

Sermon preached by
The Reverend Hope H. Eakins
at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, Connecticut
on March 4, 2018, The Third Sunday of Lent, Year B

The Ten Commandments are simple and they are memorable. They fit on two tablets, unlike modern legislation with so many sections and indices that each bill needs a binder to hold it together. Their function is not to keep life running smoothly and keep us polite and obedient. God gave us the Commandments in order to constitute a people whose faith forms them into a human community. In short, the commandments tell us who we really are and prod us to become the people we ought to be.

We live in an age that does not put much emphasis upon the Ten Commandments. This is so even in the Church. We no longer put plaques with the Commandments on the East wall, as Anglicans once did. The commandments are no longer a regular part of our liturgies as they used to be. We prefer to emphasize the grace of God rather than the Law of God, and that is a good thing, because God's love comes first, and God only gave us the Law because God loves us. But if we forget about the Commandments and forget why God bothered to carve those commandments on stone tablets, we forget their importance and why God commands us to obey them.

The grace of God and the Law of God are not antithetical. The commandments are not harsh directives sent from on high by a distant tyrant. Rather they are sent as help from a loving God to give us signposts on the tough journey of life. The Ten Commandments are not ten different laws. They are one law in ten forms. "I am the Lord your God ... therefore do this and do not do that." The commandments are only the details; "I am the Lord your God" is the main thing. First comes God's *rule*, God's reign over us, and then come God's rules.

Take the commandment to honor the Sabbath Day. Keeping holy one day out of every seven is a regular way of keeping life in its proper perspective by taking time off to rest and worship, to renew our spirits through spending time with God and the people we love. God gave us this commandment so that we might enjoy life, play, and give thanks. A recent study reports that Americans not only receive less time off than people of other nations, but we don't even take all the time off that we get. Maybe we'd better get started putting the Sabbath commandment into practice. It's a commandment that God has given us to bless us, to give us rest.

Take the commandment: You shall not bear false witness. The rule against lying exists because we can't have any kind of society if we can't trust one another's words. God's commandment is against public and political lying, lying to protect your job or your reputation, lying to get ahead by ruining the reputation of another, lying to sell goods or make a profit, or lying to the IRS, lying to make your country or your church look better than it is. If everyone told the truth, we wouldn't need fact checkers on our newspapers, and we wouldn't have to worry about "fake news."

Lying erodes the foundation of truth, and truth is necessary in order to have a common life. Organizations and families break apart and decay when members are not truthful with each other. Life is hell when lying becomes a way of life. Therefore people of God may not lie. We must be champions of the truth. We must protest when the government lies. The first and maybe the most important thing we know about the father of our country is that he did not lie about chopping down a cherry tree. And although historians have told us that this story may be a myth, we continue to remember it because it is a powerful representation of the honesty we need firmly set in our foundation.

Take the commandment: You shall not steal. This is much more than a matter of not snitching candy bars from the super market or lifting a towel from a hotel bathroom. The prohibition against stealing what does not belong to you is rooted in the concept of a God of justice who has provided the resources of the earth to be shared by all the peoples of the earth. If we take Jesus' anger against the unjust vendors in the Jerusalem temple as an example of God's reaction to those who exploit others, how do we think God views those who do not pay their employees

a fair wage or a nation which spends more money in one **day** of war in Afghanistan than it spends in a whole **year** to aid the impoverished countries in Africa?

You shall not steal, says God. You cannot take what belongs to someone else, and you shall not covet what other people have. If you spend your life yearning for a bigger car or a bigger house, wanting a fancier office or a fancier vacation, dreaming of being a rock star or a scratch golfer, you will forget to give thanks for what you have. You will forget about sharing what you have with those who have less than you do. You will be jealous and resentful rather than being grateful and satisfied.

You shall not commit adultery, says God. Sexuality is a gift from God, the wonderful way that God has made us. The very best hint we have of God's love for us, God's yearning for us, is being pursued by a lover who wants to become one with us. Sexual attraction and sexual relationships teach us about love, about God, but sex without love is not Godly. Trivializing sexuality and using pornography or prostitutes teach us of the power of lust, not the love of God.

Now how about: Thou shalt not kill. If we are commanded not to take life, how can anyone think that there should be no restrictions on the sale of AR-15s? We can argue – and we should argue – about other ways we kill, about capital punishment and abortion and eating meat and just war and euthanasia, but surely no one can come up with a good argument for having bump stocks and assault weapons at home, let alone in the hands of an 18 year old boy who says he wants to be a killer. God is clear: Thou shalt not murder. Enough is enough!

God gave us the commandments for a purpose. When God gave Moses the tablets of the Law, the desert dwellers who were following Moses became a people, became the Israelites, became a family brought into being by God and given a code by which to live.

As they decided how to obey God's law, the people gained a sense of identity and purpose and connection. The Law defined who they were and how they lived. And then six hundred years later when the people of God were forcibly exiled in Babylon, they mourned, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

Well, the Jews did four things in their Babylonian exile to maintain their identity. Here's what they did to sing the Lord's song: They circumcised their sons. They kept dietary rules. They ate a Passover meal each year to remember their rescue from Pharaoh. And they tried to keep the Ten Commandments. They kept them partly as a practical moral code but more importantly, they kept the commandments as the values and mores of a people whose God had redeemed them from slavery and given them this Law. The commandments gave them their identity.

The Jews knew that if you break a commandment and repent, God will forgive you. God's forgiveness is not an issue. But if you *forget* the commandments, then you will forget that there *is* a God who will forgive you. You will forget who you are, how you got here, and what you are about as a people. Sabbath, diet, the Passover and the Law. People who honor these things are Jews in whatever culture they happen to find themselves. People who honor these things are people who stand for something. They have to, because that something or Someone is the way they understand who they are.

God did not create us and then leave us like lost sheep without a clue about God's expectations of us. God loves us enough to tell us straight out what the expectations are.

Jesus says the expectations are only these: love God and love your neighbor. The way we are to do this is to follow the Commandments. We are to be truth tellers, so our word can be trusted; we are to be faithful to our promises no matter what; we are to come together every Sunday to worship God, we are not to kill and not to steal. The Commandments are not helpful suggestions; they are not recommended guidelines; they are not a formula for success. The Commandments are a matter of life and death.

Can you imagine living without the commandments? Can you imagine having a God who doesn't care about how we live? Can you imagine having no identity as a people formed and shaped by God's law?

Thank God for the commandments, for every single one of them, and incline our hearts to keep these laws.