

“Saying Yes to God”

So... today we have the Ten Commandments: God’s Top Ten. They’re touted as the foundation of our morality and our legal system. People say they’re just plain common sense: if everybody would just live by the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule, this world would be a better place. True enough. So let’s recite them together.

Thou shalt... what comes next? Not? Thou shalt not steal? Lie? Cheat? Wear white shoes after Labor Day? Most of us don’t really *know* the Ten Commandments. We revere them; but that’s not the same thing.

Or maybe we don’t revere them. Some folks take the view that religion should not be about rules—kind of a rule with them. Even St. Augustine said, “Love God and do as you please,” although he was hardly opposed to rules. But there are those who see rules as repressive and stifling a true spiritual response to God. Some traditions teach that the highest function of religious law is to help us discover how much we need grace. And critics of religion readily point out that righteousness that comes from keeping rules quickly sours into self-righteousness, producing what Mark Twain called, “good people in the worst sense of the word.”

But most people probably just don’t think about this whole business very much. Religion is for what we can get out of it: a lift for the week, an hour or so of peace now and again, a chance to spend time with people we like in a beautiful place where sometimes we find some guidance for living... but it’s not a place where we want to hear about obligations. Life has too many of those as it is.

The word “commandment” just sounds harsh in a have-it-your-way society. Nevertheless God’s Top Ten have stood the test of time. People still talk about them. But maybe we regard them more as guidelines... suggestions... recommendations... interesting ideas for discussion.

So I think we bring a lot of baggage to the Ten Commandments, whether we remember them or not. And none of that even touches on Charlton Heston or courthouse monuments or capital punishment. Let’s zoom back out to thirty thousand feet and talk about today’s passage in its context.

The Ten Commandments are offered to a community of people who, as Anthony said this week in Bible study, are already redeemed and free. In that sense the Ten Commandments are not a means of earning favor with God: requirements for the Chosen People merit badge. The children of Israel have escaped from Egypt and crossed the Red Sea. They understand themselves to have been delivered by the mighty hand of God.¹

But after the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, they wander in the wilderness for a whole generation—forty years—moaning and groaning and complaining most of the way, often yearning to return to Egypt where, true, they had worked seven days a week; but where at least they got three square meals a day... well OK probably only one decent meal but at least they knew where it was coming from and every once in a while they got meat or leeks or something they really liked. But in the wilderness God feeds them with manna, a strange flaky substance that tastes OK but does not keep overnight. And God provides them with water, but not from a consistent and obvious source like a river or reservoir. It comes from the very rocks of the parched desert. They have been living hand to mouth and day to day, learning their dependence upon God for their daily bread.

As they are preparing to enter the Promised Land they are gathered at Mt. Sinai, the same mountain on which God had first called to Moses via the burning bush. The big issue for them was,

¹ See Psalm 66:6.

How do we relate to a God who is holy, powerful and mysterious? What does it mean to be free? Were they free to do whatever they wanted? That sort of freedom amounts to aimless wandering. They are free now to be a people dedicated to God; and the Ten Commandments are a means of doing that: not of currying favor with God, but of living in response to the graciousness of God.

Anthony also observed this week that the Ten Commandments are not really commandments: only one of them, "Honor your father and your mother" is in imperative form. The others are actually descriptive: descriptive of the way people will live because they are God's people. Because you are God's people, you will put nothing else ahead of God, and so forth. Let's revisit the Ten Commandments in this light. I'm going to change the "shall" language to "will." We're going "open book" from this point on. You might want to follow along.

The first four relate exclusively to our relationship with God, which makes me think that folks who want them posted in courthouses haven't read them. "You will have no other gods before me." We're always tempted to worship other gods: from Baal and Astarte to wealth, prestige and power. God is whatever you let tell you who you are, whatever you think has the power to make your life meaningful and purposeful. It's never bad stuff we put ahead of God; it's the stuff we think is good: family, country, respectability. But the covenant people who are redeemed and free will have no other gods before God.

And they won't dumb God down, reducing God to some sort of image or idol or symbol. They won't bow before an idol of any kind. If you're calling something "awesome," be careful. Redeemed people will reserve holy fear for God. And they will not misuse God's name by attaching it to something that doesn't come from God. When I was a child I thought this was about swearing. But it also pertains to subjugating other people in the name of God or going to war in the name of God or speaking easily and glibly about God's will, particularly with regard to the suffering of others.

Free people will remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy. Slaves work seven days a week. But the children of Israel get a day off. Set that day apart for the love of God. Don't gather in worshipping community only when or simply because you happen to feel like it, but because it is the Sabbath, this is what we do on the Sabbath and it's how we remember who we are.

So all of that so far is about God.

Honor your father and mother. In Sunday School I learned that this was about not talking back when you're told to clean up your room. But it's really about caring for and valuing the elderly. A society can be judged by how it treats the elderly and the poor. Those who don't honor the wisdom of the elderly live in the immediacy of the disposable moment, devoid of perspective. The children of Israel will never survive as God's people in the midst of a new culture without the wisdom of their elders.

God's people will not murder. We argue endlessly over whether societally sanctioned killing is murder. The point is that human life is, in Walter Brueggemann's words, "valuable to God and under God's protective custody."²

You will not commit adultery. Sex and commitment go together. Recreational and indiscriminate coupling demeans individuals and undermines society. But really more than being about sex this is about covenant. Adultery does violence to the most intimate covenant we know.

You will not steal: don't take or claim or consume or pollute what isn't yours. But we do it all the time: from pirating copyrighted material to cheating on our taxes to ruining the environment and the economy that will support future generations. Stealing from our children and grandchildren is stealing.

² Brueggemann, Walter. "Exodus" from *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume I*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, p.850.

You will not bear false witness. Literally this means that you won't lie in a judicial proceeding. Obviously the integrity of the whole judicial process unravels when we accuse others falsely. Some folks think this commandment is mostly about gossip. But I see it all the time in political discourse. We tell shameless lies about the other party and candidates, and everybody does it. They do it because it works and it works because we eat up the garbage they spew out and we even contribute to campaigns that do it because we want the lies we like to be louder than the lies we don't like. A society that is redeemed and free does not utilize the systematic bearing of false witness to grease its political machinery and poison civil discourse.

God's people will not covet: not just because coveting leads to stealing as surely as sex leads to dancing; but because coveting is really a form of idolatry. Covetousness begins with the thought, "if only..." If only I had this or that, then I would be more than I am, then I would be happy, then life would be easy and I would feel complete. That's letting stuff tell us who we are, granting it the power to bestow happiness. There are fewer and fewer unacceptable words in our society. Lewis Black just played the Civic Center. But a dirty word in our consumer-driven world is "enough." What will happen to us if we stop wanting more? Then maybe there could be a chance for everybody to have enough, and for everybody to know: I have enough. I am enough. I am a beloved child of God.

Taken altogether this is a portrait of new life for those who are no longer enslaved to Pharaoh. God comes first, doesn't get reduced to something less than God, doesn't get co-opted into our pettiness and the rhythm of life is shaped around worship and Sabbath. People are respected. We care for and learn from the wisdom of the elderly. We don't kill. We make and keep promises to one another in our most intimate relationships. We don't deprive others of their means to life and dignity. Our judicial and political systems are based on truth-telling. And we know that more stuff of any description will not fill the hole at the center of who we are.

Commandments? Obligations? All of this is offered to Israel as a means of living that says Yes to the God who has freed and redeemed them; saying Yes to God's gift of life and of new life.

Those of us in the Christian community have heard the voice of God also speaking through Jesus, using other words to call us into this same community of love. "This is my body which is broken for you." "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." With the Christian faithful of every time and place, every liturgy and creed, every class and culture, let us gather at the table, saying Yes to God.

Amen

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