

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, Virginia
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Exodus 20:1–4, 7–9, 12–20

LIVING ESSENCE OF CHRIST

I think my dates are correct, but the first time the court house in Pulaski, Kentucky, was instructed to take down the *Ten Commandments* was somewhere around 2001. It seems that in 1999 there were objections, and so began a 10-year battle between county officials and legal, academics, and others and judges to see whether or not it was unconstitutional to have the *Ten Commandments* posted in that courthouse. In the end, the Commandments are gone. But in an act of defiance that I think we can all understand, the frame that held those Commandments was put back on the wall empty. The county officials said it was to remind everyone of something they had lost.

The ten words, the *Ten Commandments*, God's law for all people—we call it by many names—the Decalogue. It's referred to as the Ten Terms, the Ten Sayings, and my favorite, the rabbinical reference is usually the Ten Matters. What is it that really matters for us in our lives? At our essence, who are we? We are created living, breathing representatives of what God wants this world to become. Each of us has within us the essence of what God is calling us to be. And these ten commands tell us who God is as well—God's word in stone that became God's word in flesh in Jesus Christ.

In the 1600s, there was a mathematician from France who became obsessed and enthralled in Catholic philosophy. He developed what would later become the principles behind the first mechanical calculator. Think of that ... in 1650. And he also became a very devout philosopher. He said of humanity, "We are completely dependent beings, dependent on God, and we desire to be independent and therefore our need is great." This was a child prodigy, Pascal, who became not only a great mathematician but he actually worked out probability theories and he wrote, along with his sister, extensively. He wrote prayers and treatises. He said, "God, you are the sovereign master." And he prayed, "God, show me every thread of self which still needs to be broken." I wonder if we are willing to make such a risky prayer: "God, show me every thread of self." The image that comes to mind is having a thread on your cuff or your hem, and you begin to pull and realize it's a chain thread and the whole hem comes out, just from one thread.

I wonder, like those frames that hang empty on the wall in the Kentucky courthouse, how empty we have become because we neglect the essence of what God is asking us to do. At one time it was only what we wrote with our hands or spoke with our mouth that betrayed us, but now with electronic communications it's easy to see what is in our hearts. Christ said the law is contained in the commandment to love God and to love neighbor, (and we often don't hear this part of what Christ said) and to love self. And that's our difficulty, isn't it, learning to have a healthy love of self. I believe we can love ourselves best when we can confess that we all break God's law.

I remember being in a church near Raleigh, NC, and when the very famous minister—a Scottish minister who had a radio following and was much beloved—of First Presbyterian, Raleigh, retired, I was quick to have him come and fill in at the church where I was serving. And he preached on the *Ten Commandments*. And I remember he invoked the ire of some in the congregation because he said we have *all* broken *all* of the *Ten Commandments*. After church, one of the ladies in the church let him know that was not the case. She had not broken all of the Commandments. And this Scottish minister explained to her how she had. It was an interesting display. I think you had to have his experience and his background to have ever been able to contend with our rejection. We don't want to admit that we break all of these Commandments. But if we are willing to have a healthy love of self the way God loves us, we can finally accept our responsibility. We can stop blaming others for our unhappiness, and we can promise to live in such a way that God will help us through the consequences and even help us in providing part of the remedy for our sinfulness.

I wonder if we see ourselves today as a society and as individuals who have endorsed violence as entertainment. I wonder if we are willing to admit that we are teaching our children that it's okay to substitute greed for success. Is our desire for independence leading us away from the freedom—the liberty that Christ has given us? There is no doubt that there is great evil in our world. It is all around us. But the essence of Christ is the opposite of evil. His light defies the darkness. And we have been given that light that we might reflect the essence of His spirit—but only if we allow His upbringing, His familiarity with these Commandments, His engagement of what they mean to embrace our spirit, for then we will discover the peace that we long for, the peace that our world longs for.

It really isn't that complicated, is it? God comes first. Period. People are more valuable than stuff. And all the wonderful rights that we have are meant to be used to help one another because we are all in need. God comes first. People matter more than stuff. And we are created to be there for one another. I think the young people would say it this way: "This is what makes it real, what keeps it real."

The prophet Jeremiah promised us that God is powerful enough to write these words on our hearts, but we know that we first have to surrender, and then with God's help we can recommit ourselves to the essence of all that God has instructed us to become, all that God commands, all that is essential. Then we can be redefined by something other than our own best judgment. We can be truly grateful. And the outcome is that never again will people hear or read anything that we share that doesn't reflect the essence, not only of the *Ten Commandments*, but of the One who lived them perfectly. That can become a reality in this place and at this time and in our world. So may it be. Amen.