

*The Second Tablet Project*¹

January 19, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages

Exodus 34:1-5 (NRSV)

The LORD said to Moses, “Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets, which you broke. ²Be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai and present yourself there to me, on the top of the mountain. ³No one shall come up with you, and do not let anyone be seen throughout all the mountain; and do not let flocks or herds graze in front of that mountain.” ⁴So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the former ones; and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tablets of stone. ⁵The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, “The LORD.”

Matthew 22:34-40 (NRSV)

³⁴When the Pharisees heard that he [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷He said to him, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Choices . . . where do we begin?

Everyone wants to have a good life. We want to have close and lasting friendships. We want our kids to grow up loved, well-adjusted, and happy. We want to do the right thing. We want to make wise choices that lead to a good life. The hard part is that often we have trouble figuring out what the good life even looks like, and if we think we know what we want, we have trouble knowing what choices will lead us to the life we seek.

For Christians, any talk of the good life or making better choices or living ethically must begin with God. It is God who is good. It is God who points us toward the life that we seek.

The ancient Israelites understood that the creator of the universe had created them in his own image, had sought a relationship with them, and had shown them how to live in right relationship with him and with each other. God’s instruction to them was the Law and the heart of the Law was inscribed by God on two tablets. The first tablet spoke to the people’s relationship with God and the second tablet spoke to their relationship with one another.

Christians understand that any attempt to live by the second tablet while ignoring the first ~ a second tablet

Jesus, the Law, & the Two Tablets

When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai, he brought two tablets containing what we call the Ten Commandments. These commandments can be found in Exodus 20. The first four commandments speak to our relationship with God: do not worship any other God, don’t make idols, don’t abuse God’s name, keep the Sabbath holy. The last six speak to our relationship with others: honor your parents, don’t murder, don’t commit adultery, don’t steal, don’t testify falsely against your neighbor, and don’t covet other people’s possessions. The Ten Commandments lie at the heart of the Old Testament law.

Many people mistakenly believe that Jesus came to abolish the Old Testament. On the contrary, Jesus came to fulfill the law. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples what God’s Law is really all about. When tested by the young lawyer, Jesus said that all the Law can be summed in the commandments to love God (the first tablet!) and to love neighbor (the second tablet!). All of the do’s and don’ts one finds in the Bible are simply concrete expressions of those two commandments.

¹ The title of this study is taken from an essay by Jay Budziszewski, a professor at the University of Texas in Austin, which was published recently in *First Things*. I was grabbed by the image of the second tablet as a way of expressing the futility of trying to live with others as God intends, while ignoring God.

project ~ is doomed to failure. We are made in God's image. As the Westminster Confession puts it, we are "made to know God and enjoy him forever." When we seek to build a good life or to do the right thing, we have to begin with God, God's way, and the very reason why we are here in the first place!

God is relational and so are we!

In a letter, the apostle John wrote, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." (1John 4:16b) What do you think John meant by saying ~ "God is love"? Did he mean that God loves more than anyone? . . . that God loves without ceasing? . . . or perhaps that God loves truly? All this is accurate, but it isn't saying that God is love. After all, it seems almost nonsensical. Love must have an object. We love something or we love someone. How could any single person, in isolation, be love? However, when we proclaim that God is unity in three persons, then the statement that God is love makes perfect sense. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have always been, are now, and always will be in loving relationship with one another. God is love because God is inherently relational. The loving relationships among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit form the basis of God's very essence. The three persons of the single Godhead live in eternal community, in a loving community of three persons.

What might this mean for us and the choices we make? The opening chapters of Genesis tell us that humans are made in God's image. One implication is that we too are inherently relational ~ that we are made to live in loving relationship with God and one another. Thus, it should be no surprise that the heart of God's Law, God's instruction, is focused on relationships. It is almost too simple! As Jesus so succinctly put it, God's Law is summed up in the commandments to love God and to love neighbor.

Finding our way forward

Simply put, the good life we seek is built on loving God and neighbor. Such a life is a holy life. Of course, loving God and neighbor is much easier said than done. Indeed, the story of Israel is largely the story of the people's inability to live as God hoped. This is also our story. Even if we know what we ought to do, too often, we do the things we know we shouldn't and fail to do what we know we should

(see Romans 7:14-25 for Paul's own inner conflict). Still, to live as God expects us to live and to build the good life that we seek, we must grow, each day, in our ability to truly love God and our neighbor. As Paul put it in his letter to the Romans, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). Frankly, if we were left to our own abilities in this, there would be no hope. But we aren't. On the night of the last supper, Jesus promised that "the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (John 14:26). It is God himself who works with us in our struggle to make better choices!

Next week

Next week, we'll look at one area of our lives and try to apply these perspectives. We live in the Age of the Organization. Many of us work for large organizations. Some of us are their customers. All of us have a stake in them. How can God and God's way help us make better choices as we work and live with these organizations?

The Book of Exodus

Our Old Testament is the Bible that Jesus read. Some people refer to it as the Hebrew Bible. The first five books of the Old Testament are called the Torah (Hebrew for "law" or "instruction") or the Pentateuch (from the Greek for five scrolls). For a Jew, these five books - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy - are the most sacred of all the scriptures.

The Book of Exodus begins the story of Moses, who is called by God to lead God's people out of slavery in Egypt and into the land promised hundreds of years before to Abraham. The first part of the book is devoted to the narrative. If you've seen the *Prince of Egypt*, you know the story. The second part of the book lays out, in some detail, the covenant between God and his people. God tells them how they are to live in right relationship with him and with each other, and God spells out the consequences of not living in right relationship, that is, not loving God and neighbor.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

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| <p>Day 1 Genesis 1 The story of creation from God's perspective; we are made in God's image</p> | <p>Day 2 Exodus 2:23-4:17 God called Moses and reveals his name</p> |
| <p>Day 3 Exodus 19 Moses and the people arrive at Mt. Sinai</p> | <p>Day 4 Exodus 20:1-17 The Ten Commandments</p> |
| <p>Day 5 Romans 12 Paul urges the Christians to live holy lives</p> | <p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p> |

Sermon Notes

Getting These Studies Early and On-line!!

These studies are available at least a week before the sermon is preached. If you would like to get them early, you can get them on-line. There are two ways:

1. You can download a copy at the new website for the St. Andrew Center for Christian Learning by going to www.standrewccl.org. Simply click on the button, Sermon Background Studies, and you'll be taken to the right page.
2. The studies are also distributed by e-mail. To join the e-mail distribution list, simply send an e-mail to: sa_studies-subscribe@yahoo.com. You will be automatically added to the list. Your e-mail doesn't have to have any message in it – only a computer will ever see it! Just send an empty e-mail to that address.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. As Christians, we proclaim that there is a God who created everything. We also proclaim that humans are the *imago Dei*, the “image” or “likeness” of God. Human cloning is in the headlines again and some hard choices lie ahead. When we say that humans are made in the image of God, what do you think we mean? How does the Judeo-Christian belief that humans are the *imago Dei* influence your own beliefs about the wisdom of human cloning? Would cloned humans be made in the image of God? How might your beliefs about cloning differ from those who do not believe in God?
2. Recently, some teenagers went into a local Bennigan's to run up a tab and skip on the bill. An hour later, a young woman is dead. Every choice we make counts. Skipping on a restaurant bill seems like such a trivial crime. What lessons can we learn from this tragic incident?
3. The biblical perspective is that making better choices begins with God. Do you really agree? Aren't there lots of moral and ethical people who don't acknowledge God? What difference does God really make? If making better choices begins with God, why do so many of God's people make such terrible choices? What evidence is there of God at work in our own choices?