

Can you name the Ten Commandments? Recent polls of the American public indicate that while the majority of Americans affirm that the Bible is in some ways the Word of God, only a small percentage could name as many as four of the Ten Commandments. This morning, let's look at this foundation of both the Jewish and Christian faiths as recorded in the twentieth chapter of the Book of Exodus, the first seventeen verses.

Read Exodus 20:1-17

At this point in history, God had just liberated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt with Moses was leading them across the wilderness to the Promised Land. The Israelites had been in slavery for over 400 years, and up to now had been basically told what to do each and every day. Now they were free and a very young nation. They were very inexperienced and immature; like a child, they had no experience in governing themselves. A lot like the Prodigal Son we discussed last week. Thus they needed some fatherly guidance. For them to fulfill their obligation to the covenant that God had made with them, they needed some basic guidelines for daily living. Therefore, God gave them the Ten Commandments. In Hebrew, this is known as the "Ten Words," and is in the format of an ancient treaty.

There's the story of a football coach who began his first practice with his new team by going over the basics of football. He held up a football and told his players: "This is a football." One of the big offensive linemen held up his hand and said: "Coach, you're going too fast!" After the laughter died down, the coach made his point: good players never outgrow their need to review the basics, no matter how experienced, talented, or successful they are.

The same is true for Christians; the Ten Commandments are the basic instructions that God has given us for living in relationship with Him. We never outgrow our need to review these commandments, no matter how religiously sophisticated or spiritually mature we think we are, or how long we have been a Christian. The Ten Commandments are not optional; it's not a multiple choice; you can't choose which ones you will obey. Within these instructions are the things that really matter to God. The Ten Commandments are designed to protect us from any unnecessary harm, and to provide a blueprint for living life as God intended from the beginning. So let's review these basic instructions of the Christian life.

Have you ever noticed that the Ten Commandments are divided into two subsets? The first four commandments deal with our relationship with God – the proper reverence and worship of God:

1. Only worship God – only one God
2. Don't make idols or put anything above God
3. Don't take His name in vain

4. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy

The last six commandments deal with our relationship with each other:

1. Honor your father and mother
2. Don't murder
3. Don't fool around – honor the marriage covenant
4. Don't steal
5. Don't give false testimony – don't lie
6. Don't covet - your desires could cause you to break all the other nine commandments

Thus, the first four commandments focus our vertical relationship with God, while the last six focus on our horizontal relationship with one another. Throughout His ministry, Jesus acknowledged that life is to be lived on a vertical plane as well as a horizontal plane. Have you ever thought about it that way? Our relationship with God affects the way we relate to others. Conversely, the way we relate to each other affects our relationship with God.

By the way, did you know there is an eleventh commandment that we Methodists never follow: "Thou shall not have committee?" Do I hear an "Amen?"

Now let's take a quick, but somewhat detailed look at each of the Ten Commandments starting with the first one on God. This commandment teaches that no deity, real or imagined, is to be a rival to the one true God; who is the only one that matters. We are to put God first in our lives. Our call to worship only Him reminds us that we are not gods, although pride at times may prompt us to think and act that way.

The second commandment deals with the worship of God. Since God has no visible form, any idol intended to resemble Him would be a sinful misrepresentation of Him. Also no other gods are to be worshipped; therefore, making idols of them would be equally sinful. While the people of other nations at that time worshipped objects such as the sun, moon, and stars, the Israelites were to worship only the one true God. This also applies to us today when we tend to put our careers, material possessions, wealth, titles, famous people and even our worship rituals above our relationship with God.

The third commandment concerns God's name. To misuse the name of the Lord is to profane God and His name by using it when taking a false oath. Unfortunately, the irreverent use of God's name has become very common today, and yet it is among the most serious of sins. To degrade God's name is to degrade Him. If we disrespect the name of the Lord, we are telling the world that the Lord does not need to be taken seriously.

When my brothers and I were young, our mother strictly enforced this rule. If she caught us cursing and especially taking the Lord's name in vain, she would wash our mouths out with soap. At Christmas, somebody gave Judy soap on stick, you know like a Popsicle, as a gift; my mother would have loved that and made a lot of use out of it!

The fourth commandment concerns God's day. After six days of creation, God rested. When I was in Grants, there was one man who claimed that I only worked one hour a week and that was on Sunday. The point of this commandment is that there is both a spiritual and physical reason for having a day of rest; it is to be a time of renewal, both spiritual and physical. I once even heard a preacher say that a Sunday afternoon nap was spiritual. So if your wife complains about you taking a little snooze this afternoon, remind her that you are just obeying the commandments.

The fifth commandment transitions us from our responsibilities to God to our relationship with one another. We are to honor our father and mother, our parents. The Hebrew word for "honor" translates "to value" or "to treasure." Thus, we are to treasure our parents. We are to provide respect and care for our aging parents. Of course, this is one commandment we hope our children obey. This is also the only commandment with a promise. One little boy when asked to write down the Ten Commandments put down for the fifth: "Honor thy father and thy mother." I know our sons have humored Judy and me at times, and still do!

A Sunday School teacher was giving a lesson on this commandment and asked: "Does anyone know a commandment that applies to your brothers and sisters?" One little girl raised her hand and said: "Thou shall not kill;" which leads us to the next commandment. Life is precious; it is a gift from God and not to be taken lightly. The Hebrew word for murder always stresses premeditation and deliberateness.

The seventh commandment concerns the family and the sanctity of the marriage vow. Adultery is a sin against God as well as against the offended marriage partner. A theology professor said that about 50 percent of all human misery is caused by violating this commandment. A third grade Sunday School teacher was uneasy about discussing this particular commandment as many of us are. By way of introduction, she asked if anyone in the class could explain what adultery meant. One young man replied: "Adultery is when a kid lies about his age." I wished it was that harmless.

The eighth commandment deals with a person's property; taking what doesn't belong to you. Many people in Albuquerque have a hard time with this when it comes to someone else's car. Have you ever thought that this not only applies to material possessions, but also another's happiness and well-being?

The ninth commandment deals with a person's reputation. This is really important today with the social media that people use. This command applies to both gossip and slander. Gossip is like mud thrown on a clean wall; it may not stick, but it will always leave a dirty mark. At a church in Florida, following a sermon on gossip the closing hymn was "I Love to Tell the Story."

Finally, to covet is to desire with evil intent anything that is not one's own. Covet means don't set your heart on anything that is your neighbor's. It seems that we are never satisfied with what we have and are always wanting what we don't have. We try to keep up with the

Joneses. While the other nine commandments deal with outward actions, this is the only commandment against our thoughts. Wrong desires eventually lead to wrong actions.

On the wall in the Cross Trails Church in Texas, there was a small sign with the Ten Commandments in which all the “shalls” and “shall nots” were delivered with a cowboy twang. Listen to how they put it:

1. Just one God
2. Honor yer Ma and Pa
3. No telling tales or gossipin
4. Git yourself to Sunday meeting
5. Put nothin' before God
6. No foolin' around with another fellow's gal
7. No killin'
8. Watch yer mouth
9. Don't take what ain't yers
10. Don't be hankerin' for yer buddy's stuff

I don't think I could have said it better myself. The basic concepts that God intended are still there and easy to understand. These are moral laws to live by.

In the twelfth chapter of Mark that Bryce/Janet read earlier, the teachers of the Law asked Jesus what was the greatest commandment. Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” And the second commandment is: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus was essentially saying that love for God (that is, obeying the first four Ten Commandments) and the love for neighbor (that is, obeying the last six commandments) constitute the basic teaching of the Old Testament. Jesus summarized the Ten Commandments into two – relationship with God and relationship with each other.

In Exodus 19:5, God tells a young nation that if they obey Him, they will be His treasured possession. This also applies to us today. Instead of worrying or arguing over whether we can post the Ten Commandments in public buildings or schools, we should just follow them. You can post all the rules in the world and they will not be obeyed. Just look at the speed limits on Paseo del Norte or 528 here in Rio Rancho; very few people obey them. Instead of posting the commandments on the walls of public buildings, we need to post them on our hearts as God originally intended. While the Old Testament covenant was with a nation, Jesus brought us a new covenant – a covenant of a personal relationship with God. If we obey and follow Him, we will be His treasured possession.

There was an old church in New England where the Ten Commandments were printed in large letters on the wall behind the pulpit. The people who built the church practiced a religion characterized more by legalism than by grace. They believed in a God who rewarded the obedient and punished the sinners. Some people still view the Ten Commandments this way. They think that God will love us only if we obey God's law. Lacking grace, they have reduced

life to just rules and regulations; the very same thing Jesus preached against during His ministry here on earth.

However, we need to remember that the Ten Commandments are rooted in God's amazing grace. Obedience is a response to, not a pre-condition for God's grace. We do not earn our salvation by following God's commandments. Obedience is not what moves God to save us, but it is our grateful response to God's saving action. The commandments are not ways of earning God's favor and reward. We take these commandments upon ourselves as a joyous response to God's reaching out and embracing us. Obedience for the Christian is always a response of love because God first loved us enough to send His Son to die for us.

In closing I think we need to remember that the Ten Commandments are guidelines that God gave us for living in peace with Him and with each other. Jesus summarized these into two commandments: love God and love your neighbor. Even with this simplicity, we still have problems keeping them because we are human. No matter how hard we try, we will still fall short of being perfect based on these standards. But we must not be discouraged; God does not expect us to be perfect, only obedient. God grades on the cross, not the curve. His love and forgiveness can encompass all our mistakes and failures. Here's the key point to take home: Christians are not perfect, just forgiven. And for that, we can be eternally thankful. Amen