

March 4, 2018: Third Sunday of Lent (Year B)  
Exodus 20:1-17: Program

“I want to go from a size 16 to a size 12, but I guess my dream would be a size 10”

It was not the answer I was looking for, but I thought I understood what she meant. She wanted to lose some weight. At the time I didn't know the difference between a size 16 and a size 12, or 10, and I still don't, but I gathered the difference was significant.

I was twenty-two years old at the time, working part-time as a personal trainer at the YMCA in downtown Nashville to help pay for college. I wasn't certified, so I was the option for members who wanted help but didn't want to pay a whole lot. This was my first conversation with this particular woman. The first question I always asked someone was, “What are your fitness goals?” That was her answer. To go from a size 16 to a size 12.

Personal Trainer is one of those jobs that some people look at and wonder, “What does that person even do all day?” and “How is that even a job?” I became a pastor so people wouldn't think those kinds of things about me. You can't really appreciate what a personal trainer does until you have tried, unsuccessfully, for a really long time, to become a healthier, more physically fit, individual.

A lot of people want to take better care of themselves, but wanting to do something, especially something difficult like that, isn't enough. I'm sure this woman had wanted to go from a size 16 to a size 12 for some time. What she needed was not desire, but direction. She needed a routine to follow. She needed a program. And that's where I came in. She wanted me to teach her how to use the machines, and when. Which ones to use, how much weight, how many repetitions, and so on. She believed with a program in place, she could finally reach the goal she had wanted for so long to attain.

What we are talking about here is change. We all have things about ourselves we wish were different. In our Bible Study this past Wednesday we discussed a list of possibilities. Of course losing weight was one of them. A few others were a bad habit, an addiction, the way we interact with someone, or even our feelings toward God. In many situations, wanting to make those changes is not enough, a program, a plan is necessary. A program is part of any successful attempt at rehabilitation.

When it comes to what we wish we could change in terms of our relationship with God, a program is also necessary. One goal we have as Christians is to grow closer to God, which happens by becoming more like Jesus. The thing that stands in the way of achieving this objective is our sin. It is our sin that separates us from God, from becoming the people that God created us to be, and experiencing the life God has for us. This is something we want to change. We want there to be less sin in our lives. We need a program to help us. The words that we read this morning, commonly referred to as the Ten Commandments, are an excellent starting point. After all, as Moses told the people, God has spoken these words to us so that we do not sin.

It's a common misconception that Jesus did away with the Ten Commandments, and really any other commandment for that matter, except for two. This belief comes from passages like the one found in Mark 12. A scribe asked Jesus which commandment was the first of all the commandments. Jesus answered with a portion of the *Shema*, which is one of only two prayers found in the Torah Jews believed they were commanded to pray,

“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

Jesus went on to say,

“The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

We can find a similar statement in Matthew and Luke. These two commandments do summarize the entire Law, but they don’t do away with it. Jesus also said I did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. It is true to say that if you follow the two great commandments you are following all the commandments, but we don’t perfectly follow the two great commandments, because we don’t always know what loving God and loving our neighbor looks like. The Ten Commandments help us with this.

We don’t have time to look at each commandment in depth this morning. (I’m actually toying with the idea of doing a sermon series on them...looking at each one in turn...) But we can summarize them...

The first four commandments have to do with loving God. If we love God, we will not put other gods before Him. We will not worship created things as gods. We will not use his name irreverently or to endorse actions or ideas that did not originate with him. We will receive the gift of the Sabbath rest that he wants to give us and not deny it from others. This has something to do with both loving God and loving our neighbor.

The last six commandments focus on loving our neighbor. If we love our neighbor, we will honor our father and mother. We will value the life of each and every person. We will not destroy the social fabric of our society by being unfaithful to our spouse or becoming involved with the spouse of another. We will not steal. We will not deny someone justice. We will not covet anything that belongs to another. If we are not following these Ten Commandments, we can’t say that we are loving God and our neighbor.

The Season of Lent draws our attention to the fact that we don’t perfectly love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. And we don’t truly love our neighbor as ourselves. We know we still have room for growth. We still have need for change. So we need God to give us a program to follow, because we need help knowing what loving God and loving our neighbor looks like. The Ten Commandments is a great place to start. They don’t speak directly to every situation and circumstance we will encounter, but they give us a great foundation to build upon.

I wanted to share just a couple thoughts in reference to this idea of program

First, the idea of a program scares some people. As long as the change you want to see in your life remains just an idea or a desire or an intention, it’s easy to continue to put it off and tell yourself you will get there eventually, as soon as the time is right. But once you have a program with specific steps you have to take, or specific rules you need you follow...the fear of failure sets in. You feel as if you break one rule, or skip one step, all your progress will be erased and you will find yourself right back where you started. This is one reason why many Christians want to dismiss the Ten Commandments as no longer relevant because of Jesus. They feel if they them seriously they are setting themselves up for failure.

Our relationship with God doesn't work that way. We call it a journey, and not a destination, for a reason. We are not perfect. We are human. We will make mistakes. I don't say all this to provide an excuse for sinning, but to help you understand that all is not lost when you do sin, because of the grace that God has made available to us through His Son. There will be consequences for breaking any of these commandments, some worse than others, but there is also forgiveness, healing, and restoration.

We are used to referring to this list of commands as the Ten Commandments, but it would be more accurate to refer to them as the Ten Words, because that is what they are called in the Scriptures, they are words from God to us. But God's final word to us he spoke to us through His Son. It was a word of grace. We have to hear every word from God, including these ten words, in the context of this word of grace. So accept these Ten Words from God without fear, believing there is enough grace to cover our failures.

Second, for any program to be successful, we need support. When it comes to getting in shape, that is a secondary purpose of a personal trainer. They are supposed to help a person by encouraging them, challenging them, and keeping them accountable. For those people who don't have a personal trainer, most of them need an exercise partner to serve the same purpose. When it comes to personal fitness, it's really difficult to stick with a program and see it through on your own. The same could be said of trying to make all kinds of other changes in our lives.

The same is true for this program designed to bring us closer to God. We need each other to do this thing. We need each other to encourage us, to challenge us, and to keep us accountable as we follow Jesus. This is one reason why it is so important that Christians spend time with and worship with other Christians. This is not a not-so-subtle attempt to tell you church attendance is important. Although it is. It's more than church, it's the people you share life with. That is not to say we shouldn't have relationships with non-Christians. We should. There has to be a balance. And if we feel ourselves drifting further away we need to shift that balance.

I want to talk to you guys in middle school and high school for a moment. Choose your friends carefully. They will have a huge impact on your relationship with God. They will either strengthen your walk with Christ, or weaken it. If a person wanted to lose weight, it wouldn't make sense to hang out with someone who ate at McDonalds every day for lunch. Likewise, if you want to become more like Christ, it wouldn't make sense for you to be best friends with someone who cares nothing about him.

This doesn't mean don't be friends with people who are not Christians, just be honest about who is influencing who. The same is true for those of you who are in college. And for those of you who are old enough to be in a serious relationship with someone else, make sure that person loves God as much as you do. And don't marry someone who is not a committed Christian. It can lead to so many problems down the road.

So we need the support of each other, but we also have the support of the Holy Spirit. God has given us an advocate, a helper, who will be us forever. He did not leave us alone, to attempt to follow this program in our own power. When we make a decision to follow Jesus, God places the Holy Spirit within our hearts. We have to make space for the Holy Spirit to work by recognizing that we can't do this on our own, and allowing God to work in us and through us.