

Sermon March 19, 2017

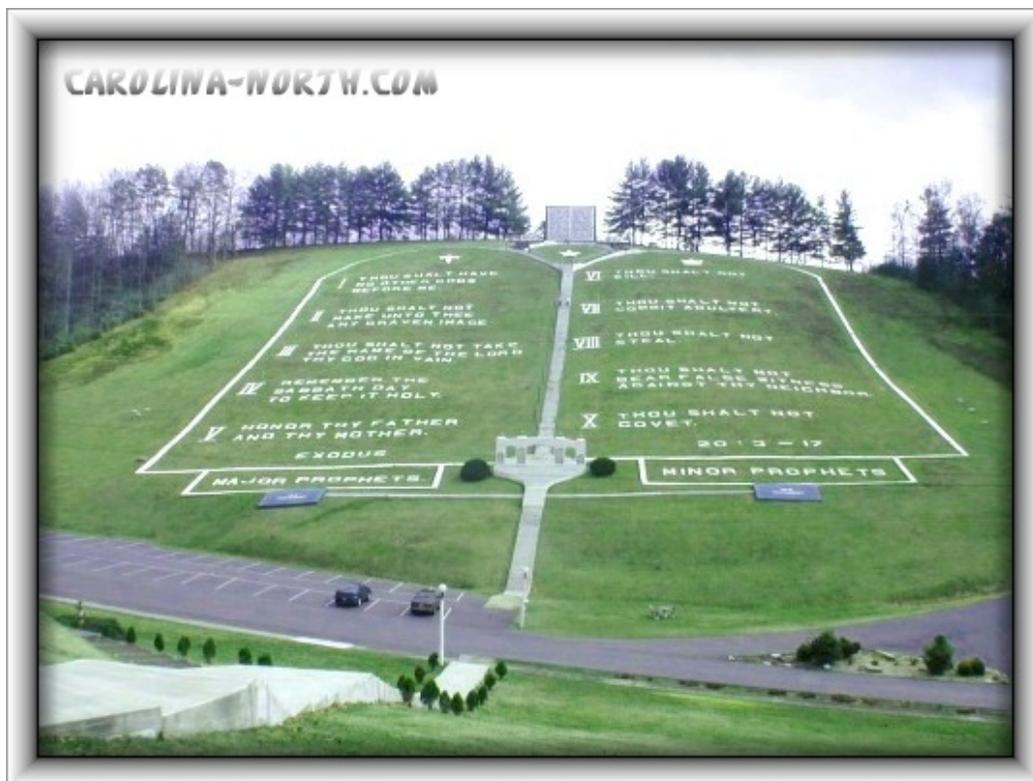
Texts: Leviticus 19

Matthew 5

Waltzing Matilda. We all know this song. That was evident from the way you sang it. We didn't even need to practice it. Anybody know what it means. What is waltzing the matilda mean. You thought it was Waltzing Matilda didn't you. The "the" was dropped out long ago. Matilda was a kind of a back pack in which a swagman, an itinerant worker looking for work, packed his sleeping gear Billybong was a watering hole, and billy was a can in which he could boil water. Make sense now?

Well, reading the Bible, written thousands of years ago in a different time and culture, is like that. It is hard to interpret without a guide or an interpreter.

One place to go is a theme park run by The Church of God of Prophecy in Murphy, North Carolina. I have personally visited twice and it is a church that puts the ten commandments front and center. Here is a picture. As you can see size matters.



For our purposes today I have chosen other sources.

Two events of the 20th century, one in 1945 , the other in 1947 have done more to change our notions of what the Bible means than anything else. We now have access to some of the earliest interpreters, who wrote extensive commentaries on just about every book in the Bible. We refer to this collection of work as the Apocrypha. There seems to be close to 600 of these writings.

The first of these events occurred in Egypt and the other on the shores of the Dead Sea. For a long time we have been aware that there were many more “books” written that contained material related to that written in the Bible. We had a few manuscripts but many more were known from other authors who mentioned them. But the discoveries at Nag Hammadi in Egypt and near Qumran in Palestine added immensely to the treasure trove of what we call Apocrypha, both for the old and the new testaments. Scholars now estimate that there were some 600 texts written, not all of which have been discovered.

So today I want to think about the 10 commandments, with the help of the additional material from various apocrypha. Biblical texts were written without capital letters, periods, commas, or any other kind of punctuation. Nor was any space left between individual words. Lots of decisions were left to the translators. And in the case of the Ten Commandments there are plenty of different interpretations in the Bible itself.

But adding the apocrypha to our resources gives us an idea of how peoples living a long time ago thought about the scriptures and specifically the 10 Commandments. These writings can give us a fuller picture of the meaning of the scriptures.

The first thing you might have noticed was that the reading from Leviticus was not quite what you might have remembered from Sunday School. Different order, different commandments. You can check for other versions of the 10 commandments in Lev. 19 and Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5

Even how the transfer took place seems open to discussion; did God come down or Moses go up. Neh. 9:13 spoke of God “You went down upon Mount Sinai, and You spoke with them from the heavens.”

Then there even seems to be some discrepancy as to how many commandments God actually spoke, 10 or 2.

Is the Decalogue the whole revelation of laws and rules of God to the Israelites or were there more laws. There is something like 613 laws and rules for the Israelites. So are these 10 more special or what? Many writers of interpretations seem to see the 10 as the essence of Torah.

And why 2 tablets surely they could have fit on one. Maybe there are two sections of five each? Philo in his "The Decalogue" (part of the apocrypha) says the first five are about relationship of God and humans and the 2<sup>nd</sup> five are the prohibitions. So maybe that why they are written on two tablets.

And what about the meaning of these commandments? What about "You shall not kill" What about animals? What about in self defense, or in war, or capital punishment? What about "Stand your ground" laws so popular now? What about gun laws in general?

What about keeping the Sabbath holy? Can a farmer not milk his goats or cows? That would seem cruel. Can I use my cell phone on the Sabbath since no humans are involved in facilitating the call?

Lots of questions. And because of those question there were many Israelites involved in the work of how to search out the meaning of these commandments,

Let's look at just two more commandments. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

I see the Waltzing Matilda problem here. What did "in vain" mean to the Israelites? What is being forbidden here? The church I grew up in saw this as a prohibition against swearing in general. But many of the interpreters writing in 200 or so BCE saw this differently, as a prohibition of invoking God in the swearing of oaths. For example in Sirach, written about 180 BCE. Ben Sira the author, wrote of this commandment:

"Do not accustom your mouth to oaths, and do not habitually utter the name of the Holy One;"

Ok but does that warrant a commandment. What is the big deal here?

But then Ben Sira continues with: "for as a servant who is continually under scrutiny will not lack bruises, so also the man who always swears and utters the name of the Holy One will not be cleansed from sin." Whoa, that is a pretty hefty penalty for "taking the Lord's name in vain"

But look at Exodus” for the Lord will not acquit anyone who takes his name in vain” acquit = cleanse

What about OMG of computer lingo?

Philo in his *Special Laws* (also part of the apocrypha) says “The Decalogue forbids us to take God’s name in vain: the good man’s word, it means, should itself be an oath - firm, unswerving, utterly free from falsehood, securely planted on truth.”

God is serious about this oath thing and speaking truth. What about fake news?

The word “vain” in Hebrew sometimes means false.

And what about the commandment “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor”

Our current reading of this commandment seems to be: Do not lie unless it gives you an advantage, then lying is just good business” and is permissible. Maybe this is not a quaint irrelevant bit of a past culture.

What I am getting from using the Apocrypha, to help decipher the commandments is that they are not rules to be obeyed or you get punished. It is rather disregard for these commandments leads to a life not really worth living. God wants us to have the abundant life that God envisioned when God created the universe. And there are relatively simple things we can do to enjoy that world.

Not killing is a good start.

Not bearing false witness. Telling lies degrades relationships. People will not trust you if you lie.

Not coveting your neighbor’s I-pad even though they made you feel bad for not having one. Live by your own set of values not somebody else’s. What does this commandment say about advertising? How do I respond to a student who is not focused enough to do well in her classes. She needs to quite college and become a bit more mature. She is wasting her time and money. And yet Simpson needs to retain students

Loving God and your neighbor

Honoring your parents is a good thing to do. What if your parents mistreat you. Take the case of the young girl in West Des Moines whose parents starved her to death. Should she have honored them?

During my many trips to El Salvador in the '90s I often saw children sniffing a sticky yellow substance. They had eyes that just stared vacantly into the distance. They have haunted me ever since then.

I asked around to learn what that was all about. I discovered it was glue, used to repair shoes, which the children could buy for a few pennies. It contained a substance that when sniffed, would lessen the hunger pangs coming from their empty stomachs. It made another day of hunger bearable, sort of. Those kids were mainly homeless. Abandoned, street kids. They didn't live long.

That glue was manufactured by the H.B. Fuller Company in Minneapolis. Groups protesting this mistreatment of the kids asked the company to switch their formulation of the glue to exclude the addicting substance. They refused on the grounds that it would cut into their profits.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Those kids were the neighbors of H.B. Fuller. They were and are our neighbors. If we follow the commandment to love our neighbors would you not agree we would be living better more fulfilled lives. I want to live in a world where all kids are valued and where all kids get to live out their own fulfilled lives.

This is why I had us sing the Christmas Carol, "Away in a Manger"

"Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask you to stay  
Close by me for ever, and love me, I pray  
Bless all the dear children in your tender care  
And fit us for heaven, to live with you there."

Following the 10 Commandments is the way we will be made fit for heaven.

Bless all the dear children every where

The Ten Commandments are not an ancient, quaint, set of rules to be blindly obeyed in hopes of getting to heaven. They are a guide God gave us to help us live fulfilled, joyful, meaningful lives here and now. Following the Ten Commandments is on the road to heaven, maybe even a taste of heaven here on earth.

Amen