

## THE TEN COMMANDS: Straitjacket Or Sacred Playground

Every civilization that trashes Mt. Sinai gets buried under the rubble. Every civilization built on the ten pillars of Mt. Sinai will flourish and prosper. The essayist H.L. Mencken once said about the Calvinist Puritans that they were a breed of people who had a deep, foreboding fear that someone, somewhere was having a good time. Unfortunately, sometimes we give the impression that Christianity is a rigid system of do's and don'ts, that God's law is some kind of ethical torture rack and God Himself is some kind of cosmic killjoy, a sadist, a Jabba the Hut [picture] who gets great pleasure out of crashing all our fun, raining on our parade, and shackling our freedom with the ball and chain of the ten commandments. We have the crazy notion in our head that freedom is doing whatever we want to do. But that is becoming a slave to every impulse that bounces around in our brain; enslaved to gut and gland. I love Psalm 119:32. It reads: "I run in the path of your commands for you have set my heart free." Instead of being a moral straitjacket, God's law safeguards our freedom.

I got great insight into that a great number of years ago while watching our son Derek in a playpen, while our family was enjoying a camping expedition together. It dawned on me that life in God's world under God's rule is like frolicking within a spacious playpen. In that playpen called life, God provides us with toys, with food, with music, with great friends, a romantic partner perhaps, meaningful work, and exciting adventure. But outside the playpen is the forest, a moral jungle. Beyond the fence of the law you find the Frankenstein monsters, the demons of idolatry, the verbal jungle of raw blasphemy, the breakdown of authority, a world where people can't keep their hands off one another's throats, off one another's spouses, can't keep their hands out of one another's pockets. Like an enormous playground, the fence of the law, the law's boundaries are there to safeguard the party of creation.

Consider the Ten Commandments. There they were. 2 ½ million people at the base of Mt. Sinai [picture] It was the third month after God had set His people free from 400 years in the furnace of Egyptian slavery: May to June of 1446 B.C. It was as if God had set His people free from a concentration camp, from Auschwitz, from Dachau. They were free! Free from the nightmare of Egyptian slavery. Free from the tyranny of Egypt's gods. The living God, Yahweh descends on this 7,519 foot **Jebel Musa**, Mt. of Moses. God's people feel the earth move under their feet. "The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder" [Exodus 19:18-19]. It was a Theophany, an appearance of God in blazing fire. For forty days and night Moses communed with Yahweh [Exodus 24:18]. And Exodus 31:18 reads: "When the Lord finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, He gave him the two tablets of the Testimony, [i.e., duplicate copies of the ten words, not two sections of the commandments] the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God." On these two tablets were inscribed the royal treaty, the covenantal bond with the most exciting persons in all the universe—a treaty—partnership, an accord God was making with His people.

The text of this ancient covenant begins with the **Preamble** where God identifies Himself: "I am Yahweh your God." Then comes the **Historical Review** where God sketches out for Israel why He has an absolute claim on His people. "Who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." Then with

one command after the next, God maps out the **Stipulations of the covenant** contract with Israel. The world offers its mix of toxic fun. But the Ten Words spell out God's formula for real freedom and fulfillment. As we briefly go through each command, I want you to sense how God isn't trying to stifle your freedom, but safeguard it.

1. "You shall have no other gods before me." In other words, **Yahweh must be your Main Flame**. My personal philosophy of life runs this way: **The path to the abundant life is a matter of keeping the fire stoked in the center and the circumference of your life.** [diagram] The burning bush still burns. To keep centered, keep Yahweh at the center. But push God out to the margins of your life and put people, sex, money, sport, Ego, or entertainment at the center and that's the prescription for misery. A few years ago, my daughter Tracy and I were driving from Dordt College back to the Twin Cities, MN. We ran across a hot red Cadillac Alliante with a single letter on the license plate. It was a 70 something man driving the car. And the license plate read, "I." [license plate] That man is stuck in the "I"sland of Ego and he's EGO, edging God out. That's one definition of sin. At another time we ran across a **Mustang** with another license plate reading **SEXY WF** [license plate]. What were they advertising?

2. "You shall not make for yourself an idol..." In other words, **Don't Put God in a box**. Don't trivialize God. If the first command warns against the false worship of false gods; the second command warns against the false worship of the true God. Moses descended Mt. Sinai to a people involved in worship and sexual orgies around a golden idol cast in the shape of a young bull. [This was the **bull-god Apis**, worshipped in Egypt. The deity rode on the back of the bull.] Israel confused the real God with this cheap imitation and said: "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt" [32:4]. It was a pathetic trivialization of Yahweh. We may not forge idols of wood and stone in our craft shops, but in the workshops of our mind we are often able to come up with our own "do it yourself God kits." Some people make God out to be an impotent old grandfather, to a tyrannical Judge like some Iranian Ayatollah; or the big policeman in the sky an LA cop. If you step out of line, he's ready to beat you with a belly club. Others are so wrapped up in their denomination that they think God is Christian Reformed or Lutheran, that He's Minnesota Swedish or Michigan Dutch. Throw all your do it yourself God kits out the window. Don't discount God. Don't put God in a box. Let the Bible alone shape your idea of God. Don't trivialize God.

3. "You shall not take the name of Yahweh your God in vain." In other words, **Don't curse!** When you curse a blue streak, when you speak god's name and don't mean it, everyone breathes in the toxic air. And religious tumors can metastasize on your soul as a result. The living God gets devalued and the bedrock foundation of culture crumbles.

4. "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work...." In other words, **Balance Work with Rest**. Diligently work six days a week. But enter into a deep, refreshing, God-centered day of rest once a week. We enter into this rest to imitate God who shaped the universe in six days "and on the seventh day he abstained from work and was refreshed" [Exodus

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31:17 Hebrew=nephesh=to catch one's breath, to catch a second wind!]. When you're burning the candles at both ends seven days a week you get burned. Overcome sloth and boredom by six days of meaningful work. Overcome burn-out and adrenal exhaustion with a sweet day of rest & worship & celebration. God's not trying to snuff out freedom. He just knows how you're wired. There's a biological clock ticking inside you. Every seven days an alarm goes off. God wakes you up and says, "You deserve a break today."

**5. "Honor your father and mother..."** That is, **Respect all God-given authorities.** Where there is no leadership in a nation, a city, a school, a church, a family; chaos erupts. The social fabric unravels.

**6. "You shall not murder."** That is, **Safeguard all human life!** From womb to tomb we must protect God's image, humankind. Abortion shocks us. And the quality of life ethic moves us down the slippery slope of our society to discount the value of the sick and elderly. Winnie has a cousin. Her name is Christi Kok. She carries a canister of oxygen wherever she goes. She's afflicted with congenital Down syndrome. And she's one of the most beautiful Christians I know. One Sunday a few year's back we were sitting across the picnic table with her in South Dakota singing the songs of the faith, And at one particularly moving moment, Christi reached across the table to grab the hand of her aunt Beulah who had suffered a stroke and said: "I pray for you." And then she burst into tears. We must safeguard **all** human life.

**7. "You shall not commit adultery."** That is, **Cherish Chastity!** Flee fornication. It's often argued when it comes to sexuality that you ought to try on a shoe before you buy it, or take a spin or two in a car before you plunk down 20/30 grand on it. You ought also to try things out in the sack before you get married. To which Josh McDowell says, "Hey, the plumbing almost always works." I have a series of questions that I want you to agree or disagree with. True or false, those who engage in premarital sex are...

1) More likely to break-up before marriage.

2) Achieve short-term success (they get the technique down), but fail long term (intimacy on average does not go as well after they're married).

3) More likely to be unfaithful (and subsequently experience divorce) during marriage. (If you can't control your sexual appetite before marriage what's to say you'll pull that off after marriage).

4) More likely to end up unhappy in their marital relationship.

Scientifically, sociologically, the answer to all the above is true. [cf. Ray E. Short, *Sex, Love, or Infatuation*, p. 114]. When I was growing up in California, I didn't live far from Tijuana, Mexico. Often we would go to get haircuts and reasonable dental work across the border. But along the river basin there were hundreds of cardboard shacks. If you're lucky you'd have a tin can roof. But that is certainly no secure environment to live in. With a gust of wind, a downpour of rain, your makeshift home could collapse. Isn't that the way it is when a couple decides to shack up? There's no security. There's no irreversible vows, no promises to keep house and home together through the storms. And what happens when the thrills and the chills are no longer there? Couples split. Sexuality is a beautiful gift of God. But God intends that beautiful gift to be shared in the security of a home with a sure foundation. A wild fire burns up a lot of people. Keep the fire in the **fireplace**.

**8. "You shall not steal."** This is economics 101. **Steward God's stuff!** We're not to take what God has entrusted to others. No five finger discounts. No plagiarism by students or preachers. No stealing from composers with uncompensated copying of their music. No cheating on tests.

**9. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."** That is, **Have Integrity! Match your talk with your walk!** Deceit and lies shred the sheer fabric of trust that holds the social order together. Trust holds up the social order. I can believe you and you can believe me. White lies are not acceptable. Speak and live the truth.

**10. "You shall not covet or crave your neighbor's house...wife...employees...[summer cottage, Porsche, power boat or power tools, computer tech toys] or anything that belongs to your neighbor."** That is, **Tame the Beasts of Desire.** Keep the beasts of the moral jungle, beyond the boundaries. Tame the camel of greed, the tapeworm of gluttony, the ravenous wolf of lust, the lion of success, the bored sloth of sloth. Sanctified ambition isn't wrong. Desire isn't evil. It's **perverted** desire—to want the wrong things; and **excessive** desire—wanting stuff so bad you could taste it that's forbidden. How do you keep the beasts out of your bedroom, out of your heart, out of your thought life? Learn contentment, restraint, balance, middle-class moderation. Relish the good gifts God has already put within your grasp in the sacred playground of creation, enjoy the stuff you already have and you won't be enticed by what you don't have. Tame the beasts of desire.

There you have it, the Ten Words that protect you from toxic fun and safeguard your freedom and fulfillment.

**1. Yahweh must be your main flame.**

**2. Don't squeeze God into any man-sized box. Let the bible alone shape your idea of God.**

**3. Don't curse.**

**4. Balance work with rest.**

**5. Respect all God-given authorities.**

**6. Safeguard all human life.**

**7. Cherish chastity.**

**8. Don't steal. Steward the stuff God's give you.**

**9. Have integrity. Match your walk with your talk.**

**10. Tame the Beasts of Desire.**

Maya Angelou was professor at Wake forest University [picture] [Winston-Salem, N>C]. Among other noteworthy things she was invited to read the inauguration poem for President Clinton. Her first autobiographical book, **I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.** Maya knew by experience sex outside of marriage, having children out of wedlock, unkempt marital vows lead to a "Massive pushing in of fear, guilt, and self-revulsion." Her grandmother, Annie Henderson taught her that industry, hard work, cleanliness, dignity, and faith in the living God is what brings order, security and success in life. Boundaries are blessings. The law is no straitjacket. It's creation's sacred playpen. The caged bird sings. 1 John 5:3 says it all: "This is love for God: to obey His commands. And His commands are not burdensome." The caged bird sings!