

WHAT PRINCIPLES DO YOU LIVE BY?

Exodus 20: 1-17; Mark 12: 28-34; Romans 13: 8-10.

What principles do you live by? For those of us who call ourselves Christians, the 10 commandments are supposed to be pretty basic. Our principles for living should be based on them somehow. Certainly, that's what I was taught growing up in the church. But did I really understand them? How did I feel about them?

Well before I get to that, let's break them down in terms of their structure. The first group of commandments are all about our relationship with God – You shall have no other gods before me. I am first and I am only. You shall not make for yourself any idols and worship them instead of me or alongside me. You shall not misuse my name which is the same as disrespecting me. And you shall have one day a week that you use to worship me, giving me thanks and acknowledging me for all I've done and keep doing for you.

Then there are the rest of the commandments that have to do with our relationship with others – You must honour and respect your parents. You must never murder anyone which most certainly also means you must never mistreat them or have negative intentions toward them; you must never break faith with your spouse by committing adultery; you must never steal from your neighbour; you must never lie about someone you know or misrepresent them to others; and you must resist wanting what belongs to your neighbour in a way that creates mistrust, envy or resentment with them.

Pretty basic, right? Pretty sensible too. But, when I was growing up, the 10 commandments felt more like a threat than an invitation. "Do this, or else..." Do this or else I will punish you, or else I will take something away from you, or else I will abandon you and you will be in trouble... I will punish not only you but those who belong to you even to the 4th generation after you.... But just in case I was feeling too scared, a promise was given too: if you do keep faith with me I will love you, reward you and rain down all kinds of blessings on you....

The principles may be ok but the motivation for keeping them is troubling. Threats make us fearful. Or by contrast, we obey because we'll get something out of it. God has all the power over us for good or ill one way or the other. Sadly, I don't think I'm the only one who grew up with this negative feeling toward the 10 commandments. I'm not perfect and I have to admit that some of these commandments I've broken more than once. What happens now? Does God abandon me? Does God punish me? Does God reward me if I try harder?

Well, before we figure out some answers, we need to question where all the negativity comes from. You know where it comes from? It comes from a flawed understanding of God. We think of God as one who can do us harm. Or else, if we're good and please God, God can bless us in all kinds of ways. Whether it's our relationships, our finances, our health, our success in life and our happiness, God can make things happen. We can experience it as punishment or reward. God is all powerful and God uses power as a threat or as a reward depending on whether we keep the commandments or break them.

But what if God doesn't have any kind of power to make things happen like that? What if God's only power is the energy to love and the energy to develop, heal and transform our lives and our relationships through love? And what if God's whole passion is not to make us do anything because we're scared or because we want some benefit? What if God's sole passion is to have a relationship with us through which powerful love can change and develop the way we relate, the way we see, the way we think and the way we feel? If God is all-powerful than God can use force and coercion to do what God wants to do. It doesn't matter what we decide.

The problem with the use of power to force anything, however, is that it can't inspire love. If I choose something because I'm afraid, or if I choose something because I'll get something out of it for myself, such choosing has nothing to do with love. Such self-serving choices don't transform my life or my relationships. But worst of all, we project such self-serving choosing onto God and our relationship with God. But the bible describes God and a genuine relationship with God very differently.

There are three basic relationship metaphors used throughout the bible to describe God's will for relationship with us. First there is the parent-child relationship. God is like a parent, a parent who knows better and has some power to determine our lives, so to speak. But like any parent knows, there comes a time when a child grows and develops their own will, their own identity independent of the parent, and their own decision-making. Even if we want them to choose and live a certain way, we know that any use of power to coerce, manipulate or threaten them, or any promise to reward them if they obey will not get us very far if we want an authentic relationship with our children as they grow. We want them to choose from their heart, in freedom, not from some other motive like fear or promise of reward.

The second kind of relationship alluded to in the scriptures is the marriage one. God invited us humans into the kind of relationship where there is special intimacy, mutuality and trust. Imagine if God threatened, manipulated, pressured or promised us love and intimacy only if we did what God wanted us to do? Wouldn't that undermine the marriage relationship right away? How can love grow unless someone is free to be

faithful to me or not. Yes, I am vulnerable to be hurt and betrayed. But without the trust and freedom I give you, I can't trust the love you have for me as being genuine either.

Finally, there is the relationship of friendship. God invites us human beings to a relationship greater than that of a parent and child. As the child grows and becomes their own person, there is the hope of developing the kind of relationship that is more like friendship. Friendship requires loyalty, commitment, love, a willingness to stick it out even when there are differences, disagreements and even conflicts. But imagine if we were afraid of what our friends would do to us or think of us if we were honest or free to say or do what we really felt. Wouldn't that undermine the depth of the friendship? It would. If it doesn't come out of freedom it cannot be love. And without love, is any personal relationship worth much?

So then, imagine this: God has visited the Israelites through Moses, Aaron and Miriam and filled them with faith and hope that they can be free from slavery. The people have developed some trust with God through their leaders and a commitment to make a break for it. They have left slavery behind and even though it's been hard going, they have made it thus far. Now, Moses goes up to the sacred mountain and receives the 10 commandments. These commandments are the basis of the relationship God wants to have with the Israelites. And if they have the right kind of relationship with God, they will develop the right kind of relationships with each other. God's love is what's critical as the substance here, not God's threats if they disobey or promises of reward if they obey.

So then, how do we read and understand the 10 commandments on this foundation, a foundation for a relationship that refuses to use power, threat or manipulation, but chooses instead love as the basis of relationships?

Well, it makes all the sense in the world that if God is going to have a genuine relationship with us human beings, God wants commitment, loyalty, fidelity and Sabbath time to acknowledge and enjoy the relationship. Worshipping other gods undermines our devotion and loyalty to God. Our worship of gods like money, power, self-promotion and narcissistic self-focus oblivious to any other needs, undermines our unique devotion to God. How can we claim to really love God and worship God if we are divided by other loyalties and commitments that don't serve that love?

And misusing God's name is not about swearing. It's about disrespect. If we bad mouth or take for granted our spouse or parent or friend, what does that say about how important or sacred the relationship is? And the Sabbath, is not just about rest or even one day above other days. It's about organizing our lives so that we make space to devote ourselves in prayer, worship, meditation and service as an expression of our faith

and an opportunity to nurture it. How can a relationship of faith be strong if it is not nurtured? We need some space and time for that. We need Sabbath.

Now let's apply the same kind of reflection on our relationships with our parents. Honouring them is not about never being critical, raising questions or holding them accountable especially when there has been mistreatment or negligence. But the principle is that this is a core relationship for us whether we like it or not. We don't choose our parents and how we relate to them will shape who we become as children of God. The same goes with our spouse. Marriage is rarely a relationship without challenges as well as joys, lows as well as highs. And sometimes, difficult decisions have to be made. But adultery is a marriage killer because it stirs up deep hurt, mistrust and self-questioning. If there are issues in a marriage they must be addressed because that's how we respect and love each other, however things turn out.

And then there's our neighbour. Neighbours aren't always the people beside whom we choose to live. But how do we deal with our tensions and conflicts, our envy of them or our desire to judge them? Do we lie and cheat them, abuse them verbally or physically, badmouth them to others around, create a wall of mistrust, resentment and fear because we want what they have and cannot be content otherwise?

The commandments were not given with the idea that every Israelite and all of us would keep them without breaking them again and again. Life is like that for any of us. But we all need standards. We all need ideals. We all need principles by which we choose to live. We all need foundations upon which to build relationships rooted in love, not hate, mistrust, indifference, the use of force, manipulation or passive aggression so that we get our way or gain control over others. By seeking to observe the commandments from our heart, we are also choosing to be purged of all the negative ways love is undermined in our lives and in our world.

God knows how poisoned relationships are in our world – between nations, between peoples and cultures, between religions, between majorities who use their power to oppress or control minorities, within families and among so called friends. The 10 commandments speak of a purity of relationship where love reigns, where people are free to be themselves, broken and flawed, yet desiring to grow and reconcile where possible.

Sometimes we use threats when we're upset or hurt, and sometimes we make promises so that people will do what we want or because we want them to like us. God is depicted in very human ways in the bible. The language of the commandments can easily be interpreted as threatening. But we are also made in God's image and that means we are made for relationships where love is what most deeply defines and fulfills

us. If our world were a place where love ruled rather than force or controlling, manipulating, competitive, self-serving ways, we know this world would be a far more heavenly place.

May we be people who inspire the environment around us upwards, rather than people who pull others downwards. Jesus says it straight – You shall love the Lord your God with all that is in you and all that you have.... and you shall love your neighbour as yourself. The Apostle Paul follows Jesus closely when he says: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” Is such love the standard for your life? Is this your foundation?

Let us pray: Feed us, nurture us, heal us, transform us through your love, O God.... Amen.