

## Hear O Israel – The Ten Commandments

Before we dive into the commandments, let's talk a bit about the book of Deuteronomy. The word itself means second law.

It is essentially three speeches given by Moses before the people enter the Promised Land. The speeches consist of the law Moses received at Mt. Sinai, called Mt. Horeb in Deuteronomy. At this point, it's 40 years after the dramatic rescue from Egypt – the showdown with Pharaoh, the ten plagues, the miraculous parting of the water at the Red Sea. After 40 years, Israel is finally poised to enter the promised land.

Now, according to Google maps the journey from Egypt to Canaan should have taken 9 days to walk. If you allow rest time for a large group of people that included children and probably some older people, maybe you'd allow two weeks...even three. But why 40 years?

Well, the thing is, the Israelites got scared. They sent scouts into Canaan and the scouts reported giants who would be too hard to defeat. They failed to trust God's promise. So, God said none of that generation would get to enter the promised land. Including Moses.

Now, with a few exceptions, the adults from that generation are dead. The three speeches given by Moses pass on the story and the law that was first given to that first generation.

Moses makes it clear that the covenant God made with Israel was not limited to a time in the past. It was for this new generation as well....and it was for all time. It includes us. And although many of the statutes that dictated everyday life in Israel no longer apply to us, the ten commandments do.

One thing I've often emphasized when I preach the ten commandments is that they are not a burden. They are a gift from God for the flourishing of life and relationships.

So this morning, let's imagine a world where the ten commandments were actually lived.

We'll go through one by one and think about them in our own time. I think that might help us see what a gift they truly are.

Let's start with the prologue – I am the Lord your God. I brought you out of slavery. God has kept God's promise.

Christians might change the prologue to this: through the death and resurrection of Christ, I have rescued you from the bondage of sin and death.

The commandments are rooted in the God who loves us and what God has first done for us.

You shall have no other gods. We can probably all name various things in our culture that serve as gods...wealth, power, possessions, celebrity stars and athletes and so on.

But what I've often felt is the most damaging alternate god is the one humans create in their image. They claim allegiance to God, but that God is hateful and vengeful – it's a God who condemns. One of my favorite authors, Anne Lamott, said this: "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."

But it also affects the person who believes that's the kind of God God is – they live in perpetual fear of God's wrath.

Your image of God affects your entire relationship with not only God, but everyone and everything else, too.

When we worship the real God, and not the image we create, we'll have a worldview of love, justice, generosity, peace – true shalom.

You shall not take God's name in vain. On one level, this means not trivializing God's name by cursing. It means not swearing an oath to God and then breaking it.

But it also means not using God's name to destroy. In a world where this commandment was followed, there would not be people killing other people in God's name. Even now, we can see where that leads as violent extremists in the Middle East have shown us, again.

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. What if we all really did this? First of all, it's hard. I preached through Martin Luther's catechism the year of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. When we talked about the Sabbath I challenged everyone to do it once...the way the Jewish people do. I gave it a try. I don't remember if I was successful or not but I know it was hard.

But what if there was one day a week when everyone rested. Things used to mostly not be open on Sundays. Now, even if you have a day off on Sunday, likely you go to the store or go out to eat or run other errands, meaning people in the service industry in particular are working.

If we practiced Sabbath, would it make us get our economic priorities straight? Would we be less devoted to the almighty dollar? Some say yes. Would there be fewer stressed-out people and better mental health overall? Would less busy-ness in general make everyone more patient and kinder?

It's worth pondering.

Honor your father and mother. I'm not sure how our culture mostly thinks about honor. It was probably a different thing in the days of Moses. In a culture very invested in the shame/honor

system like many ancient cultures, the way you honored your parents was by becoming a good person. That still works.

The value of that view moves us past the question of how we honor parents who were neglectful or abusive. I think we do that by getting help to heal the trauma...and by becoming a good person.

In our culture, I would say another biggie is how our elderly parents and grandparents are cared for. And this isn't just about individual families – it's about how our society as a whole values the elderly and cares for them. And that's especially true for the less wealthy elderly.

Do not kill. And for the record Jesus said even if you are angry with someone or insult them or call them a fool, you are guilty. And Martin Luther went even further to say you should do what you can to make sure others have what they need to live.

In a world where some starve to death while others have too much, none of us are keeping this commandment very well. When health care access is so unequal that the actual life expectancy of certain groups is drastically lower than others...when more babies die in particular groups...we are not doing well with this one.

Do not commit adultery. Be faithful in your relationships. We've gotten distracted by controversy over LGBTQ stuff, but faithfulness in relationships, no matter their configuration, contributes to stability in families and communities.

Do not steal. OK, this one seems to be super obvious. But if this includes various things that aren't strictly speaking illegal, but still contribute to a completely unjust distribution of wealth, I'd argue they violate the spirit of this commandment. In a capitalist society, what might that look like?

Do not bear false witness. Martin Luther said not only should we not tell lies or gossip about others, but we should cast the motives and actions of others in the best possible light. This doesn't necessarily mean accepting bad behavior.

But it might mean focusing more on the root causes of bad behavior and focusing on healing instead of only punishment. Social media can be a quagmire of false witness, so we need to be especially careful there.

Do not covet. This might just be direct coveting – wanting a neighbor's spouse or their possessions for your own. But I wonder if another way this plays out is by our constant comparing ourselves and our lives to that of another.

Someone's got a nicer house or car, someone's kids seem to be perfect while yours are not; you see the Facebook or Instagram posts of people traveling and having this perfect life and you covet that life instead of your own.

That envy and striving to keep up not only hurts our mental health. It can also contribute to over use of the world's resources and contributes to environmental problems.

Keeping the commandments is a tall order. When it comes from only a place of obligation, it's pretty hard. And many people, religious or otherwise, don't find the idea of some future hell that awaits after death very compelling. I don't at all.

But the world we create when we live opposed to the commandments is its own piece of hell. We only have to look to the middle east right now to see that. There, people are going through a hell created by a group of terrorists that want the annihilation of an entire people.

It's easy to despair when we look at extremist groups – here and elsewhere – who have a totally different image of God and God's law. We can really only focus on ourselves. And teach our kids. And practice love. And pray that it spreads.

We are only able to keep the commandments if they come from a place of love. A place of love that begins with gratitude for the love we have first been given. A place that begins with love of God and extends to the world God created.