

October 8, 2023
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Matthew 22:35-40

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Psalm 19

To the leader. A Psalm of David.

- ¹The heavens are telling the glory of God,
and the firmament^[a] proclaims his handiwork.
- ²Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
- ³There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
- ⁴yet their voice^[b] goes out through all the earth
and their words to the end of the world.
In the heavens^[c] he has set a tent for the sun,
⁵which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
- ⁶Its rising is from the end of the heavens
and its circuit to the end of them,
and nothing is hid from its heat.
- ⁷The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;
- ⁸the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
- ⁹the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.
- ¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey
and drippings of the honeycomb.
- ¹¹Moreover, by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
- ¹²But who can detect one's own errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.
- ¹³Keep back your servant also from the insolent;^[d]
do not let them have dominion over me.
Then I shall be blameless
and innocent of great transgression.
- ¹⁴Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

This is a part of the account of Moses' conversation with God on the mountain. The *stone tablets* which bear these words (or similar ones) do not appear until chapter 31.

20Then God spoke all these words: ²I 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. ⁴You 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. ⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. ⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. ¹³You shall not murder. ¹⁴You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵You shall not steal. ¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷You 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.

¹⁸When 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 [the reverence] of him upon you so that you do not sin."

Matthew 22:35–40

³⁵and one of them [a person among those gathered around Jesus], a lawyer, asked [Jesus] a question to test him. ³⁶"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

SERMON: "Community-Building Commandments"

The 10 Commandments formed the core of numerous laws that were intended to guide the Israelites as they trekked through the wilderness – and on into perpetuity. Most every culture, tribe, or nation has their developed their own particular ways of governing themselves as they seek to create well-ordered and safe communities. Humanity has had a wide range of success and failure in these endeavors. Safety and equality has often not been of greatest concern to leaders.

I noticed that Tuesday this week is specified as Indigenous People's Day. It is intended to be a day on which our Nation celebrates the invaluable contributions and resilience of Indigenous peoples, recognizes their inherent sovereignty, and commits to honoring the Federal Government's trust and treaty obligations to Tribal Nations. Although the United States was formed with a promise of equality and the opportunity to thrive for all people, we have often not done so well in upholding this contract when it comes to the rights and dignity of the Indigenous people who were here long before colonization of the Americas began.

This is particularly concerning given the importance and impact of native forms of governance in the development of the United States. Here is a bit of history from *The Native American Caucus Website*.

"Tribal governments are the oldest governments in existence in the Western Hemisphere. Despite common misperceptions, the United States was not the first government to institute democratic rule and introduce concepts of fair representation, equality, and justice for all. At a time when European governments were

authoritarian and hierarchical, traditional tribal governments were based upon principles of democracy, equality, freedom, and respect.”

Were you aware of just how much American government and political life as we know it today has been drawn from native culture?

“From the very beginning, the founding fathers saw tribal government as something to be admired and emulated. Did you know that the U.S. Constitution is modeled after the oldest constitution in North America — the constitution of the Seven Iroquois Nations? [These nations] called this constitution “The Great Law of Peace” and it governed an alliance of Indian tribes that was four hundred years old when the first settlers arrived.

And did you know that the traditions of Congressional debate are taken from American Indian tribal councils? When *colonists* first arrived, they brought with them the notions of British government where the members of Parliament had to shout each other down to win an argument. [You can still experience this if you’ve ever seen Parliament in action on the news.]

By watching tribal councils, early Americans observed that each representative spoke individually and everyone listened first without interruption. Jefferson and his colleagues adopted this process as a more civilized way to conduct government. Europeans were used to feudal government systems and government based on authoritarian control.” They learned about making decisions by consensus from tribes like the Algonquian, who had group meetings called *caucuses*.

So the colonies, while instituting a new nation, learned from the native peoples and developed new ways of ordering their life together.

When the Hebrew people escaped enslavement in Egypt (long, long ago), they also discovered the need for new ways of ordering their life together. And God, through Moses, provided them with expectations and laws that would honor God and help them to get along with one another. Previously, everything they did was overseen and ordered by their captors. They had to follow Egyptian laws. Now, as a freed people without a permanent home or political system, without laws of their own, they needed guidance to build up their community in faithful, loving, and moral ways. God gave them the gift of ten rules.

The Ten Commandments actually appear several times in the Hebrew Scriptures and there are differences in each rendition. Depending on how the laws are grouped and what’s included, there could be potentially twelve rather than ten commands. When Moses first brings down the stone tablets and discovers his people worshiping a golden calf, he throws down the tablets and they break apart. He literally *breaks the law*. So, he winds up going back up the mountain to ask God for a do-over. I imagine him explaining, “I’m sorry, Lord, but you know what those people are like. I just lost it – but you understand, it was on your behalf, Lord! I know it was a lot of work chiseling all those words into rock, but can we do it again?”

So when Moses gets the new tablets later in Exodus (Exodus 34), the words we read do not give an exact repetition of the first rendition in Exodus 20. Similarly, in Deuteronomy 5, there are differences such as a different rationale for keeping the Sabbath and a different ordering of those things one should not covet. Changes may reflect a gradual development in interpretation and application of the laws or, perhaps they reflect what the writer understood or wanted to emphasize. Leviticus 19 also has many of the ten commandments embedded in its much longer list.

Overall, the commandments deal, first of all, with the God who is in relationship with the community of people and, second, with those things which must be protected and recognized as moral values in order for the community to stand firm . . . to be able to **be** a functioning community in less-than-ideal circumstances

and to be a reflection of God's love for the people. The ten rules keep the people connected to the God who has saved them, they provide a foundation for the flourishing of human communities, and they also distinguish the Hebrew people from other cultural norms of the time. It was a new time that required new ways of being together.

In *Journey to the Common Good*, Walter Brueggemann summarizes the heart of the commandments' teachings: love and trust YHWH, "rather than Pharaoh's security system" (commandments 1-3); embrace sabbath rest as "an alternative to aggressive anxiety" (commandment 4); recognize that "neighbors, all kind of neighbors, are to be respected and protected and not exploited" (commandments 5-9); and "limit . . . acquisitiveness," particularly "predatory practices and aggressive policies that make the little ones vulnerable to the ambitions of the big ones" (commandment 10). The priorities are to honor God and love your neighbor.

Jesus gave his own summary or interpretive lens for all the laws – and not only the laws, but also words of the prophets. Jesus echoes what has already been said: "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." Everything is to be grounded in these two laws. Diana Butler Bass writes in her book *Freeing Jesus* (which the Nurture group is currently reading), that "Jesus does not replace. Jesus reimagines and expands, inviting an alternative and often innovative reading of Jewish tradition . . . as a rabbi, Jesus was remarkable, challenging, and inventive." [p. 41]

There are no punishments connected directly with the Ten Commandments. However, if there were, they would likely involve the death penalty, since that seems to be the primary form of punishment for other laws of that time period – or at the very least, banishment from the community. The *reason* for obeying the laws is out of love for God, and because of God's great love for the people – then and now.

The Ten Commandments or the general principles contained in them are often reflected in other sets of rules that guide us and help us to flourish in community. In the Presbyterian Church (USA) we have *The Book of Order*. And just like the canons of laws in the past, the content evolves and is re-formed to reflect new understandings. Every time the General Assembly meets (every other year), a new version of *The Book of Order* is published. Similarly, our Session receives training and guidelines every year to help us to work together for the good of the whole.

I've probably mentioned this before, but when my children were teenagers, they attended the Youth Club on Wednesday evenings at First Presbyterian Church in Stillwater, MN. There was one rule that governed the behavior for all who were involved. It said, "I will behave as a child of God, and I will treat each person as a beloved child of God." I think it is a good rule for any church community – for both adults and children. Whatever we do or say in the church, we can ask ourselves, "Is this child-of-God-behavior?"

Many of us at some point in our lives were required to memorize the Ten Commandments. But we don't always dig much deeper. We've often made assumptions about what they mean without considering their original purposes.

Through the years humanity has continued to use the Ten Commandments – sometimes well and sometimes to support their own distorted thinking. There is enough material in these ten rules for a whole sermon series, so I won't pick them all apart this morning – unless you want to be here into the evening hours! But I want to point out one example of misuse. The use of the command about honoring your parents has done damage to abused children.

An anonymous interpreter points out that honor is not a synonym for obedience. To expect a child to be unfailingly obedient would be an abusive demand. Secondly, the interpreter says, "the Decalogue is not

addressed to children.” And, “because this commandment is not addressed to children, it should be seen first and foremost as directing people to care for elderly parents.” [*Anonymous source quoted in Patrick Miller, The Ten Commandments (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 168.*]

If the interpretation or use of a law causes harm or is unloving to God’s children who are precious in God’s sight, then it is not in line with God’s intentions. That is true for God’s children of all ages – from 0 to 100+.

Liz Cooledge Jenkins, a writer and minister from Washington State, wrote in a recent *Christian Century* journal about how the Ten Commandments can continue to rehumanize us, as they did for the Hebrew people . . . by encouraging us: to trust in God to provide abundantly, to respect one another, to rest regularly, to be content, and to refuse to kill, steal, cheat or lie. And then she takes us to another level.

Jenkins writes, “Today, God’s laws not only serve as guidelines for holistic, transformative human flourishing, but they also help us discern how to engage with other sorts of authorities.” She refers to the anti-apartheid work of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Tutu wrote in his book *God Is Not a Christian*, “When a clash occurs between the laws of man and the laws of God, then for the Christian there can be no debate or argument about which he must obey. Please let us be mindful of the important distinction between what is legal and what is morally right.” [*quoted in Christian Century, October 2023, p. 25*]

We are faced with making this distinction in small and larger ways throughout life. Like Desmond Tutu, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. also took a very public, faith-based stand **for** humanity and **against** inhumane policies and laws. I know many people who have engaged in non-violent, civil disobedience for the sake of what was morally right – people who stand up to bullies and pharaohs who show no care for humanity.

Jenkins goes on to remind us that the Ten Commandments prioritize two central components: Honor God and love your neighbor. And so, she instructs us, this means “Do not dishonor God’s image in your neighbor. If human-made laws are racist or otherwise unjust, such that they cannot be followed while honoring God’s image in every human being, then they contradict God’s laws and have no claim over a person of faith. In that sense, God’s laws offer a kind of freedom: Earthly laws that contradict our higher law do not contain us. We can resist when we need to. We can struggle together for a better world.” [*Liz Cooledge Jenkins, Christian Century, October 2023, p. 25*]

While this does not necessarily mean you are going to go out and find laws to break, it does mean we have a responsibility to “struggle together for a better world,” as Jenkins put it. And, we can work extra hard to show love to our neighbors when laws and policies create injustice and dishonor to some.

When we strive to live within the spirit of God’s law, we may just start to build new responses and hope. For example, in a world that is often exploitative, we can build generosity. In a world that is oh-so competitive, we can build up community-mindedness and model working together for the common good. In a world that seems always to be rushed and impatient, we offer space to rest – a time of sabbath. In a world where there is a huge disparity in wealth distribution and where those who have plenty keep seeking to have more, we build a culture of people who open their hands and hearts and provide for those who are struggling with not enough.

The laws received by the Israelites were a source of freedom. God gave them the chance to be freed from old restrictive burdens – freed from enslavement and freed to build a community on a foundation of love – Love of God and love for neighbor. We love because God first loved us. May this be the basis for the laws that govern your hearts and your actions. Amen.