

God's Top Ten

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Exodus 20:1-17

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

*God creates,
sin destroys,
God restores.*

There is an ancient fable about six blind men who come upon an elephant. The first man touches its solid side and determines this elephant must be a wall. The second man touches the elephant's tusk and decides it must be a spear. The third blind man takes the elephant's squirming trunk in his hands and concludes it is a snake. The fourth blind man touches the elephant's sturdy leg and thinks it is a tree. The fifth man strokes its ear and resolves this elephant resembles a fan. The sixth man seizes its swinging tail and determines this elephant must be a rope. Each blind man is partly right, but all are wrong. None of these men could adequately describe an elephant.

Our sermon series on God's Big Story helps us see the whole elephant. We want you to know how the parts of the Bible fit into the whole.

God's Big Story can be summarized with three words: Creation, fall and redemption. God creates us to live in relationship. Sin, however, destroys the relationship. The rest of the Bible serves as commentary on the extent to which God restores the relationship. God creates, sin destroys, but God restores.

God's restoration process begins with the covenant, "I will

be your God and you will be my people." Human contracts can be broken by either party, but God's covenant is irrevocable. Even when Abraham and Sarah's descendants, called Israelites, become slaves in Egypt, God keeps His covenant.

God sends plagues to liberate Israel. The tenth plague wins their release, but when it registers with Pharaoh that he has sent his entire labor force packing, he takes off after them. God miraculously parts the Red Sea to deliver His people. He leads them by cloud and fire, by day and by night, to a mountain called Sinai. There, in the desert of Sinai, God entrusts to His people the immortal words of the Ten Commandments.

The Ten Commandments stipulate what it means to live in a covenant relationship with God? God's covenant means no other gods and graven images. It means honoring God's name, God's Sabbath and your parents. It means no killing, adultery, stealing, lying or coveting what belongs to your neighbor.

A lawyer asks Jesus to render a legal opinion, "Which commandment is the greatest?" (Matthew 22:34-36). Jesus answers, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself. This is the greatest commandment" (22:37). Jesus effectively summarizes the first four commandments. Loving

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God entails having no gods and images as well as honoring God's name and Sabbath. Jesus then elaborates on the second great command, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (22:39). Loving neighbor encapsulates the last six commands: honoring parents as well as refraining from killing, committing adultery, lying, stealing and coveting.

I conclude worship with the same benediction every Sunday: "Love the Lord and love the people; serve the Lord and serve the people." I recite it the same way every Sunday, not because I can't think of anything else to say, but because loving God and loving people are the two greatest commandments.

We bristle at being told what to do. If truth be told, we don't like to be told what to do by anybody, including God. We want to make our own rules. God's commands, however, are actually promises in disguise. God's call to obey is also a summons to trust God's promises. Take the first command, "You shall have no other gods before me." This command is based on the promise that there are no other gods like Yahweh. The false gods of this world cannot deliver like our God. Or take the sixth command, "Do not kill." This command rests on the promise that God creates and authors life. Life is a precious gift to be cherished and enjoyed. It is not ours to take away.

God's commands originate in love, not punishment. Parents

instruct their children with love not to touch a hot stove or cross a busy thoroughfare. God's commands originate in grace, not law. We keep these commands, not to earn God's approval but to love God in return.

Have you accepted God's grace, or are you trying to earn God's approval?

Grace was a difficult concept to grasp in my growing-up years. Most of my achievements had to be earned. Good grades had to be earned. Playing time in sports had to be earned. Nothing was given unless it was earned.

I figured God's favor had to be earned, as well. I imagined God as a cosmic accountant who kept a ledger on people. If your virtues outweighed your vices, you could "pass Go" and enter heaven. If your vices predominate, you go to jail without benefit of a "get out of jail free" card.

I regarded myself as a pretty good person. I hadn't killed anyone or committed adultery. But then again, I was only 17. People often say to me, "I'm a pretty good person." Good compared to whom: Mother Theresa or Adolf Hitler? How good does someone have to be?

I hate to break the news to you, but we cannot earn God's favor. Paul says it clearly in Romans, "All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God (3:23). He claims "No one is righteous, no, not one" (3:11).

Paul writes in Ephesians, "By grace you have been saved through faith. This is not your own doing; it

“What must I do to be saved?”

is the gift of God” (2:8). But like any gift, God’s grace can be accepted or refused.

During a British conference on comparative religions, experts from the world over debated what, if any, belief was unique to Christianity. Some suggested the birth of Christ. But other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form. Some put forward the resurrection. But again, other religions had accounts of returning from death.

C. S. Lewis wandered into the room and was asked about Christianity’s unique contribution to world religion. Lewis answered, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.” After some discussion, the conferees came to agreement. Grace is the unique contribution of Christianity to world religion.

God’s love coming to us free of charge, without any merit on our part, goes against the grain of every other religion. The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of Karma, the Jewish code of law and the Muslim obedience to the five pillars of Islam—each offers a way to earn God’s approval. Christianity is unique among the world religions in claiming God’s grace as unconditional.

John Newton, former slave trader turned preacher, captured the sentiment of grace exquisitely in the opening words of his hymn: “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

There is a story told about a mechanic who operated a garage

next to his home. This mechanic had a dog named Mace, who had a bad habit of eating all the grass in the mechanic’s lawn. So this mechanic had to keep Mace inside. Sure enough, the grass eventually became overgrown.

One day, the mechanic was working on a car in his backyard when he dropped a wrench in the tall grass. He couldn’t find it. That night, Mace escaped from the house and ate all the grass in the backyard.

The next morning, the mechanic went outside and saw his wrench, glistening in the sunlight. Realizing what had happened, he looked up to the heavens and proclaimed (are you ready for this one?), “A grazing Mace, now sweet the hound, that saved a wrench for me!”

Have you received God’s gift of grace? Are you sharing God’s gift of grace with other people?

A jailer asked Paul, “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:33). Paul’s answer: “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.” Maybe those of us who are saved need to ask ourselves a follow-up question. What must I do now that I am saved? It’s not only relevant to ask what I am saved from, but what I am saved for.

Maybe the question isn’t, as I was taught in Evangelism Explosion course, “If you were to die tonight, do you know for certain you would go to heaven?” Maybe the question should be, “If I have 20 more years, how will I live?”

It all comes down to priorities; how we spend our time and money. Our Day-Timers and Blackberries reveal where we spend our time.

What must I do now that I am saved?

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Someone once said, "Service is the rent we pay for living." Take a CROP Walk for Hunger. Visit a homebound person. Invest in the lives of children or youth. Go on a mission trip. Practice hospitality.

How do we spend our money? Our checkbooks and Online Bill Pay express whether we love God and neighbor through our giving. Paul talks about giving in his letter to the Corinthians as "the grace of giving" (2 Corinthians 8:5). Our pledge cards are one way for us to express the grace of giving.

Have you accepted God's offer of grace, or are you trying to win God's approval? Are you sharing God's grace with people? It's not enough to talk about grace. We must live it!

Jean-Francois Gravelet, who went by the stage name Charles Blondin, was a famous tightrope walker during the 19th century. He crossed Niagara Falls numerous times on a tightrope without a safety net. To keep his audiences coming back for more, Blondin executed a backwards somersault, crossed blindfolded, walked on stilts and pushed a wheelbarrow. One time on the tightrope, he actually cooked an omelet on a portable stove and lowered it to a boat below him. He once asked the crowd, "Do you believe I can carry someone across the rope on my back?" The crowd roared its approval, "Yes, we believe you can." Blondin asked for a volunteer, "How about you?" The man said, "Hardly! You don't think I am going to risk my life like that, do you?" and turned away. He

pointed to another man, "And what about you?" The man replied, "I believe, in fact I have no doubt at all." Charles asked, "Will you trust me?" The man replied, "I will." So the man climbed on his back and they headed across the falls. The crowd watched breathlessly as they crossed and roared its approval when they arrived safely on the other side.

You see, Harry Concord, was Bondin's manager. He knew Charles Blondin was good at what he did. He fully trusted him.

Faith trusts God. We accept grace on faith. By faith, we endeavor to live grace-filled lives.

