



# Auburn Presbyterian Church

*Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone*

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## **“Here’s the Operator’s Manual” Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22**

Are you doing well today? I hope so!

I thought we’d start our time together with a little survey research. How many of you have had some healing recently? How many of you know you are forgiven? How many of you have a purpose in life? Wow! A lot of thankful people here. So what do we do with that thankfulness?

Life brings us a lot of questions, and people seek answers. For example, the “self-help” area of most bookstores is the largest department; people are looking for answers. It’s common for someone looking for answers to ask a good friend, or a trusted older adult; they are looking for answers. In Starbucks or at Depot Bay Coffee, you can overhear conversations of others; and if by chance they happen to be speaking about a subject about which you have significant anxiety, you can’t help but listen in. You are looking for answers. The Internet has become a significant source of advice for many—either informational Web sites, like Web MD, or chat rooms set up to host virtual conversations about any subject under the sun. Sometimes, these are just “interests”; sometimes, these are foundational questions for which people are reaching out for answers.

Why don’t we look in our Operator’s Manual? The God Who made us has not left us orphaned since the start of time. God has given us directions for living and places to go for many of the answers we seek. It reminds me of conversations I’ve had with someone who has a physical problem or a relationship problem, and after listening, I sometimes offer to pray for them and their issue. And some of these folks look at me sideways for a second, and then they say, “Ok, I guess prayer wouldn’t hurt.” You know, “when all else fails, *pray!*”

What if we turned around that order of things? What if we looked in the Operator’s Manual first, and consulted through prayer with the Engineer who built us? Wouldn’t that seem to be the most rational, reasonable thing to do?

But many people don’t want to do it in that orderly way, and I understand. Some years ago I got my first unassembled piece of furniture—a bookcase. It came in pieces, in a flat box, with a bag of metal and plastic parts. Well, I’m one who likes to learn by doing much of the time, so I spread out the parts, and started working to put them together. Well, I saw right away I was going to need a couple of tools. I left and came back with tools, and started lining up and screwing things together. But I ran out of fasteners. “Darn cheap stuff,” I muttered under my breath (or something like that...). “Why couldn’t they count and put the right number of parts in the bag?” Then, I noticed the corners did not meet as I thought they should. “Probably drilled the holes wrong, too,” I thought. After another 15 minutes—almost an hour now spent on this “easy to assemble” project—I was pretty frustrated with the cabinet maker, and with myself. So, I reached into the box, and took out the directions. “The English wasn’t too goods”, but I could

get the gist of what they were meaning, through the words and pictures. I took apart everything I had done, and started over, following the directions. Happily, I hadn't done too much damage, and I could get it together as it (now, obviously) had been intended. But as long as I had that book case, it was weak and flimsy because of the way I had tried to force it together.

Sound familiar?

Read the Operator's Manual.

I want to read some of the Operator's Manual with you this morning, to discover some important directions for life that might seem familiar, but that have surprising applications. Let's start by opening our Bibles to Exodus, the second book in the Hebrew Bible, and turning to chapter 20. This is where Moses passes on to Hebrews the commandments God has given him. I'd like to read this passage with you, out loud, together, using the version on the screen. Then your Bible will be open so we can drill down a bit. Listen as you speak this morning, listening for the voice of God in your own voice as you read God's Word aloud. We say together. . . .

<sup>1</sup> And God spoke all these words:

<sup>2</sup> "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

<sup>3</sup> "You shall have no other gods before me.

<sup>4</sup> "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, <sup>6</sup> but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

<sup>7</sup> "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

<sup>8</sup> "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor and do all your work, <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

<sup>12</sup> "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

<sup>13</sup> "You shall not murder.

<sup>14</sup> "You shall not commit adultery.

- 15 “You shall not steal.
- 16 “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
- 17 “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” (New International Version\*)

The God who listened to the cries of the Hebrews as they were being oppressed by the Egyptians, has rescued His people from slavery. Through Moses and Aaron, he has liberated the people on the bottom of the pile. Never has there been such a God. Other nations and cultures had gods of a particular place or of a limited realm. But none have ever had the concern for His people that Jahweh/God has shown. Now out in the wilderness, this God who hears the cries of His people is specifying how He wants his people to live. This is the “Covenant” He is making with the people which they will ratify. Here is what “Covenant Living” looks like.

First, our relationship with God: we are to make God our highest value. Can you say you live this way? Can you say there is nothing that you put ahead of God? Anything we put on a level with God is something we worship. Some people place “money” there, or more broadly, “security”. Or praise from others. You name it—people have put it ahead of God. God will not stand for that. Do that, and you have to do without God. Not a good prospect.

Second, we are not to make idols that would reify a god to worship. It’s like Mark Twain (or was it Groucho Marx) said—“I wouldn’t join a club that would have me as a member.” Any God we can put down on paper or capture in wood or stone is not a god worth our worship and highest loyalty. Any god we understand so as to predict and control is not the real God at all. Imagining we have fully or accurately grasped God is to put ourselves above God, elevating our intelligence or will above God. Once again, God will not stand for that. Do that, and you have to do without God.

Third—we are not to trivialize how we talk about God. We may think this is all about cursing, but it’s more. If we joke about God in a way that cuts God down to our size—and I have—it’s like telling a joke about someone when they are right there next to you. Talk about “disrespect”!

The fourth commandment is a bridge between our relationship with God, and our relationship with people, because it controls how we ride in a rhythm of our weeks. If we are made in the image of God, then we do like God does—we rest in order to respect our limits and connect with our Creator. God has ordered the means for us to do this—to recharge and refresh our relationship with Him. It’s the Sabbath—one day out of seven. God Himself did it in Creation—and we are to do the same, to savor Creation and the Creator.

Now we get to the specifications God has given His people for relationships among themselves. Number 5 says this starts in the family, with people honoring their parents. Not everything a parent does is worthy of honor. We are honoring the person, not the practice. So, if you were abused by your parents, you don’t honor the abuse; but you know that parent was a worthy person because they gave birth to you. That alone is worthy of honor, because God values you highly.

God's people are not to murder—that's number 6. And there are a gazillion ways we can murder someone. We can kill their reputation. We can gossip—telling factual truth—but in a way that diminishes one person or group in the eyes of another.

Number 7 says, God's people are not to cheat on a spouse—your own spouse, or someone else's. Because cheating on a spouse threatens to kill a marriage.

Number 8 is, 'no stealing'. There is no rationalizing allowed. We can't say, "They weren't using it," or "they didn't need it as much as I do." When my wife, Sharon, was working for the California Youth Authority, she would hear this kind of crooked reasoning all the time. But let's cut to the chase: if it doesn't belong to us, we don't take it. But this word from God is about more than private property. We are not to steal from another their opportunity to live a full life. This commits us to working to eradicate class distinctions and crushing poverty--in our own nation, certainly, but also beyond. *So, are we our brother's and sister's keeper?* God's answer is, yes, if we are living God's Covenant. "Covenant Living" (as we see here) includes nurturing relationships with each other.

Number 9 is speaking falsely about another person. Words are important. God spoke a word, and it happened—that's how all that we see came to be. If we are created in God's image and we don't want to spit on our heritage, then we will be truthful as God is truthful. In John 17, Jesus was speaking to God when he said, "Your Word is Truth". But he spoke it to God in front of his disciples—something he rarely did--and it was recorded in John's gospel for us.

Each Sunday we confess our sin in worship almost at the very start. It's a "WE" prayer, built with care to match the theme in the sermon, and as a "we" prayer, it can't pin down your sins of the week powered by your sin—the bent you and I have to put ourselves before God. That's why we have that silent time after the confession for you to "do your own business with God" so you also are telling God the truth about yourself. The same "with God-ness" is to apply to what we say about each other.

Number 10 says, God's people are not to lust after what someone else has. This means we don't compare ourselves to others. But that is hard, in a society where "keeping up with the Joneses" is a bedrock driver of consumer spending, the largest part of our economy. Comparison is a seedbed for coveting. It requires that we indulge in the fiction that we know what another person's life is like--and in fact, we don't know very much. We don't know that a person's success has been purchased with the sacrifice of their family life, for example. All we think is, "That stuff is nice; I want it, too."

When our eye is on our neighbor's "stuff", it's no longer on our neighbor, and it's certainly not on God. We so easily put "stuff" in God's place! Much of the housing crisis we have been suffering—or any other 'bubble' that attracts great attention from people, generally—is driven by this sin: anxiety about being 'left out' from a 'great opportunity' and perhaps being thought of as 'not too bright' by other people in our social level. Media feeds this. Advertisers move us with this. Comparison leads to coveting, and God is once again left out.

What have we learned this morning? First, we've learned that God has provided instructions for us as we 'operate' these human bodies and lives we did not create. Many of His instructions are not obvious—like me assembling that bookshelf, but trying to work it out all by myself. It is a smart thing to use the Operator's Manual. Second, we've learned there is much

more than we think here—these instructions are God's way to show us how to have great lives; these are not just rules to put us in good standing with God so we get a "passing grade." Third, God's ways are not our ways, and that causes conflict with our culture. Let me give you a couple of quick examples from other parts of Scripture. Find in John's gospel, chapter 2. I'm going to read the incident of Jesus clearing the Temple, starting in verse 13. Listen for the message God is sending you through these words. *[text John 2:13-22]*

So it's like Paul says in First Corinthians 1:18-25:

<sup>18</sup> For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. <sup>19</sup> For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

<sup>20</sup> Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup> For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup> Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. (New International Version\*)

So the fourth thing we have discovered this morning is that God's ways are not only different from our ways, God's ways can cause us to confront our culture and its values, not conform to them. When the culture says, "Don't be committed to anything; keep your options open like a good consumer would," that's contrary to what God says, and we have to choose. Most of us choose to conform to culture rather than Christ. When the culture says, "Acquire and consume more than you give to others," that's contrary to what God says, and we have to choose. Most of us choose to conform to culture rather than Christ. We want to die rich, so we can pass the most on to our kids, rather than use our money in a way that demonstrates the primary love we have for God. Because we don't love God all that much.

You see, you do not own your 'stuff'. You do not own your life. It is loaned to you, giving you an opportunity to use it as God wants, following God's activity in your day-to-day life. That's why I've called this sermon, and this book, "The Operator's Manual" instead of "The Owner's Manual". We don't own any of this. We are given it to operate for a time. You and I are what the Bible calls, "stewards". If we are conscious of God, we agree with God on this, and manage or operate our lives and our stuff as God directs, in partnership with Him to accomplish what He is doing in the world. If we are in rebellion, we ignore God, and use our stuff in the delusion that it is ours in an ownership sense. And now we've fallen back to Commandment Number One.

With our lives, God has given us this great opportunity to clear away the clutter of culture and connect with Him, moment by moment, every day. God gives us a standing place with which to view the world and our lives and God, and detect what God is doing, and join in. That's the baseline purpose for which we were created, and from which we are to operate our lives.

Maybe we need to pray. Now. Please.

*O God, when we hear Your Word, we find once again how far we are from You. We are captives of our culture, but we think we are free. We are self-centered, but we think we are faithful Christians. We are deluded. Your Operator's Manual gives us reality. We turn from our delusions, and we turn to You. Grow in us a greater hunger for reality. We need Your grace and each other's help to crawl out of the skin of our culture that no longer fits, and find new life with You, fresh every day. We're serious about this, because we are bold enough to pray this in Jesus' Name.*

[And God's people said, . . . . Amen.]

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on March 15, 2009, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]

\**The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996, c1984 (electronic ed.). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.