Foundational Stories #18 of 24:

"The Ten Commandments"

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Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

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We are on familiar ground today; many of us learned the Ten Commandments when we are kids. Rather than offer a line-by-line interpretation, I'm going to take a big-picture view of all ten today.

The first thing to notice about the Ten Commandments is that they appear twice in the Bible. The two versions are very similar, but there are some differences. The first version appears in the book of Exodus. The Israelites have escaped from slavery, and God has brought them safely through the desert wilderness to Mount Sinai, or Mount Horeb, in the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula. This sacred place is called "the mountain of God" four times in Exodus (Exodus 3:1; 4;27; 18:5; 24:13). It is where Moses had encountered God in the burning bush, seventeen chapters earlier. On the third day after the Israelites arrive, "there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled…. Now all of Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently." Moses makes a brief trip up and down the mountain, and "then God spoke all these words" – the Ten Commandments. That's the first version.

The second version of the Ten Commandments appears nearly a hundred pages later, in the book of Deuteronomy. The book of Deuteronomy contains a series of long speeches Moses gives to the people as they prepare to enter the land that will become their home. The word "Deuteronomy" literally means "Second Law," because in it the Law is given to the Israelites a second time. Forty years have passed, and the people of Israel are on the brink of entering the promised land. They are in the plains of Moab on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Moses retells their history, and as part of that retelling, in chapter 5, he says: "Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently. The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb…. The Lord spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire…. And he said:" – and then Moses recites the Ten Commandments. But, as I said, there are some differences from the first version. The most significant difference is in the commandment about observing the Sabbath. The version in Exodus says the reason that commandment exists is because "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." The version in Deuteronomy doesn't say that at all; it gives a very different reason: "so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day." In Exodus, the Sabbath is

linked to creation; in Deuteronomy, the Sabbath is linked to the need for all people – including slaves! – to have a day of rest. That's the most significant difference. There are others. The commandment about honoring your father and mother results in a benefit: in the Exodus version, "so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." In the version in Deuteronomy, there are *two* benefits: "so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." And in the commandment that forbids coveting, in Exodus, the first thing that is forbidden to covet is "your neighbor's house;" while in Deuteronomy, the first thing that is forbidden to covet is "your neighbor's wife." None of these differences change the basic *substance* of the Ten Commandments, but they do provide some different *nuances* and *emphases*.

A second thing to notice is the basic *structure* of the Ten Commandments. The first five have to do with our relationship to the Divine and to our parents: no other gods, no other idols, no wrongful use of God's name, observe the Sabbath, honor your father and mother. The last five have to do with our relationship to all other people: don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't bear false witness, don't covet. The first five have to do with our *vertical* relationships; the last five pertain to our *horizontal* relationships. Jesus uses the same pattern when he summarizes the Jewish Law: "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength" – that's the vertical dimension – and "love your neighbor as yourself" – that's the horizontal dimension. Both matter. We're not faithful if we love God but treat our neighbors badly; nor are we faithful if we treat our neighbors well but give up on God.

A third thing to note: the Ten Commandments are very *general* and can be applied in a wide variety of different contexts. Many of the other laws in the first five books of the Bible are much more specific. Some examples: "You shall not see your neighbor's donkey or ox fallen on the road and ignore it; you shall help to lift it up." (Deuteronomy 22:4) "You shall not strip your vineyard bare or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien." (Leviticus 19:10) "If you come on a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs, with the mother sitting on the fledglings or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young." (Deuteronomy 22:6) "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." (Deuteronomy 25:4) And so on. Some of these laws are *so specific* that they only apply in *certain situations* that not everyone experiences. But the Ten Commandments are much broader. It doesn't matter if you live in a city or in the country; it doesn't matter if you own land or rent an apartment; it doesn't matter how or where you get your food. These commandments "work" in a wide variety of different circumstances. They are basically *timeless*.

A fourth thing to note: God did not give the Ten Commandments to the entire world, but to one particular people. Nor did God ever say that all the other people around the world have to follow these commandments. These commandments were given to the people of *Israel*, about thirteen centuries before Jesus. There were many other people, countries, and civilizations that existed back then. But God did not give these commandments to any of them. God did not give them to the Egyptians, or the Babylonians, or the Phoenicians, or the Greeks, or the people living in China, India, or Mesoamerica. God did not ask *any* of them to observe these commandments! Just the people of Israel, and their descendants. Think about that. I said a moment ago that these commandments work in a wide variety of different circumstances, but at the same time, they were never intended to be *universal* commandments for the *entire world*. God never told the Israelites to spread these commandments far and wide. Even Jesus, who refers to and quotes the Ten Commandments, never says that everybody needs to follow them. What he says repeatedly is that people need to follow *him*. That's very different!

To be sure, there *are* some rules given in the Bible that *do* appear to be intended to be for the whole of humanity. In the Book of Genesis, when Noah and his family come out of the Ark after the great flood, and there are – according to the story – only eight human beings still left (namely Noah, his wife, their three sons, and the wives of those sons), God gives Noah three commandments. Only three! The first: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." God repeats: "Be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and have dominion over it." That's number one. In other words: *go procreate!* The second: "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you, and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood." That is: *you can eat anything you want* – anything that grows from the earth, and any living creature – as long as you do not eat any creature's *blood*. And the third: "For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life. Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed, for in his own image God made humans." In other words: *don't kill anybody.* That's it. Those are the *only rules* that, according to the Bible, seem to apply to everyone. The Ten Commandments came along much, much, *much* later on, and they were given to just *one* people. Not to everybody.

There are 613 commandments in the Old Testament. In Jewish and Christian tradition, the Ten Commandments stand at the top of that heap. They are also observed, after a fashion, by Muslims. In Islam, Moses is regarded as a major prophet, and the story of his receiving the two tablets from God at Mount Sinai is retold in the Qu'ran. Most of the teachings in the Ten Commandments are reiterated in the Qu'ran, with some minor variations in wording. So, while Muslims do not have a specific list of Ten Commandments the way Christians and Jews do, they do have an ethical code that is very, very similar.

In the book of Exodus, the Ten Commandments are inscribed on two stone tablets "with the finger of God." Moses destroys the first set of tablets in a fit of anger – we'll hear that story next week – and then a new set of tablets is made after that. These tablets get placed in a special chest, called an "ark," specifically "the Ark of the Covenant," where they stay, for hundreds and hundreds of years – until the Ark is lost when the Babylonians conquer Jerusalem in 587 BC. Whether the Ark, and the tablets inside it, got taken to Babylon, hidden in Jerusalem, or secretly taken out of Jerusalem and hidden somewhere else, no one knows. Steven Spielberg's classic film *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, starring Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones, has its own idea about the ultimate fate of the Ark, and the two stone tablets.

One final question: do we Christians *need* to observe the Ten Commandments? We're not descended from the ancient Israelites. We're not Jewish. *Jesus* was Jewish, but he did not insist that everyone who follows him has to observe Jewish laws, nor did the Christians who came after him. What Jesus tells us to do is simple, but general: "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength" and "love your neighbor as yourself." The Ten Commandments give some specific examples of things we can do that are in keeping with the two Great Commandments Jesus gave us. But there are plenty of things that Jesus *wants* us to do that are not in the Ten Commandments – like what the Good Samaritan did for that wounded man on the road to Jericho – and there are also plenty of things that Jesus does *not* want us to do that *also* are not in the Ten Commandments – like deliberately cause harm to another person. So the Ten Commandments are not a prescriptive set of *laws* for us Christians. But the Ten Commandments can be a good *guide*, showing us the *kind* of things that Jesus wants us to do.

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