

We all have rules. Some we keep, some we don't. Some we expect others to keep, even if we don't. After all isn't a person's ability to keep the rules we create what we base our relationships on? You keep the rules, you will be accepted. You fail to keep the rules, you are not accepted.

That's the way we live whether we've ever thought of it that way or not. And because that is the way we live we naturally assume that is the way God operates as well. The better we are at keeping the rules, the better our relationship with God.

It's that last part about the rule-keeping relationship with God that we are going to tackle over the next four weeks as we "reThink the Ten Commandments."

Everyone's heard of the Ten Commandments. In fact, most people would agree that we should abide by them. But most people can't name them. Turn to your neighbor beside you right now and ask them to name the Ten Commandments.

My guess is even if you couldn't remember the first four; the majority of you could jump to the "thou-shalt-not rules of conduct." Do not kill. Do not steal. Do not commit adultery. Do not lie.

What's sad is not that we can't remember all Ten; but that we have bought into a myth regarding God. Simply put: obedience gets you in and disobedience keeps you out. Or to say it another way: God's approval is reserved for the rule keepers.

Over the next few weeks we want to break through some of the myths and falsehoods that surround the Ten Commandments. We need to break through those myths and falsehoods because they have deformed our view of God, shut people out of the grace of God and caused Christians to hold at arm's length those who need to experience the grace of God.

I grew up, as some of you did, listening to Paul Harvey. The iconic radio newsman popularized the statement "...and now you know the rest of the story." But my guess is that most of you don't know the story and the context out of which the Ten Commandments came to be. The rest of the story that we'll look at today will begin to put the Ten Commandments in a perspective that will help us to experience and share the grace of God.

Our scripture lesson this morning from Genesis is the beginning of the story of grace. Now when most people hear the account of creation they get caught up in figuring out how old the world is and how did it evolve over that period of time. But when Moses began writing the book of Genesis he wasn't interested in stating information about

biology or astrophysics; Moses was reintroducing God to a people who had been exposed to Egyptian mythology and a polytheistic worldview for 400 years.

Having been miraculously set free from slavery, having witnessed the parting of the Red Sea and the continuing display of God in a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day; the Israelites just wanted to know who this God was who had delivered them and who they were being asked to follow.

So to reintroduce God to the Israelites Moses began at the very beginning. Now remember that in most ancient religions the gods merely took up residence in a preexisting world. They didn't create the world; they merely ran it. But Moses claimed that the Hebrew God existed before anything. He brought all that is into existence out of nothing- not because he had to but, because he wanted to. And that is the first expression of God's grace.

Assuming that God existed before anything else; here's a question to ponder: Why did God create anything? Look at your neighbor this morning and ask them, "Why did God create you?"

Now let me offer you an explanation. You are here, along with everything that exists in the universe, because it is a gift of God's grace. When God created he said repeatedly, "That's good!" And all of creation is good not merely to give glory to God but because it was good for us.

Look back at Genesis 1:29-30 and take notice of the words that are highlighted.

29 Then God said, "I *give* you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be *yours* for food. 30 And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I *give* every green plant for food." And it was so.

God created the world, filled it with goodness, and then gave it away. God created a world that was perfect for humanity. Now let me ask you a question: "What did you do to deserve that?"

Let me answer that question for you. You did absolutely nothing! And that is grace. To receive something that you don't deserve and can't earn; that's grace. Beautiful sunsets- those are for you! Good food to eat- that's for you! We could go on all morning thinking about all that is good; but it is all for you- that's God's grace.

And when God handed the keys over to Adam and Eve he gave them authority to rule over this beautiful creation. God created it by his grace for them and he wanted them to

enjoy the world. And in that world that God graciously gave to Adam and Eve he gave them everything to enjoy. God only had one rule for this creation he handed over to Adam and Eve. Eat freely from any tree but one. Notice that in the beginning it was lots of yes's and only one no.

As Andy Stanley says at this point, God's grace was abundant and his requirements were minimal. Now it is important to hear this because many of us grew up with the opposite view of God. Many believe that God's requirements are abundant and his grace minimal.

That is why we think that God's love is conditioned on our keeping all the rules. That is why we apply the same standard to others; keep my rules and I'll love you disobey and I'll withhold my love. Think about how that works at home with either your spouse or your children? Does that conditional love create a grace-filled place or a grace-less place?

When God handed over the keys to his good creation to Adam and Eve everything in this grace filled relationship was based on trust. And for a time Adam and Eve were responsible with the trust God gave them. But then they violated the trust and everything changed.

Everything; except God's grace.

I say that because do you remember what God told Adam and Eve about eating from the tree? That's right, if they ate from that one tree they would die. But notice that death did not come. In fact, right after they sinned, Adam and Eve had a long conversation with God. Listen to how Andy Stanley put this: "It wasn't the most positive conversation we find in the Scriptures, but God didn't suddenly disappear from their lives. Their sin did not cause them to be unable to hear his voice. And their sin did not so separate them that God couldn't or wouldn't come looking for them." 14

Now God didn't simply ignore their disobedience; but God acting in grace disciplined them. As a parent, I've had my share of incidents where I expressed my love for my children by disciplining them. That is a part of grace we sometimes struggle with- especially when we are children- but grace is apparent even in the discipline that God brought to bear on Adam and Eve. But the good news is that that grace filled relationship still exists for us as the children of Adam and Eve.

The messages that Pastor Adam shared this summer from the life of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Joseph and Moses were each filled with the grace of God. The relationships that God had with the patriarchs was based on trust, on a

relationship of grace established not so much by rule keeping but by the promises of God.

Story after story in the book of Genesis is filled with grace. And it is important that we see that because it helps us to see that God is interested in a relationship with his people based on trust, based on grace; not on a legalism that separates and destroys relationships.

And that is the most important part of the back story that leads up to God's giving of the Ten Commandments.

But there is one more thing I think is important to understand. Remember that at the time the Ten Commandments are given they are given to a people who only knew slavery. As slaves, they did what their master's told them to do. They had no government, no king, no judicial system, no laws.

So when God gave the Law he was giving the Hebrews a detailed prescription of how to conduct themselves. And the Ten Commandments, which were the first part of what we call the Law of Moses (those 600+ rules), set the tone for everything that followed.

As Andy Stanley notes, the Ten Commandments and the 600+ laws that followed had absolutely nothing to do with where anyone spent eternity. God was establishing behavioral guidelines for his people who had none. These rules were for the people who were in relationship with God, a relationship built on trust and grace.

So what?

Well, simply put we need to return the Ten Commandments to their context. And in that context we need to see that the commandments are set within a grace-filled relationship established by God and based on trust.

So what does that mean to us? It means that our relationship with God isn't based on keeping all the rules. No one ever has, except Jesus, and no one ever will. So rule keeping is not what gives us a relationship with God, it is grace.

Listen to what Paul wrote in Ephesians 2: It is by grace you have been saved, through faith...not by works... Ephesians 2:8-9

Put this passage in context: People thought that our standing with God was based on keeping rules and doing good. But look what Paul says: It is by grace... not by rule-keeping!

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And we see that grace in the cross. Did you do anything to deserve the forgiveness that God makes available in Jesus? No! Do you have to be perfect? No! Keep all the rules? No! Do you remember the thief who trusted Jesus while they hung side-by-side on the cross; did he keep the rules? Do good? NO! But by grace Jesus said to him, "Today, you will be with me in Paradise."

So if God extends grace to you; why are you making other people keep all the rules before you'll accept them?

If we are going to be a church that loves God and loves others then we need to understand that God's love is unconditional toward us and our love toward others needs to be unconditional as well.

As we receive communion, receive God's grace; then go and live grace in all the relationships you have. And maybe as others receive that grace from you they will see that God's grace is available to them also.