

“The Ten What??”
Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20
Farmville Baptist Church
October 4, 2020
Tracy Hartman

What do you think of when you hear words like “commandments,” “laws,” “rules,” or “obey?” These words have pretty negative connotations in our culture don’t they? College students, your first thoughts may be, “I was looking forward to being out from under the rules at home when I came to college (but then there was COVID 19 with tons more rules).” The general impression when anyone in the church talks about commandments is often, “Here we go again.....the preacher is going to wag her finger in my face and tell me what I should and shouldn’t be doing.” (Some folks are also thinking, “I can’t wait ‘til we get to ‘Thou Shall Not Murder.’ I may not do so well on the rest of them, but I know I’ve got that one nailed!”) Growing up, when you broke a rule, your mother may have said, “Wait til your father gets home.” And that’s how we tend to think of God when we hear the words “commandments” and “obey” isn’t it - as a cosmic kill joy waiting to zap us when we step out of line.

The good news today is that there is a much more holistic way to look at the Ten Commandments. Dr. Craig Barnes, President of Princeton Theological Seminary suggests that we need to put the commandments in context – and that the proper context is verse 2 of chapter 20 – in fact he calls this verse the key to interpreting all ten commandments. Usually we skim right over this verse, so hear it again now, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” God is a liberating God!!! What if we view the Ten Commandments as God’s way of teaching the Hebrews -- and us -- how to live in that freedom?

The law was never given to tell people how to “measure up” so God would accept them or love them. God’s love is unconditional—then and now. In love God freed the Hebrews and in

love God offers us that same freedom, freedom from the worry, fear, anxiety, greed, addictions and self-sabotaging attitudes that keep us enslaved.

The law was (and is) given to tell us *how to remain free*. God's love frees us to be our best and most authentic selves – it teaches us how to be fully human and to live fully alive. But, we settle for so much less. In our fear and anxiety, we grasp at things that inevitably put us back in bondage. The Ten Commandments are a gift to show us that we can't stay free on our own, but only by walking with God day by day. It is a thrilling journey—not always easy, to be sure—but thrilling nonetheless. So in this context, let's look at the Ten Commandments as signposts of freedom along our journey. As we begin, we need to remember that the law is open-ended – it is responsive to changing situations in life.

The first four commandments deal with our relationship to God. Although our relationship to God is critical, it is more than an end in itself. You see, our way of tending to God determines our way of tending to neighbor and vice versa. It is God who gives us the passionate imagination to reshape human relations in healing, liberating ways. With the giving of the law, God calls Israel to initiate a revolutionary social experiment, one that seeks to see whether non-exploitive modes of social relationship can be sustained in the world. We're still working on this whole concept, aren't we? So what might these revolutionary relationships look like?

The first commandment is –You shall have no other Gods before me. It's a statement of emancipation. Now, Israel can freely and gladly serve YHWH without any distracting compromise. They, and we, don't need to obey this command, but only hear it and trust the good news of triumph and the banishment of all other Gods. You shall love the Lord your God

with all your heart, soul, mind and strength – it's the basis for the freedom that all the others bring us..

Commandment #2 – You shall not make for yourself an idol – perhaps you shall not make for yourself an image is better. Like we talked about last week, we prefer to shape God in our own image don't we, but we cannot locate and domesticate YHWH in a visible, controlled object. The fear is not that Israel will worship a rival God, but that they will distort who YHWH is. Any image that we might create would be static and immobile, deaf and dumb, unfeeling and unthinking. This commandment reminds us all that our God speaks, feels, and acts in might and mysterious ways in nature and history (our God is free)

The third commandment reminds us that being free means that we will not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord. When we utter the name of God, we mobilize the presence and power of God, - and we assume this happens when we pray in Jesus' name don't we? The intent in this commandment is to protect the divine name from being used in ways that bring God or God's purposes for the world into disrepute. This would include anything that harms someone in the name of the Lord. How many times have we heard painful and harmful words from a religious person who speaks in God's name? How many times have we heard TV preachers say that a natural disaster like a hurricane or diseases like COVID or AIDS are the result of what they perceive to be a sin? A central concern for God in Exodus has been that God's name be declared though out all the earth – in positive ways. And God freed the people so that they can be a blessing to the world – not a curse. We are to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

The fourth commandment, and the last one that speaks to our relationship with God, is to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. How does this command help us to live as free people? We

live in a society where we are too often slaves to busyness and business. All week long we often hear that we haven't done enough or that we haven't been quite good enough. In creation, the Sabbath – the day of rest - comes right after the day when God declared us to be very good. The Sabbath reminds us that in God we are enough and that we have been enough. When we honor this command, we honor the rhythm of creation the way God intended it to be. Sabbath is an act of creation keeping. For people who were enslaved then and now, by task masters real and imagined, the freedom to rest is a gift from God.

The last six commandments help us live freely in our relationship to others. The 5th commandment is to honor our father and mother – it is significant to note that in a very patriarchal society, fathers and mothers are to be equally honored. And note that this is an open ended commandment – we are free to respond in any way that honors our parents. Scholars also believe that this commandment is aimed towards adults more than children – in this context, obedience is not at center of what it means to honor.

The 6th commandment, you shall not kill, gives all of us freedom to live our lives free from the fear of someone else taking our life. The word “kill” here means murder but it also means unintentional killing or the execution of a convicted killer. This word is never used for killing in war. The best meaning seems to refer to any act of violence against an individual out of hatred, anger, malice, deceit, or for personal gain, in whatever circumstances and by whatever method, that might result in death, even if killing was not the intention. In taking a human life, we stand in God's stead, and this should be very rare indeed. Again we need to note that this commandment has evolved over time. The rules in Exodus 21:15-17 – cursing or striking our parents and kidnapping are offense that lead to execution, do not hold today. Discerning the divine will remains the central issue here, and it is a constantly evolving process.

The 7th command is that we shall not commit adultery, this command offers us freedom by protecting our families. The same language is used in this passage for idolatry and adultery – and both indicate disloyalty. Disloyalty strikes at the very heart of our relationship to God and to each other. Adultery is a sin against others but also against God – it violates God’s creational intention which links a positive role for sexuality with commitment and loyalty. This commandment reminds us that respect, honor and integrity should inform both our attitude and our behavior.

The commandment not to steal originates in the idea that one’s property was considered an extension of the self in the Ancient Near East, so theft of property was a violation of the person and an attack on their work. God dignifies us by giving us work to do – work from which we should expect to receive some of the fruits. Theft denies this gift and diminishes the humanity of both the thief and victim. Each person is responsible for the preservation and well-being of the property of our neighbors, even if they are our enemy. As we talked about recently, we do not possess property – we are entrusted with property by the grace and stewardship of God. On a larger societal level, the over-indulgence and waste in the first world raise questions of theft amidst widespread hunger and need.

The 9th commandment tells us that we must not bear false witness. Originally this was tied to truthfulness at legal proceedings. Later it was extended to mean any deceptive, slanderous, idle or empty talk about anyone that would undermine their reputation or cast them in a bad light. This commandment exhorts us to tell the truth in all of our dealings. It calls all of us to use speech constructively to speak of others so that their well being is enhanced. Don’t you wish that all politicians and their TV ads followed this command? Don’t you wish everyone else did too?

Finally, we are not to covet. Covet can mean desiring something that belongs to someone else, but also includes the impulses that often lead us to action. It refers to the attitudes of the heart/mind that lead to the misuse of things that are not our own. This commandment frees us to trust God for what we truly need and helps us be grateful for what God has given us. Now this does not mean that we should not hope for and work for things – especially if we have experienced poverty and oppression, but as we noted at earlier, we should do this with an eye towards doing justice and walking humbly with our God.

Friends, in Galatians chapter 5, Paul reminds us, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.” May these 10 sign posts of freedom help this be so for all of us. Amen.