

THE 10 GUIDELINES?

Lent 3 Year B

Ex. 20:1-17; Ps. 19; 1 Cor. 1:18-25; Jn. 2:13-22

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On a late night talk show, the host interviewed people in the street and asked them questions about the Bible.

“Can you name one of the Ten Commandments?” he asked two young women. One replied, “Freedom of speech?”

The other said, “That’s easy. Ummm. Don’t cheat, don’t smoke, don’t dance and oh yeh, humour thy father and mother”. (I think we probably do that anyway.)

When 1,200 people aged 15-35 were asked, as part of a survey, to name the Ten Commandments, only a few could name more than two. When they were told all the Commandments, the common response was, “No way. Everyone does that. That can’t be one of the Ten Commandments”.

We might have a bit of a laugh at answers like these but the underlying reality is not funny at all. The Ten Commandments are virtually unknown by a vast number of people. No wonder there is so much moral confusion in our society. There was a time when people had a basic set of guidelines to help them make decisions between right and wrong—today these guidelines are unknown. Lack of respect for other people and their property, stealing, murder, abortion, family strife, failure to care for people, adultery are daily occurrences and we hardly blink an eyelid when we hear any of these things. That’s not to mention the total disregard for God and the misuse of his name in our present day society.

How many here today, think that, before they heard the Bible reading from Exodus, this morning, could have actually named all, or even more than a couple, of the 10 Commandments—without looking up your Bible?

There are even some well-meaning people who believe that posting the Ten Commandments in public spaces will help society adhere to them but if clearly posting laws at regular intervals meant compliance...there would be a lot fewer speeding tickets, wouldn’t there?

Like most scripture passages in the Bible, it might help us understand the 10 Commandments if we have a look at them within the context of where and when they

were given. What were the circumstances that led to the Hebrew people being given the 10 Commandments and what was their purpose?

The Ten Commandments were given to the Hebrew people after their cries for freedom were answered and they were heading off, with Moses leading them, from the land of Egypt, into the desert toward the Promised Land. Note verse 2: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

The first thing that’s important for us to note here, is that the 10 Commandments are predicated on the Hebrew people’s relationship with their God—the God who chose them to be his people and who delivered them from out of almost 400 years of slavery to the Egyptian people. The only way to understand the 10 Commandments, then, is to understand them within the context of the people’s relationship with God. It was their relationship with God as their Saviour that forms the foundation upon which the 10 Commandments were given and stand.

The only way to begin to understand them and live by them is to remember that God acted first. This means that every “you shall” or “you shall not” needs to be prefaced with a “therefore” as in “I am the Lord your God,” therefore... you will do this or that, or you will not do this or that.

When we understand the commandments from the standpoint of a loving relationship with the God who rescued people for no other reason than their desperate cries, which prompted merciful action, the commandments can be understood as a gift to be lived rather than a rigid rule to regulate life or a burden we must bear, in order to be accepted. We love God above all else and honour his holy name because God loved us first.

All the rules set down in the 10 Commandments for living with each other depend on how well we live with God, as in “You are my people that I love, therefore... love each other.” Jesus said it best. Love God. Love your neighbour as yourself.

Ok, so how does that relate to us today? Are the 10 Commandments something that we are to follow rigidly or are they, as the pirate Barbossa in the *Pirates of the Caribbean*, speaking of the pirate’s code, ‘*more what you’d call “guidelines” than actual rules.*’ Are we as Christians bound to adhere to them—and if so, how?—or are they merely a set of guidelines for our Christian life?

For us to answer this, the next question we might like to consider is: Why were the Hebrew people given the 10 Commandments? In other words: What was their purpose?

Our tendency is to draw a big divide between Law and Gospel—with Law on one side of the equation as symbolised in the Old Testament by the 10 Commandments and all the other rules and regulations found there, and Gospel on the other side, symbolised in the New Testament by grace, mercy and forgiveness. But what if the Law was actually an act of grace—an act of the Gospel. What if Law is a part of Gospel? What if Law and Gospel are actually on the same side of the coin—on the same side of the divide—and inform each other?

All too often, the Ten Commandments are seen simply as Law—as being God’s way of calling restraint upon our human tendency to sin—to stop us from doing bad things (don’t do this, don’t do that) (don’t talk back to your mother, don’t eat with your mouth open)—or as a theological measuring rod against which we are sure to come up short. As Paul says in his letter to the Romans: *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Rom. 3:23)*. In fact, the word for “sin” in the Greek literally means, “to fall short.”

What if the 10 Commandments were more than this? What if it’s not only “Law,” but also “Gospel?” What if all those “you shall not’s” are really Good news, not only to the Hebrew people, but also to us? What if “You shall not,” is a word of promise as well as a word of command? Could “You shall not,” be both Law and Gospel?

Faced with the surrounding pagan world, the 10 Commandments give a clear indication of how the Hebrew people should live their lives—righteously, justly, and in communion with God and their neighbour. The 10 Commandments stand in sharp contrast to the way the surrounding nations lived. In effect, God is saying, “I am your God who saved you from out of slavery. If you want to be my people, this is the way you should be living your life. The 10 Commandments were to be our response to the God who saves us and therefore is the way we honour and serve God.

But there’s more to it, even, than that. Have you ever noticed that it’s absolutely impossible to keep all the 10 commandments? (Anyone ever noticed that?) Even Jesus stated that to harbour anger towards another is the same as committing murder. So where does that leave us? Why would God set in place a set of commandments that were impossible to follow?

We find the answer to that question in the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament. From the standpoint of Christian faith, the Old Testament informs the New Testament, in that the Old Testament points to the New Testament. It would be impossible with the time we have today to fully unpack that, however, in the context of today's reading from Exodus, we find a very significant aspect of this.

If you understand that the Old testament points to the New Testament, then the 10 Commandments point to the grace, mercy and forgiveness of God as displayed in the birth, life, teaching and death of Jesus Christ.

So, how does a set of rigid commands—the Law, as it were—point to grace, mercy and forgiveness? The meaning of that is found in the fact that it *is* impossible to keep the commandments. It seems like a paradox, but it's in our inability to fully keep the 10 Commandments, that we find the grace of God.

The 10 Commandments were never intended to be a set of rigid rules that if you broke one, you would suffer the wrath of God. The 10 Commandments were always to be our response to the God who saves us from our slavery to sin and death. The fact that we are unable to fulfil them completely, points us to God's saving action—his grace, mercy and forgiveness—through Christ. That, ultimately, is the purpose of the Law—to point us to Christ and the message of the gospel.

Furthermore, Andrew Wall, a church historian at the University of Edinburgh, says that “Church history has always been a battleground for two opposing tendencies . . . (God in Christ) accepts us as we are, on the ground of Christ's work alone (however) Not only does God in Christ take people as they are: he takes them to transform them into what he wants them to be.” (Walls, “The Missionary Movement in Christian Faith, p. 7-8)

To put it another way, “God loves us just the way we are, and loves us too much to let us stay that way.”

The Law is a part of God loving us too much to let us stay the way we are—it's a part of God's efforts to transform us into who and what God wants, and made us, to be. The Law is Good News, for it reminds us that God is the God who leads us out from our slavery to sin and leads us forward into the Promised Land of new life in Christ.

To him be all glory, honour and praise. Amen.