

Guardrails for Life
Sermon for the 18th Sunday after Trinity
Sermon Text: Exodus 20:1-17



And God spoke all these words, saying, ² "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ³ You shall have no other gods before me. ⁴ You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. ⁷ You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain. ⁸ Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. ¹² Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. ¹³ You shall not murder. ¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵ You shall not steal. ¹⁶ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷ You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's."

There is a meditative hiking trail in the Swabian Alb (a small mountain range in Southern Germany) where, at one particular spot, two dented guardrails rise vertically into the sky. The guardrails are meant to represent that they served to protect life. And the many dents are a sure indication that these same guardrails saved people from a horrible fate. But the hiking path in the Swabian Alb wanted to point to another deeper meaning, so they inscribed under the two guardrails the 10 Commandments as similar saving measures. This is an interesting picture because through it, it becomes clear that the 10 Commandments are on one hand a fixed limitation, while on the other hand, also there to save life. These two characteristics, limitation and lifesaver, belong undeniably together to the 10 Commandments. When we consider the characteristic of limitation, we see that the 10 Commandments are not a suggestion to do or not to do, rather, like the guardrails, they show a set boundary which man cannot cross at all. In Hebrew, imperatives are preceded by a very strong "LO." This means we're not talking here about tips or suggestions but about a declaration that is beyond dispute. So with the 10 Commandments, it shows where the path leads. And it is clearly indicated to us that there is only this way and no other. The 10 Commandments are like a high mountain where you can move freely on the plateau. But up there, it is only beautiful so long as you don't get too close to the edges because that would lead to ruin. As long as we are on the plateau, we can move around freely, but as soon as we near the slope, there is a danger that we will fall to our doom. In fact, every child can understand that the meaning of the 10 Commandments is exactly that – the 10 Commandments are a course of action for a good life. Because it's absolutely clear that life is only beautiful when you don't always have to fear murder and theft. Life is also beautiful when you can live as husband and wife or as a family with trust in each other and not with lies and deceptions. If all the people on earth would keep the 10 Commandments, we would in fact have a world without war, murder, and manslaughter. We would have a safe place! The 10 Commandments are in fact so self-explanatory that many miss their true meaning. "You shall not steal" and "You shall not murder" belong naturally to the laws of many countries, for example. That is indisputable. And yet, we don't always recognize where we are in danger of walking on the other side of the guardrail and falling down the slope. In the specific case of everyday life, we are all too quick to think of exceptions. We also make up very practical and logical reasons why we could also allow exceptions and thus not always and not in every case let the 10 Commandments apply. So the path of Christians becomes paved with numerous white lies that we have invented ourselves. But behind every exception and excuse or self-justification, there lies just one cause – which is disobedience against the Giver of the Commandments. In fact, behind such excuses lies faithlessness and refusing to believe that God is behind the Commandments. In this way, God is catapulted out of everything you do. For

example, marriage is no longer built upon God's Command but on the want and desire of our own hearts. The foundation is no longer the 6th Commandment: "You shall not commit adultery," but one's own happiness is declared the guardrails and guiding principle of my life. So a person sees only his own hurt, his own disappointments, and his own bitterness. On this path, we put ourselves in God's place and the Commandments aren't a measuring stick because God gave them to us but we consider them binding only as far as they can be useful to us. But this means that the Commandments become separated from their Giver and lead us to ruin. A very evil man once said, for example: "Only that which benefits the people is right." The opposite is true! Both the individual as well as the people must submit to the law and must act in accordance with it. Not the other way around!

But the binding principle behind this right can only be God Himself. That's why the Commandments are just a fixed guardrail because they come from God Himself and not from some other random person. That's why God is in first place in the first table of the Law. Luther said: "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." This God of the 10 Commandments is not a theoretical God but One who reveals Himself to people. He is a God who turns Himself to us with His whole being and wants to be a part of our lives. Hosea compares His love with the passion of a lover. And that's why God commands us to love Him wholeheartedly and with our undivided attention. The first Commandment is always broken when we take something out of creation and declare that thing as our god. The first Commandment is thus broken every time we value another thing higher than God Himself. That can include many things, for example, wealth, one's own marriage, or even one's own family. However, God Himself is the source of power that permeates and wants to permeate all other areas of life. God Himself wants to be in the center and all the other Commandments are actually interpretations of the First Commandment that we must have no other gods besides this One God. That's why Martin Luther begins the explanation of every Commandment with these words: "We should fear and love God so that..." How people treat one another, what we give to each other, and what we take from each other, always has to do with God.

Yet these same Commandments didn't just stay with God but were intended for all people and therefore revealed to us so that they become tangible in our lives. Here, God's holy will meets human beings. But there is a problem. After all, man is not a blank slate but is in active opposition to God. That's why man doesn't automatically and out of pure goodwill, fulfill the 10 Commandments himself, but wants to break them according to his nature. So why does God give us the 10 Commandments when He knows that they will always hit the cement wall of human will? The example of the guardrails can help us. The 10 Commandments are guardrails, they are not the path themselves. God stands at the beginning and at the end as the Giver of the path and as the end goal of the path. That's also why the Commandments are introduced with the formal explanation of God's salvation: "*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*" With this, God shows us that He is with us on the path. The entire story doesn't come to an end with the 10 Commandments. The 10 Commandments come from God, and they lead back to God. We can see this especially in Jesus' interpretation of the 10 Commandments because Jesus puts His finger right on the root of the evil and shows people where the problem is – in our hearts, which doesn't want to love God with its whole heart. Jesus relentlessly reveals that we despise and break the Commandments in our hearts. In this way, Jesus demonstrated the radical contradiction between humans and God. It is wrong to think that the human condition before God is just a small error that can be corrected. No, humanity's contradiction is an incurable disease. None of us can deal with God's demand on our hearts and that's precisely why Jesus came. The 10 Commandments that God gives us are guardrails that point us into the future. Jesus is this future in the flesh. The path of the 10 Commandments therefore begins with this formal introduction that He rescued the people of Israel from Egypt. But the 10 Commandments lead us to flee into the arms of our saving Lord Jesus. God and His saving works therefore stand at the beginning and the end of the 10 Commandments. We aren't saved because we are able to keep the 10 Commandments, rather we are saved by God Himself reaching in and saving us. That's why on our path through life, we don't have to look intently at the guardrails that point out threats to the left or to the right of our path, but our gaze falls on Jesus who points the way to the future. We become holy through faith, not through perfectly keeping the 10 Commandments. On our journey through life, the question isn't just: "What have you done? Or what have you not done?" But on our journey through life, the real questions are: "What path are you on? And where does that path lead?" Amen.