

Psalm 119.1-16

- ¹ Happy are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the Lord.
- ² Happy are those who keep his decrees,
who seek him with their whole heart,
- ³ who also do no wrong,
but walk in his ways.
- ⁴ You have commanded your precepts
to be kept diligently.
- ⁵ O that my ways may be steadfast
in keeping your statutes!
- ⁶ Then I shall not be put to shame,
having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.
- ⁷ I will praise you with an upright heart,
when I learn your righteous ordinances.
- ⁸ I will observe your statutes;
do not utterly forsake me.
- ⁹ How can young people keep their way pure?
By guarding it according to your word.
- ¹⁰ With my whole heart I seek you;
do not let me stray from your commandments.
- ¹¹ I treasure your word in my heart,
so that I may not sin against you.
- ¹² Blessed are you, O Lord;
teach me your statutes.
- ¹³ With my lips I declare
all the ordinances of your mouth.
- ¹⁴ I delight in the way of your decrees
as much as in all riches.
- ¹⁵ I will meditate on your precepts,
and fix my eyes on your ways.
- ¹⁶ I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word.

Exodus 19.1-9, 20.1-21

¹⁹At the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. ²⁰They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. ²¹Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying,

'Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: ⁴You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.'

⁷ So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. ⁸The people all answered as one: 'Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.' Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord. ⁹Then the Lord said to Moses, 'I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after.'

20:1 Then God spoke all these words:

² I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴ You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷ You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸ Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹For six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹² Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

¹³ You shall not murder.

¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵ You shall not steal.

¹⁶ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

17 You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

18 When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, ¹⁹and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.'
²⁰Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.'
²¹Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

Sermon

When I was a kid I was incentivized heavily to memorize key parts of scripture. And by "heavily" I mean "king size candy bars," which really were the gold standard of motivation in my childhood. The Beatitudes, the Fruits of the Spirit, the Books of the Old and New Testaments, the correct order and family trees of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs of Genesis, and, of course, the Ten Commandments. Once, I think it was for the Beatitudes, I remember writing little notes to myself on the pink fabric cover I zipped around my Bible as a sort of cheat. I got my candy bar, but two and a half decades later I still feel guilty about cheating...so I'm not sure it was really worth it.

But I digress.

The Ten Commandments were probably the easiest, because they were so seemingly simple: don't do this or that or the other thing. No stealing, no adultery, no bearing false witness when reciting the Beatitudes in order to get your candy bar... I'm sure a lot of you did the same thing I did: memorize the list, think on it on occasion, move on. Didn't murder today? Great, I can check that box.

But, of course, I wouldn't be spending 11 weeks of preaching and worship time on this list of rules if there weren't a lot more too them. Obviously. So, let's start there.

Today we're just going to do a little flyby, a high level overview. And if you only take two things from this sermon today, what I'd love for you to know is first of all, where the commandments came from, and second, what questions we should be asking.

But first, a little trivia:

Catholics, Lutherans, Jewish communities, and Reformed folks like us all have slightly different numberings. It's true! There's no true list of 10 that everyone agrees on! We all agree on the basic ideas, but we each differ a little in which 2 of the 11 total ideas we squish together into one commandment. If you're curious about the lists, I'll show you later.

And did you know that the Ten Commandments are the only list of laws that is given TWICE in the Bible? They are listed in Exodus 20, which we read this morning, but they are

listed again in Deuteronomy chapter 5, as the people prepare to go into the Promised Land. The commandments are also the only laws given directly to the people by the Lord. When we think of the law, we tend to think of Moses going up on the mountain by himself, talking with God, and then coming down to tell the people what he heard. But, in the case of the Ten Commandments, that's just not true. We heard it in the passage this morning: God comes down the mountain in a thick cloud and speaks the Ten Commandments directly to the people. It's the only time God speaks directly to the nation of Israel in the Hebrew Bible. Also, when the Ten Commandments are written down, they aren't written by Moses, like the other laws, the Ten Commandments are written onto the stone tablets by the finger of God. And when they are stored, the tablets are stored inside the Ark of the Covenant, while all the other laws, written by Moses onto a scroll, are simply set beside the Ark, on the outside. Finally, the Ten Commandments are the first piece of legal material given to the people of Israel, and not only are they the first, they are physically set apart from all the other lists and tables of laws. Through these various pieces of trivia, we come to understand that there is something primary and foundational about the Ten Commandments. These are the rules we were given directly by God, they're highlighted and repeated and placed in the position of primacy, so we know there's something special and different going on here.

Later scholars in the Jewish tradition would spend millennia parsing these 10 commandments into 613 mitzvot or rules, to help with precision in living. Because really, what does it actually mean not to murder? Does that only mean human life? What about animals? And what about war, is it ever just? Or self-defense or involuntary manslaughter? None of the commandments is really as simple as it appears.

And that's where our good buddy John Calvin comes to our Reformed rescue. Calvin loved the commandments, and in fact they were recited by his congregation almost every Sunday for most of his ministry. That was a common practice in churches up until about 150 years ago, when some concern around legalism and morality pushed the commandments out of vogue, theologically. But back to Calvin, he loved the commandments. He preached on them and wrote on them and worked them into the liturgy. He loved them. And one of his major contributions was the introduction of a rubric for contemplating this dusty list of "thou shalt nots."

Calvin said that we should ask two questions of the commandments, the first being somewhat easier than the second. First, he said we should ask: what does this command say we should not do? So, in the case of the final commandment not to covet, we might somewhat easily note that the commandment has a negative force directed toward jealousy and covetousness. We should not look over, see the greener grass, and burn with envy toward the lovely lawn next door. I'm not a lawn person, so that's easy enough.

But Calvin said, that's not enough. He continued by saying our second question should be this: What, then, is the opposite force of the commandment? He put it this way: "We must derive an argument on the other side, in this manner: if it pleases God, the opposite displeases [God]; if this displeases, the opposite pleases [God]; if [God] commands this, [God] forbids the opposite; if [God] forbids this, [God] enjoins the opposite." (Institutes

2.8.8). So, in our example, Calvin would say it's not merely enough not to envy the lawn, but beyond envy, I must seek the opposite, perhaps in this case seeking the wellbeing of my neighbor, their flourishing and life, perhaps even beyond my own?

Or, with another commandment, Calvin would say it's all well and good not to go around committing the casual murder here or there, but beyond that, we must also seek a wholeness and fullness of life for others. And that's a lot harder.

What does the commandment say we must not do? And what, then, does it say we must do?

And in the context of these commandments, I hope this will start to come into focus. The commandments come to the people of Israel right as they are crossing out of Egypt. These take place right toward the end of Exodus. The Hebrew people have been enslaved by the Egyptians for generations, so long that they can barely remember a life before. And now, all of a sudden, here they are, following this weirdo Moses across the dry bottom of the Red Sea and into the desert. A free people. But very quickly the question arises: what are they free for? Who, now, shall they be, if not enslaved people? What is their task, if not building and surviving?

This isn't an ancient question, either. This is a today question in our own country. Here in the United States we are called this year to observe the 400th anniversary of slavery in our nation. When you look at North American history, we have 339 years of slavery, 89 years of segregation policies and Jim Crow laws, and only 65 years where segregation has been illegal in law, but certainly not totally in practice. And all of us, white people and black communities, native tribes and newer immigrant groups all bear the marks of those same questions. It hasn't been very long, not even two full life expectancies, and slavery leaves an indelible mark: who are we all, if not beneficiaries of a system on one side, and enslaved people on the other?

And it is into this question that God answers, directly, with this list of commandments. And this is what I want you to keep close to heart as we discuss these over the autumn. These are not laws that we "ought" to follow in order to be good, moral beings. Instead, these are God's spoken hopes and dreams for the beloved community. God is speaking these ten words as an act of love, an act of definition. Who are we? The people ask. And God replies...not "who are you," but "who am I?" "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;" and because I love you and have chosen you, you my people should live lives reflective of my love. Be kind, love one another, seek life, listen for my words and follow only me. Honor your elders and speak honestly with one another.

We will come to find that these laws are not simply a list of dos and don'ts, but instead a blueprint for community, a call to live faithfully in response...not to the demands of God, but in response to a God who loves and chooses and blesses. These are not laws written for people who are mindless drones, but laws written for people who are grateful, and desire

to live out their gratitude in the words and actions of their lives. What shall we do? What shall we not do? We shall be a free people, set free to live fully as a community beloved by God.