This is the third Sunday in Lent. For some of you, Lent is a somber time, a time to be introspective, a time to consider our relationship to Jesus, consider our faith. Last week I asked you to contemplate what idols are in your life. Idols - those things that may be distracting you from your relationship with God. Lent is indeed a somber time, a reflective time. We often sing songs in a minor key and we are confessing our faith every Sunday with words about Christ that may be unfamiliar, yet words that allow you to consider what Christ's death on the cross means to you.

This Sunday, I just read the Ten Commandments and your response may well be: “I know that I've broken the commandments and strayed like lost sheep. But, please, give me a break today!” You may remember that Jimmy Carter and Bill Graham, well respected Christians, have coveted another's wife. When it comes to the Ten Commandments, we tend to beat ourselves up because we fall short in keeping them.

But today, cheer up! I don't intend to beat you over the head with the Commandments. Let's not read the Ten Commandments as a hand slap. Let's take a closer look at what they say and consider their biblical purpose. Perhaps then we can take a new perspective, take a new look at how to consider the Commandments in our lives.

A little factoid I found when researching for this sermon. How many of you have seen the Cecil B. DeMille movie The Ten Commandments? Probably just about all of you! Can't you just see the smoking mountain and the angry Charlton Heston as Moses bringing the tablets down the mountain to present them to the people who had begun to worship an idol, the golden calf? How many of you remember that Hollywood director Cecil B. DeMille, through the Fraternal Order of the Eagles, distributed granite copies of the Ten Commandments nationwide as part of an effort to promote the star-studded 1956 remake of his 1923 film? Yes, the granite copies of the Ten Commandments found today on many courthouse lawns were indeed placed there as a publicity stunt by Cecil B. DeMille. Some articles say there were 4000 monuments, others say around 200.

And these are the monuments that are being challenged in court today! Some believe the monuments represent religion and have no place on public property and others believe they are a part of our history as a country. They provide our country with laws to live by.

Laws to live by. That's how so many people think about the commandments. Many people feel they need to keep the laws, the commandments, and that's all they need to do to be religious. But that's much too simple of an explanation of the Ten Commandments. It's always easier to see life as black and white, right or wrong, than to consider what's going on behind the scene. And that's what we need to do today. Let's look behind the scene at the Ten Commandments.
First, why did God give the Ten Commandments to the Hebrew people? Any ideas? The Ten Commandments are a gift from God to the Hebrew people to structure their common life and to be used to guide the Hebrew people so they could be worthy of the God who rescued them, brought them out of the land of Egypt. The Ten Commandments were a gift from God to the Hebrew people enabling the people to live in community, to live in peace with each other, to have a flourishing society.

It’s thought-provoking when we consider that the Hebrews didn’t speak of the Ten Commandments as law as we think of law today. We consider a law as a rule that cannot be broken or there will be consequences. The Hebrew idea of law relates to teachings or direction. Perhaps we need to change our mental idea of the Ten Commandments from law to the biblical idea of them being ‘a lamp unto our feet.’ This is how Calvin viewed them. The Ten Commandments guide us as we travel our journey of faith before God – and the Commandments guide us as we love our neighbors.

Is God’s faithfulness to the Hebrew people contingent upon the people keeping the Ten Commandments? (Wait for answers.) No, it is not. God was faithful to the Hebrew people year after year even though they had sinned against God with idol worship and cheating the poor, for example. The Hebrew people broke about every Commandment. Yet, God still loved them and kept the covenant God had with them.

Let’s look at this faithfulness idea a little closer. Are there any punishments listed in the commandments if they are not kept? This is a trick question. The only punishment listed is when God tells the Hebrew people he is a jealous God and expects them to honor God alone and have no idols. There are consequences to not honoring God, not making God number one in your life. This is the only Commandment that has a negative consequence if not kept. If you look at the codes of other early Middle Eastern civilizations, there are specific punishments for not keeping the code. The Ten Commandments do not list specific punishment for offenders except in this one case.

Interestingly, the Commandment to honor your father and mother gives a positive outcome if you keep it. “So that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” God is indeed a good God and the Ten Commandments were God’s gift to the Hebrew people.

How many tablets did Charlton Heston bring down from the mountain top? That is not a trick question. How many tablets did the Bible say Moses brought down from the mountain top? In Exodus 31, verse 18, it says “two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.”

The Commandments can be separated into two sections. The first tablet has to do with our relationship to God. Of these, the first three Commandments tell us how to honor God, the next two tell us how we are to take care of ourselves and our families. The second tablet contains the Commandments on how to live with other people.
There's an internal logic to the Ten Commandments. The way we honor God shapes the way we deal with our neighbor. Faithful worship of God leads to proper love of neighbor. Jesus brings this out in Mark 12: 28-34. You may recall this incident recorded by Mark when a scribe, a person with religious authority, asks Jesus which Commandment is the greatest. Jesus answers using the Shema: “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.” Basically, Jesus is summarizing the commandments on tablet one that have to do with our relationship to God. But Jesus doesn’t stop there; he goes on to say, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus is saying as are the commandments: You cannot love your neighbor without loving God. You cannot love God without loving neighbor. Jesus saw this cause and effect. Too often one vein of Christianity emphasizes our love of God to the exclusion of taking care of neighbor. Or some Christians emphasize the Social Gospel, taking care of neighbor, so much that they forget to love God. This idea of loving God without taking care of your neighbor doesn’t wash with God. And in the same vein, taking care of your neighbor without taking care of your relationship with God is not truly loving your neighbor.

What is our take away for today? Lent is a time to reflect on our relationship with God. It's a time to repent of our sin and get right with God. We can't just say that we kept eight of the Ten Commandments, but that coveting and Sabbath keeping – well, I just can’t manage to keep those two. If I could just get those two under control, I'd be just fine. That's not what the Commandments are for!

The Ten Commandments were given to the Hebrew people as a gift from God to shape their lives and their relationship to each other. The Ten Commandments are teachings that provide direction for our lives. How are you doing when you reflect on these teachings? Are you increasing your love of God and your love of neighbor? Or is your love of neighbor out of balance with your love of God? Or is your love of God out of balance with your love of neighbor? Take time this Lenten season to consider that Lent and the Ten Commandments are not about religious moralism. Seek to understand the relationship between love of God and love of neighbor. Perhaps, then, you will be like the scribe I mentioned earlier who questioned Jesus about the greatest commandment. After the scribe demonstrated to Jesus that he understood the importance of loving neighbor and loving God Jesus told him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” May you hear those words this week.