

The Ten Commandments - 21st November 2021

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[0 : 0 0] So I've been thinking a lot about the Ten Commandments recently. Now that seemed a really weird thing to be thinking about. You might think the Ten Commandments are this list of rules. And they definitely are a list of rules.

Quite an important list of rules, I'd say. Most modern societies have really hung them up somewhere very important. I think until very recently, maybe a couple of years ago, every single American courtroom had a copy of the Ten Commandments hanging up there.

They were the kind of ultimate source of law. And I think the Ten Commandments have really inspired a lot of kind of jokey versions of the Ten Commandments. I don't know if you've seen any floating around. I think the worst one I heard was the Ten Commandments for self-improvement, which started with, thou shalt not sleep in.

Thou shalt drink plenty of water. There are plenty of versions like that floating around. There's one for remote workers. Thou shalt not wear pyjamas. If you ask James, he's got quite a funny story.

One of his colleagues, unfortunately, didn't realise that the morning meeting would be on Zoom and did it from bed. I think they got into some trouble. Now, I don't know about you, but if we just move to an awesome picture of Moses and leave it there, that would be better at this point.

[1 : 1 1] So I don't know about you, but when I look at the Ten Commandments, there's a huge temptation to see them as a list of rules, a list of things that you can and can't do. Like very reasonable things that you can't do, like not killing people or worshipping idols.

But today, I really want to convince you that these are not just a list of rules. Instead, this is an awesome reflection of the love story between God and humanity. So that might seem like a push, but bear with me.

So the Ten Commandments are given to the Israelites early in exile. The Israelites had kind of become free from being slaves in Egypt, and they were in the desert on their own, and they kind of messed up a few times.

They tripped up on being grateful to God, and they'd made a lot of golden statues of cows and worshipped them as idols. Now, that might not be the way you and I would trip up, but I guess they were just really looking for something they could hang their hat on.

And with the Ten Commandments, God tries to sort of create a different relationship with the Israelites. So when he gives them the Ten Commandments, he speaks directly to them for the first time.

[2 : 1 6] Until now, God has only spoken to Moses, and Moses has spoken to the people. But now, at the base of this massive mountain, Sinai, God speaks through the wind and the rain and the thunder, and tells people what it's like to be a people of God and to live well as a society.

So God says, I am the Eternal One, your God. I led you out of Egypt and liberated you from the lives of slavery and oppression. You are not to serve any gods before me. You are not to make any idol image of any other gods.

In fact, I'd rather you didn't make any images of anything in the heavens above or the earth below or the waters beneath, because that seems pretty dangerous. You're not to bow down and serve any image, for I, the Eternal, your God, am a jealous God.

And as for those who are not loyal to me, their children will endure the consequences of their sins for three or four generations. But those who love me and keep my commandments, their children will experience my loyal love for a thousand generations.

God says, You are not to use my name for your own idle purposes, for the Eternal will punish anyone who treats his name as less than sacred.

[3 : 25] You and your family are to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. You have six days a week to do all your work, but the seventh day has to be different. It is the day of the Sabbath of the Eternal, your God.

Keep it holy by not doing any work. Not you, not your children, not your servants, not even your animals or any foreigners living among you. For God made the heavens above, the earth below, the seas and all the creatures in them in six days.

Then on the seventh day, God managed to rest. That's why God blessed the Sabbath day and made it sacred. You are to honour your father and mother. If you do, you and your children will live long and well in the land your Eternal, your God, has promised to give you.

You're not to murder. You're not to commit adultery. You're not to take what isn't yours. You're not to give false testimony in court against your neighbour. You're not to envy what your neighbour has or set your heart on getting his house, his wife, his servants, his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to him.

And the people heard God say this. In the signs of God's presence, there was a blasting of a massive horn, roaring thunder, flashing lightning, smoke-covered mountain, and they shook with fear and astonishment and all ran away.

[4 : 42] Then the Israelites came up to Moses and said, we don't want to have God directly speak to us anymore. We're certain we'll die if it happens again. We'd rather you spoke to us at this point and we'll promise to listen next time.

And Moses said, don't be afraid. God's putting on this big show, these powerful manifestations, as a way of instilling awe in you so you won't sin. So they come in this massive cloud with all this drama and you can imagine that actually it would be quite shocking to receive them like that.

But how should we think about these rules? These rules which are one of the first things which God tells people directly, which were presented to the Israelites in the desert when they just escaped from slavery.

And I guess they were trying to work out, how do we build a society? Because we've only ever been slaves in this one really terrible Egyptian society. How can we do better? What does that look like?

And God gives them this vision. And I think this vision tells the story of God's love for humanity. Now, when I started writing this, I wanted to talk about all of the Ten Commandments. I'd just been to this really great lecture at the London School of Jewish Studies and I had about a million ideas.

[5 : 48] And I think I told Mark I was going to talk about all of the Ten Commandments. And Mark's view was, maybe just pick one. So I think that probably was wise advice. I've picked three. But when I started writing, it did look like this might go on forever.

So be grateful. As a brief overview, because I think the overview is important, we have these first three commandments, which are about God and the authority of God and putting God first before governments, before any ideologies, even socialism or conservatism, before anything else that might seem important to you, before fears and dreams and social pressures, the rules that you have to buy your own house, putting God before all of that.

And I think one day, I'd really love to have a conversation with you and say, what would the world be like if we really had God first? I think that's a huge question. And I think it's one we should explore together at some point.

Then we have this second set of three commandments, which are going to be my main focus today, which are keep the Sabbath and rest, don't kill and honour your father and mother. I'm going to come back to these, but I'm just going to put them in the context of the rest first.

Then we have a final set of three rules, which are about living together in a way that you can trust each other. So they're don't cheat on your partner, don't steal and don't lie in court.

[7 : 04] Now, not lying, not cheating, not stealing. We can all think of situations where they might not be the best rules. For example, when someone's starving, do I think I want to begrudge them a loaf of bread?

No, I don't. But I think we wouldn't have a free society without some version of these rules, some way in which we can trust each other. There are also rules which let us as people stand up to unjust structures and oppressors and enable justice that makes a free society possible.

I don't think we could have a free society without these rules. So more on that later. And then at the end, after all these very reasonable rules, like don't cheat on your partner, we have this one really scary rule, which is almost impossible, which is don't be jealous of other people.

Now, I'm pretty sure everyone in this room has broken that one. I definitely have. What could be the prohibition there? The rule against envying your neighbour's house, wife, slave, maid, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to them.

This is an odd rule if you think of these as commands that you definitely can't break, but not if we think of them as this vision of this better society. Because I think one of the biggest challenges as a world we have is how to contain envy, the desire to have or to be someone else.

[8 : 19] Envy lies at the heart of all violence. I mean, in the Bible, we have envy leading Cain to murder Abraham. It made Abraham and Isaac pretend that their wives were their sisters because they were scared of being married to beautiful women.

It led Joseph's brothers to sell him into slavery. It is envy that leads to adultery, theft, and false testimony. And it's the envy of the neighbours that led the Israelites to build those idols time and again.

And I think envy is basically about failure to understand that everything has its place. We all have our tasks and our own blessings and sometimes those blessings are hard to see from inside. Live by these truths and those order.

Abandon them and there is chaos. Nothing is more pointless and destructive than to let someone else's happiness diminish your own. And the antidote to envy is always to rejoice in what you have rather than worrying about what other people have.

But anyway, more on that later. Back to that second set of commandments. Rest for one day a week. On your parents. Don't commit murder. Well, I think these are a group of three. And I think they have something very important in common.

[9 : 24] I think the thing that they have in common is they have this vision of the fact that we are all created beings. We are made in the image of God and deliberately made the way you are. So how would that apply to Sabbath rest?

Now, resting one day a week, that's a rule we can all let slip. Sometimes I definitely do. It's almost impossible if you're working shifts. So lots of people can't even imagine being able to take a day off a week.

I think that's one of the great injustices in our society. Resting doesn't sound like it should be more important than not killing people, but it is higher up the list. And why might that be? I think in society, rest has become complicated.

There's this huge pressure to rush around doing things. Sometimes it feels like you really have to prove that you are busy to feel worthy, to feel like part of the club of people who've made it and have things to do all the time.

There's also this huge pressure wherever you work to keep working even when perhaps you shouldn't. I guess we live in this big capitalist society. And from some perspectives, the organisations that offer the most work in society really just do see people as tiny cogs in a machine which keeps it going.

[10 : 32] So saying no and saying, I will not be your cog in your machine, I am a human being, is really radical. We live in a world where there are all these systems trying to keep people in their place, make people less by pretending that they are just what they do.

You are only your job. You are only what you have or what you earn. And these systems pretend that some people are worth more than other people because of what they can do, because of the job they have, or because of their race, gender, sexuality.

And I think stepping back from these systems and saying, no, I'm not a cog in a machine, I am worthy of one day of freedom where I do not work, that is challenging injustice. It reminds us all that we are created beings in the image of God, that we are loved children of God, and that we are worthy of a day where we are more than being a cog in a machine.

Now, I don't know about you, but I've had some really great bosses in my life and some really terrible bosses. There was one particular boss, and I'm going to mention no names here, who would make me feel really stupid.

Sometimes he'd start the morning meeting with, well, you're no intellectual weapon, are you, Ruth? You're not really that bright. And sometimes he would make me feel small, like I didn't have the right words for anything, that I didn't have any good ideas.

[11 : 45] I remember working there would make me feel smaller and less capable, and gradually I began to shrink into the background, worry what I was going to say next in the meeting. I thought I was constantly trying to manage myself in case I said something wrong, or trying to pretend to be something I'm not.

I wasn't very good at taking any time off from that job. I guess I was trying to prove something to myself, to everyone else. And sometimes it is harder to take time off from the jobs that make you feel dreadful.

It's only when I came back from my honeymoon and I'd had some time away that I realised that I was more than my work, more than this job let me be. And I guess you might sometimes struggle with being defined by being in a bad job or with a difficult boss.

And that's one of the reasons why Sabbath rest is really important. It's stepping away and saying, you know, this small institution says I'm this, but I'm not just that. I'm not just a cog in the machine.

I'm not just what my terrible boss thinks of me. Working all the time, eternal labour, makes you lose something important about yourself. It kind of makes you into a robot where you forget that you were created freely to be free, love made deliberately.

[12 : 56] Sabbath means one day in seven, all human hierarchies are suspended and everyone, slave, master, employer, employee, even domestic animals are free because being free, being rested is the revision of the world that God has.

Now, if you're lucky like me and your current job is amazing and life-giving and you find God in it, rest is still super important. Sometimes rest is important just because it's important to step back and remember that the world will still turn even if I don't turn up to work.

You are not and you can't keep the world turning because you're not God and the world isn't really resting on your shoulders. So I guess that's why I think resting is about being a created being.

How about honouring your parents? I guess fitting into the theme of being created, this is a reminder that we are made through other human beings, created by the people who give us time and bring us up and love us, whether those are your biological parents or not, created ultimately by the people who give us life.

Nobody's parents are perfect and I don't know what your experiences of being or having parents are, but I guess I want to say being a parent is an innately risky business.

[14 : 15] Childbirth is still one of the biggest killers and loving some being before you've even met them is very vulnerable. Honouring parents can seem difficult, especially when those relationships are difficult.

Personally, I'm very blessed by having very good parents who are fortunately not here today, but I guess one of the traps that parents can fall into is that they become just parents.

They define themselves as I am a mother, I'm not anything else. I'm not a created being of God and myself, I am just a mother, I am just a father. They can sometimes forget that they're loved and worthy in themselves rather than just as parents.

And I think sometimes that could be extra hard because children don't always treat parents kindly. And so if you're defining yourself as a parent, I bet that hurts sometimes.

I know I've hurt my parents sometimes. Parenting looks like it can be hard and tiring and overwhelming as well as life-giving and joyful. I guess for me, honouring my parents means remembering that they are also individuals in their own right.

[15 : 19] Love, children of God, made in God's image and love desperately. That they've done a lot for me, taken risks for me. I wouldn't even be born without them taking risks. And that I'm lucky that they've loved me and taught me to love other people.

And if that's not your experience of parents, I guess it's important to remember that they should have loved you. And that honouring them may mean mourning that they didn't love you in the way that you deserved.

If your parents didn't love you right, I think honouring them can mean taking the time to heal the hurt that passes down generations so that people in the future aren't hurt by it. That's honour.

That's honour in a way that reflects loving creation of God. What do you think? What do you think honouring your parents means if they weren't good parents? What does it mean if they were great parents?

How would you want children today to think about honouring their parents? Has that changed? Finally, we have do not commit murder.

[16 : 16] Do not deliberately kill other human beings. Now, killing human beings is obviously a really bad thing for other people. It's better to live in a society where no one will randomly kill you. But I guess it's also a crime against God because we're all made in God's image, even if that's difficult to see sometimes.

Killing someone made in God's image is a sin because it shows a failure to see part of the person made in God's image. Now, this week, I've been spending some time with my friend, well, Jo, and she's had a very difficult week because she's kind of in love with this guy who is on trial in Greece.

And he's on trial for something really strange in that, so what he does, kind of as a living, is he kind of leaps into the waters at Lesbos and pulls out the asylum seekers and brings them to the shore safely.

So he looks at these people and says, you know, you are loved, you're made in God's image, you have a right to live. And he's currently on trial. He might be going to prison for 10 years maybe for that, which I think is quite shocking.

Like, if I saw someone hit by a car, I might want to pull over and say, is everything okay? And I think it's actually quite bad if you see someone hit by a car and you don't pull over and see as everyone's okay.

[17 : 28] I think, you know, if we saw a child drowning in a puddle, everyone would scoop them out. I think sometimes do not kill doesn't just mean don't pull a gun to someone's head. It means, are you denying them the right to live?

Are you preventing them from thriving? Are you failing to see that these people who may be difficult to have around may be different, may challenge expectations, those people are also made in God's image and they also have a right to thrive.

So I guess these three commandments, take a day off, honour your parents, don't kill other people, teach us a lot of interesting things about what it means to be a human society rooted in God rather than the pressures of the world.

These commandments, which may seem strange and certainly come in a strange order, tell a story of what it means to resist the unjust voices that try and say that some people are not worthy of the same equality as other people, that some people are just where they came from or what they have or what they do.

Instead, these commandments offer a vision of radical transformation where the culture which pressures people to have and consume more is kind of overturned and instead it says, step back, stop working, stop consuming and see the joy in other people.

[18 : 46] That is what it means, I think, to come from a place of not envy, I want what they have and I don't have it, but from a place of transformation. What would the world be like if we all looked at each other and remembered that we were all created in love, all with the image of God and really ran with that?

What kind of a world would be possible? I guess, I think we see some of that love story in the Ten Commandments. Thank you.