

## On the Corner

by Robert Docter –

I tend to relate poorly to negative interventions. I'm not talking about criticism of creative efforts. I can profit from those. I'm not referring to spontaneous feedback in which an individual takes a position somewhat different from mine. I can learn from that. No! I'm talking about people telling me what I *shouldn't* do. It's just not helpful.

Even the Ten Commandments are filled with a bunch of "thou shalt nots ...". During my run the other day I started wondering why God would want to communicate nine of the Ten Commandments in such a negative way. The only one that's got a positive ring is "Honor your father and your mother," and even that one ends with an implied threat.

I pondered the matter further in the middle of a hill. I knew that Moses took Aaron up the mountain with him, so I suspected that Aaron was the "chisel guy" and Moses received the words. By his own admission, Moses had some kind of a speech impediment, so it crossed my mind that maybe Aaron had difficulty understanding him.

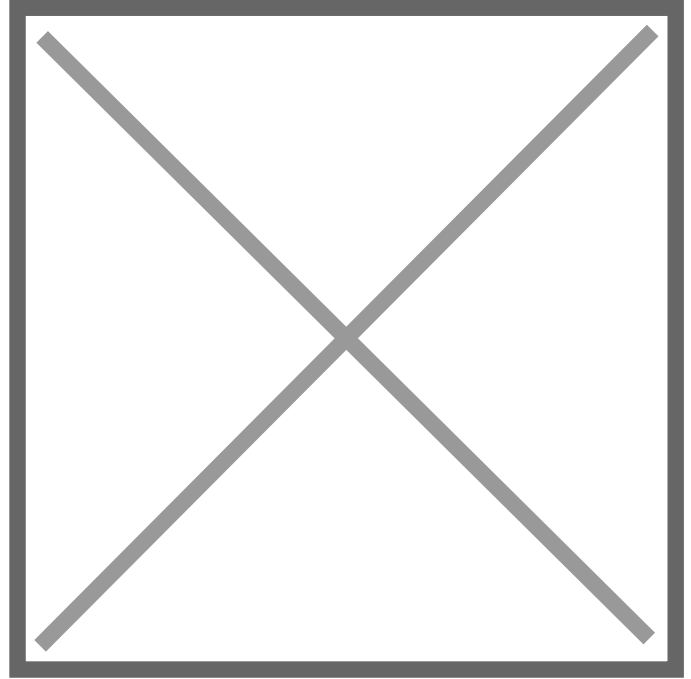
"Nah!" I said to myself. "Brothers can always understand each other even through difficult speech impediments, and Aaron had already had considerable experience in communicating Moses' intent to the people." So I discounted that one.

Still chugging up this hill, I then wondered about maybe Aaron doing some on-the-spot editing because of a dull chisel. "Maybe," I said, "he short circuited the list of rules a bit because of the difficulty in carving the stone."

However, as soon as I got to the top of the hill, and an increased blood supply started getting to my brain, I discounted that hypothesis. God would make sure he got it right, and Moses himself seemed like a good detail man with a habit of being obedient to God.

Then suddenly, while coasting on a fairly level spot, it hit me. I understood why God had all those specific, negative rules. Moses was dealing with a bunch of spiritually immature and irresponsible people who had been slaves for generations within a foreign culture. They were "strange to the meaning of liberty."

The "children" of Israel needed the specific direction of God—even to the recipe for breadmaking as they plotted their escape from Egypt. They were not ready to grasp complex, abstract concepts. They needed to be guided in



very concrete ways, and God knew this several centuries before the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget came to the same conclusion about children under the age of ten.

Then, some centuries later, along came Jesus.

He translated “the law” in more general and abstract terms with the lawyer who confronted him with the important question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

As usual, Jesus answered this question with one of his own: “What is written in the law?”

The lawyer replied with his summary of the Ten Commandments: “*Love* the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, *love* your neighbor as yourself.”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will *live*.”

So, ten specifics came down to two conceptual abstractions, each of which begin with the word “love.” It’s interesting that the lawyer needed some additional instruction on the concept “neighbor.” It was then, of course, that Jesus made the matter more concrete by telling the story of the good Samaritan. He broadened the concept beyond the geographical limits of “neighborhood” to include members of despised cultural groups different from us.

The last word in Jesus’ dialogue with the lawyer was the word “live.” When we fail to open our hearts with love for others when we burden ourselves with “un-love” we deny ourselves the abundancy of life which God promised us. Sometimes, in our adolescent rebellion, we resist God’s teaching because we see it as narrow and rigid. It’s not. God simply wants us to love him and our “neighbors.” And then, we begin to live.