

**“Playing Favorites”**

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First Presbyterian Church  
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**New Testament Lesson: Matthew 22:34-40**

**Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 19:1-6, 20:1-2**

We usually think of the Ten Commandments as “cut and dried,” you either keep them or you don’t. But that’s not always the case. Consider the second commandment prohibiting idols, or “graven images.” You know we have such a thing out in our parlour – the painting of the Mother Mary with the baby Jesus.

When we had visitors from the Maya Quiché Presbytery here at First Church a couple years ago, Rachel Lausch who coordinates our Mission Trips to Guatemala warned us not to show off our painting of Mary and the baby Jesus.

Because while we know we don’t worship such images from the Bible, our brothers and sisters in Guatemala are much more sensitive about this. They live in a largely Catholic country where there is confusion about all the statues and paintings of Mary and the Apostles and all the Saints.

What the Catholics see as visual aids in worshiping God others see as worshiping idols. So you see, Ten Commandments are not a strict list of do’s and don’t. So what are they?

The apostle Paul makes it clear (in Galatians 3 and elsewhere) that the law, as represented by the Ten Commandments, is not there to make us holy, but rather to show us what holiness looks like, and where we fall short.

We need the Ten Commandments to show us who we really are. They serve as a mirror. They reflect our need for Christ’s salvation in the face of our self centeredness and our weakness when it comes to temptation and sinful misguided behaviors.

And the Ten Commandments show us not only where our most basic human weaknesses lie, but also who we are in relation to God and to one another. Just like you look in a mirror every morning to see how you’re doing, the Ten Commandments are a good place to look in your life everyday to see how you’re doing.

Today we begin a four-part sermon series on the Ten Commandments, exploring each one and it’s purpose in our lives. But first, let’s look at the overall structure of this “code of law” handed down to us by God.

On one tablet you have the first four commandments concerning our relationship with God. And on the other, you have the last six commandments concerning our relationship with neighbor.

On one side is God; on the other side is neighbor. Both are important. Both are God's will. Both are close to the heart of Jesus.

The first four commandments – I am the Lord your God, you shall have not other gods, don't trivialize God's name, and keep the Sabbath holy unto the Lord – these first four commandments are about our responsibility and faithfulness to God.

If the root of our sin is idolatry – the idea that we can set up other gods to worship and follow, or heaven forbid, set ourselves up as the center of the universe – then these first four commandments are powerful reminders that there is only one God, and we are not him.

The other six commandments – honor your parents, don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal or bear false witness, and don't covet your neighbor's property or relationships – these six commandments are about living in community with others.

By focusing on these commandments, we are reminded that when we fail to treat others as people – people created in the image of God – we are actually failing God.

And yet, the Ten Commandments are not all about the negatives. They also provide a positive framework for living life. When we honor our parents, prohibit murder, refrain from adultery, turn from stealing, speak the truth, and resist being envious of others, then we find it much easier to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Focusing on these commandments moves us into relationships that not only reflect the will of God, but also result in happier and healthier lives for us. Our lives become more about God and others and less about ourselves. And the good news in all of this is, we don't have to worry about making ourselves special; God has already done that.

"You shall be for me," says God, "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." God is setting us aside as something special. That's what God promises us in giving us the Ten Commandments. In calling us to live spiritual lives, God has given us a special purpose in this world.

The challenge for us is to accept that we are God's people, and thus to step into the fullness of that claim upon our lives, as reflected through each and every one of the Ten Commandments.

Sam and Jane were not a very religious couple, but they tried their best, they made it a point to get to church at least once a year. As they were leaving church, one year, the pastor said, "Sam, it sure would be nice to see you and Jane here more often." "I know," said Sam. "We're just such busy people, leading active lives, but at least we keep the Ten Commandments." "That's great," said the pastor. "So you keep the Commandments?" "Yes, we sure do," Sam said. "Jane keeps six of them and I keep the other four." Now that's team work.

But it isn't God's work. However it is that Sam and Jane get through life's roughest moments, they're doing it without the fullness of what God has to offer us.

When the Israelites came into the wilderness of Sinai, God met them there and gave to them 10 commandments – not just six and not just four – but 10 commandments. This is what God gave to the Israelites – to our spiritual ancestors – to get them started on the right track and to protect them along the way.

And God says, "If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples." So you see, to be God's treasured people, we need to keep God's word ever in front of us. But what's at the heart of God's word? What's at the heart of the Ten Commandments? What do you think was the most important reason God was able to claim to be the Israelites' God? Maybe it was their history together: God was the God of their ancestors. Or how about power: God sent the plagues upon Egypt on behalf of the Israelites. And then there's privilege: God promises to treat them special. How about for you?

What is the most important reason that God can claim to be your God – history, power, privilege? Or is there something else embedded deeply in the Ten Commandments, in this covenant between God and the Israelites, between God and us? How about love? God loves us so much that God chose to be a special people.

Did you know that about yourself – that you are special in the eyes of God? Did you know that by loving God and seeking to do God's will, you have been given a special place in this world, a special place in God's heart?

Did you know that in the sight of God – when it comes to you and to me – God is playing favorites? That's what it means when God says "you shall be my treasured possession." We are God's people. Those who do the will of God and keep God's commandments ever before them, God claims them as his own.

We know this because, more than any other place in the Bible (apart from the words of Jesus himself), this is where we get the sense that God is really speaking to you and me. This is God! Speaking to us! God's words to us in the Ten Commandments are a communication of God's love, God's hopes and God's protection for us. "I made you. I love you. I know what will satisfy you, and I know what leaves you longing," says God. That's why God gave to us the Ten Commandments.

Jesus summarized the Ten Commandments with one simple concept: Love God and love neighbor. Jesus looked upon the Ten Commandments and saw a two-way movement between God and God's people.

There's a vertical movement up and down between God and us – love God. We do that in our worship of God. And there's a horizontal movement side to side between us and one another – love your neighbor, which is what frames our interactions with other

people. What sets us apart as God's people are these two movements: worship of God and love of neighbor.

Take some time this week to look for evidence of your specialness in the eyes of God. It might be positive evidence, such as helping another person or praying to God daily. Or it might be negative evidence, such as failing to do God's will or treat your neighbor as yourself.

Whatever it is you find in your life that reflects your relationship to God and neighbor, bring it back with you next week. Join us at that time in looking together for ways that we can turn all that we are and all that we do toward our love of God and our love of neighbor. Amen.

### **PASTORAL PRAYER**

God, you turn our worries into wings of joy and our sorrows into songs of thanks, if we but trust in you. We pledge you our trust and obedience as your children, and we thank you for your gift of love, hope, and eternal protection.

Give comfort, O God, to our brothers and sisters who suffer, whether from illness, disease, grief or some other loss, either materially or spiritual.

We also ask strengthen for ourselves to replace criticism and hatred with love and acceptance, tension and prejudice with trust and togetherness, selfishness with caring and community.

Heal, O God, all your children, so that those who hate and those who are hated, those who hurt and those who *are* hurt, may grow up in a world of peace, opportunity and justice.

We ask all this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive  
our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,  
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**