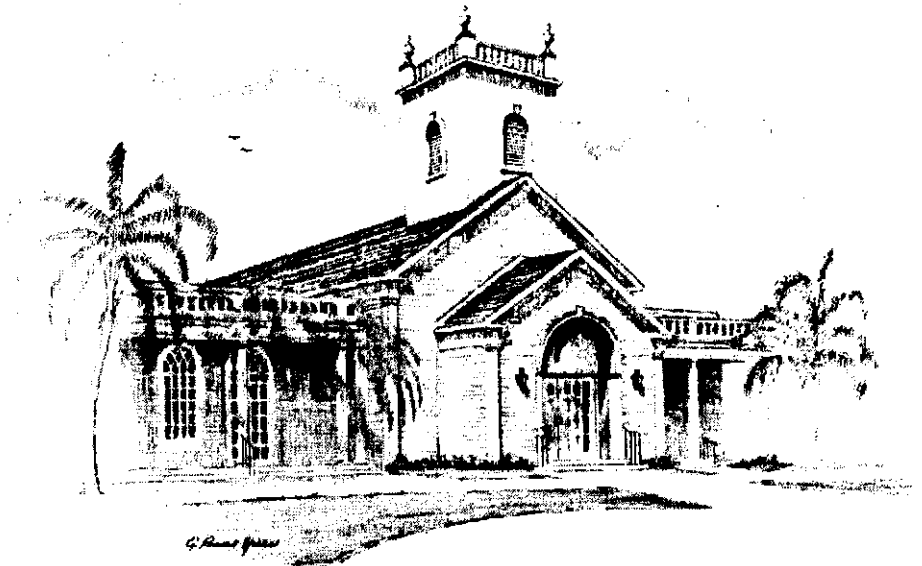


THE CHAPEL PULPIT

**"ARE THE TEN COMMANDMENTS
VALID ANYMORE?"**

Text: "You shall have no other gods before me . . ."

— Exodus 20:3



THE ROYAL POINCIANA CHAPEL

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I want you to take a little journey with me through the question: "Are The Ten Commandments Valid Anymore?" The Number One cause of all that has gone wrong in our world? Things could arise out of your answer like the rise in crime, the breakdown of the family, the prevalence of drugs and alcohol, the problems of sex, or poverty, or gun control, etc. There must be a dozen answers as to why it happened.

But, I think the single most important cause is the breakdown of authority. We have allowed a non-stop assault upon the authority of home, of parents, of church, schools, police, clergy, national leaders, and most of all, the authority of God and His Commands.

Beginning with Voltaire at least, but especially since the 1950's, we have elevated the rights of individuals over the common good. We have replaced the commands of God with the preferences of man. We have taught that you should follow what you feel, not the facts of God's word. Selfishness is replacing selflessness.

Let me give you an example: I was watching a television interview with a union leader whose local went out on strike. The interviewer asked: "What are you trying to accomplish? Why are you on strike?" He replied, "We are on strike for the good of the nation." The interviewer asked: "What do

you mean by 'the good of the nation'?" The man said: "I am a member of Local 590. When we get more money and job security and benefits for our members, that is the good of the nation." We all want to say A-men; it is so patently true. But don't point your finger too quickly. Each and every one of us has a tendency to weigh the worth of an item or new policy by how it helps me and mine.

But back to the point: We have turned ourselves loose from the structures and restrictions which we need to live in harmony. You could say the cause was selfishness. You could say it was sin. Meaningful responsibility has been placed on the back burner.

Do you think what I am saying is true? Have we become lax in our vigilance against all that can go wrong? Did we keep our minds so open, as Confucius said, that our brains fell out? Have we become so accommodating to individual needs, that we forgot the common good and commands of God?

I read the other day about a man who allegedly had stolen a couple hundred thousand dollars from a local social agency in Palm Beach County which was founded to help the dying. It appears as though he squandered the money on gambling at the dog races. Hmmm. . . . His attorney said he was preparing a defense that because the accused has a gambling habit, like an addiction, he should be treated leniently

and hopefully released, if he gets help for his problem. "It would do no good to punish him," he said. I have been fuming about this ever since: to forgive someone for unforgivable behavior because he likes to watch the dogs race would be laughable, the stuff that Will Rogers and Jay Leno would make hay with, but it is not funny. Too many times the other side winds.

The same day, within a couple of hours I listened to a "Sixty Minutes" broadcast. One of the featured stories was a young black lawyer who said that it was the responsibility of black jurors to free black defendants whether they were guilty or not. His rationale went on to say that black people had been so universally persecuted and abused by the legal system of the United States in the past generations that this generation should make it up to them. Black Prosecutor Christopher Darden said last Friday in an interview with Barbara Walters that that is what happened with O.J. Simpson.

The "Sixty Minutes" lawyer was serious. And I heard hidden applause from all around the nation. He did concede that seasoned violent criminals might be an exception. But it was alright to annihilate due process of law to compensate the poor and racially abused. I try to be sensitive to minorities, so do you, I hope; we all should try harder, but this is ridiculous. When the law becomes the tool of the lawless, anarchy rules, and we all better run for the hills.

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This diversion from the law is not new. People have never been perfect, not since Eden. The recurrent theme in the Bible says that when people do what is right in their own eyes, everything goes wrong.

Historian, Arnold Toynbee echoed that opinion in his classic work. He suggested that the pattern is repeated in all civilizations. A society is born. Then it grows to maturity. Then it revels in its strength. Then it begins to relax. Then it forgets where its strength came from. Then it lingers around the edges of personal pleasure. Then responsibility recedes. In the end the culture begins to decline, and eventually, as with thirty-three previous civilizations, it disappears from the face of the earth.

Are the Ten Commandments valid anymore?
Of course they are.

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I find a lot of people who tell me they live by the Ten Commandments, but, they cannot name more than a few of them. Back in the time of Moses, about 1200 B.C., the people of God were led out into the wilderness of Sinai. They came through the Red Sea. The going got rough. They complained to Moses: "Why did you ever bring us out here? It was better back in Egypt . . . at least we had a roof

over our heads. Out here," it actually says it, "we have to trust in God to provide." (So say we all.) We cannot do it on our own. . . .

Moses began to think of how he could organize 600,000 people. He saw their selfishness. He saw their difficulties. He worried for lack of a common purpose. He went up Mt. Sinai and God gave him the Ten Commandments.

They never even waited for him to return. They got nervous. They collected the gold they had, melted it down, and shaped it into a golden calf. They marched around the calf, with Moses' brother Aaron leading the parade.

Then, when Moses came down from the mountain he was angry. He threw the tablets to the ground. Eventually they recovered, but thereafter, when they lived by the Ten Commandments, they prospered. When they didn't, God turned His back. When they honored the marriage contract, their families were strong. When they did not steal, lie, bear false witness, a blessed the good community spirit grew up around them.

It was not only an aside, by the way, that they chose the golden calf. That was the symbol of the Canaanite religion, a religion that sponsored the breakdown of the family; a religion that offered easy personal favors; a religion with no central law and authority at all. Everybody had his own little god,

and each one did what that little god inside told him to do.

* * * *

Which brings me back to the Ten Commandments. The first four refer to our relationship with God. That is where it begins. **Thou shalt have no other Gods before me. Thou shalt not make a graven image. Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord your God in vain. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.**

* * * *

The final six Commandments regard our behavior to our family and others. **Honor your father and mother . . .** a lovely thing to say. You should. The day will come when they will not be here for you to honor them. The New Testament adds that we should also honor our children.

Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not commit adultery. . . . Oh, dear. It is not so much a prohibition against a particular sexual behavior. It is a promise that if you are faithful to your wife, or husband, if you place your family first, the third and fourth generations will reap the benefits. The Bible promises that if you take care of your family, God will take care of you.

Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not lie.

Thou shalt not covet. You see, these are more than little commands. They are God's way of saying to Moses: If it is ever going to work, the people must obey and place the common purpose above the self.

Louis Cassels once quipped that all of us believe in the Ten Commandments, but what we mean is: "Thou shall not steal . . . unless you need it. Thou shall not commit adultery . . . unless your wife doesn't understand you. Thou shall honor your parents . . . as long as they agree with you. thou shall not bear false witness . . . unless you are in a jam. When it is convenient, yes, Lord, I will follow you." If God is the authority in your life, then follow Him. If someone else is, then follow him.

Well, you might be thinking, if this is the Number One problem of why things go wrong, then what can I do about it? Sometimes the good people feel they are swimming upstream. Power does not give up easily.

You cannot change the world, but we still can change yourself. We can try to change our families, our communities, our churches. Is the One Eternal God your first concern? Are you ready to surrender your life to Jesus Christ?

I have a friend who preached a wonderful sermon on the environment. He mentioned litter on the highways: "One individual does not matter all

that much, you throw out one Pepsi-Cola can, one cigarette butt, one little piece of tissue . . . what's the big deal? But one day I was on a county road in New England. There were thousands of little bits of litter. And the only way they got there was one by one." The same is true with our moral landscape, with far more worrisome results. One little sin here, one forgetful moment there, one throwaway episode, one compromise, one silent response . . . you know what I mean. And the whole fabric of society begins to unravel. In the end we make fools of ourselves.

Build them into your own structure. Tell the world and all: This is what I believe; this is where I stand; on this I will not compromise. This is what I stand for! Assume the Lord God is watching and listening. He is. Live by them, preach them. Teach them. For now and evermore. Amen.

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