

“Guilt or Love?”

What is it about the Ten Commandments that makes certain Christians so focused on them? Some Christians are so fixated on the Ten Commandments that they must have them posted in courthouses, schools, town squares, and other public places. Of all the lists of religious laws in the Judeo-Christian scriptures, there is something about the Ten Commandments for some people that makes them the summation of faith, and particularly Christian faith.

One aspect may be that there is an almost universal awareness of the Ten Commandments in our society. References to the Ten Commandments show up in jokes, cartoons, and on greeting cards. Moses bringing the tablets of the commandments down the mountain to a rebellious people leads to jokes about a preference for the Ten Suggestions. Other times, there is the suggestion of an eleventh commandment, whether in jest or in earnest. The famously non-religious New Yorker magazine routinely has cartoons that feature Moses, the Exodus, and the Ten Commandments. They are so well known that one does not have to be a Christian or a Jew to find them humorous.

That said, the Ten Commandments are found in the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible. Christians tend to be more focused on the New Testament or the Good News of Jesus. Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”¹ However, most Christians take the view that Jesus’ teachings either illuminate or supersede the teachings of the Old Testament. That is, if there is a conflict in the teachings, we always follow what Jesus taught. Since that is the practice, why is there so much focus among Christians on the Ten Commandments? Why would we not instead focus our lives on The Beatitudes? If you wonder why I ask this question or how the two might be comparable, let me share some observations that are common among those who study the Bible.

As you may recall from previous sermons and teaching, the writer of Matthew has a particular viewpoint when he writes about Jesus. He wants his readers to see Jesus as the new Moses. Thus, in his telling, he wants us to see the parts of Jesus’ life that are parallel to Moses. For example, in the nativity story, there is the murder of the innocents,² which is parallel to the murder of the infant boys under Pharaoh.³ The Holy Family’s flight into Egypt⁴ parallels Moses’ flight to Midian.⁵ The Holy Family’s return from Egypt⁶ parallels the Exodus of the Hebrews that Moses led. These are just in the Nativity narrative.

So, when Jesus ascends the mountain at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount,⁷ we are supposed to see the parallel with Moses, who climbed Mt. Sinai to meet with God.⁸ Jesus gives the Beatitudes from a mount parallel to Moses receiving

¹ Matthew 5:17 NRSVUE

² Matthew 2:16-18

³ Exodus 1:15-18

⁴ Matthew 2:13-18

⁵ Exodus 2:11-25

⁶ Matthew 2:20-23

⁷ Mathew 5:1

⁸ Exodus 9:3

the Ten Commandments, which are given to the people. If you are aware of what Mathew is doing, this parallel cannot be any more obvious. The two lists are not a perfect match in number, as there are nine blessings in Jesus' Beatitudes. If that disqualifies the comparison for someone, they are straining gnats.

Given that Matthew wants us to see Jesus giving a set of blessings that somehow relate to the Ten Commandments, let us compare the two lists and see what we find. Turn to page 350 in the red prayer book to see the Decalogue. As you look down the list of commandments, what do you see as common among eight of them? Or another way to look at it, what are different about commandments four and five? They are not prohibitions. The other eight begin with or contain the words "You shall not." Except for honoring the sabbath and our parents, the other eight tell us that there is something that God is commanding us not to do.

How does that compare with other parts of our lives? [listen for parental rules, laws, rules of order, doctors' rules, rules for healthy eating...]. It seems to me that we start our lives hearing about things that we should not do. Do not touch the stove, do not put a fork in an electric socket, do not cross the road without a parent, and so forth. I think that is why children start asking the question, "Why," early on. They are tired of hearing rules without explanations. Adults give children rules for their safety. However, as children's brains develop, they seek to know the why behind the rule. [Or they just want to be irritating. You pick.]

Even as we grow and our cognitive abilities increase, we have already become programmed for prohibitions. When we make rules for ourselves and our society, those rules often focus on what we should not do. Once in a while, we have rules that command us to do something, but even those have a negative aspect to them. You'd better do this or else. Seldom are they suggestions, just as the Ten Commandments are not suggestions.

Now look at the Beatitudes in your bulletin. How are they different from the Commandments? [listen for blessings not rules, blessings that involve diverse kinds of people, not rules for life, not commanding to be one way but acknowledging how people are by nature...]. Jesus' list is not one of don'ts with a few does. His list of blessings. Those blessings are on traits that we might naturally possess. No matter what righteous thing comes naturally to you, Jesus is blessing you for it.

Which list would you rather see posted in a school, library, courthouse, and other public places? A list of dos and don'ts that most people cannot keep in their entirety or a list of blessings in which almost everyone can find their place in? Let's vote. [ask for a raising of hands and continue] Those that want the commandments instead of blessings, what is it that makes the commandments preferable for you? [listen for tried and true, humans need rules, too many bad people ...]. OK. Now those who prefer blessings, what makes them a better choice for you? [positive, not guilt focused, hopeful, Jesus' words,...].

Jesus gave us The Beatitudes, not to replace the Ten Commandments, he makes that clear. But he gives them as a counterpoint to the rules-based aspect of the Commandments. Jesus wants us to feel loved for who we are. He wants us to find ourselves welcome into God's kingdom, not as a terrible person who can only make it into the kingdom because God is infinitely forgiving. He wants us to feel that we have

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worth in who we are. He wants us to know that the gifts God has given us are worthwhile and we should use them. That is why we are here. No gift is worthless, and no person is worthless. If we use the gifts we have been given, our lives have meaning, and the love we receive is the love we are worthy of.

Do not despair. God blesses you just as you are. If you feel reviled and outcast, take heart, Jesus sees and loves you. In the dark night of your soul, what you see as a faint light is the beacon of God's love for you in Jesus Christ. It is the light that is shining to guide you on your way home. It may be a long and tough journey, but at the end of the journey is love.

Like the monks walking for peace. Like those praying for forbearance and restraint. Like those seeking justice for the outcast. They are doing it because they believe in hope, justice, blessings, and the belief that there is something more than the material world. Our trust in God and our hope in God, no matter how you define God, is worth risking everything for, because who we were made to be and the love that we share with others will be blessed. And as God told Abraham, we are blessed and are to be a blessing. May each of us be a blessing all the days of our lives.