



"Much More than Dos and Don'ts"
Scripture – Deuteronomy 5:6-21
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, October 8, 2023

As soon as we begin to crawl across the family room floor, and before we have the ability to string a few words together in a simple sentence, we discover that life includes rules. Parents establish boundaries by telling us "Thou shalt not (fill in the blank)." What were some of the rules your parents laid down when you were very small? You shall not ____? [Thou shalt not put your wee hand on an electrical outlet or play with a knife or pull the cat's tail].

Parents guide us away from danger and toward good behavior not only with "Thou shalt nots," but also with "Thou shalt." What are some things your parents said you shall do? [Thou shalt eat your food, be nice, and the most critical rule of all: Thou shalt sleep at night! Of course, this is really the flip side of Thou shalt not cause your parents to lose too much sleep or upon the house will descend a vile atmosphere!]

As we grow older, we discover that in addition to rules to live by, there are laws to be obeyed. What are some of the laws we must obey? [stop at a red light, pay your taxes, maintain your property]. However, some people do not believe laws apply to them, so they may learn the consequences for flouting the law.

Today we look at the Ten Commandments and I hope we can move beyond the notion that they are simply a set of rules handed down by a stern, no-nonsense Judge. I hope we can move beyond the idea that a spiritual life can be boiled down to a list of dos and don'ts. Might we recognize the Ten Commandments as a prescription for a beautiful life?

Our initial step is to appreciate the context within which the Ten Commandments were given. When did Moses deliver the Ten Commandments to the Hebrew people? [Soon after they were liberated from slavery in Egypt.]

For years, I had a CliffsNotes version of the Ten Commandments in my mind. In that abbreviated form, the first commandment was: "You shall have no other gods besides me." However, that version leaves out something vital. The statement begins: "I am the Lord your God, *who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*"

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann points out that the word "Egypt" refers to Pharaoh, and Pharaoh is the ruthless ruler who used his power to exploit people. He garnered his wealth and power to commit acts of violence against vulnerable people. The Ten Commandments begin with a declaration that God is behind their *liberation from slavery*.

And now that they are freed from the harsh governance of Pharaoh, they are to live under the good governance of God. Contrasted with the bondage and injustice of Pharaoh are the rules for freedom and justice.¹

As it was for the Hebrew people following the exodus from Egypt, we are never to submit to a corrupt power who believes some lives are more important than others. We are called to follow the One who emancipates us so that we can live in life-affirming ways.

The second commandment is "You shall not make for yourself an idol." None of us will sculpt a statue and worship it. But we certainly have things we are tempted to idolize, don't we? These are things that we spend too much time and energy pursuing and are in danger of overtaking God for our primary allegiance. What are some of the idols that vie for our attention? Who can name one? [wealth, power, prestige, fame] True confession: when I was young football was my idol. Everything else came after football. Is your tennis or golf game more important than coming to church? We need to be alert for the idols that threaten to replace God as our chief focus.

The third commandment is "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God." Or, as the King James Version taught many of us when we were young, "You shall not take the Lord's name in vain."

Whatever word we use for God – Creator, Holy One, Ground of Being, Father, Mother, Lord – is the one from whom all life comes, and the name is not to be taken lightly or thrown around loosely.

There is something that really bothers me. If you have ever watched one of those home makeover shows you have seen a couple who has paid a contractor to redo their kitchen and family room, and when the couple sees the sparkling renovation, most of them blurt out: OMG! God's name is evoked to express their delight at their new kitchen. That is the wrongful use of the name of God, and I'm sure you can think of numerous other examples in which people throw around God's name in a casual fashion.

The fourth commandment is the longest of the commands and, again, if we focus on the CliffsNotes version, we miss something essential. "Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day...you shall not do any work."

This is not a demand for a six-day work week as opposed to a five-day work week, or as some businesses are now experimenting with: a four-day work week. The point of this commandment is a day of rest.

Remember what we said about the first commandment: Pharaoh is no longer the ruler of your life. You are no longer beholden to the one who demands you work until you drop. You are no longer captive to a cultural expectation that your worth is measured by how much you produce.

God the liberator has a new routine to live by. The rhythm of your life is to include a day of rest and renewal. And not just for you, but for everyone. Listen to the command. "The seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord; you shall not do any work – you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your slaves may rest as well as you." Everyone, including the work animals, deserve a day of rest. Pharaoh will run you into the ground and then replace you with someone else. God respects all people and all living creatures and calls on us to incorporate a day of rejuvenation.

Who remembers the fifth commandment? [Parents: this is the one we want our children to learn]. "Honor your father and your mother."

The Hebrew people had been liberated from slavery and were on their way to a new location where they would establish a new community. Now that they were no longer subject to Pharaoh's oppressive rules, what guidelines would they establish to help them create a community in which all people have the chance to thrive?

Can you imagine the nightmare if they broke free from the bonds of Pharaoh only to unravel because they lacked the discipline to govern themselves. To make it work, people had to respect one another. If people do not treat each other with dignity, there will be constant friction and unrest. If people do not learn to respect and obey their own parents, there is no chance they will respect their neighbors or obey the rules of their community.

The following commands are warnings to prevent society from crumbling. "You shall not murder. Neither shall you commit adultery. Neither shall you steal. Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbor. Neither shall you covet your neighbor's wife...Neither shall you desire anything that belongs to your neighbor."

[Pointing to 10 Commandments in our stained glass window above pulpit] Perhaps each week when you come into the sanctuary, you can look up at the Ten Commandments and remind yourself of the critical guidance they provide.

We are living in volatile times. Deep divisions, violence, inequality, prejudice, and lies permeate the land. Our current systems seem to be buckling under the strain.

Pharaoh's way leads to fear, enslavement, exhaustion, and injustice. The Ten Commandments reveal a way that leads to joy, freedom, vitality, and the common good.

Desmond Tutu wrote, "When a clash occurs between the laws of man and the laws of God, for (people of faith) there can be no debate about which we must obey...(We must never forget) the important distinction between what is legal and what is morally right."²

The Ten Commandments stand as an urgent call to change our course. We are to be intrepid believers who are determined to nudge our world away from its current unraveling to a place of human flourishing. The Ten Commandments are not simply a list of do's and don'ts. They are a prescription for how we can get the best out of life. And how life can get the best out of us.

NOTES

1. Walter Brueggemann, "Strategies for Staying Emancipated," *Day1.org*, March 4, 2018.
2. Liz Cooledge Jenkins, "In an Uncertain, Murky Time, God Gives the People a Gift: Ten Laws," *Christiancentury.org*, October 2, 2023.