

Tom Coop
Exodus 20:1-17
October 8, 2017

Ten Finger Commandments

Every now and again I hear about a law that's on file somewhere that doesn't make much sense, at least not anymore.

Like, did you know that in many states, no one can carry an ice cream cone in their back pocket.

Or, in Alabama it's illegal to put salt on a railroad track.

In Florida, if an elephant, goat or alligator is left tied to a parking meter, the parking fee has to be paid just as it would for a vehicle.

In Montana, it is illegal to have a sheep in the cab of your truck without a chaperone.

We laugh at these today because they sound so absurd, but when they were written someone thought they were a good idea, and convinced others they were too.

Something was happening that they felt like they had to tell people not to put salt on the railroad tracks in Alabama.

It turns out that if you put salt on the tracks, cows are attracted, and a train that can't stop might derail.

Or, in the case of the ice cream cone in the back pocket, people used to use it to lead a horse they wanted to steal away.

Legislators wrote laws that made sense for the times, and now, decades if not centuries later, no one has thought to take them off the books.

The Bible has some examples like this too. According to Leviticus, you can't wear a piece of clothing made of two fabrics. So corduroy is out.

Or if your child is disrespectful, he can be stoned to death. That would certainly curb the population growth problem.

Or, if you don't have perfect eyesight, you shouldn't enter into the Temple.

We as Christians don't believe in those laws anymore. We know they are from another time and place. But we don't throw out the history of where we've been.

We know that there was a time when these laws, like the one about salt on a railroad track, made sense. And we know that they don't any more.

The Gallup organization regularly conducts polls to determine the religious beliefs and practices of modern Americans.

Despite new attitudes about morality, fluctuations in church membership, higher levels of education, and so on, there have been remarkably few changes in responses in recent years.

The polls generally show that about 95% of us believe in a God of some sort.

People may call God by different names, if indeed they believe that God is callable at all, but they do believe that a God exists.

In reference to our text, over 80% of America believes that the Ten Commandments are still valid for today. Terrific.

But of that 80+%, less than half can name even five of them. If that is true, my friends, the Ten Commandments (or maybe we) are in trouble.

What's even sadder is that in another poll, it revealed that 74% of Americans admit that they will steal from those who won't miss it, and 64% will lie for convenience as long as no one is hurt.

93% of those surveyed said that they alone decide moral issues, basing their decisions on their own experience or whims.

84% say they would break the rules of their own religion. And 81% have violated a law they felt to be inappropriate.

Today we read about how Moses went up on Mt. Sinai and talked to God. And God gave him Ten Commandments, ten laws, to take back to the people.

But we're not just reading about some sort of divine law book with no longer relevant statutes. We're reading about the foundation for a covenant, the foundation for a relationship.

And so God gives us these tablets. And on them are everything we need to love God back.

In the Gospels Jesus sums up the whole of the law this way:

37 And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the great and first commandment.

39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

He was really summing up the Ten Commandments, there. Jesus wasn't a legalistic savior. He was one who lived not to serve legalism, but to serve the law itself.

Because the law itself was there to encourage our love of God, and our love for one another. The law is a servant to the love of God, and our relationship with God – not a dictator of it.

Jesus showed us that was true when he healed the sick on the sabbath. Christ himself, in the eyes of many, broke one of the Ten Commandments.

But he did it in order to save a life. And by doing so he was actually being more true to God's law than those who would have stood by and watched someone suffer.

The law is a useful guide in that it points to a greater grace, but it can only be understood in the context of God's love and will for us.

God's law is given not to scare us into obedience, but to teach us how to live and how to relate to both God and others.

You may have noticed when you've seen some paintings of the Ten Commandments that one tablet has four laws on it and one has six.

I never understood that when I was younger. I've always liked symmetry, and I wondered why not just put five on each.

But when you hear about why they have historically been depicted like that, it actually makes sense.

On the first tablet are four commandments. And these are the commandments that teach us how to relate to God.

Then on the second tablet are six commandments. And these are the commandments that teach us how we, as the people of God, should relate to one another.

Listen to those first four commandments and hear how God wants to be in relationship with us:

Don't have any other gods but me, don't make idols and worship them, don't take my name in vain and, one day a week, save it to be with me.

Some rabbis have compared these commandments as God's marriage proposal to the people of Israel.

This is God asking for us to commit to being God's people, and to promise our faithfulness and that we won't stray and we won't confuse our lust for the fleeting things of this world with what we should truly worship.

This is God asking us to say, "I do" and to be just as madly in love with God as God is with us. That's what that first tablet is about.

And the second tablet is about being so loved by God, that we cannot help but to do right by those whom God also loves.

In other words, those around us who God wants us to respect and to love and to treat not just fairly, but with grace.

This is what God asks: honor your father and mother.

Do not murder.

Do not commit adultery.

Do not steal.

Do not bear false witness.

And, lastly, do not covet.

Ten Commandments. Ten guides along the way. Not from a God who demands our obedience by invoking fear, but from a God who calls us into right relationship with God, and with one another.

They are the standards upon which we should judge all our relationships. They are the cornerstones of the life Christ called us to.

They are not a checklist of do's and don'ts. They are not albatrosses around our necks.

They are a way of life.

You know there has been a great deal of political discussion over whether or not to permit the Ten Commandments to be posted in courtrooms and schools across our nation.

But we need to realize that posting the Ten Commandments is not the main issue.

We who follow God must not just KNOW the Ten Commandments, we must “*post*” them in our hearts ... we must live them.

We must show that God’s laws work by the way we live them out in our day to day lives.

You know, this is the season when families load their cars and take their children off to begin their college careers.

And I imagine that as they carried all those boxes into the dorm and helped them get settled, they reminded their kids certain rules to obey, like:

“Don’t go to parties where there will be drinking or drugs. Be careful who you date. Get plenty of sleep and eat the right foods.

“Be careful of who you lend your car to. Be sure to study hard. Do your best! Find a local church to attend. Pick the right friends to hang with.”

Now did these parents hand down these rules because they wanted to limit their children’s freedom and prevent them from having any fun?

No. Of course not. They gave their children their own ten or twenty or thirty “*COMMANDMENTS*” because they love them and want them to be happy and healthy and safe.

They laid down the law because they wanted to protect them.

Well, in the same way, this parental love was also the motivation for God's giving of His laws. And His love for us is infinitely greater than our love for our own children.

All that being said, understanding that the Ten Commandments as important guides for faithful daily living, still many people cannot remember all ten when asked.

If they weren't on the front of the bulletin, could you?

So, let me give you a way you can remember them, using your ten fingers.

1. **"I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before me."**

Hold up one index finger for the number one. We worship one God.

2. **"You shall not worship idols."**

Idols, false gods, are not only things like statues, but anything in which we place our ultimate trust and allegiance — for example, money, possessions, our job, the internet, etc.

Hold up two fingers. Should we worship more than one God? No, two is too many! One of them must be an idol, and we should not worship it!

3. **"You shall not take the Lord's name in vain."**

Use three fingers to form the letter "W" which stands for "words." Watch your words! God wants us to use his name in loving, caring ways, as we pray and as we talk about him, not in swearing or in anger.

4. **"Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy."**

Hold up four fingers, and fold your thumb under to let it rest. The thumb has the right idea. It's the Sabbath, and the thumb is following the commandment to take a day of rest.

God does not want anyone to overwork or be stressed, so we need a day to rest, to be at peace, and to worship with others.

God also gave us the Sabbath so that working people would not be taken advantage of by their employers (Deut. 5:14)

5. **"Honor your father and your mother."**

Hold up all five fingers on one hand as if you are taking a pledge, to honor your parents. God wants there to be peace and love in all our family relationships.

6. **"You shall not kill."**

Pretend the index finger on your second hand is a gun, shooting at the first five fingers. God's sixth commandment teaches us not to do anything that would hurt another person unfairly.

7. **"You shall not commit adultery."**

Hold one hand out flat. The five fingers and hand becomes the floor of the church. Two fingers on the other hand are the two people to be married, standing in the church, making promises to each other.

This seventh commandment calls for couples to keep the marriage promises they make.

8. **"You shall not steal."**

Hold up four fingers on each hand, for the eighth commandment. If you stretch out your fingers slightly, these become the prison bars, which hold someone who was been arrested for stealing.

Our Presbyterian Church's Study Catechism says "God forbids all theft and robbery, including schemes, tricks, or systems that unjustly take what belongs to someone else." (Question # 112)

9. **"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."**

Hold up all five fingers on one hand and four on the other.

Fold your second thumb under and turn your hand around, so the thumb is hiding.

It is secretly going around telling the other four fingers on that hand lies and rumors about the five fingers on the other hand.

It is "bearing false witness," as it talks behind people's backs, spreading gossip, criticizing others without talking directly to the people involved.

Again, our Study Catechism teaches us "Negative stereotyping is a form of falsehood that invites actions of humiliation, abuse, and violence as forbidden by the commandment against murder." (Question # 115)

10. **"Do not covet what belongs to your neighbor."**

Hold out your hands, palms facing you, and wiggle all ten fingers to show that they've got the "gimmies."

Your fingers are saying, "Gimmie what belongs to my neighbor. I want all those things my neighbor has."

This is not the way God wants us to live.

Well, that's all ten! I hope that together we can remember the Ten Commandments' teachings in the light of Jesus' teaching — that the love of God and neighbor are the two greatest commandments (Mark 12:28-34).

Do that and you shall live!

Amen...