

"THE PROBLEM WITH THE BIG TEN"

A Sermon By

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106 East 86th Street  
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## "THE PROBLEM WITH THE BIG TEN"

### INTRODUCTION

Let me begin by saying that today's sermon has nothing to do with Big Ten football or with March madness. Remember Bennett Cerf, the book publisher...some of you do...for a number of years one of the regulars on television's What's My Line. He once told about a book called The Ten Commandments which was to be published for the armed forces in World War II. The book, unfortunately...like many sermons preached from this pulpit...was too long. One of his editors quipped,

"How about using only five of them and calling it, A Treasury of the World's Best Commandments?"

I think that's what many of us would like, isn't it....take out five of them and have a treasury of our favorite commandments? To me, it's like the guy who walked out of church one Sunday after the service and shaking hands with the preacher, said...

"Reverend...you really got to me today...you really inspired me with your sermon on the Ten Commandments. Starting today, I'm going to keep one Commandment a week until I get through all of them...."

It's been said by someone that during that period when the Israelites were suffering in Egyptian bondage that God traveled over the earth seeking those who might follow His Law. He came across an Arab and said to him,

"Would you like to follow My commandments?" The Arab frowned suspiciously, "Like what, for instance?" God said, "One is, thou shalt not kill!" The Arab said, "You must be mad...why, follow that commandments...indeed! My profession consists of lying in wait for camel trains, slaughtering the merchants when they arrive, and confiscating all their goods. Why...a commandment like that would just about ruin the whole system of private enterprise!"

And with that God turned away and traveled over to Babylonia. There He accosted a merchant and said to him,

"Would you like to follow My commandments?" The Babylonian said, "For example?" God said, "Thou shalt not steal!" Said the Babylonian, "I am sorry...my entire living consists of buying cheap and selling dear...of mis-representations and dishonesty. If I cannot steal, I cannot live!"

Rather discouraged, God turned westward and in Egypt, He found a bearded old man haranguing the elder of the land in an attempt to get him to free some slaves. God called to him,

"Moses....can you hear Me? Would you like to follow My commandments?" And Moses said, "How much do they cost?" "Nothing" said God...."I'm giving them away - free!" "Well, in that case" said Moses....."I'll take ten."

Three great religions of the world - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - have at their very heart these sacred laws of God which you and I know as the Ten Commandments. They are not the Ten Suggestions or the Ten Recommendations. They are commandments given to Moses long ago on a mountain top as the Laws of a Holy God. Let me remind you on this special Sunday some things about them that we would do well to remember for they certainly have not outlived their usefulness in today's world.

#### THE FOUNDATION

The Ten Commandments are the foundation for civilized behavior. Scholars tell us that they came into their present form during that period we speak of as The Exile - 587 BC to 538 BC. They seem to fall into two sections. One through four are concerned with religious duties.

"You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image. You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain. And remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy."

OK so far? How are you doing? Any trouble thus far? Some of the commandments, of course, are easier to keep than others.

It was about 30 years ago that a young man by the name of Sandy Koufax, a Jewish pitcher with a sling like David's for a left arm, announced that he would not play on the holiest day of his year - Yom Kippur. His employer, the Los Angeles Dodgers, respectfully pointed out to him that this was the first game of the 1965 World Series. Couldn't he pitch just a little? "NO" said Sandy Koufax. Later on in that Series, however, as some of you may recall...he pitched shutouts in games five and seven and the Dodgers won that series, 4 - 3. And who was that player with the Mets in 1969 who also refused to play on Yom Kippur. Raise a hand if you can remember his name...was it Art Shamsky?

I worry at times about our treatment of what historically has been the Lord's Day. I think we can feel pretty good about the first two commandments, but far too many people profane God's name and the concept of a Sabbath has been pretty much lost, I feel, in our American culture. Certainly it's not the life style of people in this city. Perhaps you come from a part of the country where it is. But I ask you, how do you keep your Sabbath? Is it at all special for you, in any way? Have we lost something? I wonder what it was like back there in 1837 when our church first gathered. Or, in 1858 when the second building was built? Or in 1882 - 1884 period when the third structure on this location went up? Or, 1927 when this place of worship was erected. But let's move on and consider five through ten.

#### FIVE THROUGH TEN

Now the fifth through the tenth commandments are concerned with our moral duties. Hear them again.

"Honor your father and mother. You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. (The word is commit...not admit). You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maid servant...or anything that is your neighbor's."

The first section of the "Big Ten" has to do with our personal relationship to God, and the second section deals with our relationships with one another.

Yes, the Ten Commandments are the foundation of civilized behavior and more power to that Judge down in Alabama that we read about in Thursday's paper who has the Ten Commandments on the wall behind where he sits in the courtroom. We could not live in a society where people were allowed to kill one another or to steal from one another. Even the prohibition against adultery serves a societal interest in order to maintain a viable family life, as does the one that says, "Honor your father and mother". These are the traffic lights of our society and no society can function very well for long if they are ignored. That's the first thing we need to see and here's the second.

A DEEP COMMITMENT IS REQUIRED

In order to keep the Ten Commandments in all of their richness requires a deep commitment.

Someone once asked,

"What is it about human nature that makes it easier to break a commandment than a habit?"

And certainly that is so in our culture today. It is easier to break a commandment than a habit. Some recent Gallup Polls have shown the extent to which our ethical and moral standards are declining among all strata of our society. We are becoming a nation of cheaters in which nothing is holy and everything is allowed. Gibbons in his Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire cited five reasons for the fall of that great civilization. I couldn't put my hand on them this week, but as I recall they touch on some of the areas of concern we have for our society. Higher and higher taxes. The craze and brutality of spectator sports. The breakdown of family life. Failure to recognize that the real enemy was within, not without.

There was an article in the Reader's Digest not too long ago that had to do with automobile repair shops. When 226 garages were randomly selected to repair a car with only a missing spark plug wire, 74% (or 167 of them) repaired something not broken or did nothing and yet charged up to \$500. It does make one wonder, does it not, as to what is happening to us as a society. This loss of personal integrity is most troublesome.

Some have said it began back there in the nineteen sixties when social morality began displacing personal morality or accountability. There was a reaction during the sixties to smug Christians who said they were moral people...who kept the Big Ten....but were insensitive to the plight of African-Americans and to women and to gays and so on. And so the pendulum swung from personal accountability to compassion, from keeping the Ten Commandments to having a strong social conscience. And the results were somewhat predictable, but fortunately for all of us, there are still lots of people out there who stand for personal integrity and who have not lost a sense of personal accountability, who still have a moral compass by which to find their way.

Two or three years ago, golfer Davis Love III called a one stroke penalty on himself during the second round of the Western Open. He had moved his marker on a green to get it out of another player's putting line. One or two holes later, he couldn't remember if he had moved his ball back to its original spot. Unfortunately, Davis Love gave himself an extra stroke.

As it turned out, that one stroke caused him to miss the cut and to get knocked out of that tournament. If he had made the cut and then finished dead last, he would have earned \$2,000 for the week. And when the year was over, Love was \$590 short of automatically qualifying for the following year's Masters. He began 1995 needing to win a tournament to make the Masters. When someone asked how much it would bother him if he missed the Masters for calling a penalty on himself, Love's answer was quite simple.

"How would I feel if I won the Masters and then wondered for the rest of my life if I cheated to get in?" But the story does have a happy ending.

The week before the Masters, Love qualified by winning a tournament in New Orleans and then in the Masters, he finished second, earning something like \$ 27,600.

I always find it refreshing when I come across account of persons with that kind of moral rectitude, but such accounts are increasingly difficult to find. Two points thus far: the Ten Commandments are the foundation stones of a civilized society and secondly, keeping them requires some strong and deep commitments.

NOT ENOUGH FOR CHRISTIAN BEHAVIOR

But there is one more thing I would like to say about them.

The Ten Commandments are not enough for us...for those who profess to be serious followers of the Christ. The Big Ten are wonderful and they are essential and we have not come to the point where we can do without them. They have not outlived their usefulness, to be sure. But they do not speak the final word in any area they touch. Instead they speak the first word which must be spoken if other words are to follow. And this is why for over three thousand years after their formulation, they remain the moral cornerstone of half the world! It is what led Heinrich Heine to exclaim of the man who transmitted them, "How little does Sinai appear when Moses stands upon it."

But come with me over to the New Testament. When Jesus was asked to cite the great commandment, He did not mention any of the Ten. Rather, He cited a Law bigger than all the commandments put together.

"You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your hearts,  
soul and mind...and your neighbor as yourself..."

(Mark 12: 30, 31)

It isn't enough just to keep the Ten Commandments. They tell us, of course, what we are not to do, but that's not nearly enough for the Christian. We need both personal integrity and compassion. We need to have both morality and love for the least and the lowest. Purity and passion for the oppressed. The Ten Commandments and a strong social conscience. The Ten Commandments are wonderful, but they are not enough.

In the book, *Awaken the Giant Within*, Tony Robbins takes us back to two events that captured the national spotlight a few years ago. You may remember them. The first one had to do with a young woman who was jogging when suddenly a dozen young boys began to sprint in her direction. Before she had time to realize what was happening, they pounded on her, pulled her into the bushes, beat her with a lead pipe, kicked her in the face until she was bleeding profusely and they they raped her and left her in the park - for dead.

The attackers were kids...ages 14 to 17...and contrary to stereotypes, they were neither poor nor did they come from abusive families. These were private school boys, little league baseball players, kids who took tuba lessons. They were not driven by drugs, nor were they racially motivated. They assaulted and could have killed this 28 year old woman for one reason and one reason only: FUN! Remember...they had a name for what they had set out to do. WILDING!

Not more than 250 miles away in our nation's capital, a jet air-liner crashed after take-off from National Airport during a blinding snowstorm. It hit the Potomac Bridge at the peak of the rush hour. As traffic snarled to a halt, emergency rescue services were immediately dispatched to the scene and the bridge became a nightmare of chaos and panic. Firemen and paramedics were overwhelmed by the destruction and dove again and again into the icy river to try and save the crash victims. One man repeatedly passed the life preserver to others and in so doing, he saved many lives...but not his own. By the time the rescue helicopter finally got to him, he had slipped beneath the icy waters.

That man gave his life in order to save those of complete strangers. What drove him, Robbins asks in his book, to do this...to place such a high value on the lives of other people....people he did not know....that he was willing to give his own life in the process?

CLOSING

Here's what you and I need to see and to understand. That man could have kept the Ten Commandments and walked away from that crash without helping one person. There is nothing in the Ten Commandments about helping your neighbor. The first incident reminds us that the Ten Commandments are essential and that we have not yet reached the point in society where they can be disregarded....but they are simply not enough.

What is needed is to add to those laws the love of our Lord, Jesus...and that is why Jesus said that day long ago....that He had not "come to destroy the Law, but to fill it full....." Yes, to fill it full of love. And so friends, dear friends....as we go on from here, let each of us continue to do likewise. And let this Church with such a glorious history for 160 years...let it continue to preach the Gospel of love - love of God and love of one's neighbor. To me, that's the bottom line....that's what we are called to do.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive once again, O God, to Your presence and to Your nearness here in this church on this special day. Wrestle with us in those hidden corners of our hearts where doubt and discouragement and despair and selfishness and sinfulness so often lurk. And as we reflect up the laws and commandments which you have given us by which to live...take us beyond the minimal requirements of the Ten Commandments...over to the Great Commandment Jesus gave us....to the realm of love - love of You and love of our neighbor. Confirm within us the decisions of this day - the resolutions, the intentions - that we may be better followers of the Christ, in whose name and spirit we pray. Amen.

"EATING PEAS WITH A KNIFE"

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March 22, 1998

## "EATING PEAS WITH A KNIFE"

### INTRODUCTION

There's an ancient verse by an unknown poet that goes something like this...

"I eat peas with honey....been doin' it all my life;  
It tastes kind of funny, but it keeps the peas on my knife".

Have you ever known anyone who eats peas with a knife? It sounds like quite a feat. I know if I tried it, they'd be all over the floor. And yet I understand that there was a time when some people practiced this rather quaint custom. Let me share a story with you that appeared in a recent issue of Guideposts. A lady by the name of Cori Connors tells the story of her mother, who, to this day is teased for eating peas with a knife, instead of a fork...but there's a wonderful story behind this strange custom.

### DEVELOPMENT

Cori's mother apparently grew up during the great Depression. Her family was poor...like much of the rest of the country, but they had a vegetable garden that kept them from starving. And strangers passing through town in search of work were always welcome at their table; they never turned anyone away hungry from their table.

She remembers the day her father brought home a man by the name of Henry. Henry didn't know much English, but his gestures of gratitude toward the family were easy to understand. At dinner that evening, the family waited to let Henry start his meal first. And eagerly, he picked up his knife and dug into his peas. The children around the table were somewhat astonished for Henry had an amazing ability to balance perfectly the peas on his knife. The kids began to giggle at this strange eating habit, but the father of the family...giving his children a silencing look...picked up his own knife and began eating his peas. Although he had much less success than his guest, Henry, he nevertheless kept at it and eventually captured every last green pea on his plate.

That day, Cori's mother saw a concrete example of the grace of acceptance, of treating people with dignity in spite of our differences. And now, years later, that message has been passed down to her children and to her grandchildren. Who knows how many generations will learn from the example of the man who ate peas with his knife. A beautiful story...but now,

### TODAY'S SCRIPTURE

Come with me now to our Scripture Lesson for today. A Pharisee invited Jesus to his home for a meal. Jesus accepted and as they sat down to break bread together, a woman who had led a sinful life heard that Jesus was there and brought to that room a very exquisite flask filled with rather expensive perfume.

Now...a party in those days was a public event. Homes had open courts and the uninvited could stand around and observe the guests and festivities. This woman knelt behind Jesus...weeping...with her tears falling upon His feet. In those days it was forbidden to unbind your hair and only loose women did so, and yet this woman not only unbound her hair, but she used her hair to wipe her tears off the very feet of Jesus. And then she kissed the feet of Jesus and poured perfume on them. Now, please understand that religious leaders such as the Pharisee and Jesus weren't even supposed to touch a woman, if possible. Doing so would pollute them. And when the host saw what was happening, he thought to himself...



"This proves that this Man is no prophet, for if God had really sent Him....He would know what kind of a woman this one is!"

Then Jesus answered Simon's thoughts with a parable, saying to him,

"A man loaned money to two people - \$ 5,000 to one and \$ 500 to the other....but neither of them could pay him back, so he kindly forgave them both...letting them keep the money! Now which of the two do you suppose loved him the most after that?"

And Simon answered,

"Why, I suppose the one who had owed him the most."

Jesus then said, "correct". And then turning to the woman, He proceeded to say to Simon,

"Look...see this woman kneeling here! When I entered your home, you didn't bother to offer me water to wash the dust from My feet, but she has washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You refused Me the customary kiss of greeting, but she has kissed My feet again and again from the time I first came in. You neglected the usual courtesy of olive oil to anoint My head, but she has covered My feet with rare perfume. Therefore her sins....and they are many...are forgiven, for she loved Me much; but one who is forgiven little, shows little love".

And He said to her, "Your sins are forgiven!"

#### THE NEED FOR ACCEPTANCE

Let's begin here with the first of three observations.

The first is this. The greatest need some people have is for acceptance. I think you and I know that, but it's well for us to be reminded of that. Remember when we were small and how it felt to be shut out. Remember when we were teenagers, how it felt not to be a part of the "in" group. Some people never really get over that. So put that down first: the greatest need that some people have is for acceptance.

Dudley Moore, the successful movie actor, has that need. As a youngest, Dudley was born with a club foot. He was smaller than the other children and one of his legs was shorter than the other. Kids laughed at him and called him, "Hop-a-long". He says that he felt humiliated...."I felt unworthy of anything... a little runt with a twisted foot".

His parents felt guilty about his defect and so Dudley grew up feeling that he had done something wrong. His home lacked love and his parents seemed always to be burdened by fear and anxiety. When he was six or seven, he spent much time in hospitals. One night a nurse named Pat gave him a goodnight kiss. Forty years later, Dudley Moore said,

"I almost spin when I think about it. She was truly an angel of mercy, and that kiss was probably the first taste of real, unqualified, uncomplicated affection I had ever had. In many ways my entire life is based on re-capturing that moment of affection!"

How did Dudley Moore deal with his need for acceptance? He learned to make his classmates laugh. He became what we call the "class clown", and the rest, as they say, is history!

We all have a need to be accepted. Some people will do far worse than become the class clown to be accepted. How many young people take their first drink, or smoke their first joint, in a bid to be accepted? How many have their first sexual experience for the same reason. This drive...this powerful drive for acceptance....indeed it is powerful and for some, it is their greatest need!

ACCEPTANCE HAS BEEN KNOWN TO CHANGE PEOPLE

And a second observation that needs to be mentioned here in connection with acceptance is that acceptance has been known to change people. There are people who are decent and responsible citizens today because someone, somewhere along the way gave them the acceptance they were looking for and the acceptance they craved.

A child psychologist tells about a boy who was brought to him who was labeled "incorribible". The child was supposed to be "uncontrollable". He was moody and negative and at first wouldn't even talk to the psychologist. There simply seemed to be "no handle" with which to take hold of this young life. And even the boy's own father said of him...

"This is the only child I've ever seen who doesn't have a sizeable and likeable trait.....not a single one!"

That's tough. The psychologist realized that this was his starting point and so he started looking for some "one thing" he could approve and affirm. Several things turned up in his search, one of which was that the boy liked to carve and he was good at it. At home he had carved up the furniture and been punished for it. Anyway, this psychologist bought him a carving set, a set of carving knives and some soft wood. He also offered him some suggestions on how to use them, AND he didn't hold back on his approval. One day he remarked to him,

"You know, Jimmy.....you can carve out things better than any boy I ever knew....."

And that remark registered. Soon the psychologist found other things he could affirm and approve and then to make a long story short....one day Jimmy surprised everyone by cleaning up his own room without being asked! And when the psychologist asked him why he did it, Jimmy answered..."why, I thought you'd like that...."

The point is that acceptance changes lives. We've all seen it happen in other situations...with adults as well as with children and young people. This is the strength of groups like Alcoholics Anonymous and other support groups. When people feel accepted and affirmed....the power to change comes into play.

This was one of the secrets of the ministry of Jesus. He accepted people just as they were and He changed their lives. You see, the Pharisees were probably among the best people in town....but there is no evidence that they ever changed anybody. They tended to avoid the people with problems and not accept them, but Jesus came along...reached out to those in need. He said,

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick".  
(Matthew 9: 12)

He was wise enough to know that the greatest need some people have is for the grace of acceptance, and He also had the wisdom to know that acceptance changes lives....but consider before we finish this a third thing, the last thing.

THE CHURCH: CALLED TO BE AN ACCEPTING COMMUNITY

Last Sunday morning I asked the boys and girls of the Confirmation Class which title I should go with for this sermon that was "in the works". Either, The Grace of Acceptance, or Eating Peas With a Knife. The latter seemed to appeal to more of them...catchy, clever....but one of the boys whose name is Chris thoughtfully said,

"I like the Grace of Acceptance....it has a more 'noble' sound to it....and then he added...and isn't that what the church should be....open and accepting...."

Yes, was my reply....the Church that bears His name should strive to always be an accepting community. That is who we are and what we're all about. We are not an exclusive club. We are not a representative sample of the best people in town who gather each Sunday morning to congratulate ourselves on our virtues. As someone has said, "The church is a hospital for sinners...not a museum for saints". We are those who know we have been accepted and, having been accepted, pass on that acceptance to others.

Philip Yancey, a writer, tells a rather disturbing story in his book, What's So Amazing About Grace? He says that he heard this from a friend who works with the "down and out" in Chicago. This is what his friend said on one occasion,

"A prostitute came to me in wretched straits...homeless, sick, unable to buy food for her two year old daughter. Through sobs and tears, she told me she had been renting out her daughter, two years old...to men interested in 'kinky sex'. She made more renting out her daughter for an hour than she made or could earn on her own in a night. She had to do it, she said, to support her own drug habit.

I could hardly bear hearing her sordid story. For one thing, it made me "legally" liable...I'm required to report cases of child abuse. I had no idea what to say to this woman. At last I asked if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. And I will never forget the look of pure, naive shock that crossed her face. 'CHURCH?' she cried....'Why would I ever go there? I already feel terrible about myself and they would just make me feel worse'.

"What struck me about my friend's story" said Philip Yancey...."is that women much like this prostitute fled toward Jesus and not away from Him. The worse a person feels about himself or herself, the more likely he or she saw Jesus as a refuge. Has the Church lost that gift?" asks Yancey.

"Evidently the down and out...who flocked to Jesus when He lived on earth, no longer feel welcome among His followers". "What has happened" he asks.

CLOSING Is that the case? What has happened? A prostitute who rents out her two year old daughter? It would be tough to fall any farther than that. Could you accept her? Could you forgive her? Let's face it...this is when the Christian faith gets difficult. Sometimes it is easier for us to relate to Simon the Pharisee than to Jesus - the Christ. And perhaps the only way we can ever have that kind of accepting heart is to ponder and to reflect on our own acceptance. You and I have fallen short of the glory of God, too... but we have received grace upon grace....yes, most "amazing", too.

As Paul Tillich put it so eloquently in his book, The Shaking of the Foundations,

"Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness...it strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us....

It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear...when the old compulsions reign with us as they have for decades...sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness and it is as though a voice were saying to us, 'YOU ARE ACCEPTED...!'

GO FORTH Go forth from here then remembering that we are accepted and that now we must accept others. There is room at the foot of the cross for every one of us. Acceptance changes lives. And that is what the church is all about and may this place of worship always be a place where people can come in and discover the acceptance of God and of the Christian community. That is our goal and our mission - now and always!

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your presence and to Your nearness in these moments, O God. Wrestle with us in those hidden corners of our lives and our hearts where we struggle...struggle to find acceptance and favor and approval in Your light. Let our lives be touch by your amazing grace that we may be lifted to new levels of self-acceptance and acceptance of others... in Your name and in the spirit of Jesus, the life-giver...we now pray. Amen.