A Compass in the Wilderness
Exodus 20:1-21

I want to speak to you this morning about a compass in the wilderness. A few months ago I happened to across an old issue of The Atlantic magazine. I like The Atlantic. Its articles are almost always thought provoking. In this particular issue I found a fascinating article entitled The 50 Greatest Breakthrough Since the Wheel. It seems the author, Mr. James Fallows, asked a panel of scientists, entrepreneurs, engineers, historians, and others to nominate the innovations they thought most influenced the nature of life as we know it today.

Glancing down the list, I was not surprised to find a number of inventions that came immediately to mind. For example, I was not surprised to find the printing press, electricity, penicillin, vaccinations, computers, and the internet placing high on this list of influential innovations.

On the other hand, I was a bit surprised to find the nail, cement, Archimedes screw, and the moldboard plow ranking right alongside these more memorable inventions; though upon further reflection I can see how each of them made the cut. Houses would be far more primitive without the nail; buildings would be far smaller and less sturdy without cement; Archimedes screw, a primitive pump, is still used for irrigation in many parts of the world; and the moldboard plow – well the experts say it revolutionized agriculture.

Clearly, all of these inventions have a place on a list of the greatest breakthroughs, as does the magnetic compass which came in at #17 – just below the personal computer and just above the automobile. As a Sailor, I suppose I should have thought of it right off. After all, a compass of some sort is essential for navigation. It was the compass that freed mariners from the coastlines and allowed them to explore the vast oceans and open seas.

For those of you who are curious about such things, you might be interested to learn that the first compass was made with a lodestone of magnetized iron ore. The ancient Chinese discovered that when a lodestone was suspended by a filament, it naturally pointed toward the magnetic poles. And the name “lodestone” even describes this compass-like function. It comes from a Middle English word meaning “a course stone” or “a leading stone.” You see, lodestones lead those who look to them for guidance.

And yet despite what historians tell us, lodestones weren’t the first compasses after all. You see, hundreds of years before the Chinese used lodestones as compasses, God gave two stones to guide the ancient Israelites through the wilderness and beyond. Those stones were the twin tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments.

The Ten Commandments are a kind of compass given to guide God’s people. Before they were given, and even up to the time Israel entered the Promised Land, God led his people with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. But those two pillars were
a temporary expedient. They were never intended to last forever; and in fact, they faded away when Israel entered the Promised Land. But the Ten Commandments stayed with Israel. They served as a compass guiding God’s people through the wilderness and through the ages. They are still guiding Israel, and they are guiding us too.

The Ten Commandments guide us by showing us the proper orientation for life. As all of us know, proper orientation is absolutely vital. If a pilot loses his orientation then he may crash into the sea. If a Captain loses her orientation then she may collide with another vessel. If a Marine lieutenant loses his orientation then he might fire on his friends. And if we lose a proper orientation then we can get lost in life and in eternity to devastating effect.

Yes, proper orientation is critical. And the Ten Commandments show us how to orient our lives as we wander through the wilderness of this world. They show us that life is best lived when it is directed upward toward God and outward toward others.

The first four commandments orient our lives upward toward God. They say:

- You shall have no other gods before God.
- You shall not make for yourself an idol.
- You shall not make wrongful use of the Lord’s name.
- And you shall remember the Sabbath, and keep it holy.

Each of these commandments sets God above all and keeps life heading in a Godward direction. The first two clearly set God above all. You shall have no other gods before God and you shall not make for yourself an idol. The third commandment is not only a prohibition against employing God’s name in slang or profanity, but it keeps us from invoking God’s name to bless our foolish plans without regard to his divine will, in essence, using God to serve our purposes. And the fourth commandment reminds us to set aside a day of rest to remember God lest we forget him in our busyness.

Yes, these commandments set God above all and keep life heading in a Godward direction. And why is that important? It’s important because God is supreme and worthy of such worship. But it’s also important because we can only become our best and highest self by worship what is highest. If we worship other things, lesser things, then we are diminished as a consequence.

Many years ago I read James Michener’s book, *The Source* which describes life in Canaan from prehistoric times through the birth of modern Israel. In one of the earliest chapters there’s a touching scene where a woman watches as her husband goes off to worship with temple prostitutes at the local fertility temple believing that such an act will promote fertility in the land. And as she watches him go, I remember her saying something to the effect that he would be a better man if he had a better god.
Isn't that true! We tend to become like whatever we worship. Speaking of his ancestors, Jeremiah said, “They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves.” (Jer. 2:5) Indeed, if we worship anything less than God then we are diminished as human beings. If we worship lesser things then we become lesser people because our lives will rise no higher than where we set our sights.

Paul describes this effect in the first chapter of Romans. Speaking of those who chose to exchange the glory of the immortal God for images of human beings, birds and beasts, Paul says, “God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.” (Rm. 1:28-31)

Could Paul be any clearer? If we worship lesser things then we become lesser people. And those lesser things don't have to be images or idols in the traditional sense. They can be things like promotions or advancement, possessions or pleasures, power or prestige, or any number of other things that lure our heart's affection from God. So the first four commandments remind us that we must always orient our lives upward in a Godward direction if we want to become fully human – if we want to be our best and highest self.

And the next six commandments remind us that we must orient our lives outward toward others. So through them, God says:

- You shall honor your father and mother.
- You shall not murder.
- You shall not commit adultery.
- You shall not steal.
- You shall not bear false witness.
- You shall not covet.

These are the kinds of commandments that strengthen relationships, establish trust, and ensure healthy community. Without them, we can hardly live together in peace. But by honoring our parents and avoiding adultery we preserve the family unit which is the very foundation of a thriving society. And by abstaining from murder, theft, deceit and covetousness, we avoid inflicting harm on our neighbors.

But as Christians we know that mere obedience to these commandments is not enough; that literal obedience to them is only the beginning; and that each of them points to something higher and better.
So it’s not enough to merely honor our parents. We must be parents worthy of honor. So Ephesians 6:4 says, “…do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”

And it’s not enough to abstain from murder. We must control the very emotions that lead to it. So Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister without cause, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” (Mt. 5:21-22)

And it’s not enough to simply avoid adultery. We must avoid looking on others in ways that entice us toward infidelity. As Jesus says: “…everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Mt. 5:28)

I suspect the same holds true for women lusting after men though I suspect it may happen less often!

And finally, it’s not enough to refrain from theft because the last of the Ten Commandment tells us that we must abstain from the very covetousness that so often leads to stealing.

If the first four commandments orient our lives upward toward God, then the last six orient our lives outward toward others. In following the first four, our lives are elevated. In following the last six, the community is enriched. By following all ten, we keep our bearings as we wander through the wilderness of this world on our way to the Promised Land.

But I don’t want to leave the impression that following these commandments will somehow earn us access to the Promised Land of heaven. For all of us know in our heart of hearts that we have not kept these commandments as we should.

- We have worshipped other gods.
- We have cherished idols and worshipped lesser things.
- We have used God’s name in vain.
- We have not always kept the Sabbath as we ought.
- We have not honored our parents or been the parents we should be.
- We have murdered the reputation of those we do not like.
- We have lusted in our hearts.
- We have stolen credit that belongs to others.
- We have played fast and loose with the truth.
- We have coveted what isn’t ours.

No, we have not kept them as we should. But Jesus kept them all. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have
come not to abolish but to fulfill.” Yes, Jesus kept the commandments and he credits his obedience to our account if we ask him. In the words of Romans 5:19, “…by the one man’s obedience (that’s Jesus’ obedience) the many will be made righteous.” And how are we made righteous? We are made righteous when we “…receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness” offered to us by Jesus Christ. (See Rm. 5:17)

Have you asked Jesus to share his righteousness with you – to credit his obedience to your account? If not, why not? And why not do it today? If you do that then all of your sins, even your sins against the Ten Commandments, will be fully and finally forgiven. More than this, Jesus will inscribe these commandments in your mind and on your heart so that you will have a new orientation in life and will be motivated from within to obey them. (See Heb. 8:6-12)

Friend, proper orientation is important. If a pilot loses his orientation then he may crash into the sea. If a Captain loses her orientation then she may collide with another vessel. If a Marine lieutenant loses his orientation then he might fire on his friends. And if you lose your orientation in life then you can get lost in this world and in eternity to devastating effect.

But with Christ before you and the Ten Commandments beside you, you will have a compass to guide you as you journey through the wilderness of this world toward the Promised Land of heaven! If you follow Christ and the compass of these commandments then you will never be lost in this world or in the world to come. Are you following him? Are you following them? You think about that. Amen.

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ii http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lodestone