

The Ten Commandments
Matthew 5:17-20, 22:34-40 and Exodus 20:1-17
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Few passages of Scripture are as well-known and identifiable, even to those not overtly religious, as the portion we find in Exodus 20. You may not be able to recite all the commandments or in the proper sequence, but the title itself is easily and widely recognizable. It is the singular passage of Scripture we might find, at least in America, in the homes or on the front lawns of Christians who are con-vinced that observance of these Ten Words is the key to our country's survival and that our disregard for them will inevitably lead to our demise. There is no other biblical text that has been so much debated regarding the constitutionality or non-constitutionality of being displayed in public schools, courthouses and city halls.

Two years ago, we did an in-depth sermon series on the Ten Commandments, breaking them down one commandment per week. Today we'll cover all ten in one sermon, so this will be a view of the law from the "30,000 foot" level, so to speak. As we prepare to do that, I want to reiterate what I said last week about the integral relationship between the Ten Commandments, the covenant and the story out of which they grow. These 10 words are a gift from a loving God who has redeemed his people. They show us what it means to be truly and most fully human and how to have the abundant life Jesus promised us.

Given that context, it's no surprise, and it's certainly no accident that the first commandment is, "You shall have no other gods before me." This commandment is the foundation for all the others; break commandments 2-9, and you have also broken #1. To use the language of Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*, this command means to love, trust and respect God above all things. It is to be absolutely loyal to Yahweh. It is critical to see that before this command is given, God pledges loyalty to the people. "I am the Lord *your* God." God does not expect loyalty *from* Israel apart from declaring loyalty *to* Israel. In fact, it is only within the context of divine faithfulness that human faithfulness is possible. Those who are called to obedience know that the God who speaks to them is a God who is *for them*, who wants only what is in their best interests. If you find yourself resistant to the demands of the law, it is usually because you do not really trust

God at this very point, that God is always, always *for you*, and until you settle that, the law is going to feel like an imposition.

The second commandment against making idols sets Israel apart from the religious practices common in the cultures that surrounded them. While the commandment certainly includes manmade physical images that were worshiped as if they were gods, it is not limited to that. The primary issue addressed by the prohibition is the state of our hearts. A god is whatever is of highest importance in our lives—what we desire above all else, what we turn to for security, what we serve, what shapes our soul and identity, what drives us, gives us meaning, or is the center of our attention. Modern day idols include sports, politics, status, shopping, sex, money, being right or in control. The second commandment begs the question, what idols do you struggle with?

The third commandment, “you shall not take the Lord’s name in vain” is basically concerned with God’s reputation, meaning, it is intended to protect God’s name from being used in any way that brings God or God’s purposes for the world into disrepute. At a minimum it means that we are to avoid using God’s name as if it is of no significance. But it also means that we are to conduct ourselves in both speech and action such that we bring honor to God’s name. God is concerned with the effect the hearing of the Lord’s name will have on people. Will they be drawn to it or repelled by it or remain indifferent to it? If that name has been dishonored by the way in which it has been used by the people of God or by the practices with which it has been associated, then God’s name will not receive the respect it deserves. Instead, we make God’s name known throughout the world positively by our use of God’s name in prayer, praise, service, worship and witness.

Jonathan Sacks, formerly Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom has said that, “When the Greeks and the Romans first encountered Jews, they could not understand Shabbat. They knew the concept of a holy day—every religion has such days. What they had never before encountered was a day made holy by rest, a day of being rather than doing.” That is the essence of the fourth commandment, observe the Sabbath as a holy day, a day that is set apart. At its core, this commandment reminds us that time, like everything else we have, is a gift from God and thus, we are not to live as if all time is our own, to do with as we please. We keep the Sabbath by making space in our lives for worship, but we also keep it by refraining from work in order to rest and renew. This commandment, like all the others, is both a gift from God, reminding us of God’s care for us, and also an expression of our reverence for God. It is intended to be part of the rhythm of our

lives. Sabbath reconnects us to God, honoring God, while at the same time renewing our own souls. I don't believe we have any idea the price we pay for ignoring this commandment. Our bodies, minds, spirits and relationships are all built for Sabbath. We need rest, worship and time to *be*. How intentional are you about practicing this word of life?

Beginning with the fifth law, the Ten Commandments turn from our relationship with God to our relationships with, responsibilities toward, and ethical treatment of others, beginning with our most foundational human relationship, the relationship with our parents. The commandment is open-ended, inviting us to act and respond in any way that honors our fathers and mothers. In all our dealings with them, respect, esteem, having regard and concern for, and showing affection, consideration and appreciation are the order of the day. OT professor and scholar Terence Freitheim notes that "if this commandment were written today, it would no doubt take into account the grave problem of child abuse and lift up parental responsibility toward children." This commandment does not require us to excuse or enable unhealthy or toxic family dynamics, but it does call us to maintain care and concern for those who gave life to us.

The sixth commandment, "thou shalt not kill," has grabbed considerable attention in recent years as the ethics of just war, capital punishment, suicide, euthanasia, physician-assisted death, self-defense and abortion have all appealed to it in one way or another. The basis of the command is that all life belongs to God. The divine intention throughout creation is that no life be taken. Life is not for human beings to do with as we will, because we are not God. Specifically, the law prohibits murder, as opposed to self-defense and war, for which Scripture does make provision. It is important to remember that within the commandments that are negatively stated, there is an implicit command to do the positive. So, this command not only speaks to the sin of acting as if we are God in determining if someone lives or dies, it also commands us to recognize that all of life is sacred. And, of course, Jesus greatly expands this commandment to remind us that an attitude of contempt or disdain towards someone sets us on a path of diminishing the worth of another human being and is therefore, not in keeping with the 6th commandment or his command that we love others.

Like all the commandments that address human relationships, the seventh one, "do not commit adultery" seeks to protect the community by extending covenant faithfulness to include the bonds of marriage. The promises made between two spouses are as binding as those made between God and people. This

commandment has the audacity to insist that issues of sexuality are not a casual matter, that respect, honor and integrity should inform our attitudes and behaviors in *all* our relationships. Ecclesiastes is right—there is nothing new under the sun, and pornography, infidelity, prostitution, open marriage, polygamy, and more were as present in Egypt and the rest of the ancient world as they are today. Israel was called to be different. How could the people of God, who had been the recipients of God’s lavish faithfulness turn around and wound members of the community by being unfaithful? Jesus, of course, presses the issue even further. The attitude of your heart matters, too, not just your physical self-control.

Theft, which is an attack on the dignity of human beings and their work, is prohibited in the eighth commandment, “do not steal.” Central to this law is the understanding that the people of God do not possess property because they have some natural right to do so but only by the grace of God. To steal, then, is to treat with disdain what God has given. The positive side of this commandment is that each person is responsible for the preservation and well-being of the property of their neighbor. In light of Jesus’ call to love neighbor and enemy alike, this law raises profound questions regarding the affluence of modern society. The attachment to things, extravagant life-styles, over-consumption and the mountains of waste generated, all in the face of widespread hunger, poverty and desperate levels of need, reframes the issue of theft. At whose expense is wealth gained? What are we to do about the growing disparity between rich and poor and how do our governmental and corporate structures support, even encourage that disparity?

The ninth commandment calls us to tell the truth about others. It specifically applies to testifying before a judge in legal proceedings. The courts, and more broadly, human society as a whole, require trust. Society works only when we’re honest and not deceitful about others. In a climate in which false accusations, “fake news,” conspiracy theories, half-truths and innuendo are the cultural norm, speaking truthfully and with integrity is the minimum requirement of the people of God. This commandment also calls for us to use speech constructively, to speak of others in such a way that their well-being is enhanced. Sharing an opinion as if it were fact, saying something uncharitable about a co-worker in the breakroom, assuming the worst about someone, then posting it online, spreading gossip—we all need to check ourselves for the impact our speech has on others.

The last commandment shifts focus from the actual deeds prohibited in the earlier commandments, such as adultery or stealing, to the desires that give rise to those deeds. We want what our neighbors have. The challenge today is that our

entire economic system is built on cultivating discontent with what we have and convincing us to want what we do not need. Our economy is fueled by desire and dissatisfaction. “Ours is an age in which the appetite for more and more seems almost impossible to assuage. We find it increasingly difficult to maintain any sense of balance regarding our use of food; gadgets for home, office, or auto; clothing; entertainments done in our behalf as we look on; or recreational goods and equipment.” In order to be a covenant people able to make God’s name known throughout the earth, we must learn to make distinctions between desiring that which is good and beneficial for both people and nature and that which only feeds a hunger for more than we need. Interestingly, covetousness, greed, materialism—they all go back to the first commandment. Who or what do we treat as god? Where do we find our meaning, our purpose, our ultimate end? What is the source of our deepest delight? Jesus addresses it squarely when he says, “Desire first and foremost the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

This final commandment, along with all the others, was given not to deny us happiness but to free us from the things that enslave us. These Ten Words show us the true state of our heart, that slavery to sin is alive and well—and like the Hebrews in Egypt, we’ve gotten so comfortable with our bondage, we don’t even recognize it for what it really is. God wants so, so much more for us than that, hence, the gift of the law. Our obedience to the law is the sign that we want to live with freedom, joy and abundance. Why would we settle for anything less? Amen.