

“Thou Shalt...”

Exodus 20.1–17

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 15 March 2009

They have been glorified by theological conservatives as the basic rules for life. Some have insisted they should be posted in public buildings. And progressives have sometimes ignored them. The Ten Commandments – or Decalogue – are central to the Judeo-Christian tradition, but are they useful?

Here is a sampling of what Christian theologians have said over the ages: Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century wrote: “The precept of the Decalogue contain the very intention of the lawgiver who is God...they admit of no dispensation.” And in the 16th century, Martin Luther said, “No work or anything can be good and pleasing to God, however great and costly in the eyes of the world, unless it is in keeping with the Ten Commandments.”

Sometimes, we shy away from seeing God as a lawgiver and judge, though the biblical record affirms both of those roles. And this portion of the Bible is called the “Sinai Covenant,” getting back to the idea of covenant that we explored last week. But, did God actually etch the Decalogue into tablets of stone with her finger?¹ Or are they a set of rules and a creed of sorts developed by the Moses and the leaders of the Hebrew people in the desert? We will never know the answer, but for the sake of argument, let’s assume that they have some sort of divine inspiration, even if God’s fingerprints are not all over the stone tablets.

According to Jewish tradition, the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, contain a total of 613 commandments. There are 248 positive and 365 negative rules.² Among the Decalogue, only three of the ten commandments are affirmative.

To be honest with you, I don’t tend to preach often on the Ten Commandments, because I think most of what is contained in them is pretty clear to you. But, what if we looked at them from a slightly different point of view? What if we considered the Ten Commandments in the affirmative, instead of the negative? (I owe that basic insight to Rob Voyle, an Episcopal priest in Oregon, who led the Rocky Mountain Conference clergy retreat last month.)

The first commandment is positive: “I am the Lord your God.” But it has a negative rejoinder: “You shall have no other God’s before me.” So, how do we turn that negative statement into a positive expression? Does it seem different to say, “**I am the first and foremost of all you consider sacred.**” Do you remember the passage from Matthew’s gospel that I lifted up two weeks ago: “Seek first the kingdom of God”? Put your relationship with God at the top...ahead of everyone or anything else. It also echoes the sentence in the Plymouth membership covenant: “I give myself unreservedly to God’s service.” To my mind that has more meaning today – and a more positive approach – than “have no Gods before me.”

The next commandment is also negative: “You shall not make for yourself and idol...[or] bow down to them or worship them.” Does that mean I’m not supposed to keep a Zuni fetish on the shelves in my office? Probably not, but let’s turn the commandment positive: “**Worship God, and understand that God’s creation is sacred, and the things that we humans make are unworthy of worship.**” So, even if you really love

¹ see Exodus 31.18

² See W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*. (NY: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), p. 544

your iPod, even if your investments are important to you, even if you have a car or house that affords you status, **worship God.**

“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.” That’s easier for me to understand than, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.” And it pertains mostly to swearing oaths falsely in a covenant or legal situation. But, it’s still negative. So, try this: **“God’s name is sacred; use it only when you really need to call on God.”** I think of it like the little boy who cried “Wolf!” Don’t call me unless you need me.

Finally, we have an affirmative commandment, but it’s one that nobody I know (at least among Christians I know) holds to: **“Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.”** Ironically, it’s one of the commandments that could cure as many ills in our society as any other, yet we aren’t willing to take the day and dedicate it to rest and faith. In my Wednesday email last week, I sent out a link to a wonderful talk by Barbara Brown Taylor, called “Downtime: The Art of Sacred Stopping.” What would your life be like if you took a day off every week and did no work, no shopping, no schlepping kids to soccer games, no cooking, no web surfing? (I’ll bet if I did that I could stop taking blood pressure medication!) It’s an idea that is anathema to our American idea of progress and to the Protestant work ethic.

Here’s another positive commandment: **“Honor your father and your mother.”** (I wish my kids were here this Sunday to hear that!) Your parents may not be perfect, but without them, you wouldn’t be here. So, it doesn’t hurt to show love and respect in your relationship with them.

“You shall not murder.” That definitely counts as negative. But isn’t it obvious for us? So how about extending it by saying, **“You shall affirm life and settle disputes peacefully.”** That’s a taller order than not murdering someone. Imagine what a different world it would be if we had been told that we couldn’t kill at all, even if the killing was legitimized by a nation at war. Imagine a world in which Desmond Tutu’s *ubuntu* theology was the norm – a world where I could face my oppressor and from the depths of my being say, “I am because you are.” Imagine a world dominated by restorative justice and reconciliation, rather than by violent retribution.

“You shall not commit adultery.” That’s another big one. Jesus commented that anyone who looks at someone else with lustful intentions has already committed adultery.³ But, what if the commandment had read, **“Be faithful in all your relationships.”** Fidelity is a lot more than not cheating on your spouse or partner. It involves being truthful and earning the trust of the person you’re closest to. Does it take a lot of work? You bet!

“You shall not steal.” (I should have written that with big, purple marker on my laptop that was lifted from the church last month!) What would it be like if the commandment read, **“Help create a world in which no one needs to steal.”** I guess you could say it’s a utopian ideal, but if we see the incredible abundance of God’s planet and act as stewards of natural and financial resources, sharing what we’ve been given, it may result in fewer prisons. I remember visiting Kilmainham Gaol in Dublin, and hearing about men, women, and children being imprisoned there for stealing bread during the Great Famine, and it makes me ashamed of British jurisprudence.

“You shall not bear false witness” is pretty easy to turn around: **“Tell the truth.”** How much heartache, crime, psychological dis-ease, and political shenanigans could we avoid if we could just be honest? (And it could put Fox News right out of business!) Sometimes it is hard to be honest with ourselves, with others, and with God. But, honesty is

³ Matthew 5.28

what we are called toward. My mother and her mother used to like to quote Sir Walter Scott: “Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive.” And it’s true. It’s usually simpler to just lay out the truth and say it straight.

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house ... wife ... slave ... ox ... donkey ... or anything else.” Since most of us don’t have slaves or donkeys, this may not seem relevant. How many of our children have every complained that other kids have a) better toys, b) nicer vacations, or c) bigger houses than they do? Would I like to replace my eight-year-old Honda Civic? Sure. But, it’s not a priority, though I do sometimes have covetous thoughts about all of your Toyota Priuses. So, perhaps we could say, **“You shall be satisfied with what you have and share generously what you’ve been given.”**

In any of these affirmative revisions of the Decalogue that I’ve suggested, you’ll notice that you never get off easy. In fact, putting them in a constructive tone tends to make things even harder; we don’t just avoid bad behavior – we have to go the extra mile with positive actions. It tends to expand the scope of our responsibility. If you want to get someone else’s take on applying the Ten Commandments, a wise first-century rabbi did that in a famous sermon. You can find it in the fifth chapter of Matthew’s gospel, right after the Beatitudes and being told that you are the light of the world.

It is too easy to say that our faith is about following the rules. It is too simplistic to say that if we all just followed the Ten Commandments, we’d be okay. The Decalogue is just a starting place. Our motivation must be the compassion and wholeness of Christ. “Be whole, therefore, as your heavenly Father is whole.” May the love of God guide us. Amen.