

**Series: Ten Keys to the Joyful Life**  
**Introduction: “The Law - Good News or Bad?”**  
Matthew 5:17-20 and Proverbs 29:18 (NRSV)  
By John Gill

We live in a different America today. America has changed. Sixty years ago, who would have thought that the Supreme Court would interpret the Constitution in such a way that teacher-led prayer would be outlawed in public schools, at football games, and high school graduations?

And if someone had told us that the Ten Commandments – one of the pillars on which rests all the laws of our nation – indeed even our very civilization... if they told us the Ten Commandments would be expelled from most displays at courthouses and other public buildings, we would have said they were crazy! But friends, that is what America has come to. God has been put on trial, and we have convicted Him.

What’s going on? The Constitution hasn’t changed, so why is this happening now? There are many reasons, I’m sure. Of course, it has to do with the arguments about the separation of church and state – and each side has valid points to make. But I believe the underlying cause for the rejection of the Ten Commandments lies in HOW we view laws in general, and the Ten Commandments, in particular. We, as a society, have allowed the Ten Commandments to be banished from the public square because we see them as restrictive – they cramp our style. We think God is the “divine party-pooper” determined to take all the fun and joy out of our lives.

It reminds me of the story of two men who were adrift on a raft in the open sea, and it looked bad for them. Finally, one of them, frightened, began to pray: “O Lord, I’ve broken most of the commandments. I’ve got some pretty bad habits – I drink, I curse, I steal, I treat people like dirt. But, if my life is spared now, I promise you that I’ll change – that I’ll never curse again, that I --” Suddenly his friend cried out to him: “Wait, Jack, Don’t go too far. I think I see a ship!”

We laugh, but doesn’t that ring true for you and me? Like little children, we don’t like rules. We rebel. We disobey them . . . or we simply ignore them.

Why do you think it is that so many people in America will never darken the doors of the church? They want to live their lives any way they want, and they don’t want anyone – including God – to “rain on their parade.” We live in a society that wants no absolute rules. In America today, all morality is relative. We make up our moral code as we go along and then wonder why our country is in such a mess. We don’t want anyone to tell us what is right or wrong. We’re not about to let some preacher or holy book hold us accountable for our behavior. WE want to be free to enjoy our lives without restrictions. In short, when we think of the Ten Commandments, we see them as “bad news,” and we want nothing to do with them.

Friends, this is a very prevalent assumption today. But this popular view of God's Law is mistaken – and it's not Biblical, either. According to the Bible, God's gift of the Ten Commandments is meant to be "good news," not bad! True, the Law of God DOES restrict... it's no accident that eight of the ten commandments are worded negatively – "Thou shalt NOT..." But that's not because God wants to take all the joy out of life. It's because God knew that we, like little children, need boundaries in order to live a safe and happy life.

Dr. James Dobson, the well-known Christian child psychologist who has been an out-spoken advocate for families for years, often points out that, in order for children to grow into responsible adults, they must learn to live within boundaries, and that a good parent will make those boundaries clear and then enforce them. The child may not like it at the time, but he or she will thank you later – because living within boundaries makes life secure.

God, our Heavenly Parent, knew exactly what He was doing when He gave us the Ten Commandments. They were given because he loves us, and wants the best for us.

Years ago, I had the privilege of going fishing with one of the members of the church I was serving at the time. Don Meister was an avid fisherman, who loved to take his boat way out into the Gulf of Mexico and let down his lines – and he always seemed to come back with a great catch! Anyway, we had to go a long way out to reach our fishing spot. But in order to get there, we had to travel a specifically designed channel which was deep enough that boats wouldn't run aground. That channel was marked by buoys. As long as you stayed within the boundaries of the buoys, you would have smooth going. But if you strayed out beyond the boundary, you would be asking for trouble. The Ten Commandments are like those buoys that mark the safe path through life.

We NEED the guideposts God has given us. According to the Associated Press, on the evening of February 6, 1996, three friends drove the rural roads east of Tampa, Florida, with the intent of playing pranks. Tragically, their game was anything BUT funny.

They pulled some twenty street signs out of the ground, including the stop sign at one fateful intersection. The next day, three 18 year old buddies, who had just finished bowling, breezed through the intersection without stopping. Their car sailed right into the path of an 18-ton truck, and they were all killed. One year later, the three perpetrators of the deadly prank were convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Traffic signs are there, not to restrict us, but for our protection. When those guideposts are removed, we are all in danger.

You see, the BIBLICAL view of the Law is that it is meant to be a guideline for living, that if observed, will bring meaning, fulfillment, and joy to life. As Psalm 119 (vs. 1 & 93) puts it: "Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord . . . I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life."

And you and I know that's true, don't we? Our sin-nature tells us to rebel against God's Law – to pull up all the signposts. We think we will be liberated and freed to go live joyously. But, the exact opposite is true: When we cast off the restraint of God's precepts... when we set out to "do what is pleasing in our own sight," we are doomed, and we're fools. But when we voluntarily submit to the boundaries God has set, then our lives are blessed, and we prosper.

Therefore, we observe the Law of God, NOT reluctantly, out of a sense of obligation or duty, like taking bad-tasting medicine; NOR out of a fear of divine retribution, lest God might send us to hell. No, instead, we are EAGER to observe the Laws of God because we have recognized that they are the "keys to the joy filled life" that we all desire. Far from being "bad news" to run away from, the Ten Commandments are wonderful "good news" that we can embrace and live by.

In recent years, the posting of the Ten Commandments on courthouse lawns has become a politically divisive issue, with some people arguing strenuously in favor, and others vehemently against it. However, I wonder if those who have such strong opinions about the Ten Commandments on either side of the argument - actually live by them – or even could name them, if asked to. Could you?

My friends, I believe that the controversy about posting the Ten Commandments on the walls of public buildings will continue to go on for a long time to come. But as strongly as I may feel about that issue, I believe that it is not nearly so important that the Ten Commandments be written on the walls of our courthouses and schools, as it is that they be written within our own hearts.

As God says through the prophet Jeremiah (31:33); "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." Only when we have the Commandments written on our hearts will they make a difference in our lives, and in our society.

That is why for the next ten weeks, we will be taking a look at God's recipe for the joy-filled life which is outlined in the Ten Commandments. If we live by them – ALL of them – then our lives, and our world, will be transformed. I hope that you will make it a point to be here each and every Sunday, as we look at God's "keys for the joyful life."

Let us pray:

O Lord, we have no excuse for not knowing what you expect from us. We can't plead ignorance, because you have set out your guidelines so plainly in Your Word. Forgive us for our complacency, and fill us with the desire to live according to Your Laws, so that we may experience the grace of the joy-filled life. Amen.