

“ Thou Shalt Not! ”

by Herbert W. Armstrong

Are the Ten Commandments negative and therefore a wrong form of law?

OFTEN we hear the basic Moral Law impugned by theologians and educators as negative and therefore outdated. Its Giver is often conceived as a stern, wrathful God, who angrily says to us: “THOU SHALT NOT!” It is sometimes looked upon as undesirable for modern, advanced, enlightened man. The Ten Commandments ought to be positive, they say, not negative.

Modern humanity looks upon itself as elevated to a plane of rational thinking, and with knowledge higher than God or God's law. Of course, when we understand, God's truth is the most positive religion or philosophy there is—it eradicates fear! It is the way of faith!

But is the negative form, “Thou shalt not,” wrong for society today? Is it outmoded in building character? Should a perfect law be permissive, containing only dos and no don'ts?

Consider for a moment what is meant by true character.

Character—that is, true character—has been defined as: 1) coming to the knowledge of the true, as opposed to the false values—the right, instead of the wrong way; 2) making, of one's own free will and volition, the choice to do the right instead of the wrong; 3) the exercise of the will in actually doing the right instead of the wrong.

Character, then, once the true knowledge is acquired and the right decision made, involves self-discipline. The truly educated person is a self-disciplined person.

What, then, does this self-discipline involve?

Two things: 1) self-restraint to resist the lower impulses and pulls in human nature—to restrain the self from desires, impulses, habits or customs that are contrary to the right way; and 2) self-propulsion or determined initiative to drive the self to do those things that ought to be done. In other words, in true character in action there is the positive and the negative.

Suppose one rejects the negative as faulty and something to be discarded altogether. Suppose one applies the positive only and impels the self to do those positive

things to be done, but exercises no restraint to resist those things of habit, impulse, desire or custom of others that ought not to be done. Because human nature is what it is, the very nature in such a one will pull constantly in the wrong direction. Thus character is destroyed. That person is out of balance, living in a hopeless world of permissiveness.

We find present in nature both the positive and the negative and the principle of opposites. Electricity functions and performs its work by use of both the positive and the negative. Some elements are alkaline; some are acid. Living things and beings in this world of matter are male and female. There are sins of both omission and commission.

Frequently we read the pitiful, feeble efforts of one who fancies in ignorant egotism that he or she is wiser than God, setting forth an idea of 10 positive commandments. Ten dos, and no don'ts. And what do we find? How much character would such a list of “commandments” produce?

Just about as much character as an electric light bulb would produce light with merely the one positive wire leading into it. Just about as much character as the male

alone, without the female, could reproduce his kind. He might do a few good things, but all his good would be nullified and canceled out by the unrestrained evil he would commit.

No basic law of life, forming the basis of perfect character, could be a perfect law unless it contains, in perfect balance, both positive and negative.

Examine, now, the Ten Commandments, God's basic code, upon which all his laws, social, economic, civil and religious, hang. Here is the basis of true character:

1. "THOU SHALT have no other gods before me." This is stated in the positive form, implying we shall worship and obey the true God. In a sense, this commandment contains both the positive and negative, directing us positively, "Thou shalt," to the true God, and restraining us—the negative—from false gods.

2. "THOU SHALT NOT make unto thee any graven image, or . . . bow down thyself to them, nor serve them." This is negative, restraining from either making or worshiping any thing as a god; also restraining from either worship of, or obedience to, such a false god. To the true God man owes both worship and obedience.

Notice the principle of government in this, as in all the commands. The whole issue is one of government. The first man and woman rejected God's government, refused his rule over their lives, disobeyed four points of the basic law of his government. Christ came preaching the kingdom of God, which is the government of God, commanding humanity to repent of rejection of that government and the transgression of its laws (sin is the transgression of the law—I John 3:4).

3. "THOU SHALT NOT take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." This much-abused commandment is a restraint—negative—to prevent cutting humans off from the power and benefits of the right use of God's name. This command is a negative, making possible the positive and vitally needed blessings through that name!

4. "REMEMBER the sabbath day, to keep it holy . . . the seventh day

is the sabbath of the Lord thy God." Here is another positive command—the only one God specifically commanded us to "remember," and the very one mankind insists above all upon forgetting. Is it not an indicting commentary on unrestrained human nature that this most positive of all the Commandments men flout and disobey with greatest impunity?

Again, notice the perfection—here again is a command including both positive and negative, for while it is primarily positive, yet it includes negative restraints to make possible that positive—"in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son," etc.

5. "HONOUR thy father and thy

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mother." Do you see any negative statement in this command? Here is a positive command, with a definite promise of blessing. This heads the six commands regulating our relationship with our neighbor. However, the negative opposite is implied, though not stated.

6 through 10. "THOU SHALT NOT" kill, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness against another, or covet. Here are the famous negatives, yet each implies the opposite positive: as, you shall love and have charitable, tolerant patience toward your neighbor, be true to your wife and respect your neighbors' property.

Here is a perfect law (Ps. 19:7). It outlines, in broad detail, our right relationship with the true God that we may have all the needed guidance, help and bless-

ings from God; and also our right relationship toward human neighbors—including parents, children, husband or wife. This law provides for every human need for our own good in a living, active, continuous relationship with the all-wise, all-powerful, all-loving God.

This perfect law forms the basis of all human relationships, as well as our God-relationship. It provides the wide, basic general rules affecting every phase of life:

a) Religious, in our relationship to God;

b) Family, in our relationship to parents, children, wife or husband, and is designed to preserve the blessed sanctity and dignity of the home;

c) Next-door and personal neighbors and friends;

d) Civil relationships—here are found the very basic civil laws respecting murder, larceny (theft), adultery, perjury;

e) Economic life—honesty, not coveting others' money, goods, property or possessions, which coveting is the very root source of today's economic principle of competition;

f) Social life—such commands as those respecting adultery, false witnessing, coveting, stealing, form the foundational principle of right social attitude and relationship with neighbors.

This law, in its basic principles, defines the whole duty of man (Eccl. 12:13). It is the basis, in principle, for all the Bible. The entire Bible is, so far as its teaching is concerned, a magnification in specific detail of these basic principles.

This law is complete. It contains, in brief summation-principle, all the positive and negative obligations of the perfect, rightly balanced life. It is the very antithesis of permissiveness! It expresses and reflects the very character of God.

The whole law is summed in one word, *love*. It is like God, for God is love, just as his law is love. It was given in love for us, and love is the fulfilling of the law—love in action.

It is love to God, and love to neighbor. It is perfect. It is complete. □