

Jesus and the Ten Commandments

Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

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We may be flippant regarding the Ten Commandments, perhaps regarding them as Ten Suggestions, or if you are a fan of Reader's Digest, maybe Ten Points to Ponder or Ten Quotable Quotes. But in spite of our shifting regard or disregard of God's Ten Commandments, they remain.

Every year during Lent, we may begin our Sunday services with "The Decalogue" from The Book of Common Prayer, a prayerful recitation of the Ten Commandments with the recurring response of "Lord, have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law" (BCP 317-318). And unless you are utterly self-deceived, praying through The Decalogue is a stark reminder of God's unchanging standards in the Ten Commandments and our internal or external failure to obey them.

Today's Old Testament reading is from the twentieth chapter of Exodus, the famous passage containing the Ten Commandments.

Today, I am preaching about Jesus and the Ten Commandments. Jesus did not joke about the Ten Commandments or water down the Ten Commandments. When it came to the law of the Old Testament, including the Ten Commandments, Jesus turned up the heat, as he proclaimed during his Sermon on the Mount:

For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:18-20).

Jesus also remains the only human being who always obeyed the Ten Commandments, externally in his actions and internally in his heart.

The first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3), sets the tone for the rest. As soon as we put anything else before God, breaking the remaining commandments results—one by one, they fall like dominoes. I once heard a preacher say, "When it comes to worship, work, and play—we worship our work, we work at our play, and we play at our worship." Jesus never did this.

Just before the beginning of his earthly ministry, Jesus was tempted for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by Satan to put another god before his Heavenly Father. Matthew tells us, "The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these will I give you if you fall and worship me.'" How did Jesus respond? "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him'" (Matthew 4:8-10). From his birth in a Bethlehem barn to his execution on the hill of Calvary, Jesus obeyed the first commandment.

When it came to the second commandment, "You shall not make for yourself an idol" (Exodus 20:4), Jesus obeyed that as well. Jesus not only refused to idolise the things we do—money, sex, power, celebrities, sports, our children and grandchildren, our reputation, our career, our possessions, our Facebook "likes"—Jesus also refused to let others idolise him. After his miracle of feeding the five thousand, the crowd was amazed by Jesus, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world"—

and yet, as John wrote, “When Jesus realised that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself” (John 6:14-15). Jesus had no idols.

Jesus also obeyed the third commandment, “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God” (Exodus 20:7). In fact, he did the exact opposite when he taught about prayer, “Our Father, in heaven, hallowed be your name” (Matthew 6:9). On Palm Sunday Jesus entered Jerusalem riding a donkey as “he who comes in the name of the Lord” (Matthew 21:9) and just before his passion prayed, “Father, glorify your name” (John 12:28). And of course at the Great Commission the Risen Jesus commanded his disciples to “make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). We make wrongful use of the name of the Lord all the time, either in barrages of profanity or in using the name of God to justify causes that God would never justify—but Jesus never misused the name of his Heavenly Father; instead, he glorified it.

How did Jesus do with the fourth commandment to “remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8)? As “the lord of the sabbath”, Jesus healed people like the man with a withered hand (Matthew 12:8-13) or the man born blind (John 9:7, 14). To those more concerned with keeping on the sabbath than people being healed, Jesus said, “The sabbath was made of humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

In our workaholic culture, we often brag about never taking time off, as if we were the ones who kept the world turning rather than God. Clergy are not exempt, with many caught up with the view that it all depends on them. One of my roles at Archdeacon is to keep a watchful eye on our brothers and sisters in ministry to mitigate the risks of burn out. The Sabbath is a gift we often refuse to receive although we need it desperately—and yet Jesus, “the lord of the Sabbath,” kept the sabbath, even resting in the tomb on the Sabbath, the day after dying on the cross.

Throughout his earthly life, Jesus also obeyed the fifth commandment to “honour your father and your mother” (Exodus 20: 12). His entire earthly life was about obeying his Father, as he said, “the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise” (John 5:19)—this happened all the way to the cross. Again, scripture emphasises that Jesus’ ministry was based on his intimate relationship with his Father. Even on the cross, Jesus honoured his Father by praying for all of us, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

And at the cross was Jesus’ beloved mother, Mary. For over thirty years, Mary had watched her son grow up and go on to preach the gospel, teach about the kingdom of God, and heal the sick—and now she watched him hang on the cross, gasping in agony for every breath. And yet, even then, Jesus honoured her. “Woman, here is your son,” he said, nodding toward his disciple John—and to John, “Here is your mother” (John 19:26-27). And Jesus honoured his Father in his final breath of surrender: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46).

The sixth commandment, “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13), was never broken by Jesus either. Jesus taught that those who harbour anger toward others in their heart are guilty of murder (Matthew 5:21-22). There was no anger in Jesus’ heart, only love, even love for his enemies. And although he never committed murder, on Good Friday, Jesus literally took the place of a murderer named Barabbas (Luke 23:19) and was murdered with all the anger the world could muster.

Jesus never broke the seventh commandment, “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14). However, he did warn that those who lust in their hearts after others are guilty of adultery (Matthew 5:28), which makes everyone except liars uncomfortable. When Jesus taught in the temple, and an adulterous woman was dragged to him, he did not condemn her. Instead, he made it clear that everyone present was guilty of adultery in one way or another, and everyone left, one by one until only Jesus and the woman stood there. Jesus asked her, “Where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She was stunned, “No one, sir.” Jesus gently said, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more” (John 8:1-11).

The eighth commandment, “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15), was kept by Jesus too. Jesus went to jail for all the stealing we have done and was crucified between two thieves.

Jesus never broke the ninth commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour” (Exodus 20:16). Jesus never lied; he always told the truth, especially about others. He took it a step further when he told his disciples at the Last Supper, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Some of you know how wounding it is when people speak falsely to you or speak falsely about you—those wounds run deep. But on Good Friday, Jesus was condemned because of false witnesses. Scripture tells us, “The chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death” (Matthew 26:59). Eventually, they got what they wanted as false witnesses accused Jesus of blasphemy, a capital offence. Jesus was, therefore, handed over to the Romans and condemned to death for something he never did. His wounds on the cross were more profound than we could imagine, and the Risen Jesus still bears the scars.

Finally, Jesus never broke the tenth commandment, “You shall not covet” (Exodus 20:17). Jesus did not covet his neighbour’s wife or his neighbour’s stuff. Jesus did not envy the Romans’ power or the religious leaders’ prestige. Jesus did not covet the things we crave. As the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Jesus did not need to covet anything. But there was and is one exception...Jesus did and does covet a relationship with you, so much so that he died for you.

Although everyone has externally or internally broken all the Ten Commandments externally or internally, with no exceptions, Jesus never broke a single one. Instead, Jesus died in your place for every time you have broken the Ten Commandments. In so doing, Jesus did what he said he would do in his Sermon on the Mount; he accomplished or fulfilled every letter of the law and the Ten Commandments. Jesus taught that all “the law and the prophets” hung on the commandment of love, love for God and love for one another (Matthew 22:37-40)—and as Jesus hung on the cross out of love for you, he fulfilled all the law in your place—“It is accomplished...It is finished” (John 19:30). That is the good news of the gospel.

In response to God’s unconditional love, we can thank God and ask God to incline our hearts to keep his law—in other words, to enable us to love others with the same unconditional love God has shown us.

AMEN

Based on Material by

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