

“The 10 Commandments”
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First Presbyterian Church of Willmar, MN
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Exodus 19-40 (Select Verses)

I’ve been thinking a lot about rules this week. On any given day, we follow all kinds of rules.

Our kids follow classroom rules, playground rules, swimming pool and splash pad rules. And then there are the rules they are expected to follow at home – rules about screen time, chores, or how to treat your siblings. For all the youngsters who think growing up means not having to follow so many rules, let me tell you, you are mistaken.

We follow just as many rules as adults: we follow the rules set by our employers about dress codes and professional conduct; we follow the rules set by our insurance companies about how to have our medical bills covered; we follow the rules we set for ourselves about diet, exercise...screen time; we follow rules about how to schedule appointments, pay bills on time, and keep records for our taxes; we follow rules of etiquette and social behavior; we follow the rules of the road.

While we may chafe at some of the rules we are expected to follow, we know that we follow these rules for the same reasons we set rules for our children – we are trying to preserve some degree of order, and as much safety as possible. We have rules for a reason. Right? Yesterday the lights at the intersection of Willmar Ave and 1st Street were flashing red. It’s a chaotic navigating a major intersection as a 4-way stop when everyone is following the rules. Add Minnesota nice into the mix and it gets even more complicated. Imagine if there were no rules, and drivers drove on whatever side of the road they felt like, and decided not to use blinkers, ever.

I suspect most of us don’t even think about all the rules we follow every day. The rules are so ingrained in us that we just obey them without even thinking. We follow them on instinct, or as a matter of deeply ingrained habit. But we didn’t always know them. We learned those rules – we were taught them – by parents who insisted we write thank you notes and held us accountable for completing our chores and treating others with respect, and by teachers who clearly spelled out expectations and consequences, and by driving instructors who had the patience and courage to ride beside us before we really knew what we were doing.

Most of us are familiar with the 10 Commandments. If we can't name them all, at least get the basic idea: do not murder; do not steal. Those are pretty obvious, and most of us don't have trouble following those rules. It gets a little harder when we get to do not covet what belongs to your neighbor or bear false witness against your neighbor. Those two are almost a national pastime. Jealousy is a way of life for many people and gossip the natural accompaniment to jealousy. It is part of being human that we have trouble following the rules. It's always been that way. But from the beginning of recorded history there has been an understanding that there have to be some kind of rules in order for community to be established and for society to flourish. Even before written laws, there were community norms and expectations that guided behavior.

There were, no doubt, already community norms that the Hebrew people ascribed to before their exodus into the wilderness in search of the land of milk and honey. As slaves in the land of Egypt they were subject to Egypt's rules and the rules established by their masters. They had grown up knowing the norms and expectations placed on a minority people in slavery in an empire. But they were no longer slaves, and they no longer had masters to dictate the pattern of their days. They were a free people, but not yet a nation. They were starting from scratch, figuring out this new way of being in the world. They were God's chosen people, but a people who had been forbidden to openly worship and practice their faith. So, they were figuring out what place the rituals and practices of their faith would take in this community they were building.

The cornerstone of their emerging religious practice had already been laid in the Passover – the blood of the sacrificial lamb painted on their doorframes that they might be spared the angel of death visiting their homes in the final plague. The Passover - when they fled Egypt with unleavened bread because there was no time to allow the bread to rise. The Passover – which they would ritually remember every year by rehearsing the story of God leading them out of bondage into freedom. But they were going to need more than that. God had a vision for this rag-tag group of people and who they could become, and they were going to need some guidance about how to live as God's people in the world. So, God called Moses up to the mountain top for a little one-on-one. And God gave Moses the law that God expected the people to follow. God, the divine parent, established boundaries for God's children. And before Moses even got all the way down the mountain, they were breaking the first and second rule: thou shalt not have any gods before me, and thou shalt not make for yourself an idol. Moses came down to find them dancing around a

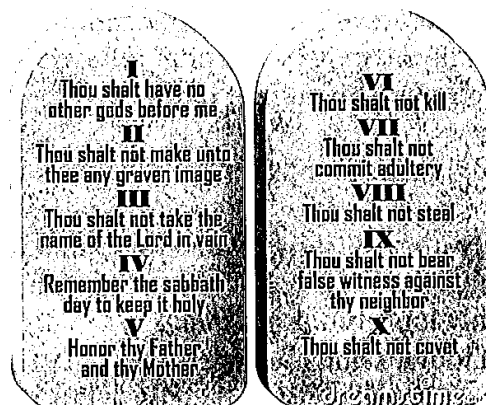
golden calf --- creating for themselves the kind of cultic worship they had witnessed in Egypt. The slaves becoming their masters. Moses, in his frustration, threw down the tablets and broke them. But God was willing to give the people another chance, even if Moses wasn't so sure about it.

And that friends, is how we got the 10 Commandments. God gave them to God's people. We are God's people. They are our rules to follow. And like any other set of rules we follow, they are designed to establish boundaries about how to order our lives and keep us safe. And we are still learning how to follow them. And I think it will help us follow them, if we understand them. To truly understand them, we have to recognize that they are more than a list of rules. If they are just a list of rules we can check off, its easy:

- I didn't murder anyone today.
- I didn't steal anything.
- I didn't cheat on my spouse.
- I went to church on Sunday and I put my offering in the plate.
- I don't own a single golden calf. I just got the cutest little frog planter for my garden, but no golden calves.
- And I certainly haven't been gossiping. Nope, I have not told a single lie about my coworker. Everything I said was true.

So, I think I'm good. Right? But it's not that simple.

The 10 Commandments are not just a list of rules. They are the shape of our lives. They are intended to be who we are with every breath that we take. They are our identity as members of God's family. And if we look at the shape these rules take, we can see that they serve two distinct functions. They define who we are in relationship to God, and they define who we are in relationship to each other.



First, who we are in relationship to God:

1. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me.
2. You shall not make idols.
3. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.

All of these rules are about how to be in relationship with God and how to create space in our lives for God. God comes first in our lives, and to invoke God's name is to invite power into your lives – so use that power wisely. Allow God to be the center around which the rest of your life rotates (like we worship on Sunday to center our selves and set us on the right course for the rest of the week). And honor your father and mother. This seems like a strange commandment to include on the God side of the commandments, but God was teaching the people how to understand this relationship with God, reinforcing that God is not a remote and fickle deity. Rather God desires a close and loving relationship with the God's people, like the close relationship between a parent and a child. In a very real way, God was teaching the people that to honor their earthly parents was to honor their heavenly parent.

The second half of the commandments is about who we are in relationship to each other:

6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet.

These rules all govern how we are to treat our neighbors. And they all make sense. To break any of these rules tears at the fabric of community, violates trust, breeds anger and hatred. And while we may be adept at following the letter of the law, we are not always great at following the intent of the law.

We are really good at looking for loopholes. Like the man who asked Jesus, "who is my neighbor," we ask:

- Is it murder if I only imagine it in my head but don't really do it?
- Is it stealing if I only take what I should have gotten in the first place?
- Is it cheating if I only look, but don't touch?
- It's not actually an idol if I don't actually pray to it, right?

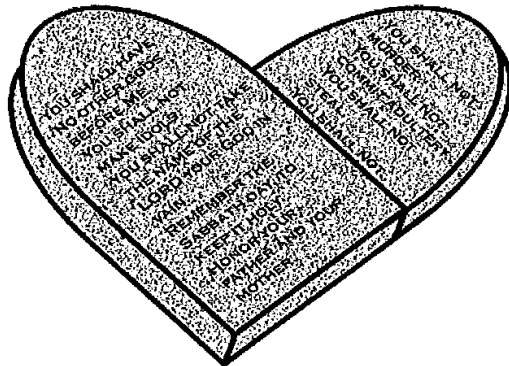
And the answer is, if it damages our relationship with God, or our relationships with other people, we have violated the rules about how God intended our lives to be ordered. In the religious world we call that sin – anything that damages our relationship with God or with each other. But please remember, this is not about following the rules for the rules sake. It is about honoring the norms and expectations that make loving relationships possible. If it is just about the rules, we can spend all kinds of time out of our day seeking the sinners and pointing out to them how they have failed. We can make ourselves feel pretty high and mighty casting shame on another. And it seems to me, that if that is how we spend our time, we are the ones who are violating the intent of the law, pushing others (and God) away, instead of lovingly inviting them into the kind of relationships God intended for us.

If you have any questions about what it means to follow the rules God has set for the family of faith, if you wonder how to keep yourself from violating those rules 10 times before breakfast, consider the words of Jesus to the scholar of the law who was looking for loopholes, trying to find a way around actually having to follow the ridiculously long list of rules. He asked Jesus (Matthew 22:36-40),

³⁶ “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷ Jesus 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 greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.
(1-5)

Love your neighbor as yourself. (6-10)



The rule is love. All 10 of these commandments are about love. The summary of everything that God established to govern our community is love. Love is the standard by which we are measured. Love is what makes it possible for us to be in community with each other. Love for God (first) is what makes it possible for us to love our neighbor – really love them without envy, anger, or pride. Love is the rule. When you leave here today, you will have to navigate a world of rules. But in your life of faith you don't need to remember 100 different rules, or even 10, you need to remember 1: Love. And if love – real, unconditional, godly love is what you are striving to shape your life around, the rest of the rules are a breeze. Because one who loves, does not kill. One who loves, does not envy, or boast, or covet. One who loves God and neighbor helps weave a community of safety and trust.

If you do one thing when you leave here today, I pray that you will live learn to love well. It may take a lifetime of practice to learn to do it well, but I pray that love would become the shape of your life and the shape of the community of God's people, here and around the world.

Alleluia! Amen.