

The Ten Commandments: The Close of the Commandments

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Exodus 20: 5-6 and Deut 5: 9-10

It happened again last Saturday! After hearing Ryan's vows, Holly said these very familiar words back to Ryan: *I, Holly, in the presence of God and these witnesses, take you Ryan, to be my husband. To have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish until death parts us, and I pledge you my faithfulness.* When it was all said and done, they were joined together in Holy Marriage with one final sentence: *What God has joined together, let no one separate,* and down the carpet of wood chips in the Botanical Garden, and off into life they went!

Weddings, and especially wedding DAYS, have a wonderful mystique about them.....all the planning, all the preparation, all the worry, all the check-writing finally culminates in the saying of the vows, the dance down the aisle, the reception, the honeymoon.....and then.....not to put a damper on the whole thing, but eventually, finally, there comes the reality of daily living! And we all know how exciting, how challenging, and even how heartbreaking that can be.

God has been in a loving relationship with His people ever since the time of creation and in each case, God has always been THE faithful one. Adam and Eve had their troubles, Cain and Abel theirs, and finally God's frustration came to a head when, of all the people on earth, only Noah and his family remained faithful. So God "washed the earth clean." For those who were left, God "Covenanted" (Gen 9:12-17) that He would never destroy the earth again by water. He marked that promise with a visible reminder....the Rainbow.

Even today, when we see a rainbow, we remember the promise God made, the COVENANT that God put into place for us AND for Him.....unless, of course, no one has cared enough to pass on its meaning to us! At that point, God's covenantal symbol in the sky may bring nothing more to mind than a few 'oohs' and 'aahs' and a Kodak moment, and therein lies the problem.

Fast forward through history to the time of Abraham and once again we find God establishing a Covenant, this one involving both LAND and DESCENDENTS. God promised Abraham, who was childless at the time, that he would have descendents like the "sands of the sea" AND that He would give Abraham's descendents all the land in Israel. (Genesis 15)

His descendents would have a problem, however. God told Abraham that they would spend 400 years enslaved and mistreated in a foreign land, but ultimately they would return and take possession of their land, where the Savior would be born.

Finally we arrive at the moment in history where Moses and the MILLION descendents of Abraham have been led by God out of Egypt. They witnessed the destruction of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea and encamped around Mt Sinai, where God *carved with His own finger* His NEWEST COVENANT into stone.

God spoke to Moses for SO long that the people down below, the very same people that God was "covenanting WITH," had time to get bored, get frustrated, imagine Moses was dead, and ultimately figured that if God was even up there, He sure didn't care about them! By the time God and Moses finished their business they had melted their jewelry and created a NEW god for themselves in the shape of a golden calf! What part of "til death do us part" did they miss?

In His COVENENANT with Moses, God was literally writing out His marriage vows that would apply to Him and to His people. We call them the TEN Commandments. We've been studying them for 10 weeks now, commandments that Jesus would later summarize this way: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and love your neighbor as yourself.*

Today we come to the end of that study, focusing on some very special words that Luther describes as both the "Close of the Commandments" in his Small Catechism and as an "Appendix to the First Commandment" in his Large. These are God's words: *For I the Lord am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing mercy to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.*" (Ex 20: 5b-6 and Deut 5:9b-10)

What's the ONE WORD that seems to jump out from God's description of Himself? It's the word that far too often comes with lots of negative baggage. The word is "jealous." Why would God attribute this word to Himself? God jealous?

Remember the marriage vows, maybe even YOUR marriage vows, where you both pledged to love each other and "forsaking all others be married as long as you both shall live." How often have we seen marriages destroyed by one or even both partners forget

about the “forsaking others” part? That’s WHY God describes Himself to us as a “jealous” God, because He knows the mischief of which are more than capable.

The “golden calf story” is a perfect example. God’s people were only a few weeks out of Egypt and already had witnessed miracles one after another and still, within almost HOURS they were ready to switch gods! And what did they think that a golden calf would do for them? Would it provide food? Would it protect them? Would it deliver them from their enemies? And ultimately, would a golden calf provide for *anyone* a means for eternal salvation from sin?

Only God created us. Only God has the power to save us. Only God loves us. And only God can....and did send His Son Jesus Christ to die for us! It’s God who has vowed to be OUR God and promised to deliver us from sin, death, and every other evil imaginable, from false gods masquerading themselves bright and shiny before our wandering eyes.

Imagine for a minute the most wonderful wedding you’ve ever seen. Guys, make sure you describe this later on to your wives as YOUR wedding! You’ve spoken your vows, lit the unity candle, and the pastor has pronounced you husband and wife. He introduces you as to the congregation as Mr. and Mrs. Myron Farquar, the music starts and you head on down the aisle. It’s a magical moment!!!

How would you feel if your newly-pronounced spouse was couldn’t keep their wandering eyes off of someone else? Would you be upset? Of course you would! Would you be jealous? Yes! What does the future look like? Not so good!

That’s why God is jealous. He has an EXCLUSIVE right to His relationship with us, a relationship for which His Son Jesus Christ DIED! Jealousy on God’s part is part of the *Language of Love* that God expresses for us and toward us, because He knows what lies ahead for us if we choose another god or no god at all!

God’s COVENANT of the COMMANDMENTS has conditions attached to it laid out for us within the words of what we call the “Close of the Commandments.” Let’s take the positive side first: *I will show love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments!* God gives us TWO conditions here: first, to love Him and second, to keep His commandments. On the other side we have these words, *“punishing the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.”*

Last week I included a simple phrase about the goods in our lives that are often positioned to becoming 'gods.' That phrase? "What's in your wallet?" Today's phrase....again a question... is a bit different, but even more crucial: "What....or WHO... is on the throne of your life?" Is it God.....or someone or something else? These aren't my words and it isn't my question: it's straight from God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

"Love me" God says, "and follow my design for your life and I will be your God, I will forgive your sins, and I will prepare a place where we....and your children and your grandchildren and all who love me will live together in paradise!"

God's plan is so simple, so straightforward and so loaded with grace and mercy that our human minds can barely wrap themselves around it. And far too often, they don't! Permit me one simple example from the City of Chesapeake just this week.....parents upset that their dear child was to a prayer said in the name of Jesus at a city council meeting! Friends, I'm not arguing church and state issues.....I'm recalling God's Words where He is JEALOUS over the eternal destiny of this child whose parents are insulating Him from knowing that God loves Him and Jesus died for Him. It's a perfect example where the sin of the father (and the mother) that could eventually cost the son his eternity.

How can God DO this? Why would God threaten this? God is perfect and God is holy..... He cannot change His nature and He cannot BE in the presence of sins or sinners. Jesus came to understand this personally when He hung, covered by OUR sins on the cross of Calvary, felt God's face turn away from Him. Yet it is the very unchanging nature of God that also binds Him to His own covenant with us...that He will be our God and we WILL be His people, NOT if we keep all His commandments with 100% perfection, but if we love Him with our hearts, we seek to do His will, we receive Christ's forgiveness when we don't, and we share His love and mercy with our children and they with theirs!