

The Ten Commandments Series
“God's Grace-Filled Integrity”
Sermon on Exodus 20:1-17 and Exodus 32:1-14 (11/15 & 11/16/14)
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When we began this Ten Commandments series in early October, the message of the first sermon of the series was that there is grace in the boundaries God gives us...that, when we know what we should say “no” to, we begin to understand all that we can say “yes” to.

There is grace in the boundaries God gives us.

There is grace in the boundaries given to us through *civil* law, too...and, like many of you surely have, I have had the experience of butting up against civil law on a handful of occasions in my life – the most recent of which was when I was last pulled-over by a highway patrol officer. (It was three years ago, but I can picture it like it was yesterday!)

That particular night, I was driving back to Wahpeton where I was living at the time after having flown into Hector airport in Fargo. I'd been away on a long week of meetings for a Conference board I'm part of and the big, annual church bazaar was the next morning.

I hadn't slept all that well during the week of those meetings and, simply due to the nature of that Conference board's work, there had been some emotionally challenging conversations. Anyway, on that night three years ago, I wanted nothing more than to get home to my dog and to my own bed. I was exhausted. //

Have you ever noticed that when you are vulnerable – for any reason – you are particularly susceptible to making mistakes? Well, on that night three years ago, on my drive from Fargo to Wahpeton, I was vulnerable. And I made a mistake:

Four miles from home, I rolled through a stop sign at the intersection of two highways, I misjudged the speed of the oncoming traffic, and in my attempt to get ahead of that traffic, I over-accelerated and made way too wide a turn. In the process, I ended up on the shoulder and I narrowly missed hitting an oncoming car. However, I did *not* miss getting spotted by a highway patrolman who was less than impressed with my driving skills. (Understandably so.)

Now, I haven't gotten pulled over all that many times in my 20 years of driving...but, years ago, I decided that, if I ever did get pulled over, I would *not* make excuses for myself.

So, that night three years ago, when Mr. Patrolman asked me what in the world I'd been thinking, I simply apologized and told him the truth: I'd had a hard time judging the distance of the intersection and the speed of the oncoming traffic...and I just wasn't paying close enough attention.

I drove away with a \$40 citation, which, in and of itself, made me wish I'd been more careful. But I knew the results of that experience could have been much worse. In my eagerness to get home and my lack of attention to what I was doing, I could have killed myself or someone else.

Later that night, I thanked God for that \$40 citation and I thanked God for that highway patrolman...because sometimes we need to get caught making mistakes in order to remember just how careful we have to be – not only when we're tired and vulnerable, but all the time. People can get hurt.

As I thought through this final message in our *Ten Commandments* series, I couldn't help but think about this experience.

Even though I'd been caught for violating a couple of traffic laws, I had recognized the consequences as *grace*. The stern words of the patrolman and the \$40 citation didn't *feel* like grace in the moment – but they were. Even though those stern words and the \$40 ticket were consequences, they gave me another chance to do better...they'd reminded me that next time I should be more careful...that next time – especially when I'm vulnerable – I'd need to pay more attention.

See, so often, grace is not about a lack of consequences. Sometimes we may receive grace in that way: had I just gotten a warning with no ticket – or had I not gotten pulled-over in the first place – that would have been grace in a different way. But, that time, it was grace within consequences...grace in the form of a wake-up call. Grace to keep trying to do better the next time...and the next time.

Today's story from Exodus 32 offers a glimpse of how God responds when the Israelites are particularly vulnerable, when the Israelites stop paying attention...and when they make some pretty major mistakes as a result.

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We started this series with an overview kind of message that described the “thou shalt nots” of the Ten Commandments as grace-filled boundaries: God gave us these ten boundaries as gifts so we can live in freedom with one another, trusting that our fellow community members will all be attempting to live within these boundaries, just as we are.

After that introductory message, we spent a week focusing on commandments one through three:

no other gods before our God, no idols, and no misuse of God's name. That week was about learning to put God first in our hearts, our minds, and our lives.

Week three of this series centered around commandments four and five: remember the sabbath by keeping it holy and honor your father and mother. That week was about ordering your household's time and relationships – putting God first by reserving time for rest and worship... as well as learning respect for those who have given us life and who probably know a little more about life than we do.

Last week we explored commandments six, seven, eight, nine, and ten: no murder, no adultery, no stealing, no lying, and no coveting.

These commandments are about understanding that our neighbors' things are not ours to *take* and that our neighbors' things are not even ours to *desire* – not their reputations, not their stuff, not the people in their lives, not their lives themselves.

Following these commandments fosters trust among our neighbors, but these commandments also serve as reminders of the first three commandments: putting *God* first in our hearts and lives.

If we find ourselves desiring things that are not ours for the taking, we've put *something* or *someone* before God. And so even those last five commandments – that seem to be about our relationships with other people – are really, first and foremost, about our relationship with God.

So, that was the first four weeks of this sermon series on The Ten Commandments. And, after four weeks discerning what it means to live within the ten holy boundaries God gave us, I think it's probably time for us to be reminded of what happens when we *fail* to live within these boundaries. But, before we get there, we need to spend some time recalling the sermon series we did *before* this series on the Ten Commandments.

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Since July, we've been living with the Israelite people: from the time when God and Abraham made a covenant with one another, through the meeting of Abraham's children and grandchildren, through the Israelites' time as slaves in Egypt, until this point, when they were wandering about the wilderness, having escaped from their slavery in Egypt...finally on their way home to their Promised Land.

At the beginning the Israelites' story, God had made a very important promise to Abraham, the father of the Israelite people. Abraham had agreed to follow God, and God then promised three things:

The land we call Israel, many descendants, and blessing – that Abraham's descendants would not only *be* blessed,

but that they the world would be blessed *through* them. Land, descendants, and blessing.

That was the promise God made to Abraham when Abraham promised that *his* people would be *God's* people. It's extremely important to keep that in mind as we consider what happened in Exodus 32.

So, at the beginning of Exodus chapter 32, Moses had been up on Mt. Sinai for 40 days and nights, receiving instructions from God about how the Israelites were to live their lives as God's people.

In that time, the people got bored and nervous, unsure how to live without their human leader present among them. In their nervous boredom, they made an idol out of their gold – a golden calf: they worshipped it, and then they proceeded to party in a *very* unholy way.

They had already learned the Ten Commandments but, once they'd learned them, Moses had gone back up the mountain and he just kept not coming back. In their anxiousness during Moses' absence, the Israelites ended up violating many of those ten holy rules – first and foremost of which was that they created an idol to worship. The situation was *not* good.

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Now. I'm going to reread our lesson from Exodus chapter 32...and I'm going to put some particular emphasis on some things I want you to pay close attention to:

“When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, 'Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.' Aaron answered them, 'Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.' So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron.

“He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, '*These* are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.' When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, 'Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD.'

“So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.”

All right, now listen very carefully right here: “Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Go down, because *your* people, whom *you* brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt.

“They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, “*These* are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” ‘I have seen *these* people,’ the LORD said to Moses, ‘and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make *you* into a great nation.’”

Now, again, listen veeeeery carefully: “But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God. ‘O LORD,’ he said, ‘why should your anger burn against *your* people, whom *you* brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, “It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth”? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on *your* people.’”

“Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore...: “I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.” Then the LORD relented and did not bring on *his* people the disaster he had threatened.”

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So God saw the people worshiping an idol and engaging in unholy revelry...“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Go down, because *your* people, whom *you* brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt.’ Did you hear that?

God then went on for a bit about how corrupt the Israelites have become, and then Moses offered this response to God: “O LORD, why should your anger burn against *your* people, whom *you* brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?”

Did you catch it? It's really pretty powerful.

See, at first, God was so incredibly angry that the Israelites had become so unfaithful so quickly, God referred to them as *Moses'* people: “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Go down, because *your* people, whom *you* brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt.’”

But Moses wasn't going to let that slide. He said, “Ooooh, no-no-no, God. These are not *my* people.” Moses said, “O LORD, why should your anger burn against *your* people, whom *you* brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?”

I'm not going to go into the mystery of Moses arguing with God and then God changing the plan to destroy the Israelites over their sin. God seems very human here: so angry that the people have flagrantly violated the commandments that God simply wanted to destroy them...God wanted to renege on the promise made to Abraham generations before.

But Moses knew that his God is not that kind of God – that his God was not the kind of God to go back on promises. So Moses reminded God of this. God remembered the promise and God forgave the people.

That's divine integrity: our God is a God who keeps promises...even when we, God's people, make mistakes.

It's kind of like the Etch-a-Sketch: we have in mind what we want to draw, what we want our lives to look like or how we imagine ourselves behaving in particular situations...and we start drawing. But then we turn one of the little wheels and the line doesn't go the direction we thought it was going to go.

Sometimes the mistake is minor and can be corrected with a slight adjustment – an apology, some flowers, a *mea culpa* trip to the mall or to your loved one's favorite frozen yogurt or pizza place. But sometimes the mistakes we make seem to require a full-on shake that just erases the thing and let's us start over.

And isn't that how we truly understand God's grace – as a sort of eraser that wipes our mistakes clean and gives us the opportunity to try again?

It's what God did for the Israelites in today's reading from Exodus 32. They made some huge mistakes, but our God is a God of grace-filled integrity, remembering promises...remembering love...and offering forgiveness.

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Next weekend is our Consecration Weekend – a time when we'll be thinking critically about what it means to give God our sincere thanks for all we've been given in this life...and the time when our McCabe members and friends will be invited to offer their Estimate of Giving cards for 2015.

Being so close to our national celebration of Thanksgiving, it's appropriate for us to give thanks to God and it's appropriate for us to think about how God is calling us to give of our time, our talent, and our treasure in the coming days, weeks, and in the coming year.

As we think about Thanksgiving, and as we prepare to make financial commitments to McCabe for 2015, it is incredibly important for us to remember the message of *this* series and of *this* sermon in particular: that when we fail miserably at living within these Ten Commandments – or even when we fail just a little – God's grace is there for us.

God remembers we are beloved children...that we are precious creations...that we are loved deeply and steadfastly...and that sometimes we fall and need help getting back up again.

In this season of Thanksgiving, as we consider the many and varied ways we are challenged and blessed in this life, let us never forget to be most thankful for the gift of God's forgiveness – grace that erases our sin and allows us to try again. Day after day, moment by moment.

Let us pray.

God of love and mercy, we don't always sense your presence with us...even in times of our deepest need for your grace. Help us to trust you are there. When we fail, when we fall, when the hurt in our hearts is greater than we think we can bear, bless us with that mercy. Sustain us with your peace. Remind us always of your forgiving grace. Restore us, that we might bless this world and glorify you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.