

Under Orders

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

On this World Communion Sunday we return to one of the most important and formative texts of faith - the Ten Commandments - any one of which would be enough for a sermon by itself. These ancient commandments are a call for order within and among the faithful, the kind of order that may just be at the heart of the longing we see in the world today. I wonder what would happen in the communities in which we live if we actually lived by these commandments?

Ethics is perhaps a more common word today in our increasing secular society. We don't hear much anymore about God's commandments. We may wonder about morality as we read the daily news. I sometimes wonder what people are learning in business school about morality. This little story may illustrate the point:

One day a young boy asked his father, who was a store owner, "What's business ethics?"

"Well," his father replied, "it's like this. Say someone comes into my store and makes a purchase and pays \$10.00. And as I put the cash into the cash register I discover that there are two \$10.00 bills stuck together. This is where business ethics comes in. Should I tell my partner?"

It's a silly story and the humor is in the twisted sense of right and wrong. How has the moral compass, our sense of right and wrong, become so twisted and misguided?

Some years ago a survey of 1,200 people, ages 15 to 35, found that most of those polled could name no more than two of the Ten Commandments, and as the essayist

Cullen Murphy wrote, “They weren’t too happy about some of the others when they were told about them.”¹ The Ten Commandments have fallen into relative obscurity these days. I suggest we dust them off and teach them again to a new generation.

The rule of law established 3,000 years ago with the Ten Commandments has had far reaching implications for our world. In the American Constitution, when the framers declared, “We hold these truths to be self-evident”, the Ten Commandments provided an important backdrop and setting for the values articulated there. There is something universal about these commandments. Today perhaps we can imagine Christians the world over gathered around the Lord’s Table, reasserting a way of living that begins with proper worship and leads to respect for others. Jesus summarized these commandments when he said, “Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.”² This is also our Vision Statement here at the church.

The Ten Commandments may provide a helpful point of convergence in the conversations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims because of their universal appeal. It is clear they are intended to protect the communal nature of human life from falling into chaos. They are directed at the individual, at the inner person, calling each to serve of the needs of all. And they apply to everyone, those who have little power and those who wield much power. The standard of evaluation is one and the same for all. The rule of law keeps life from the chaos that it sometimes becomes.

The problem today is that we don’t want anything like commandments. In this age of personal autonomy, few of us really want to be told what we are to do. Maybe what is needed is some updating. Charlton Heston (who played Moses in the film *The Ten Commandments*) was once asked what he thought about updating the

¹ Leo, John, *The Ten (Revised) Commandments*, San Diego Union November 13 (John Leo writes a syndicated column on the state of our culture that appeared in numerous newspapers throughout the country. I have only a partial attribution on the copy of the article in my position.

² Mark 12:30-31

Commandments. Heston suggested, “Do your best” and “keep your promises”³ might be good additions. The National Parenting Center asked children to suggest additional Commandments. Among their ideas, “No bombing for the heck of it,” and “No grabbing.” John Leo (with tongue in cheek) suggested that any new set of Commandments should be called the “Ten Tentative Suggestions.”⁴ They might include, “Know that you are the universe” or “Maximize your time spent in the flow and happiness,” as some have actually recommended.

Another way out of the commandment dilemma, Leo writes, might be to keep the negative and bossy language out but add some loop holes. For example, “Thou shall not steal,” but creative work on your tax return is OK. “Thou shall not covet thy neighbor’s goods,” except in the sense that our whole economic system seems to depend upon the power of envy and wanting more. “Thou shall not commit adultery,” except if thou are unhappy or if personal fulfillment points thee toward the new young associate working in thine office. “Honor thy father and mother,” including thy birth, adoptive, step-, surrogate, or same sex partner parents.”⁵

Life may be more complex than it used to be but it still demands order to avoid chaos. Can these moral guides still direct us in modern life? Do the Commandments have any lasting value in human affairs? Absolutely! I once saw a bumper sticker that read, “Break with convention, keep the Commandments.” On a very fundamental level, perhaps that is what the protestors on Wall Street this week want to affirm. We must all be held to the same standards of justice and fairness. We need to reorder our communal life together, our economic life together.

One theologian sees it this way, “The real message of the Commandments is this: all your unhappiness, all your troubles, crimes and wars, all your distrust of one another

³ Leo, John Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

and your lack of inner peace, stem from this one fact, that you have lost the center of your life. Only on one condition, namely that you allow yourself to be called to order and brought to order through Jesus Christ at this innermost point in your life where fellowship and peace with God are at stake, (in other words, that you learn to “fear and love God,”) can the healing process also begin in your moral life and in the public areas of politics, business, and culture.”⁶ If he is correct, then the obvious question appears to be this, “Are we willing to be called to order and brought to order at the innermost point in our lives?”

Throughout history the pendulum of freedom and morality has swung in one direction and then the other. Today, we seem to want to throw off any form of restraint on human life. But we can go too far in the other direction of control and certainty, becoming too legalistic, as has happened historically from time to time. For example, at the time of the Reformation, things had become quite narrowly construed and lacking in freedom and creativity. We should live as God intended, and look to Christ Jesus as our example. The follower of Jesus is engaged in a lifelong battle to lessen the hold of selfishness, self-indulgence and sin in their life, and to increase the influence of Christ, through the Holy Spirit within him/her. There's more than one way to be imprisoned in life! “You belong to the power which you chose to obey,”⁷ said the Apostle Paul. With so much addiction, so many compulsions, and so much depression in our time, maybe it's time we rethink our faith and find a better balance between freedom and faithfulness, between liberty and license.

The Reformers reacted to the strictness, which in their judgment had crept back into the life of the Church with what became a mantra of the Reformation; “Saved by grace through faith alone.” The ideas of justice and fairness in the Bible are still helpful in directing the civic life of our communities. The rule of law requires leaders to be

⁶ Thielicke, Helmut *Man in God's World*, Lutterworth Press, November 1987, p.27

⁷ Phillips, John, *Exploring Romans* Kregel Academic & Professional, March 2007, See 6:16

free to make laws as they see fit for the common good. John Calvin went farther and described a “third use of the law.” The moral laws like the Ten Commandments are still effective guides for human behavior helping to direct the believer in how to live as God intends, wholly alive and loving others. We are free from condemnation and freed for caring and loving one another. The moral laws help guide those who are predisposed to live according to them because the Spirit of the Lord is present within them helping them to live as God intends.

Christ has demonstrated the power to change life from within, to lessen the grip of our compulsions and addictions so we can be truly free to live and love. Christ not only reconciles us before God. Christ also helps us to live as we should as part of our “regeneration,” as the moral law helps to guide us forward.

There was a time when many felt they were accountable to a higher law (God’s Law) and when it was commonly believed that each of us must answer to the God who created us. Maybe it’s time to remember again that we are under orders by the Almighty One, and to allow ourselves to be called to order and brought to order, in order for the healing to begin within ourselves and in the world.

The Psalmist proclaims, “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever . . . by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”⁸ Amen

⁸ Psalms 19:7-11