

Avoiding the Minefields of Life

Over the next few Sundays that we will have together, I would like us to look at some well-known Scriptures, hopefully with fresh eyes. They include today's Ten commandments, the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, Paul's speech to the Athenians in Acts 17, and the great hymn in Philipians chapter 2 which describes Jesus' attitude of humble service. These texts have shaped the Christian religion from the beginning and continue to inform our faith today. By taking another look at them, we may be reengaged by them and discover aspects formerly overlooked but very necessary in this time. We begin today with the Ten Commandments. [SLIDE]

The Ten Commandments are universally known and appreciated throughout the world, well beyond Christian circles. They are found framed on walls in embroidered works next to "God bless our mortgaged home." They are carved into the marbled walls of governmental shrines. They are memorized by millions of children who attend Sunday school. The movie, "The Ten Commandments," by Cecil B. DeMille has introduced many other millions to them who may never have darkened the door of a church. Yet, their origin and purpose are often either overlooked or not considered important. They seem to speak for themselves.

So popular are they that they are found in one form or another in most of the religions of the world. They are even in documents such as the famous Code of Hammurabi, written about 500 years before Moses. The name Hammurabi is found enshrined in the Supreme Court of the United States as one of the influential law creators to which our nation is indebted.

Our familiarity with the Ten Commandments has not led so much to contempt as to misunderstanding. Their origin and purpose remain for most unknown and therefore miss the import of the lessons they teach. They have been reduced to a list of sins to avoid or suffer eternal punishment and continue to perpetuate the notion that God is the cosmic policeman searching out and nabbing sinners. But this overlooks the context in which the commandments were given. [CLICK]

Then God spoke all these words: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;

God announces that a gracious gift is about to be delivered to Israel. The very God who brought Israel out of slavery and is about to bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey, presents to them words of life-giving importance. Words that will ensure that the people of Israel will live happily and be prosperous. Words that if followed in succeeding generations, even down to our own day, will discover the very same rewards.

Most of us have seen depicted in movies about WWII the clearing of mine fields. They are discovered when a soldier unaware steps on a mine and is mortally

Idolatry is not only a sin against God, it is also a sin against humanity. As a sin against God, it is a form of trying to take control of God. When we don't get from God our desires, our way in the world, we fashion idols in ways to promote our

2. [CLICK IDOLATRY]

Kierkegaard, in his book, "Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing", accurately penetrated into the wiles of the human heart. We are a fickle people. His premise is that our highest calling as human beings is to attain a "purity of heart" which is to "will one thing". That one thing is to follow single mindedly the will of God. For Christians, Jesus is understood as one who completely achieved this, and we are to emulate Jesus as best we can. Any other goal that supplants this is to supplant God, thereby breaking this commandment. More precisely, breaking our connection to life itself. To honor this commandment is to always have our priorities in proper order.

We moderns easily pass over *no other gods*. But at the time this commandment was formulated, Israel believed in the existence of other gods. Israel's history can be read as one idolatrous association with the gods of Canaan after another. Jeremiah decried the rampant idolatry in Israel with this challenge: *But where are your gods that you made for yourself? Let them come, if they can save you, in your time of trouble; for you have as many gods as you have towns.* [2:28]

I just alluded to the universal reality of the Ten Commandments found in one form or another throughout the world. They are in themselves seemingly unnecessary to explain. They are self-evident truths. As one wag put it, "I don't need God coming down from a mountain to tell me not to steal." So then, why are they found in our Bible? And for what purpose? The answer to these questions is found in the very first commandment. 1. [CLICK YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME]

The Ten Commandments are a gracious gift, not a burdensome law. To turn them into a life-constricting, joyless burden is to destroy not only the pleasure these words can bring, but to pervert the nature of God's own loving self.

disregarded and unwanted consequences follow.

intended to keep us from harm. And as in the movies, they are often

was killed. **The Ten Commandments are God's white flags of warning that are** someone who either wasn't warned or foolishly went ahead stepped on a mine and detected a white flag was inserted into the ground to warn others away. Often, on the edge of my seat as the soldier assigned to identify the buried mines slowly walks into the field swaying his mine detector back and forth. Once a mine is wounded. These are some of the most tense moments on film. I remember sitting

will over the world, to achieve our goals, to become our own gods. What we don't understand is that we are not God and are incapable of creating the good life.

Since you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely,¹⁶ so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure—the likeness of male or female, ...

Human beings are in the image of God. To make anything else in the image of God is to degrade not only God but humans also as God's sole image on earth. To honor this commandment is a reminder that we are not God.

3. [CHECK TAKING GOD'S NAME IN VAIN]

We are not to trivialize God. A synonym of wrongful use is misappropriation. We are not to think that God does not matter and that somehow we know better. Boiled down this commandment simply was to prevent people from preempting God's will with their own.

The lengths Israel went to to ensure the integrity of God's name included never pronouncing it. For a sinful vessel such as a tongue and God's name are thought to be incompatible. So instead of saying out loud Yahweh, they substituted Adonai (Lord). It seems to me that rather than avoid saying the name, we should be proactive and consider if what we are about to do in invoking God's name is appropriate. We then can either refrain from what we are about to do or go ahead with a clear conscience. To honor this commandment is to always align our life with God's purposes for us.

4. [CHECK REMEMBER THE SABBATH DAY]

This commandment is a direct application of humans being created in the image of God. As God rested on the seventh day, so humans are directed to rest. And not just humans, but even all those whom God placed humans in charge of. **This is to reinforce two things:** Our role as stewards of God's creation and in the application of that role, we are not to abuse those who help us accomplish it. To honor this commandment is to maintain the creation in God's good order.

5. [CHECK HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER]

Here, God's compassion in the commandments is clearly seen. In a time where the elderly, especially widows, were vulnerable, God insists they be cared for. It was given to adults with living parents. This commandment was never intended to keep young children in line. How this impacts the entirety of society will be shown in a bit. To honor this commandment is to keep one's society whole.

6. [CHECK YOU SHALL NOT MURDER]

Obviously, this does not refer to killing, as God instructed Israel to go to war repeatedly in the Old Testament. The Law of Moses also required that a murderer's

life must be taken in recompense for breaking this commandment. Of all these commandments, this one has undergone the most revision since Jesus reinterpreted it in the Sermon on the Mount by instructing us to love our enemies (not kill them). To obey this commandment as understood by Jesus is to honor the integrity of life.

7. [click YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY]

All of Israel's sins could be reduced to one act: unfaithfulness to God. Here God instructs Israel that unfaithfulness should be practiced across the entirety of relationships beginning with one's spouse. To obey this commandment is to live a life dedicated to honoring one's commitments.

8. [click YOU SHALL NOT STEAL]

As with many of the commandments, this one goes well beyond theft. It is to reinforce the integrity of a person's self. That what one has achieved must not be taken from one whether it be possessions, reputation, even family. To obey this commandment is to honor one another.

9. [click YOU SHALL NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS AGAINST YOUR

NEIGHBOR]

This commandment has personal and societal implications. Maintaining personal integrity is vital for an individual. A society cannot survive if its courts cannot be trusted. To break this commandment in person or court is to destroy either. To honor it is to maintain the integrity of each.

10. YOU SHALL NOT COVET

In his book, *The Nine Commandments*, David Noel Freedman suggests that there really is only one commandment, You shall not covet. Why? Because each of the others arise out of covetousness. [Go to next slide]

Last Sunday we heard from a Buddhist prior who said the essential Buddhist teaching is how to overcome the problem of desire. That's another way of saying how to overcome the problem of covetousness. If we can eliminate covetousness in our lives we will never violate any of the other commandments.

I'd like to round out our look at the Ten Commandments by offering an insight into their value from Jesus. [click]

and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" 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.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

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Life is a mine field of any number of opportunities not only to wreck our own lives, but to wreck our society. In the Ten Commandments, God has given us a pathway to avoid these harmful, even deadly options in life. To honor them is to live life abundantly. AMEN

The Ten Commandments

- 1st** I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.
- 2nd** 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.
- 3rd** 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.
- 4th** Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy.
- 5th** Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.
- 6th** You shall not murder.
- 7th** You shall not commit adultery.
- 8th** You shall not steal.
- 9th** You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
- 10th** 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.