

Philippians 3:4b-14    Pressing On (Wonnit)  
Exodus 20:1-20  
Psalm 19  
October 8, 2023

I don't remember the Ten Commandments being read in worship when I was growing up. We learned about them in Sunday School. They were hung on the wall. They were listed on bookmarks. So whenever the Ten Commandments appear as a lectionary reading, and to insure that they never become something merely on a plaque or in any way in the background, hopefully kept in the forefront of our lives, it is appropriate to read them in worship.

It is important to note that there are two ways to keep the Commandments. The first has little spiritual value, and that is to keep them grudgingly, out of a sense of obligation, as a debt owed, when the genuine desire of the heart is to reserve, at least the right, to disobey them.

This motive arises especially when they are an inconvenience, or might keep us from attaining something we desire. Along similar lines, one might try to keep them in order to obtain something, like a transaction, as a way gaining leverage over God.

The other is to love them, to agree wholeheartedly with them, as if they were written on the heart and not just on stone, or paper; to keep them willingly and voluntarily; to be willing to keep them even if there was no obligation.

The latter way of keeping the Ten Commandments is, in Paul's words when he was commenting on offering our bodies as living sacrifices, "holy, and pleasing to God." In any case, the ability and desire to obey is grounded in God's grace, as are the commandments themselves.

An example of the latter way is presented to us by Paul in Philippians. In the great text in the third chapter, he starts by enumerating his inherited status and his personal accomplishments, and then how he came to consider those things worthless.

"Whatever was to my profit, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ."

It is not that Paul suddenly ceased to be a Hebrew of Hebrews, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised on the 8th day, all of which was part of what he was born into, or that he ceased to be a Pharisee, in the sense of being set apart for service to God, and blameless in the legalistic righteousness sense. *What changed was his view of the meaning of it all.*

"I consider them garbage for Christ's sake." And he goes on to claim that he desires the very thing God wills for him.

"To be found in him (Christ) not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ - the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith."

These words are Paul's way of saying that by God's grace his own will has been brought into harmony with God's will. It becomes a goal.

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection; and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings; becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead."

Paul's confession, is not that he grudgingly accepts grace, sacrificing the self because he has no choice, but that he has come to embrace the mercy and grace of God enthusiastically, with his whole being. One can see that the love for God's law is consistent with this embrace, is part of what it means to love God with all heart and soul and strength and mind. For when we love God's commandments, we love God.

One of my coaches in high school had a saying that was meant to goad us to success. He would say, "you got to want it," although it came out, with his slight North Carolina accent, "you gotta wonnit." I doubt very seriously that anyone who was there lacked competitive desire. In order for that desire to apply, other things had to happen, over which the athlete had no control.

If those other things are in order, if there is talent, and if one has prepared through hard work, and if one understands how the competition works, and if there is health and support, then the willingness to accept pain and make sacrifices *is* necessary for success. Even the desire to defeat the opponent, has to be

present. Paul says we want to share in Christ's suffering. It is a point well-taken.

In a way the life of faith is similar. Given the grace of God, and enough life experience to be aware of the human predicament, the limitations and shortcomings that are associated with it, and some exposure to the thought world of Grace, the language of faith, if all those things are present, one must *desire* a relationship with God; to be found in Christ, a righteousness not by law but by faith, desire the resurrection of the dead.

And this desire is *not* like other desires that seem like requirements. Love can never be real if it is given as an obligation. Sometimes love is an obligation but it must be offered freely. Like faith, love is freely given, or it is not love.

The theologian Karl Barth aptly puts it this way;

"Knowledge of God is in obedience to God. This obedience is not that of a servant but of a child. It is not blind but seeing. It is not coerced but free. But for this very reason it is a real obedience."

The gospel message for us today is, that God's grace *has* been given to us through our Lord Jesus Christ. If it were not so, then all the desiring in the world would make no difference. But it does matter. We can "wonnit," as my coach used to say, and press on toward the goal . . . to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus."

The service today began with a Call to Worship taken from the 19th Psalm, which is inspired by nature, particularly the sky, that great proclaimer of God's glory. Then there is a move in the middle of the psalm to an affirmation of God's law. It ends with a prayer that I have heard at the beginning of sermons, but is actually appropriate for any occasion, or just the daily living of life,

“May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.”

Here we have another example of the voluntary acceptance of God's law. More than that, for one might accept something voluntarily as necessary burden, something negative but so much part of reality that it can't be avoided. We can pray this prayer; and delight in God's law, and love God genuinely, and respond faithfully to the magnificent grace that created us and the world, sustains earthly life, and leads into eternity.

Pray it with me;

“May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.” Amen

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