



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**God's Law: Burden or Delight?**  
A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

March 15, 2009  
*Third Sunday in Lent (Year B)*  
Exodus 20:1-17

I almost did something different with the children's time this morning. Instead of asking the children to name one of the 10 Commandments, I almost had a contest. And some of you would have been involved. I was going to pick three children to go into the congregation, look you over, and to select the person they thought could come up here and recite the 10 Commandments for us. It then hit me that the contest could dissolve in any number of predictable ways. One of them, even though they weren't convinced that either of their parents could name the commandments, might have selected their mother or father as an attempt to keep commandment number 5. Another child might have started to covet the selection made by another. And then one of the more astute children would have probably told me that going out into the sanctuary and making a selection could technically be understood as working, which, of course, you know is prohibited on the Sabbath by the fourth commandment. And so I didn't do it.

But what if someone were to come up to you and ask you to name the 10 Commandments? Several years ago the youth group of a neighboring church conducted a video scavenger hunt. Each team was given a video camera and a list of things to get on video—stuff like singing a song in the McDonalds or someone mowing the lawn or something like that.

One of the things on the list was to record someone saying the 10 Commandments. One of the teams knew just where they could find someone to do that, which is why my good friend Steve—the unfortunate pastor of that youth group—was awakened from a peaceful nap on the couch by the ringing of his doorbell. When he opened the door, he was greeted by the lens of video camera pointing right at him as an energetic youth group excitedly asked him—or commanded him—to recite the 10 Commandments. Believe me, that congregation never stopped joking about their pastor Steve—the one who could name all 9 of the commandments. How would you have done?

One thing's for sure today: Whether we can name them all or not, most people around today tend to view these commandments as burdens. In today's popular religious thought, the 10 commandments have somehow become burdens—they are viewed as weights and heavy obligations. They act like a governor on a car that keeps you from going too fast—they place restrictions on personal behavior.

As one commentator says, "Most people cannot name all ten, but they are persuaded that at the center of each one is a finger-wagging 'thou shalt not'" (Tom Long, "Dancing the Decalogue"). We've even had a pretty good visual for that over the past several years.

Many of you will remember the judge in Alabama—Roy Moore—who fought a long legal battle trying to get the court to allow his huge stone monument to stay in his

courthouse. What you may not know is that Judge Moore became a popular speaker in some circles, and so he travelled the country giving speeches about his battle to keep the commandments displayed. *The Atlantic Monthly* ran an article about it which told how he would haul this monument around the country on a flatbed truck which literally groaned under the weight. And, when he would get back home, the five-ton crane used to take it off the truck and place it back in storage would bend as it carried the load.

Remarking on that article's description of the monument as weighing 5,280 pounds—just slightly over 500 pounds per commandment—one commentator said this: “I know that Jesus once scolded the Pharisees for neglecting the weightier matters of the law, but somehow this I-beam-bending version of (The Ten Commandments) seems way out of proportion” (Long, “Decalogue”).

Even worse, though, is how some others see the commandments as heavy yokes to be placed—not on their own necks—but rather upon the necks of others. In that way, we wield the commandments as weapons against others, forgetting that they are also directed toward us.

Barbara Brown Taylor examined this understanding in an essay in which she noted how some of her neighbors put up yard signs bearing the 10 commandments. Some of those sign-placing neighbors could be seen mowing around those signs as they worked in their yards on Sunday mornings. Others were known to bear false witness against their neighbors who didn't share their appreciation of those signs. As Taylor notes, “Public defense of the Ten Teachings is no substitute for practicing them.” And then she hammers home her point: “The best plan may be to turn the signs around (or at least print them on both sides), so that those who commend God's directions to others remember to follow the directions themselves” (Barbara Brown Taylor in *Feasting the Word*).

But no matter how common the thought is that the commandments are burdens or weights, it's a far cry from the way the Old Testament understands them. And, since Jesus was grounded in and formed by the Hebrew Scriptures, it's also not the way Jesus understood the law.

It's clear that the OT hails the law as a joy and delight. It was a blessing—perhaps the greatest blessing. As we sang a bit ago—“Happy are they who delight, who delight in the law of God.” The OT understands the law as God's blessing to us, and Jesus agrees.

You see, to look—as so many of us do—at the 10 Commandments as a set of burdens is to forget the context in which the commandments were given. The original context was that of Israel being enslaved in Egypt. You remember how the people cried out to the Lord for God to do something, and so God called Moses to go to Pharaoh—“Let my people go.”

And so Moses goes to Pharaoh and a struggle ensues between Moses and Egypt until finally the 10 Plagues happen, and Israel is then commanded to leave. But, as you remember, Pharaoh had a change of heart and sent his army after them, and Pharaoh's army pursues them to the Red Sea—but they are miraculously delivered.

And then God provided for their care in the wilderness and finally brings them to Sinai, where God pronounces these words: ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you

obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”

Then come the 10 Commandments, or the Ten Words, beginning with this important preface: *I am the Lord your God*. In other words, what you don't have before God speaks them is something like an order saying—‘Here are 10 rules—obey them!’—but instead we hear a breathtaking announcement of freedom. ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.’”

This is huge. As Al Winn writes, “(The 10 Commandments) are not a recipe for gaining God’s favor; Israel already has God’s favor. They are not requirements for being delivered from bondage; Israel has already been delivered from bondage.” So what are they? “They are a description of what it will be like to live as God’s own people. They are (instructions) for Israel’s function as a kingdom of priests before God in behalf of the Gentiles. They spell out the lifestyle of a holy nation” (Al Winn, *The Christian Primer*).

What the Ten Commandments do is to begin with the good news of what God has done in setting us free, and then they describe the shape of the freedom that results. Tom Long writes that this is like a dance—a dance in which the good news of the God who sets people free is the music and the commandments are the dance steps of those—like you and me—who hear God’s music playing. In that way, “the commandments are not weights, but wings that enable our hearts to catch the wind of God’s Spirit and to soar” (Long, “Decalogue”).

In order to soar, though, we’ve got to reclaim the understanding of the commandments as blessing and delight—not burden and weight. I like the way one contemporary writer, Joan Chittester, puts it when she writes that “The Ten Commandments are laws of the heart, not laws of the commonwealth. They are laws that are intended to lead to the fullness of life, not simply to the well-ordered life.” As such, “we are not so much to be convicted by them as we are to be transformed by them” (Joan Chittester, *The Ten Commandments*).

In order to be transformed by them, it would be better to think of them the way Al Winn suggests, as the Ten Promises. By this, he means that there is a promise implicit in every demand God lays on us, just as there is a demand implicit in every promise God makes to us. And both promise and demand are in the Ten Words. For too long we have emphasized the demand side of those words—and it’s now time to emphasize the promise.

And the chief reason we focus on the promise is because it turns our attention to the future. “Our translation—‘thou shalt not’ can also express a future promise (that sounds like this): ‘as my people you will not have other gods, you will not make graven images to worship. . . you will not kill, commit adultery, steal, lie, covet.’ Imagine a society where those things—so characteristic of the world as we know it, simply no longer happen. What a promise! (Winn)

Do you see what happens? The demand remains—but it is transformed. Instead of hedging life with a list of no-no’s, the 10 Words demand of us something else, something deeper. Because we have received God’s grace and been set free, and having received the

promises, the words ask us to live as though the future were now, as though the kingdom has already come, as though you really are God's peculiar people, God's own possession." (Winn)

I don't know if anyone will ever ask you if you can recite the 10 Commandments. But I do know this: you are among those who have heard the good news of what God has done to set you free. And now you can live in that freedom as one shaped by the promises—the delightful, life-giving promises—of God.