

Sermon, March 3, 2024  
Exodus 20:1-17

### “The Ten Commandments”

In chapter 19, we are told that “...the Lord descended upon Mt. Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the Lord summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.” It is there that Yahweh gave Moses the Ten Commandments to be given to his people. Although they will be followed by many other laws, these ten stands at the heart of all of them.

Now, each of these ten could be the subject of a sermon by themselves, but today I will just offer a comment or two about each.

First, it begins with the statement “I am the Lord **your** God”. Take note of the word “**your**”. Although it is addressed specifically to the Israelites, it also speaks to the connectedness between ourselves and the Lord. It also refers to the fact that at that time and place there were many different gods recognized, even among the Israelites. But the first commandment is “you shall have no other god before me”. Again, place an emphasis on the words “**before me**”. In other words, the Lord is saying that even if it is the case that there are other gods, I am the only one worthy of your worship. Eventually, this will evolve into the idea of monotheism, that there is only one God, in Western religion. Yet, it still speaks to us today. Although we may not believe in a whole array of divine beings, we can make a god out things such as possessions, or money, i.e., things that demand our allegiance, or are a driving force in our lives.

The second commandment is “You shall not make for yourself an idol” - in other translations, “a graven image”. This refers to the wide variety of statues or images of other gods, but the commandment has, unfortunately, been used as an argument against forms of artwork in churches. Many beautiful works of art, for example, were destroyed during the era of the Reformation, but it should not be interpreted as anti-art, but, rather, a prohibition against seeing such works as objects of worship. We can look at Leonardo’s “Last Supper” and appreciate it for its beauty, its symbolic meaning, and the story that it tells without seeing it as something we must worship.

Thirdly, we have, “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God”. Two ways you can look at that. First to use God’s name, or Jesus’ name, as a form of cursing or swearing is obviously disrespectful, and a failure to recognize the sacredness of those who bear those names, but it was also understood as a prohibition against using the name as a form of oath taking, and then not living up to that oath.

Next, we have the command to “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy”. This may be one of the least observed of the ten in today’s culture, or that which is sometimes referred to as a rat race. A time in my childhood when most businesses were closed on Sunday, and a certain silence seemed to fill the air, seems long gone.

The Sabbath was considered a time of rest, not only for humanity, but for animals, the land, and creation. It is considered a time that is “a divinely given means for all creatures to be in tune with the created order of things”.

The commandment to honor father and mother speaks of the importance of inter-family relationships but can also be turned around referring to the honoring of children in a time when child abuse is a grave problem.

You shall not murder - or kill - is perhaps the most controversial of the commandments when thought of in terms of what it refers to. It seems to be pretty, straight forward when it is about the criminal act of murder - but it becomes wide open for debate and controversy when it comes to questions about war, capital punishment, suicide, euthanasia, self-defense, and abortion. For example, thinking about the war between Hamas and Israel, when does self-defense suddenly evolve into genocide?

You shall not commit adultery is obviously a violation of wedding vows and a disruption of all sense of loyalty and fidelity.

Violation of the commandment to not steal not only has to do with the taking of other person’s property, but, also, “an attack on the dignity of other human beings and their work.” The parsonage that I lived in in New York was once burglarized, and the loss of items that had sentimental value was hurtful, but, perhaps, not as much as the sense of the violation of one’s own person.

The original focus of the commandment to not bear false witness had to do with false testimony in legal proceedings, but we must keep in mind that gossip and lying about another person is one more example of robbing another person’s dignity.

The tenth commandment saying you shall not covet is interesting in that it appears to be at the root cause of the other violations. To covet another’s spouse or property can often lead to adultery, the robbery of possessions and personal dignity, and even murder.

Let me conclude with another way of seeing these ten prohibitions. In chapter 22 of the Gospel of Matthew the Pharisees ask Jesus, what is the greatest commandment, to which he replies, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...And the second is like it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”.

If you hold that up alongside the Ten Commandments you can see how the first four commandments reveals ways in which we can love God, and the latter six points to ways in which we should love our neighbor. Those six are also related to how we best love God - that we are loving God when we love our neighbor - and, finally, by observing and honoring all Ten Commandments is a way in which we love ourselves. Amen.

**Let us pray:** Lord our God, ever gracious loving, and kind, we gather this morning to offer our worship, and to give thanksgiving for the many blessings in our lives. We are grateful for your gift of your Son Jesus and seek to live lives faithful to his teaching. May we strive in ways that are pleasing to you, as we open ourselves to the inspiration of your Holy Spirit. We also thank you for your commandments that show us the ways of justice, peace, and love. May we show our love for you through the actions in our lives, particularly through acts of love towards our neighbors, remembering especially our neighbors in need. May we serve you by serving them. Amen.