



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### **Living Beyond Mediocrity**

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**Exodus 20:1-19**

I believe people are doing the best they can. I believe we try our best with what we know. The problem is, it mostly leads to mediocrity. Most of us live in the bondage of mediocrity. And like Jim Collins realizes in his book *Good to Great*, the greatest barrier to becoming great, for corporations as well as individuals, is not being bad, but being good. Good is the enemy of great. As Christians, we've been taught to believe that's okay.

In the church we've even created "levels" of Christians, just to explain our mediocrity. Most of us are in the "God's called me to just go to church" level." (The other levels go something like this: If you're really called, you become a leader in a ministry at church. And if you're really, really called you become a pastor. Or if you're really, really, called, you become a foreign missionary.) And so we wind up wandering through life in this fog of mediocrity that leaves us frustrated and dull when it comes to making an impact in the world around us. And even though we've read "Purpose Driven Life," we live mediocre lives, missing out on God's purpose for our lives. And the world winds up dying of thirst, lost in injustice and whims of any cool new teaching that comes along. The world winds up saying "Your God is irrelevant." When it's really us who have chosen that. We never meant to, but somewhere along the way it happened? Mediocrity, I mean. The questions are where, and how, and how long do we have to stay there?

Eph. 4:4 *"There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one hope when you were called—5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism"*. Scripture seems to boil it down to one calling: you lay your life at the feet of Jesus and do whatever he asks. It's a calling that says *"to live is Christ and to die is gain."* Philippians 1:21. It declares *"I've been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me"* (Galatians 2:20).

But in our human neediness and self-centeredness, we keep lowering the bar until we can clear it. And all we're left with is the bondage of mediocrity. As individuals we become bottom dwellers, living at the bare minimum of God's "best" for our lives and the world.

These levels of calling have also kept the church as a whole from being a *movement* of God and reduced us to a *mediocre institution* of society. We've gone from a movement to a monument and in some cases, to a mausoleum. Mainline to sidelined to flat line, and just plain mediocre.

I think if we got the first calling right, none of the others would be necessary! Jesus said *"Follow me and I will make you fishers of people."* (Matthew 4:19). He did not say "Believe in me so that you can go to heaven." In fact, he said *"Deny yourself. Take up your cross and follow me."* (Mark 8:34) Unless we deny ourselves, we can't be his disciples.

Now that sounds more like the foreign missionary-thing. So, what we've been labeling the highest level of calling in Christianity was for Jesus the basic entry point! It was to the whole

church that Jesus said “*Go therefore and make disciples in my name, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*” Matthew 28:19-20.

In order to understand what has tripped us up and held in the bondage of mediocrity, we need to go way back to the Old Testament, back to the Law of God. The Law is one of the most important, amazing, and misunderstood of all Christian concepts. The Law of God is amazing.

The Law: reveals

- the character of God
- reveals the standards of God.
- marks the way humans beings can express love for God and for each other.
- also condemns, because no one except Jesus Christ has ever kept the Law’s requirements.

Now, for many people, the Law seems terribly restricting. But the Bible says that love sums up the whole Law. Romans 13:9-10 “*...whatever commandments there may be are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the Law.*” Love is at the root of the Law, and love is behind the restrictions of the Law, just as a parent puts restrictions on going into the street for a toddler too young to know what’s best. And the Law leads to what is good. Deuteronomy 15:4 promises that if Israel will only obey the Law “*there will be no poor among you.*” The Law was to produce a just society and eliminate poverty! God knows the loving and just thing to do.

And so we have the 10 Commandments, which are followed by pages of case law—illustrating these principles as they apply to specific cases.

Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 contain 10 basic moral laws God revealed to Moses. The Laws on the first tablet of focus on human relationship with God. The Laws on the second tablet focus on our relationships with each other. Let’s take a look:

#### Relationship with God:

1. No gods before me.
2. No idols.
3. Do not take my name in vain.
4. Keep Sabbath holy.

#### Relationship to Others:

5. Honor father and mother.
6. Do not murder.
7. Do not commit adultery.
8. Do not steal.
9. Do not give false testimony.
10. Do not covet.

Realizing each Commandment is worth a whole sermon, let's take a glance at each:

1. *"You shall have no other gods before me."* Exodus 20:3. God has exclusive claim to our allegiance. No rivals. Maybe you can name what tries to take over in your life...

2. *"4 You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them;"* Exodus 20:4-5. We are to respond to the Word and Spirit of an invisible God.

3. *7 "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God"* Exodus 20:7. *Yahweh* means "I AM THAT I AM, the One Who Is Ever Present. How many of us need to decide to just stop saying "God" unless we're really talking to the Lord? It may apply to watching TV shows that use God's name like that as well.

4. *"8 Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy"* Exodus 20:8. Did you ever think about this: Rest honors God. Rest is to benefit you. Don't throw away distort this good gift of God. Today we rest not on a special day, but in a person—Jesus Christ.

5. *"Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you."* Exodus 20:12. Respect of parents leads to knowing God.

6. *"Do not murder."* Exodus 20:13 The right of every person to life is protected.

7. *"Do not commit adultery."* Exodus 20:14. The value of faithfulness cannot be overestimated. Sex is not "animal instincts," but an expression of deep, personal commitment between one man and one woman. And you can have an affair with something besides another person. It could be your TV watching, computer, hobby, job, or habit.

8. *"Do not steal."* Exodus 20:15. Respect for others extends to their property. We do not "use" people for gain. If you are manipulating people for personal gain, you know nothing of God's love.

9. *"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor."* Exodus 20:16. Don't lie! Along with your neighbor's life and property goes his or her reputation. Don't steal someone's reputation, including your own!

10. *"17 You shall not covet"* Exodus 20:17. Was this written for Americans or what? It's like Pokemon—"Gotta catch 'em all!" You wind up paralyzed because of everything you *don't* have. Throw away your lists, and quit sizing people up.

Now...here's the twist most of us miss: But listen: The 10 Commandments are not God's standards. They're not God's attempt to pull us up from acting human to acting all spiritual. The 10 Commandments are not the highest standard. They are the lowest possible standard for humane living. Anyone living below the 10 Commandments is choosing to live like an animal or a barbarian.

Can you imagine a world in which simple things like honoring your parents actually happened? A nation where people were honest and upright in business endeavors? Can you imagine a nation in which you could leave your stuff outside and no one would take it? In which you could leave your spouse with a friend and they would not take him or her? Can you imagine a society in which no one was ever slandered, gossiped about, or falsely accused? And that's only the last 6! The 10 Commandments don't call us to an extraordinary spiritual life; they call us to stop dehumanizing one another.

God gave Israel the map for a healthy society. Not the ideal, but the minimum. The same is true for the church. Jesus said *"I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it."* Matthew 5:17. And the basis from which this new worldwide community would draw its ethos is what Jesus gave us: GRACE.

But we get *that* backwards too: Some of us all our lives have seen grace as the ability we have to live beneath the Law...rather than our capacity to soar above the Law. We've been so mediocre for so long, we're ecstatic when someone is actually interested! So we throw out any barrier people must cross with theology like "all roads lead to God," and "It doesn't matter what you believe," rather than letting people know that the Gospel writers had it right: some say yes, some say no. Our Methodist emphasis on grace says "It's a great big umbrella, come on in!" But that also means it's still an umbrella—you can choose to be outside of it.

And I love our church for throwing open the umbrella. Some people come to church looking to see if we're a Grace church or a Law church. And since we don't often tell people they *have* to do this or that, a lot of people think we're a grace church. And they're right! But listen to what Jesus said: The Law says, "Do not murder." Grace says you don't even have to have hatred in your heart; you can love your enemy. The Law says "Don't go to bed with another person's spouse." But grace says you don't have to let your heart be corrupted by lust. The Law says "Give 10%." But grace takes us beyond the law. We'd never stop you from living by grace. ☺

God's grace says "I've come for all of you—your whole being." And while it sounds impossible, I'm inviting you to jump all the way in. Lean fully on me. Worship me with your whole life. No other Gods. Together, guided by My grace, we'll toss off mediocrity and change the world with the cure you've received through the blood of My Son!

Isn't it interesting we think of grace as something *less* than the law, when in reality it's the end of mediocrity as we know it?