

### “Are The Commandments, Suggestions or Something More”

Today we started our service by saying the Ten Commandments. Then we heard the Exodus version of the Ten Commandments read to us. Yet I wonder how many of us consciously keep the Ten Commandments as a basic tenet of our faith. Let me ask all of us some questions for reflection.

The first commandment calls for us to have no other god before YHWH. The commandment does not actually preclude having other gods, but the Lord thy God is to be the primary god. However, even with that qualification how many of us might put ambition, money, possessions, property, fame, sex, drugs, or alcohol before God? Would any of us put some apparent good before God. Goods such as physical fitness, education, altruism, volunteerism, or self-sacrifice before God. We may do things that we think are good, but if we put them before God, we have violated the first of the commandments.

The second commandment forbids graven images. There has been blood spilled over what is a graven image. It is clearly a forbidden image of another god such as the Hebrews created on the base of Mt. Sinai. It could be an attempt to portray God. It could be a statue of a saint or an icon. Graven images could come in more forms than ones we associate with religion. Could the graven image also be money, a politician, a celebrity, a sports team, a car, a house, or any other thing that takes the place of God in our lives?

The prohibition against taking God’s name in vain initially referred to misusing God’s name when testifying at a trial or in a contract. Saying, “As God as my witness...” or “so help me God” and then lying is what the commandment prohibits. (by the way it has nothing to do with using the profanity we are told it prohibits). However, I wonder if our casual use of the word God in daily speech and exclamations also falls under this prohibition? Saying OMG and similar phrases is not the same as taking an oath in God’s name; but our thoughtless use of the name of God could be just as offensive.

Next is the admonition to observe the Sabbath Day and keep it holy. Our society makes it almost impossible to keep the entire day holy. We may worship in the morning, but what of the remainder of our day? Do we rest? Do we allow others to rest? If we go to the movies, sporting events, shopping, or out to eat are we robbing others of their needed rest? Are our economy and our social norms making it impossible for people to live without working seven days a week? While a few businesses will close another day than the Sabbath which allows their employees to get rest, is that good enough?

Honoring your mother and father can be tricky. Does honoring mean that we must bow to their wishes in all things such as career, marital partners, school choices etc.? Does it mean we should care for them in illness and as the age? What about parents who are not loving? There are parents who are physically, emotionally or psychologically abusive. Some parents are manipulative and try to get their children to fulfill their needs instead of focusing on the needs of the children. How do we honor those parents?

The prohibition against murder seems straightforward until we look at what might constitute a murder. Just War Doctrine aside, is killing someone in battle murder? Some people think so and are Conscientious Objectors. Is killing in self-defense murder? Most do not think so, but some do. Our society also has limitations on what is considered appropriate force when defending ourselves. We do not have carte blanche to kill someone unless the threat to ourselves meets a certain standard. What about capital punishment, is that murder? For centuries people did not think so but more and more people in western societies are convinced that it is murder?

What constitutes adultery as stated in the seventh commandment? A simple answer is being in an intimate relationship with someone other than your spouse. But what constitutes an intimate relationship? Is it just a sexual one, or could it also mean a relationship of spiritual or emotional intimacy that degrades the marital relationship? Could it also mean other practices that degrade a marriage such as overwork, over recreation (e.g., golf widows), pornography, video gaming, gambling, alcoholism, etc. These can have the effect of alienating partners from each other just as surely as a physical relationship.

Stealing would also seem to be obvious on the face of it. Taking something that belongs to another person is theft. Could that also mean withholding someone's rightly earned wages knowing they have no recourse to obtain them? Does it include outrageous interest charges that cripple people who have no good option for a fair loan? Does it mean cheating on our income taxes knowing that the money we keep back prevents the government from funding programs for the poor, our national security and may eat into earned benefits such as Social Security, Medicare and veterans' benefits.

Bearing false witness seems a bit legalistic and I expect some people uses that way out. But bearing false witness is more than lying in the witness box in court. One of the most pernicious ways we do this is when we gossip. How much of what we gossip about is known fact? What's more, even if it is a fact, do we not sometimes amp it up to make it more alarming or colorful? Perhaps bullying, doxing, swatting and other internet "pranks" should fall under this prohibition.

Number ten on the list is often modified to put all people under the prohibition against coveting. The original the commandment was clearly focused on a man who might covet another man's wife or another man's possessions. In some ways this is a summation of the other commandments. Lusting after what someone else owns could well lead to stealing, lying, murder and even dishonoring our parents. All cop shows trade on the commandment not to covet and how coveting can lead to these sins. As well as the coveting of someone else's spouse which can lead to adultery.

I ask these questions not to accuse or to say that these commandments are to be looked at so expansively. They are just questions. There are many questions we must ask ourselves if we are serious about The Ten

Commandments. To say that scripture is simple and the meaning obvious is disingenuous at best. Scripture often asks more questions than it answers.

Indeed, the Bible is not so much a rule book, but collection of books that calls us to ponder, think, and pray. God gave us brains and hearts to be discerning. To take what is in scripture and learn to apply it to new situations. It is hard because we want simple answers. Simple answers to complex questions makes our lives easier. But life is neither easy nor simple. God has provided us with commandments and scripture to help us find our way in an increasingly complex and difficult world. We can put blinders on to avoid the challenges or dive into scripture to sort out how God's commandments can lead us forward into a kingdom of God's making instead of a tyranny of our own making.