

You Have Ten Commandments to Guide You
Series – “Eight Encouraging Words”

Exodus 20:1-17

Sunday – September 22

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I've mentioned before that I grew up in a conservative Norwegian household. We had any number of rules to guide our behavior: *No drinking, no dancing, no card playing (at least not the cards with hearts, diamonds, spades and clubs), no swearing, no working in the fields on Sunday, no hanky-panky before marriage*, and on and on went the rules. Anybody here grow up with something similar? I don't know where all these rules came from – perhaps from the Bible – but as I remember it, we often heard a lot more about the rules than we did about the Ten Commandments.

No doubt, most religions and cultures have their own set of rules. They're used in raising up children in the way they should go. And, as adults, if we're still paying attention to those rules, they can guide and direct us in how to live a holy life.

I have a hunch, though, that the longer we live with certain rules, the more tedious they become. And the more we might start to question them. I know I did as a teenager. Come on, I thought, does the Bible really say “no dancing” or was that because of Elvis Presley and the Beatles? There are plenty of references to dancing in the Bible, and long before Google, I found them. My questioning continued. Does the Bible really say “no drinking”? What about “wine that gladdens the human heart” in Psalm 104. Granted, as a teenager I might have been looking for loopholes, but just as much, I was trying to understand why some of my friends' family rules were so different than mine.

In his day, Jesus bumped up against the rules of Judaism. If you think we Norwegians had a lot of rules, they had 614 of them. For a variety of reasons, Jesus regularly went toe-to-toe with the religious leaders of his day, especially the scribes and Pharisees.

In today's gospel reading, the actions of Jesus' rough and tumble disciples are suddenly on display. Before eating, they were supposed to thoroughly wash their hands, and so to honor the tradition of the elders. They were supposed to wash the food they picked up at the local market. After eating, they were supposed to carefully wash their cups and pots and kettles.

Now, perhaps some of these rules were simply good hygiene, but the religious leaders openly criticized the carelessness of Jesus' disciples. Jesus didn't take it lightly. He called them hypocrites. He even quoted God's words in Isaiah to them: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." In a similar vein, Jesus had run-ins with the scribes and Pharisees over his actions on the Sabbath. Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath? Jesus said "Yes." The religious leaders said "No, you must wait until the following day."

To be clear, Jesus didn't totally dismiss the traditions of his heritage. Nor did he declare that the Mosaic Law was unimportant. Rather, he disagreed with the religious leaders over their interpretation of many of those laws. And he asserted that the law's basic concern was not only about guiding behavior, but about restraining evil. In the middle of a heated exchange, Jesus laid out the basic problem of human beings: evil and defilement come not so much from outside of us, but from inside, from places deep within the human heart.

When hearing stories about Jesus, we need to be careful not to turn him into a radical, anything goes kind of guy. But we also need to remember that Jesus was less concerned about rule-keeping than about the deeper requirement of creating a genuinely humane society. When pressed about it, Jesus summed up our responsibilities this way: *Love God and Love your neighbor.*

Much like Jesus, Martin Luther also took the Ten Commandments beyond a simple list of rules. We're going to read his explanation of the commandments in a few minutes. We'll give extra credit to any of you good Lutherans out there who can answer Luther's explanations from memory. But even if you can't, it's important to remember that these commandments were not simply for children. They were meant for adults too, as a restraint of evil and a guide for our lives.

Recently, we've been hearing of the actions of the Louisiana state legislature. They intend to place the Ten Commandments in the classrooms of all their schools. While there are bound to be legal challenges, maybe some good can come of this. Maybe there can be serious conversations about why they're doing this and to what end. Maybe they'll even get to the point where they realize that they need the Ten Commandments just as much as their children do, and maybe more.

With this in mind, let's take a brief walk through the Ten Commandments – also known as the Decalogue. First off, notice that the setting is Exodus 20

shortly after the exodus from Egypt. First and foremost, these commandments come from the God who brought Israel out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. It is this liberating, emancipatory God who first heard the desperate cries of the slaves and then came down to deliver them.

You shall have no other gods. The Decalogue forbids the worship of idols. We're not necessarily talking about the shiny gods of Egypt. The idols that are most tempting to us probably include all the "isms" of class, race, political party, and nation. Keep in mind, our God is a "jealous" God, who won't allow any such "ism" to claim our loyalty or allegiance, especially in an election year.

Keep the Sabbath holy. The Decalogue points to the Sabbath as a day of rest. But it's meant to be more than a pause in our busy routines. The Sabbath is the culmination of life in God's good creation. Thus, it's a little protest against every ideology that imagines Sabbath rest as only a prelude to more work, or more money, or more power.

Honor your father and your mother. This often gets turned into a pat on the head for good little boys and girls to do what mommy and daddy say. But it's intended to be more than that. It's also about the protection of aging people (and perhaps all vulnerable people) who are non-productive. We must guard against dismissing those who no longer seem worthwhile to us.

You shall not kill, says the Decalogue, or as the NRSV puts it, ***you shall not murder.*** No doubt, human life in God's world is precious. A long time ago, we started making exceptions to this commandment for things like war and self-defense and capital punishment. But the commandment itself makes no such exception. It insists that all human life is precious, including those who are clearly different from us. And yes, this commandment can also be used for the protection of unborn children. This leaves us with the hard work of determining when a fetus is to be reckoned as a "child."

I'll admit, I've had problems with abortion over the years. Then a co-worker of mine shared that she was raped as a teenager and got pregnant. Suddenly, my easy answer about abortion became a lot more complicated than simply insisting that she carry the baby to term.

You shall not steal says the Decalogue. We hear this as a protection of property that is rightfully ours. Don't swipe somebody's cell phone. Don't fudge on your timecard. Don't neglect to pay your bills. But the problem is

often bigger. What about times when businesses refuse to pay a living wage, or insurance companies won't acknowledge preexisting conditions, or when cities won't work on issues of affordable housing.

You shall not bear false witness. I'd like to hear this commandment recited every time someone running for office stands up to give a speech. And on our side of the ledger, in a world of social media, there are plenty of instances in which juicy speculation gets passed along to another as "truth," often without bothering to verify its claim. That is not truth-telling. Truth-telling is meant for the enhancement of our neighbors and of the neighborhood in which we live.

You shall not covet, and thus the Decalogue ends. In a world of plenty, this one seems especially hard. I've had far too many funerals over the years in which brothers and sisters were no longer on speaking terms because of how the estate was divided.

It's not hard to find examples of covetousness, both in the ancient world and today. Nine centuries before Christ, King Ahab really wanted to get his hands on the vineyard of a small farmer named Naboth. It was near the palace. He wanted to use it to plant vegetables. Naboth said no, it was part of his ancestral inheritance. But rather than take no for an answer, Naboth and his wife, Jezebel, hired some scoundrels to bring false charges against Naboth. The small farmer didn't have a chance. He ended up getting stoned to death, and Ahab and Jezebel finally had their hands on his property.

Friends, I encourage you to spend some time with the Ten Commandments. They are meant to guide and direct us in how to live a holy life. They can be turned into a simple list of rules for children, but they're more than that. They're for grown-ups too. They can be a check on evil, especially on the wayward actions that come out of the human heart.

When we break one of the commandments, whether intentionally or not, it behooves us to consider the cost, both to ourselves and to society as a whole. Collectively, the commandments give us a picture of what our liberating God intends for our world. In the end, Jesus says, what's most important comes down to this: *Love God and Love your neighbor.* Amen.