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### *Free to Obey*

Intro: Our Old Testament lesson comes from Exodus chapter 20. In it we hear the most familiar version of the Ten Commandments. (It is good to note there are three times the ten commandments appear in scripture. And each one is different than the other.) I won't ask anyone to recite them, but I will ask if anyone remembers having to memorize the commandments at some point in time. It used to be a routine part of confirmation, or joining the church. Let us listen for these words from God. (Read)

I'll be focusing on the Hebrew Scriptures this morning. But before leaving the New Testament lesson, I'd like to note what a change from our commonly held viewpoints of God our two scripture readings perhaps represent for us. In John's telling of the Good News, Jesus is not smiling and holding a lamb in his arms when he visits the temple. He has whip and we see his angry response to the way worship had been misshaped. This picture of an upset and angry Jesus is in stark contrast to the Jesus we often think of who is a friend to all.

Sometimes people say they think of the God of the Old Testament as vengeful and quick to anger. They don't like this vintage God who would take sides with one army to help defeat another, or who would flood the world in order to start all over again or who

acts with anger against cities and nations. And yet our passage from Exodus starts with the loving reminder to the people of God, remember I am the one who freed you from slavery. I am the one who promises to always be your God.

It is interesting to note that in a recent gallop poll, more than 80% of Americans thought the 10 Commandments are valid today, and there are many who would support posting the them in public places. For years there have been debates about posting them in schools and other public places. Now as it turns out that may be a very good idea, because when asked to name the 10 commandments less than 30% of people asked could name even 3 of them. I don't think posting them is going to solve all the problems many people think they

will, but discussion about the 10 commandments can be a good thing. Perhaps it can be, depending on how we view to the commandments.

A number of years ago, Ted Turner the creator of CNN has declared the 10 commandments obsolete. He says that the biblical 10c's simply do not relate to the current global problems such as global warming and overpopulation. He says "we are living with outmoded rules, for we are living under the ten C's and I bet no one pays attention because they are too old, and out of touch. They don't matter any more.

When Moses went up the mountain there were no nuclear weapons, no poverty. Today if people knew them they probably wouldn't go over. Nobody likes to be commanded. So the Commandments are out" he says. I'm sure Ted Turner never commanded or bossed anybody in his life.

What may be surprising is that the 10 commandments are not commandments like we think of commandments. Even though God can be considered the great physician and there is good humor to be had in the idea of "take two tablets and call me". The ten commandments are not a prescription they are a descriptions. Indeed the ancient Jews didn't even refer to them as commandments with such legalistic terminology - as attractive as that may be to Book of Order Presbyterians or those of us who live with covenants and codes and commandments. The ancient Jews simply called them the 10 Words, seeing them as the gracious and providential statements of a God who cared deeply for them and

yearned deeply that they would care for one another and find a way to live together in peace.

The word for the commandments is decalogue, which means ten words or utterances. These are Ten words from God, saying I love you. And I will always love you with no compromise no end. Always and forever. And because I love you, you are free and able to do what is good and affirmed by the law, and not do, or stop doing what is denied in the law. The law as it is given here is a gift of grace. There are no conditions placed on it whatsoever.

Too often the 10c's can be, and are, twisted and used as weapons against one another. People are threatened with you MUST do these things in order for God to be your God and for God to love you. When that happens these 10 words about life and love which are supposed to be words of encouragement and part of a lively faith. These words when twisted can become words of judgment and despair.

A number of years ago there was a series of creative billboards that I liked. There may still be a few of them around. I remember how they stood out because they were solid black with just a few words written in white letters. They would say things like "I never doubt your existence"- signed God. Or "if you must curse, use your own name!" There was one that said "I can think of ten things that are (underline are) carved in stone." And there was one more that said "What part of thou shall not – didn't you understand?."

Where we get off track, it seems to me, is that we see the commandments only as a set of laws. They are the top 10 laws of over 600 laws and commandments in the Bible.

And since they are laws, it can be tempting to sometimes use them as our personal check list of who we think is good and who is bad... who God loves and is worthy of our love and who is not.

Some think some laws are more important than others. We think little of breaking law #4 - the Sabbath or law #10 on coveting what others have... but judge harshly #7 on adultery, #8 on stealing, or #9 on lying. God makes no such distinction.

What does it mean for people who have failed to follow the 10 commandments? Do we say that's OK, God understands, it's all excused? Everything is fine in the name of Love? No. The commandments count and they are current. As we, and as others deviate from the 10 words are we to be viewed as people unloved by God? What happens if you don't follow the commandments? Do you get zapped by God? No. The commandments are God's description of what is good for us, seeing the potential of how we can live our lives. When we turn from it, we engage in self-destruction. That is the punishment. God doesn't send a lightning bolt or afflict us with a disease. Rather we put ourselves down and we demean our own spirits. Jesus said I did not come to destroy the law but to complete it. The law of God is perfect and it gives life. If we live by God's words we will find ourselves free to become so much more, no longer held down by

patterns of self destruction. Through God's never failing love, we can move closer to living freely as God intends. Amen.