of this commandment against murder?...and that's just *one* of the *Ten* Commandments!

The point is that whether we realize it or not, these Ten Commandments are *solid gold* for our lives, and also for the good health of our country and the world around us. The better we know these Commandments, and the more carefully we put them to work in our lives, the more fully we can see and avoid anything that's evil and harmful in life, and the more richly and deeply we can be blessed with the very best things we all hope for in life. These Commandments are not just nice, pat ideas for teaching to children as an introduction to religion, or for giving lip service to in a sermon or conversation and then moving on. Next to the Lord, these commandments (arguably) lie at the heart of the Lord's Word, and at the heart

of all religion and all of life. They are ten universal laws of life which the Israelite culture, and also the entire Word of God, show us are so precious, so sacred, and so holy that nothing in the whole world could be more holy than them.

So let's throttle back a bit...and let's get started on this third spiritual program in our church year. Let's come together, and learn together—in detail—what each of these marvelous and miraculous commandments is all about. Then let's pray to the Lord and work like we've never worked before to make them a part of our lives, and also to share them with others around us by the example we set.

And God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the Lord Your God Who bring you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

Now behold, one came and said to Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may have eternal life?" So He said to him, "If you want to enter into life, live the commandments." Amen.

Readings: Ex. 3:1-4,7-8,10; Ex. 20:1-17; Matt. 19:16-21

People do not join themselves to the Lord, but the Lord alone joins people to Himself, and this He does by a person's knowing, understanding, willing, and doing the Ten Commandments; and when a person does them there is togetherness (or conjunction). Togetherness is effected by doing. (*Apocalypse Explained* 1027:2-3)

A person might wonder why the Ten Commandments, known as they are the world over, were promulgated from Mount Sinai by Jehovah Himself with so great a miracle. But listen: they were promulgated with so great a miracle in order that people might know that these laws are not only civic and moral laws, but also spiritual laws; and that to act contrary to them is not only to do evil to a fellow-citizen and to the community, but is also to sin against God. (*Doctrine of Life* 53)

The Ten Commandments are the first-fruits of the Word, and therefore they are the first-fruits of the church. What's more, they are a brief summary of all the things of religion by means of which there is union of the Lord with a person and of a person with the Lord. Because this is the case, these Commandments are so holy that nothing is more holy. (*Doctrine of Life* 54)

On account of the Lord's presence in the Ten Commandments, miracles were wrought by the ark in which the Commandments were kept. These miracles were all performed solely by the Lord's presence in those Ten Commandments. (*Doctrine of Life* 55:3)

All nations in the wide world that have religion possess precepts like those in the Decalogue. In fact, what nation is not aware that it is evil to steal, to commit adultery, to kill, and to bear false witness? If people were not aware of this, and if they did not by laws guard against the commission of these evils, it would be all over with them; for without such laws the community and the country would perish. (*Doctrine of Life* 65, 53)

The last seven commandments, in all the countries of the world, have been precepts of law, for without them no country can continue to exist. (*True Christian Religion* 444)