

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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Exodus 20:1–17

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

O God, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Give us grace to receive your truth in faith and love, and strength to follow on the path you set before us; through Jesus Christ, Amen.

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; you shall have no other gods before me. 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. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. 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. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

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

About 15 years ago, a survey was done in the United States about religion in Americaⁱ, and it specifically asked questions about the Ten Commandments. But it also asked some other questions as well. According to this survey, 74% of Americans can name all three Stooges (say it with me, Larry, Curly, & Moe). 35% of Americans could name all six kids from the Brady Bunch. (Marsha, Jan, Cindy, Greg, Peter, Bobby). 25% of Americans could name the seven ingredients of the McDonald's Big Mac (two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions, sesame seed bun). Only 14% of Americans surveyed could accurately name all Ten Commandments. Although 78% of Americans surveyed were in favor of public display of the Ten Commandments.

A more recent study found more than 90 percent of respondents indicated that the commandments about murder, stealing, and lying are important principles to live by, but only 49 percent said that it was necessary to "keep the Sabbath Day holy."ⁱⁱ

Isn't interesting that the majority of people think the Commandments should be displayed, but that only a small percentage can name all of them? Or that almost half think that the commandment to "keep the Sabbath Day holy," is optional? Maybe for a consumer driven capitalistic society, that shouldn't be a surprise. Maybe we like the idea of the commandments because we think we should, or that, in general,

they seem like a good thing, but in reality, they don't hold much sway over our lives?

I want to take a minute or two and let you all have some conversation. If you are worshipping on-line and you have others worshipping with you in your location, feel free to engage in conversation, if you don't, feel free to journal on your own or to drop a comment on whatever platform you are on. For those of you here in the sanctuary, turn to one or two other people and spend a moment with these questions.

- Why do the commandments matter?
- How can we know if we are keeping the commandments?

I do think the Commandments matter. I think they can help shape us as a community of faith. As I mentioned several months ago, there are bills introduced every year in various state governments to display the Ten Commandments in some way publicly. Many of these bills are written to display the Ten Commandments in public elementary, middle, and high schools. While some of these bills have been passed, most are struck down later. Often, the proponents of these bills state that displaying the Ten Commandments is not a religious statement, but that it is for a more general moral purpose and guide. I think this argument is disingenuous at best. I don't think that it is possible to separate the Commandments from their context.

As one pastor says, nineteen comes before twenty. That is, the nineteenth chapter of Exodus comes before the twentieth chapter where we hear the Ten Commandments. "Nineteen comes before Twenty.' The point is that the relationship God establishes with the chosen people *comes first*, it is literally primary. The law, with its ethical demands on our behavior, *comes second*, it is literally secondary. In Exodus 19 God says, 'I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you

obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples ... you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation' (19:3b-6a).”ⁱⁱⁱ

The words of Exodus 20 are spoken into a context where God has already been in relationship with the people for generations. This is the God of Noah. This is the God of Abraham and Sarah. This is the God of Isaac and Jacob. This is a God of covenant.

Even in the introduction in chapter 20 we get context. The very first sentence reads, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” One commentator says, “The Ten Commandments are not a law code, a body of laws that are meant to float free of their narrative context. This introductory line about redemption, often omitted from printed versions of the Ten Commandments, unfortunately, is recognized in Judaism as the first word; “you shall have no other gods before me” is the second word.”² You cannot separate the content from the context.

The Ten Commandments aren't moral abstractions, says author Chris Hedges. In his book *Losing Moses On The Freeway; The 10 Commandments In America*, he writes, “There is nothing abstract about the commandments to those who know the sting of their violation or have neglected their call.”

“The commandments, says Hedges, frame the most important questions we can ask, like the mystery of good and evil, the meaning of living in community, the nature of integrity, the meaning of fidelity, or the necessity of honesty. In honoring the commandments, we embrace the sanctity of life, the power of love, and their function to bind us together in life-affirming community.”^{iv}

And maybe that is why I balk at some who want to display the Ten Commandments in public, even though I think they matter. I worry that the reason is to impose a personal morality and force a particular rule-based Christianity on people, and I think that misses the point of the commandments. The Ten Commandments are not some set of rules that we must follow in order to get to heaven or attain God's love. They are about relationship with God and with others.

While the Ten Commandments are personal, unlike most places in scripture, the pronoun "you" that is addressed in the Ten Commandments is singular, the concern of the Commandments is not a private morality or welfare. While they are addressed to the individual the "focus of the commandments is vocational, to serve the life and health of the community, to which end the individual plays an important role. The first commandment lays a claim: How you think about God will deeply affect how you think about and act toward your neighbor."^v

The Commandments are not about us, they are about our neighbors. As I have mentioned before, the church is the only institution that exists for the benefit of others, not for the members of that institution. This isn't about us. It is about our neighbors.

The Apostle Paul makes this point in his letter to the Galatians. He writes, "The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" One commentator says, "Paul isn't saying that if you have warm cozy feelings about your neighbor, then you've done all that you have to do. Rather, the word that is translated here as "summed up" is similar to the modern economic metaphor of the bottom line, and that can help us understand Paul's message. Paul is saying: The bottom line of the entire law is that it is about loving the neighbor."^{vi}

I believe the commandments are important and I think the way we know we are following them is by our care for our neighbors. May our actions toward our neighbors, the work we do to make the world more just, more equitable, more sustainable, more loving be the true display of the Commandments. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.frc.org/booklet/the-ten-commandments-foundation-of-american-society->

ⁱⁱ <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-the-usa/2018/03/ten-commandments-still-popular-in-america-regardless-of-religious-affiliation>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/preaching-series-on-the-ten-commandments/commentary-on-exodus-191-6-201-17#:~:text=My%20friend%20David%20Lose%20likes,first%20%E2%80%94%20it%20is%20literally%20primary.>

^{iv} <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3637-20140929JJ>

^v <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-exodus-201-17-3>

^{vi} <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/preaching-series-on-the-ten-commandments/commentary-on-exodus-191-6-201-17-3>