

Rev. Jerry Deck
Exodus 20:1 – 17

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Roots Ten Ways to Be Perfect

As many of you know my father, who was just in town for a few days, was in the military which mean that I grew up in a military environment. And one of the things you don't realize as a "military brat" is that things which seem so normal to you, might seem a bit strange to those who didn't grow up in the military. Things like moving every two or three years, seeing people continually saluting one another (rather than just waving), having to always have your military id in order to get into places like the grocery store or go bowling and even living behind a barbed wire fence, just didn't seem all that strange to me. I'm usually reminded of this unique environment about once a year when we go to visit my sister whose husband is in the Army. I remember the strange looks given and questions asked the first time my civilian wife Megan (or civvy as we call her) went on post for the first time.

Perhaps the strangest and most distinct part of this difference is in the language that is used. It's been fifteen years since I had a military I.D. and there are a fair amount of times when my sister says something to me and I think, "Is she speaking English?" So, she might say something like this: "Hey, I know your husband is TDY, but I was wondering if you have heard anything about your PCS orders? No, we haven't gotten them yet, but the OIC said he is hopeful for them by the COB today." Do you think y'all will do a DITY?" Not sure. He should be back tomorrow from his TDY, and after the AAR, we'll have time to sit down and talk about it." "Okay, well, I am off to take the kids to the CDC, so I can hit the Commissary kid free. Let me know if there's anything the FRG can do for you while your husband is TDY." Got it?! What's interesting is that when I was talking to my sister about these unique letters and military terms she remarked that she usually assumes that everyone, including the non-military, know what these things mean because they simply roll off her tongue and are so familiar to it. My point is that unless you have some kind of "decoder", you might as well be speaking a foreign language because it just doesn't make any sense at all.

I bring that up this morning because I'm increasingly convinced that in some ways, we in the church are like my sister and just assume that people understand what we're saying when it comes to something like the 10 commandments. We make an assumption that if people could just see the 10 commandments, in schools or public places, that folks will start getting it. No hear me, my point is not to talk about the separation of church and state and whether you think we should be able to put up the 10 commandments, my point is that I think all too often we forget that in order for the 10 commandments to be understood that people have to have and understand the decoder. And most often they simply don't. In fact, most often we don't even include the decoder in the 10 commandments. So, let's look at a picture of how the 10 commandments is oftentimes illustrated.

You see, as I've mentioned before, I believe the decoder is missing and that decoder is the words that come right before the "You shall have no other gods before me." And those words are, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." I am suggesting that these are not throwaway words or a nice preface, but they are the foundation of the commandments and if we miss that foundation, then like the foolish man who built his house upon the sand, the commandments will simply wash away because they are not understood in the right context.

Because first of all, these words are the words of relationship. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery," is a statement of relationship. It is God saying, "I love you." "In fact I love you so much and care for you so much, that I brought you out of Egypt." In other words, I'm not a distant God or a God who doesn't care, but a God who sees your pain and struggle and wants to be with you in the midst of that.

This decoder statement is also pivotal because it makes clear that the commandments don't begin with us and what we need to do, they begin with who God is and what God has done for us. We, especially we who live out the Protestant Work Ethic, love getting past the relational part, the part about what God has done first. We are more comfortable with focusing on what we have to do. But, when we do that these 10 commandments become tasks to be done, they become burdens or even worse, they become the things we think we need to do in order to become free from the slavery of sin. But, when we see that the commandments begin with how God has freed us, we begin to see that they aren't tasks for salvation, rather they are a response to what our loving God has done for us and do you know what we call that? Worship!

And so we begin to understand that, as has been pointed out, the 10 commandments are about worship, not about simply doing the right things. I was reminded this week of the story of Moses that I preached on two weeks ago when God tells Moses to take the Israelites out of Egypt so that they could do what? So they can worship God. Ultimately, following the 10 commandments is an act of gratitude for God's saving act. Ultimately, following the 10 commandments is an act of worship that should be done, not with drudgery but with joy. And if you fail to see and interpret the commandments with the decoder of "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" then we have failed to understand them.

But let's look at another part of this sentence. Not only does this pivotal sentence help us to see that it begins with God wanting to be in relationship with us and with God reaching out to us first, but also that God has freed us from slavery. Seen in this light, we begin to see that the 10 commandments aren't just random things we should or shouldn't do, they are things that, if we follow them, keep us from falling back into slavery. In other words, what God is saying is, "I've freed you from slavery now don't go from one form of slavery to another. What does that mean?"

Well, let's look at the first couple of commandments. They deal with not having other gods and not making idols. Why doesn't God want us to do that? Because he doesn't

want us to have fun? No, because God knows that if our lives are centered around anything but him then we will once again become slaves.

So, what does that look like in our lives today? Well, my guess is that you could come up with your own examples, but I just so happened to stumble upon a blog this week that I friend of mine recommended. It's not written from a Christian perspective, per se, just a blog from professional basketball player Steve Nash. Here's what he says.

We are so scared that if we do not have our child specialize, if we do not get the extra coaching, or give up our entire family life for youth sports, our child will get left behind. Even though nearly every single parent I speak to tells me that in their gut they have this feeling that running their child ragged is not helpful, they do not see an alternative. Another kid will take his place. He won't get to play for the best coach. "I know he wants to go on the family camping trip," they say, "but he will just have to miss it again, or the other kids will get ahead of him."

"Even though nearly every single parent I speak to tells me that in their gut they have this feeling that running their child ragged is not helpful, they do not see an alternative." Do you know what I call that? Slavery. We know it's not good, but we can't stop. [As a quick aside, I was reluctant to bring this up today because at two different times this week I talked to parents who were talking about how exhausting it is to run this way and that to different kids activities. I typically hate preaching on something that someone has talked to me about the previous week for fear that they will think I'm passively aggressively talking to them. But then I realized that if I waited to mention something like that until no one talked to me about this, that I would never preach on it because parents are continually mentioning it to me!] Anyway, the point is that we all need to look at things like youth sports, or just sports and even look at how we look at our children and ask if these things aren't actually idols that have enslaved us. Are we centering our lives more around these things or around God? How does the way we live our lives, spend our time and our money, tell us about who our god is? We all have our own struggles, but I think we have too many parents who are enslaved and don't know how to free those chains and perhaps the first way to do it is to simply ask who or what are they worshipping and how might we begin to change that? Because the truth is, we do have a choice in how we and our children spend their time. We don't have to be slaves. We can, we must, live differently.

Or let's look at the commandment about coveting. This is one that we've talked about before. Why doesn't God want us to covet what others have? Not because God doesn't want us to have anything, but because God knows that if our happiness and joy are built around what others have and what we want then we will never be satisfied and at peace because someone will always have something we want. To put it another way, our happiness will be chained to our neighbor's stuff which does not bring freedom. Freedom comes only in God and in desiring what God wants for us.

Or what about the commandment to keep the Sabbath. Why does God want us to keep the Sabbath? Is it because God doesn't like it when we work or because he doesn't want us to get ahead? No, one of the key reasons why the Sabbath is so important is because it is a reminder to us that our value comes, not because of what we do or

produce, but because of who we are as children of God. Taking a Sabbath helps us to break away from our jobs or duties, and that space is a time for us to be intentional about remembering that what is most important is not how good of a job my boss says I'm doing or how much money I'm making, but who I am in Christ. Otherwise it is all too easy for us to be slaves of our performance reviews and titles. Most preachers (or at least their spouses!) will tell you that their Sunday afternoons are oftentimes dramatically affected by whether or not they think the sermon that morning went well or not and, while we certainly want to preach sermons that are meaningful, we also have to see how easily we become slaves to whether or not people say "nice sermon" or not. The Sabbath helps all of us, whatever we do, to remember that we serve a God who loves us and has freed us and desires us to not enter back into slavery. Every commandment, if we look at it carefully is geared around not being chained to anything, but to the freeing love and grace of God.

Now there is one more think, it seems to me, that is necessary for those in our world to decode the 10 commandments. And that is that the commandments be illustrated to them by a community of faith. Because truth be told, the commandments can really only be followed by being in community. As one commentator has suggested there should be a sign on every listing of the 10 commandments that states, "Don't do it alone."

The reality is that we are all prone to idolatry, to making things like sports or youth sports or (if we have them) our children the center of our lives. We are all susceptible to coveting what others around us have. Almost all of us struggle with taking a Sabbath, making us vulnerable to allowing our jobs and duties become the things that give us value and worth. And what we need desperately is to have people around us who are looking out for the ways we subtly try to put chains of slavery around ourselves. We need one another to help us with our blind spots with our propensity to live, not in the freedom of God's salvation, but in the chains of this world.

Which is why today, a day when we bring in members of the church, is so important. Now, I realize that you can be a part of ZPC and not officially be a member, but I also want to say that there is something about publicly standing up here and saying, "Yes, I want to be a part of this body." I want to stand up here and let you know that I need help keeping free of the chains of slavery that are a temptation to me. And not only that, but that I am committed to helping you to stay free of those chains as well. In other words, becoming a member is not about being able to vote or become an officer (though that is not unimportant) but is about saying you are committed to this local expression of Christ's body. That you realize that this faith is not meant to be lived out alone, but together. It doesn't mean we will always get along or always agree, but it does mean that we are committed to following God and worshipping God as one body.

And as we do so we will grow in our gratitude of what God has done for us, of how he has freed us from slavery. We will grow in our love for one another as co-commissioners in the beautiful mission that God has given to us. And together we will be a people who help the community that is around us and throughout the world

understand more deeply what it means that God loves them and wants to be in relationship with them. That God desires us to worship him out of gratitude for what he has done for us. And that we no longer have to be chained to this world, but can live in the freedom and joy that only God can give. Let us live this peculiar life together and may all the world know what it means to be free.