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Top Ten: Source

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A number of years ago in Texas, there was a kerfuffle about whether it was legal to post the Ten Commandments in public places like courthouses and schools. I watched one news report of a politician who was in an absolute frenzy about how important it was to post the Commandments where people could see them and be influenced by them. He went on and on until the news reporter innocently asked, "Can you share a couple of the Commandments with us?" And after a few "Umm's" and "Aaahs" it was obvious that this politician didn't know a single one.

Most of us probably know at least a few, if not all, of the Ten Commandments. But I'm not sure we're always clear on why God gave us the Commandments and what purpose God intended them to serve. And so, we're launching a new worship series on the Commandments, and today I want to explore the backstory of the Commandments. Truth is, it's pretty fashionable today to just write off the Ten Commandments. To see them as the impossible demands of an angry, far-off deity who thunders demands from a mountain shrouded in storm clouds. Or to see them as little more than ancient history, irrelevant to modern day life. Or to see them as nice suggestions from the buffet of life. We can try one and if we don't like it we can put it back and try another or just ignore them altogether.

But to ignore the Ten Commandments, to write them off, is to miss the deep grace that gave birth to them, grace to shape our lives and give us an identity. That's why God gave the Commandments to the Israelites long ago. The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt for hundreds of years. Their lives had been shaped by submission, oppression and despair. They didn't know anything else. They had no collective sense that they were loved or valued. They didn't know that God loved them. They had a slave mentality until God set them free and gave them a new identity. And one of the ways in which God gave them a new identity was by giving them the Ten Commandments, a down-to-earth, radical vision for life, inspired by God's grace. God chose these stiff-necked, rebellious slaves and formed them into the people of God, and the Ten Commandments were central to that process.

Next week we're going to take a look at the First Commandment, but today I want to step back and take a look at the God who gave the Commandments. Because how we envision God shapes how we see the

Commandments. If our vision of God is of an angry, distant deity then we'll see the Commandments as unreasonable demands. If we envision God as an ancient and irrelevant construct, we'll see the Commandments as ancient and irrelevant. And if we see God as largely disconnected from our lives, a God who throws down an occasional suggestion to guide us, we'll see the Commandments through that lens. But the story of the Exodus paints a very different picture of the One who gave us the Commandments. The God who is revealed in this story is a God who is bringing order out of chaos and beauty out of brutality. Let's turn to the story now.

First, the story tells us that God hears our cries for help. Long ago an Israelite named Joseph saved the Egyptians and the Israelites from starvation during a famine. The Pharaoh was so grateful that he invited the Israelites to settle in the fertile lands of Egypt. They did, and enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity, but it didn't last. Here's how the Exodus story puts it,

Eventually, a new king came to power in Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph or what he had done. He said to his people, "Look, the people of Israel now outnumber us and are stronger than we are. We must make a plan to keep them from growing even more. If we don't, and if war breaks out, they will join our enemies and fight against us. Then they will escape from the country." So the Egyptians made the Israelites their slaves. They appointed brutal slave drivers over them, hoping to wear them down with crushing labor. They forced them to build the cities of Pithom and Rameses as supply centers for the king. Years passed, and the king of Egypt died. But the Israelites continued to groan under their burden of slavery. They cried out for help, and their cry rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and he remembered his covenant promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He looked down on the people of Israel and knew it was time to act.

— Exodus 1:8-11; 2:23-25

The God who gave the Ten Commandments is a God who hears us, a God who is attentive to our cries. That was the Israelites' experience. It was King David's experience too. In Psalm 40 David wrote, *"I waited patiently for God to help me; then He listened and heard my cry."* God isn't "up there" somewhere straining an ear to hear us. We don't have to yell to get God's attention. God dwells within us through the Holy Spirit and hears not just the cries of our lips, but also the cries of our heart that are never given voice. And while I'm not inclined to believe that God intervenes in our affairs like a chess master moving pieces on a game

board, I do believe that God works through others, as God did through Moses. The God who gave the Ten Commandments is a God who hears us.

Second, the God who gave the 10 Commandments is a God who chooses us. God didn't set the Israelites free because they were the best and the brightest. God set them free because God freely chose them. God chose to love them. When Moses recounted the story of how God had set the Israelites free, he said this, "*The LORD did not set his heart on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other nations, for you were the smallest of all nations! Rather, it was simply that the LORD loves you.*" – Deuteronomy 7:7-8

The God who gave the Ten Commandments is a God who chooses us. Despite our failures and flaws, despite our rebellion and our poor decisions, God chooses us for no other reason than because God loves us.

Can you remember all the way back in elementary school when kids would choose up sides for games like kickball? You might remember how good it felt to be chosen. Or you might remember how painful it was to not be chosen. Back then whether you were chosen or not impacted our sense of identity. And that's still true today. We all long to be loved and we long to be chosen. And the God who gave the Ten Commandments is a God who chooses us because God loves us. Jesus once put it this way, "*You didn't choose me, but I chose you.*" – John 15:16

Third, the God who gave the Ten Commandments is a God who rewrites your story with grace. From the moment that the Israelites left Egypt, throughout all their wilderness wandering, God was in the business of rewriting the storyline of their lives, changing it from the script of slavery to the script of being the people of God. It was always a messy rewrite because the people of Israel were often resistant to God's leading, irritable, and so easily distracted by their circumstances. But God refused to give up on them. God never stopped pursuing them and loving them. That tenacious love gradually re-wrote their story because love is the most powerful pen to inscribe the script of our lives.

Our oldest son, Michael, and his girlfriend, Whitney, adopted a dog not long ago. They named him Garbanzo and it's obvious that Garbanzo experienced a lot of trauma and abuse before being adopted. He's afraid of his own shadow and cowers if you come anywhere near him. But Michael and Whitney are intent upon giving that dog a new identity and writing a new script into his life. And they're doing that by providing clear and gentle boundaries to keep him safe, and boundless love. It hasn't been easy. He's run away a time or two. He's

made messes that had to be cleaned up. But slowly Garbanzo is becoming a different dog.

The Israelites were a lot like Garbanzo." Beaten" and "abused" were their first and last names. Slavery was their identity. But God loved them and chose them and set about rewriting their story, giving them a new identity as the people of God. And one of the ways in which God expressed that love was by giving them the Ten Commandments, a vision of what it looks like to be ferociously loved by God, and then respond to that love by loving God and loving their neighbor.

Two thousand years ago God sent Jesus into this world to rewrite our stories. His life, death and resurrection proclaim how far God will go to proclaim how loved we are, that we are fully and freely forgiven, and claimed as beloved children of God. And just as the rewriting of Israel's story was messy, so is ours. We, too, can be stiff-necked and rebellious, making a mess of things. And yet God persistently pursues us and ferociously loves us. And day by day, week by week, year by year, that loves rewrites our story.

That is the God who gave us the Ten Commandments. A God who hears our cries, chooses us in love and rewrites our stories with grace. And these Commandments, which we'll dive into starting next week, continue to serve the same purpose in our lives that they did in the lives of the Israelites. They are a gracious picture of what it looks like to be fiercely and tenaciously loved by God, and then in response, as followers of Jesus, to love God with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength, and love our neighbor as ourselves.

So, I hope you'll join us for this important series throughout the summer and together experience how God continues to graciously rewrite the story of our lives as beloved children of God. Let's pray.

Gracious God, in this modern world of technology where everything is available to us through a phone or computer, we sometimes struggle to believe that ancient words written on stone tablets could really impact our lives. But because we entrust ourselves to Your love, we trust that these Commandments matter. So, open our ears, eyes and hearts to the vision that these Commandments cast for our lives, and make us receptive to the gracious story that You are writing in and through us. We pray all this in the strong name of Christ and together all God's people said, "Amen".