

Year B

Exodus 20:1-17

How difficult it is to do the right thing! One of the most famous criminal trials in history was that of Benjamin Francois Courvoisier in London in 1840, a character who is now immortalised in Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum. Courvoisier was a Swiss valet accused of murdering his elderly employer, Lord William Russell. What made this trial notorious was the argument for the defence. The police had bungled the investigation. The evidence against Courvoisier was entirely

circumstantial or had been planted. One of the officers had perjured himself, and the maid's testimony brought suspicion on herself. The defence barrister, Charles Phillips, was convinced of the innocence of Courvoisier and cross-examined witnesses aggressively. At the beginning of the second day of the trial, however, Courvoisier confessed privately to his lawyer that he had committed the murder. When asked if he were going to plead guilty, he replied to Charles Phillips, "No, sir, I expect you to defend me to the utmost." Phillips was faced with a dilemma. Should he declare to the

court that the man was guilty, or should he defend Courvoisier as best he could? Should he break the confidentiality of the client-lawyer relationship, or should he help a guilty man to possibly go free? Which is more important--truth or professional duty?

Phillips decided to defend the guilty man. But despite Phillips's efforts, Courvoisier was convicted. When the dilemma was later made public, Phillips's decision to defend a murderer horrified British society and brought him a great deal of criticism.¹

¹ Snodgrass, Klyne 1990 *Between Two Truths - Living with Biblical Tensions* Zondervan Publishing House, pp. 11- 12.

Lying, cheating, and stealing are becoming an "acceptable norm" among high-school and college students, said Ralph Wexler, speaking for the Joseph and Edna Josephson Institute of Ethics. In a survey, the Institute reported that 61 percent of the high-school and 32 percent of the college students polled admitted to having cheated on an exam during the past year; 33 percent of the high-school and 16 percent of college students said they'd stolen something in the last year; and 16 percent of the high-school and 32

percent of the college students said they'd lied on a resume or job application.²

What do we read over and over again in the Exodus passage today? “You shall not....”

And over and over again we tighten up.

H.A. Ironside wrote the following about one of his proteges. “Some years ago, I had a little school for young Indian men and women, who came to my home in Oakland, California, from the various tribes in northern Arizona. One of these was a Navajo young man of unusually keen intelligence.

One Sunday evening, he went with me to our

² National and International Religion Report, quoted in Signs of the Times, June, 1993, p. 6.

young people's meeting. They were talking about the epistle to the Galatians, and the special subject was law and grace. They were not very clear about it, and finally one turned to the Indian and said, "I wonder whether our Indian friend has anything to say about this."

He rose to his feet and said, "Well, my friends, I have been listening very carefully, because I am here to learn all I can in order to take it back to my people. I do not understand all that you are talking about, and I do not think you do yourselves. But concerning this law and grace business, let

me see if I can make it clear. I think it is like this. When Mr. Ironside brought me from my home we took the longest railroad journey I ever took. We got out at Barstow, and there I saw the most beautiful railroad station and hotel I have ever seen. I walked all around and saw at one end a sign, 'Do not spit here.' I looked at that sign and then looked down at the ground and saw many had spat there, and before I think what I am doing I have spat myself. Isn't that strange when the sign say, 'Do not spit here'?

"I come to Oakland and go to the home of the lady who invited me to dinner today and I am

in the nicest home I have been in. Such beautiful furniture and carpets, I hate to step on them. I sank into a comfortable chair, and the lady said, 'Now, John, you sit there while I go out and see whether the maid has dinner ready.' I look around at the beautiful pictures, at the grand piano, and I walk all around those rooms. I am looking for a sign; and the sign I am looking for is, 'Do not spit here,' but I look around those two beautiful drawing rooms, and cannot find a sign like this. I think 'What a pity when this is such a beautiful home to have people spitting all over it -- too bad they

don't put up a sign!" So I look all over that carpet, but cannot find that anybody had spat there. What a queer thing! Where the sign says, 'Do not spit,' a lot of people spat. Where there was no sign at all, in that beautiful home, nobody spat. Now I understand! That sign is law, but inside the home it is grace. They love their beautiful home, and they want to keep it clean. They do not need a sign to tell them so. I think that explains the law and grace business."

As he sat down, a murmur of approval went round the room and the leader exclaimed, "I

think that is the best illustration of law and grace I have ever heard.”³

So, what about these ten commandments? Were they designed to drive us to wrongdoing? Do they belong to the old era of law that is now dispensed with, because of grace? I don't think so. When Moses brought the ten commandments down the mountain inscribed on two stone tablets they were placed in the ark of the covenant. They were placed in the presence of God, not because God needed to read them, but because human life needed to be lived out in

³ Ironside, H.A. 1945 *Illustrations of Bible Truth* Moody Press, pp. 40-42.

the presence of God and how could that happen without divine guidance? We have a tendency in Christianity to reduce the ten commandments to a set of moral principles by which we are expected to live. We say, 'these are rules and that's it'. What happens when you make a rule? People will begin to break it. There will be an outbreak of spitting around the 'do not spit' sign. But what happens when the rule is understood in context; when the extravagant love of God, his grace, is presented to us, when we delight in the beauty and generosity of what is offered to us. What happens? We are

inspired to respond by living faithfully and honestly and before we know where we are, living as God intended us to live. There is no spitting in the beautiful house. What happens when the sign goes up? Well, we all know.

By the third Sunday in Lent I can almost feel the weight of exasperation! 'Give us a break!' you may be feeling. 'All this talk of law and commandments and fasting and denial is just too much and we feel like rebelling big style.' What about a change of mind? What about Lent as a gift of God just like the ten commandments? What about Lent as an

invitation to heighten our awareness of where we are at, so that we might be better able to respond to the extravagant love of God resplendent before us on Easter morning? Keep going! Dig deeper and you will find that the trials of this time will prepare us for a wonderful blessing.

Amen.