

The 10 Commandments

On this third Sunday of Lent we are invited to meditate on the 10 commandments that we just read in Exodus 20. Lent is a perfect time for this kind of reflection because the commandments touch on every aspect of our lives. For example, a mother was once speaking to her three children about the 10 commandments and they were discussing the command to honor one's father and mother. Her youngest boy asked if any of the commandments had to do with how to treat one's brothers and sisters. Without skipping a beat the older brother said, "Yeeah. Thou Shalt Not Kill!"

So yes, the commandments are still quite relevant. And yet the 10 commandments aren't everyone's favorite subject. A woman once spoke up during an adult Sunday School class about the 10 commandments and said, "I don't like them, they sound too bossy!" And maybe in a way, maybe we can all relate to this – we don't really like being told what to do, do we? By way of confession, I will tell you that the minute I sit down in a doctor's office waiting room and see the sign saying, "Do not use your cell phone" I begin to rebel. I start thinking, "Why? Is sending a text message or browsing the web going to hurt someone? I'm looking for some kind of reasons as to why I need to follow that rule. I had an ethics professor once say that humans are so naturally rebellious that if a law was made that stated: "Thou shalt not stack marbles on Tuesdays" that thousands of Americans would then be found stacking marbles on Tuesdays....just 'cause.

Commandments are a lot like laws, but we know that laws are necessary for a functioning society. Laws are meant to create order, protection, safety and health for the people of that society. We may disagree about the laws- right now our country is embroiled in disagreements over gun laws following the tragic shooting and killing of 17 students and staff in a Florida – and yet we can still basically agree that laws are necessary.

The 10 commandments are laws, but they are also a way of life- they deal with every area of our lives – private and public and they even touch on matters of the heart. The 10 commandments are said to have been given to Moses on Mt. Sinai on two tablets – the first tablet or set of commands being focused on our relationship with God and the second set or tablet is focused on our relationship with other people. So let's take a quick look them.

The first commandment is: 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. This command tells us that God actually exists and that God – Jehovah – is the God we are to serve and none other. In other words: believe in God and serve God alone.

The second commandment is: You shall not make for yourself an idol. This is about proper worship as well as a prohibition against the worship of idols. There was a real temptation in ancient times to adopt the worship of the neighboring gods, especially if you felt like God wasn't doing what you thought God ought to be doing for you. Today this commandment is more applicable to the idea of guarding against the temptation to worship the idols of money, possessions, sports, careers, addictions, the self, and maybe even technologies that seem to be increasingly taking all our time, focus, and attention. We're called to be careful about the idols that can creep up in our lives to be sure nothing is being used as a substitute for God and taking the place of God in our lives.

The third commandment is: You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God. This was originally focused on a prohibition against taking oaths in legal disputes by swearing in God's name and making false statements (eg perjury). Even today we are called to make an oath to tell the truth in court with the words "so help me God." But over time the command has come to include things like breaking or delaying vows or promises, or speaking God's name as a curse word.

The fourth commandment is: Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. This law was likely put in place to protect servants from being worked too hard without rest but it also protects all of us from either burning out or becoming workaholics. We are called not only to set aside a day of rest, but to keep it holy – meaning to sanctify a day for things like prayer, worship, and reflection. Imagine if we as a nation actually took one day out of the week to do this- can you imagine the positive impact on our society? Nevertheless, I believe we are still called to observe some kind of sabbath day of rest and reap the spiritual benefits of that.

The fifth commandment is: Honor your father and your mother. This command involves treating parents respectfully and caring for them in their frailty and old age.

The sixth commandment is: You shall not murder. While this is certainly a prohibition against cold blooded murder, over time rabbis came to view this more broadly to encompass things like failing to provide food or shelter to someone in need as well as significantly harming another human being in any way. Recall Jesus' words that we commit murder in our hearts whenever we hate another person.

The seventh commandment is: You shall not commit adultery. This prohibition was meant to protect the covenant of marriage. States like California have the so-called "no fault divorce" but adultery is still the primary reason for divorce in the US and is considered one of the few moral reasons for Christians to get a divorce. Jesus himself stated in Matthew 19 that divorce was permissible in instances of adultery. And so this is a call to faithfulness to one's spouse in order to uphold one's marriage vows.

The eighth commandment is: You shall not steal. This prohibition was meant to cover both people (like kidnapping and slavery) as well as property. While it is a law against theft and robbery it's also viewed as a prohibition against theft by deception or unethical business practices.

The ninth commandment is: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. This is a prohibition against lying and dishonesty but also against harming another person with your words (like defamation, gossip, scoffing and slander). This is extremely important in any community, particularly in places like the church- where we must guard what we say about others carefully.

The tenth commandment is: You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. This isn't about simply wanting to improve your lot in life – this is about sins of the heart –not coveting is about not harboring resentment, envy, jealousy, or lust in our hearts. Jesus seems to echo this commandment when he says, "out of the heart come evil ideas, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are the things that defile a person." What's in our heart matters too.

The bottom line is this: if and when we live life according to these commandments, we will find ourselves in right relationship with God and others. A faith-filled relationship is the key.

But as so often happens in religion, particularly religious institutions, the focus on relationship as given to Moses in the 10 commandments disappeared over time in place of not only empty ritual but big business. By the time of Herod the Great's reign, religion had become big business in the Temple: animals were needed for sacrifice and they were being sold for profit, creating a burden on the poor and on God's people. Hebrew shekels were needed for the payment of the temple tax, so money changers were present and exchanging Roman money for the appropriate Jewish coinage, all the while cheating people on the exchange. The focus and reliance was on the rituals and the "business" side of religion rather than a relationship with God. And that is exactly why Jesus becomes so angry and drives out all the animals and money changers from the Temple, completely stopping the exchange of money and bringing the sacrificial system to a total halt. He was bringing the focus back to faith and relationship with God...which is the real means of salvation. The same basic thing that Jesus rails against here happened in the Church in the 1500's as the Church became focused on ritual and business with the selling of indulgences and all manner of money making schemes- which is why the Reformation was so necessary. We were given reminders from people like Martin Luther that we are saved by grace through faith –bringing us back to the basics: it is the grace filled relationship we have with God that matters – not the institution of business or empty ritual. The church and all religious institutions are always in danger of this error.

Lent is the time to re-examine our relationship with God and with others....to search our hearts and confess where we have gone astray. Using the 10 commandments as a guide is an excellent place to start- this is one of the reasons why we recite the 10 commandments at the beginning of our liturgy in Lent. Why the 10 commandments? Moses was asked that very question and he said, "Do not be afraid, God has come to instill a deep and reverent awe within you and me so that we will not sin." My friends, God loves you and seeks a deep relationship with you. Don't settle for anything less.

Amen.