

Name the Ten Commandments

William Stell
October 8, 2017

Exodus 20:1-7 — Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, accounting the sins of parents to their children, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses God's name.

So, before Stephen Colbert was hosting The Late Show on CBS, he had his own show on Comedy Central called The Colbert Report—some of you have seen it, I'm guessing. And on that show, ten years ago, Colbert interviewed a congressman who was co-sponsoring a bill that would require the Ten Commandments to be displayed in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. Colbert asks the congressman why he wanted to co-sponsor this bill, and the congressman says, "I think if we were totally without [the Ten Commandments], we may lose a sense of our direction." Immediately after that comment, Colbert asks him, "What are the Ten Commandments?" The congressman swallows. "What are *all* of them? You want me to name them all?" "Yes, please," Colbert confirms. And the congressman goes: "Mmmmmmm...Don't murder. Don't lie. Don't steal. Mmmmmmmmm. I can't name them all." And that's basically the end of Colbert's interview. For the record, "Don't lie" is not technically one of the Ten Commandments, although "Do not bear false witness against your neighbor" is, so we'll give him half credit for that one: two and a half out of ten.

It's amazing to me how many of us will insist on something without really knowing what we are insisting on, and how many of us would eagerly impose something on others without ever applying it to ourselves. How should we apply the Ten Commandments to our lives today? Should we display them in our halls of power, subtly proclaiming our own religion's supremacy? To use the congressman's language, what sense of direction should the Ten Commandments be giving us? Let's take a closer look at the first three of the ten, laid out for us in today's second reading, and let's look to receive new clarity and insight from these commandments this morning.

So, commandment #1. Actually, the Jewish tradition and the Christian tradition count the Ten Commandments differently. In the Christian tradition, the first commandment is "You shall have no other gods before me, and you shall not make for yourself an idol." But in the Jewish tradition, the first commandment comes before that, in the very first verse of our second reading: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of

slavery.” In Judaism, *that’s* the first commandment. It’s not exactly a command, of course, but it *is* a foundation for all of the commands that follow, because it names and describes the God who is doing the commanding.

So, what kind of God are we talking about here? A God who loves rules for the sake of rules? A God who gets a rise out of punishing people? “I am the LORD your God, *who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*” What kind of God is this? A God who frees slaves. A God who liberates the oppressed. That’s who God *is*, and moreover, that is why God gave us the Ten Commandments: so that people of faith could live lives of freedom and flourishing, with these principles as one of our guides. These commandments are not meant to be burdens or instruments of shame; they are meant to help us, both as individuals and as communities of faith, live in harmony with God and with our world. So, any command that enslaves rather than liberates, any command that oppresses or subjugates any part of God’s good creation, is not a command from God. Because any and every command from God, including these ten, comes from a God who is leading creation out of bondage and into the freedom of peace and justice.

Commandment #2. This one is related to the first. There are other gods you could follow, the text says, other gods you could give your heart to: wealth, power, respect, beauty, security, popularity, your country, your political party...just to name a few. Certainly, there will be times when other gods seem worthy, enticing, convenient, or advantageous. But ultimately, these gods will not lead you into a life of freedom and flourishing. Ultimately, they are just another Pharaoh, another master eager to enslave. And because of this, the second commandment tells us, “You shall have no other gods before me.”

Then the text talks about idols, which we might assume is just saying the same thing. Many of us have been taught that any god other than the LORD is an idol, and so saying “You shall have no other gods before me” is basically saying “You shouldn’t have any idols.” But there’s more to it than that. In the ancient world, an idol was a particular object that served a particular purpose. Idols were statues, made of wood or stone, through which the powers of a deity could be channeled. People didn’t believe that these statues themselves were literally deities; rather, they believed that the an idol gave you access to a deity. If you treated the idol well, did certain things for the idol, then the deity associated with that idol would treat you well and do certain things for you. For example, Baal was a popular god in the land of Canaan (later called Palestine), where the ancient Israelites lived, and this god Baal was believed to have powers that could help your crops grow. So, people would worship idols of Baal in hopes that this god would choose to bless their crops. Worshipping idols, then, was a way of trying to influence the gods, to get what you wanted or needed from them.

But according to the Ten Commandments, the LORD your God will have none of it. Don’t use an idol of any deity, including the LORD, it says. Why not an idol even of the LORD? I mean, it’s the right God, right? Because the LORD is infinitely bigger than we can imagine, infinitely greater than whatever resides in a nation’s halls of power. Because our big and great God is not

tied to an earthly region or human agenda, and thus the LORD cannot be won over for your or my purposes. So, the text says, don't use an idol, even an idol of the LORD, because you can't control God.

Commandment #3: "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God." A more accurate translation of the Hebrew would be "You shall not take up the name of the LORD your God for emptiness." In the ancient world, and especially in ancient practices of magic and divination, people would use the names of deities to invoke their powers, to compel them to act on their behalf. Like the second commandment, this is about control. We are commanded not to use the name of God for the sake of emptiness, for the sake of agendas that are not of God. So, when it comes to this third commandment, perhaps we don't need to be so concerned about merely uttering the phrase "Oh my god," and we need to be more concerned about praying things like "Lord, bless our nation's bombs."

In closing, let's look at the words in between the second and third commandments: "I the LORD your God am a jealous God." On one hand, God is not tied to an earthly region or human agenda, but on the other hand, God has tied God's self to us, God's people. The God who is Love wills to be in an intimate relationship with us, friends, and God is so committed to this relationship that, according to the text, when we choose paths of bondage over God's paths of freedom and flourishing, the God of the universe can actually feel something like jealousy.

Then there's this line about God accounting the sins of parents to their children, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject God, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love God and keep God's commandments. Some Bibles translate this phrase as God punishing children for the sins of their parents, but that's not how I read this. Personally, I think of how trauma, dysfunction, and harmful dynamics get passed on from generation to generation. Haven't some of your parents' and grandparents' mistakes led to consequences in your life? That's true for me. And I think this verse is telling us, "That's the way this world works." Because of our parents' bondage, and their parents' bondage, you and I will bear some pain. And yet, this verse is also telling us that when we love God and follow the paths that God puts before us, it's not just us who are blessed. When our little faithfulness meets God's big faithfulness, generation after generation after generation will grow more and more into God's perfect love, will grow more and more into the freedom and flourishing that God desires for us all.

This week, friends, let's ask ourselves: In what ways am I following a God who enslaves, instead of a God who liberates? How have I wandered from the path of freedom and flourishing? How can I get back on it? Amen.