

January 2, 2011

WHO'S IN YOUR CORNER?

We are beginning this morning a series on the Ten Commandments. It's the beginning of a New Year and what better way to begin a year but to turn our sights on the way God wants us to live. If we would want to claim this year for God ... if we would want to say in day 2 of the New Year that we would like for God to have his way with us this year, then it's probably a pretty good starting point to consider God's ten point plan for abundant living. So we are going to spend the next ten weeks looking at The Ten Commandments one at a time, beginning today with commandment number one.

Listen then with me to the word of God found in Exodus and Matthew:

Exodus 20:1-3

Matthew 22: 34-40

When Muhammad Ali was asked once to name the greatest lesson he learned in life he told the story of his heavyweight title fight against Sonny Liston in 1964. Some call it the

greatest fight in boxing history. Ali at that time was named Cassius Clay and was the young upstart challenger to the seasoned pro Sonny Liston. Odds were greatly in Liston's favor. When the fight started the two men went after each other pretty hard. It wasn't long before both were feeling the brutal effects of a heavyweight fight. By the fourth round Cassius Clay could hardly see and Sonny Liston was growing exhausted. By the time the fight got to the end of the sixth round, as Ali recounts it, "I was completely spent. I couldn't even raise my arms. I couldn't even stand up to go back into the ring. 'I'm going home,' he told his trainer Angelo Dundee, 'I'm not going back in there!'"

When Angelo Dundee, Cassius Clay's trainer, heard this he demanded that the young boxer walk back out into the ring. Clay refused. The bell rang and Cassius Clay stayed in his seat. It was then that Angelo Dundee pushed him off of his stool and yelled, "Get in that ring and don't come out until you are the heavyweight champion of the world."

The young Cassius Clay struggled to his feet and across the ring Sonny Liston stayed on his stool and did not answer the bell. Cassius Clay was the new heavyweight champion of the world.

Muhammad Ali said, “The greatest lesson I’ve learned was from that fight. That to always have someone in your corner who’s pushing you and making you do things you don’t think you can do.”

To always have someone in your corner pushing you and making you do things you don’t think you can do.

I want to talk to you this morning about who’s in your corner.

Now some of you when I ask that question, “Who’s in your corner?” will immediately think, perhaps, of some family members. Maybe your spouse, your siblings, your parents or your children. Some of you will think of a couple of close friends perhaps. Maybe a friend from your youth, a next door neighbor or someone from church. And maybe some of you will think of someone from work, a trusted employee, a kind and benevolent boss --- someone you have always counted on to get the job done. “Who is my corner? Good old Charlie or Susie, they always seem to come through for me.”

But I wonder if this question of “Who’s in my corner?” is not the question that is getting asked when you and I turn our attention to the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments. There may not be a more recognized code of laws in all the world than the Ten

Commandments. People not only recognize the Ten Commandments, but they usually seem to have some feeling about them. Somewhere in the Union there is a debate likely happening over whether or not the Ten Commandments should be posted somewhere – some government building. Some parents want them posted on the walls of their children’s schools. They do, in fact, appear on the wall of the Supreme Court Building in Washington, DC. You can’t get too far into an Intro to Law course without discussing the role of the Ten Commandments in the development of our legal codes. Just about everybody agrees that these are commandments that should be generally obeyed. I’ve never heard anybody suggest anything to the contrary. If I took a show of hands this morning asking who is in favor of the Ten Commandments I bet just about every hand would go up. It’s hard to be against the Ten Commandments. It’s kind of like being against motherhood and apple pie.

And yet if I were to ask who could recite the Ten Commandments there might be a few less hands. There might be a lot less hands. We’d all take a stab and we’d probably all get a few right. Some would remember most. A couple of us would get all of them right. But it’s interesting, isn’t it, that something so fundamental to our faith story is so scarcely recalled. It’s almost like we have this sort of approach/avoidance thing going on with the Ten Commandments. We are strongly in favor of them but we are not quite sure what they are. Hard to follow a law when you don’t know what it is.

Now it may likely be that we moderns think that we have somehow outgrown these commandments. That maybe these commandments don't serve us like they used to. That there is something inside us that wonders if these ancient laws are really the best thing for us. Do I really need to trouble myself with these laws handed down from Sinai some thousands and thousands of years ago? Are these laws of God just something that God hands down in order to somehow keep me under his thumb, to rein me in or, worse still, to prevent me from having the fun I might ordinarily have? Do these laws really have my best interest at heart?

Makes me think of the boy who was standing in the lunch line at the local Catholic elementary school and at the head of the table was a large pile of apples and on the tray the nun had posted a sign that said: "Take only one. God is watching." Moving further along the lunch line, at the other end of the table was a large tray of chocolate chip cookies. And a child had written a note: "Take all you want. God's watching the apples."

Somehow I think we look at the Ten Commandments and we know by their existence that God is watching but we wonder whether God really has our best interest at heart.

Kind of like when I was a boy and was watching my mother doing some baking and noticed her using some vanilla extract and it smelled wonderful. And mom told me that this vanilla extract was not for drinking, it was just for baking. And, of course, I assumed that's just

what moms are supposed to say, and that moms are supposed to keep you away from things you are generally supposed to enjoy. So when mom left the room for a moment I grabbed for that bottle of vanilla extract and took a nice big and quick swig -- and discovered that mom really did have my best interest at heart!

So the question is: who's got our best interest at heart? Who's in your corner when we listen for what God has to say to us in the Ten Commandments?

Because you see when God issues his Ten Commandments he does so to a particular group of people, the Israelites. And the Israelites for most of their story have been slaves. They have been slaves for a long time. They have suffered under the cruel hand of Pharaoh for a long time. But the good news is that God has heard their cry. And God is in the delivery business. So God sends Moses. And Moses confronts Pharaoh. And God sends signs of great power. And God delivers the people from the angel of death and Pharaoh finally gives in and God leads Moses and the people of Israel out of Egypt and delivers them from the cruel hand of slavery. He takes them across the Red Sea and gives them a new life and sets them on a journey to the Promised Land. God is in the delivery business.

But here is the good news, the really good news. When God delivers these slaves into freedom he doesn't just turn them loose. No, he gathers these ex-slaves together and presents

them a way to live. He says, “If you want to know how to live ... here’s how to live. It’s not every man out for himself. It’s not catch as catch can. It’s not dog eat dog. If you want to know how to live, here’s how to live.”

So when God begins his list of Ten Commandments he begins with an introduction, or maybe not an introduction as much as a reminder. When God begins to list his ten commandments he begins by saying: “Remember, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. If you want to know who’s in your corner, if you want to know who has your best interest at heart, if you want to know whose way you should follow, remember your story of salvation. Remember the one who got you here. Remember that I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”

Commandment number 1: *You shall have no other gods before me.* Do you hear what God is trying to say? God gathers together the people of freedom, the people he has liberated from the bondage of slavery and he says, “Guess what? You don’t have to have any other God but the God of freedom. You don’t have to have any other God but the God who loves you. You don’t have to have any other God but the God who intends well for you. You get to freely choose me.”

You see the Ten Commandments are for people who are in touch with their freedom. The Ten Commandments are for people who understand that they owe no servitude to anyone. The Ten Commandments are for people who long to have the God of life and liberation right in their corner pushing them into the ring to live the life that we were created for.

You see, the Ten Commandments are not tablets to hang on some wall somewhere so that we'll never look at them. The Ten Commandments are ways of life that we are invited to fully embrace. And the only way we will bring ourselves to embrace them is when we realize that they are offered to us by a God who has fully embraced us.

And the question today is this --- are you free or are you a slave? It's a great question for the New Year. There are all kinds of commandments out there, all kinds of do's and don'ts, all kinds of political correctness – and God says, “Are you going to be a slave to all that or are you going to be free to obey me? Are you going to put me in your corner?”

I love the way Jesus put it. When they asked him about the greatest commandment he didn't flinch a bit when he said, “You shall love ... (do you know what love is ... love is a freedom word ... it's something you want to do) ... Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength, and

you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” No more slavery. Now we are talking about freedom. We are talking about putting God in your corner so he can push you out into that ring.

And God in the ring says, “Obey the commandments. You want to know the will of God in your life? Obey the commandments. You want to know how to face into the opponent in the ring. Obey the commandments. Learn the commandments ... and then obey them. We are slaves to no one and servants only to God. And we shall love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.” And so when we see that the world seems to be going to hell in a handbasket – what’s the response? Obeying the commandments. Love only one God. And love our neighbor. The eyes of the world will be looking to see how free we really are to obey and to love. Is there someone in our corner pushing us and making us do things we don’t think we can do?

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me.”

Makes me think of that graffiti in the New York subway: “God is not dead, just unemployed.” Oh that we might be people of these great commandments. Oh that we might be people of this great God who wants so badly to be employed in our lives and in our corner – not

simply for our sakes but for the sake of this hurting world that yearns to know that God still lives and loves.

So what's it going to be? God wants to know and so does your neighbor. Are you still a slave or are you free? For you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.