

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Exodus 20:1-18

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on October 8, 2017, the Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.'

Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.' Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

In 37 years of preaching, I have never given a sermon on the Ten Commandments. But they are central to our faith; many of us were exposed to them or even memorized them as children; and they are our Old Testament passage from the lectionary today. So I think it's about time.

I.

First, a bit of background.

It is fair to say that the Ten Commandments are the highest expression of God's will for humanity; and *equally important*, they grow out of God's love and commitment to us as human creatures, as special objects of God's attention and affection. "I am the Lord, *your* God [they begin], who brought *you* out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery..."

Thus the Ten Commandments are the product of a pre-existing relationship. They are not simply rules stuck on a refrigerator magnet or displayed at the entrance to a public park or pool with do's and don'ts of behavior.¹ They are rather an expression of God's love for us and they call forth our love for God.

The Ten Commandments are given to *all* the people of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai surrounded by signs of God's revelation: dense cloud, thunder, lightning, trumpet sound, fire and smoke, shaking of the earth.²

Yet they are spoken directly to *all* the people, unmediated by Moses in their initial giving. The giving of the Ten Commandments is in fact the only occasion in the entire Old Testament in which God *speaks* directly to the people; all other times God speaks through Moses or other prophets and leaders.³

Even though their giving is marked by high drama, the commandments themselves are clear and concise:

You shall have no other gods before me....

You shall not kill...

You shall not steal...

They are not tied to any period in Israel's history, or to any institution, such as synagogue or Temple. They are not, therefore, tied to any period in *our* history. They are *universal*, for all times and places.⁴

Ways of following the commandments and *consequences* for not following them are not specified *within* the commandments *themselves*, leaving each commandment to be heard, studied, interpreted, codified, and lived out in *each* historical period, in *each* human life. They thus present *maximum freedom* and *maximum responsibility* for *each* of us in our *time and place*, as individuals and *communally*.⁵

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume I* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 841.

² Exodus 19:1-9, 16-25.

³ Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 52-53.

⁴ Childs 52.

⁵ Childs 52-54.

Later generations in Israel summed up the commandments this way:

Hear, O Israel:
The Lord our God is one Lord.
You shall love the Lord your God
With all your *heart*,
And with all our *soul*,
And with all your *might*.⁶

Jesus took this summary and added to it a provision from Leviticus: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”⁷

Moses once said of the Ten Commandments:

...what other...nation has a god so near...
And ...statutes and ordinances [so] just...?⁸

God breathes through the Ten Commandments, breathes love, and they are near for us as well.

II.

So let’s go walk through them in the briefest of ways.

...you shall have no other gods before me.

When I heard this commandment as a child, I thought it odd. I hadn’t ever heard of any other gods. I didn’t believe in other gods. I believed in the God I heard about in church and Sunday School. This focus on “other gods” seemed a bit out of place for me.

But then I learned that this commandment does not *deny* the existence of other gods, but calls us to *focus* the God we know.⁹ Other gods – existent or not – don’t matter; the God we know calls us to singularity of focus. “Purity of heart is to will one thing,” said Kierkegaard. “*You shall have no other gods before me.*”

You shall not make for yourself an idol...

I first memorized this as “graven image,” and again, it seemed quite foreign to me. I didn’t do woodworking. I couldn’t even make clay animals out of Play-Doh as a child or a car for Pinewood Derby during my brief foray into Scouts.

But when I learned that “idol” can be translated “image”¹⁰ – graven or not – the commandment came to life for me. You see I am a person of images. I have:

- An image of what it means to be a male
- An image of what it means to be a husband and father, son and brother
- An image of what it means to be a friend.

⁶ Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

⁷ Leviticus 19:8.

⁸ Deuteronomy 4:7-8; Mark 12:30.

⁹ Brueggemann 841.

¹⁰ Brueggemann 842.

My life is filled with images:

- An image of what it means to be a minister, a citizen of the United States, a person who doesn't have to worry "What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we wear?"¹¹

I have images of what it means

- To live near our nation's capital
- To be part of a people free and prosperous
- To be successful
- To be Christian
- To be human.

I still don't put religious trinkets on my shelf or dashboard. I don't engage in religious rituals in my office. But I live by images that define me. And some of them are false, distorted, misshapen. "You shall not make for yourself a false image."

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God....

Like many of you, I first learned this commandment as "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain"¹²; and I knew, like you, that it meant I should not swear, or curse; or, if I did, at least not attach the name of God to my words of invective.

But when I became a minister I began to counsel people, some of whom were women, some of whom had been counseled by other ministers: "Even if your husband abuses you," these other ministers had said, "stay with him, for God will use *you* to save *him*." I also began to notice that when some people were running for public office or endorsing others who were, they would invoke the name of God on with a *certainty* concerning political positions or candidates that seemed to me at least to be open for discussion and reasonable disagreement among people of "good character and principles."¹³

So when years ago I learned that "taking the name of the Lord in vain" could be rightly translated "*misusing* the name of the Lord," I knew I had seen such misuse, by clergy and by politicians, and I was glad this commandment called me to something greater than holding my tongue when a grounder I should have caught rolled under my first basemen's mitt into the outfield.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.

The wording was always the same on this, and I thought it meant that Sunday was set aside for church, which I didn't mind, because I had good experiences in church as a child; it was something we did as a family; and we could still work in the yard or go to movies afterward.

But when I learned that this commandment focuses more on *rest* than worship, it caught my attention in a new way. Rest for a whole day. Not working for *one whole day out of every seven* days because that is what God did at creation. A whole day for *rest*. I've got a ways to go on that one.¹⁴

Honour your father and your mother...

¹¹ Matthew 6:25.

¹² Exodus 20:7 KJV.

¹³ "The Historic Principles of Church Order," Presbyterian Synod of Philadelphia, 1787.

¹⁴ Brueggemann 844-845.

I didn't have trouble with this commandment as a child, but again when I became a pastor I heard people tell me stories of their fathers or mothers or both who did things – terrible things – not worthy of honor.

I was glad to learn the Hebrew root for “honor” is the same as the root for “heavy, weighty, serious.”¹⁵ This commandment can mean “Take your father and your mother seriously,” even if means coming to terms with ways they may not have been worthy of the parental office. It can mean “Take *your experience* of your parents seriously.” It can mean “Take their needs and their situation seriously.” It is a whole new way of thinking about honor.

You shall not murder.

I don't know what to say about this one.

“Murder” is the correct translation, not the more familiar “kill,” for this commandment is about the taking of one life by another, or many lives by another.

I believe I have shared with you before that I came face to face with murder, early in my ministry, when I conducted the wedding of a girl in my senior high youth group right after she graduated from high school. A year later she called me when her husband was missing. A few days later, after his body was found in an adjacent county and it was all over the news, she asked to meet me in my office at night and she confessed – without any sign of remorse – that she had hired his killing and watched a fellow factory worker carry it out. I was 28 years old. I had been a minister all of three years. It shook me, and left me deeply aware of the reality – indeed intractability – of evil.

All of us are still trying to sort out the murders we have seen on a mass scale from Columbine eighteen years ago to Las Vegas six days ago. In addition to the lives they take, these murders kill our souls. They kill our faith. They kill our national spirit. They set us one against another, as if we don't already have plenty to set us one against another. If these murders are to be figured out and stopped, then we must figure them out and stop them. They are in many ways tearing us apart, to say nothing of the lives they take and the families they leave behind. “You shall not murder.”

You shall not commit adultery.

I know that some marriages survive adultery. I know that some people commit it, are forgiven, and never commit it again. I know that some people commit it time and time again. And I know that some people violate marriages that exist in name only.

Marriage has taken many forms in human history. It is relatively recent that *romantic love* and *emotional fulfillment* have become the central purpose and defining characteristic of a good marriage.

No society can thrive in which the most intimate of human relationships does not have at its base *trust, truthfulness, and fidelity*.

If adultery is something you have experienced, forgiven or been forgiven, such forgiveness is an event of grace calling for a response of gratitude. If adultery is something you are feeling yourself drawn toward or into, then I urge you to have the courage to ask – honestly – why? Keep asking until you find and face an answer. You owe that to yourself, your partner, your children if you have them, your faith, your God.

You shall not steal.

¹⁵ Brueggemann 847.

This one is self-evident. But if your stealing is as minor as cheating a bit on your taxes, not returning something that is not yours, then ask yourself why. Shoplifting is a danger sign, at any age, no matter how small the amount stolen. Working for a cause or a company illegal, unjust, rapacious deserves self-scrutiny as well. Ask yourself why.

You shall not bear false witness...

I always took this to mean you shall not lie, and I usually told the truth. Usually. But the setting of this commandment is a courtroom, and part of what God is stressing is the need for an independent judiciary, free and fair trials.¹⁶

You shall not lie. You shall not spread false information. You shall not gossip. And you shall not bear false witness, *especially* in a court of law.

You shall not covet...

All the other commandments are about behavior, action; but this final commandment is about *attitude*. What goes on in our hearts and minds matters.

Perhaps that is why when Jesus talked about the commandments he summarized them:

You shall love the Lord your God
With all your *heart*,
With all you *mind*,
With all your *soul*....

Matters of the heart matter.

III.

You have listened well. I think you deserve a little humor. You may have heard this joke before, but it is pretty decent.

Little boy. In Sunday School. Called upon to recite the catechism he is supposed to have memorized.

Teacher asks: “What is the definition of a lie”?

The boy thinks for a minute: “A lie is an abomination in the eyes of God, and a very present help in trouble.”

Amen.

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¹⁶ Brueggemann 848-849.