

October 8, 2023 @ Trinity Bixby  
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 Deuteronomy 5:1-22, Matthew 5:17-24

Today begins a sermon miniseries on the ten commandments – a two-parter, just as there were two stones on which the commandments were written. I’m borrowing a persistent idea in this series – that the commandments were divided across two tablets, and that the first three deal with God’s relationship with humanity, while the last seven are about humanity’s relationship with each other. However, this is not the only way to see things – and I think, by the end of the series, you’ll have a greater appreciation of the way the ten commandments have affected us – and, in turn, how we have affected the ten commandments!

First of all, let’s set something aside: no where in the Bible are these words referred to as the Ten Commandments! “But, Pastor Lucus!” I hear you saying, “What about Exodus 34:28?” You are very clever to have the verse number memorized! I’m very impressed. If you read it in the King James version, from 1611, it does, indeed say, “And [Moses] was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread, nor drink water. And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.” Most English translations since then have used the same words, “the Ten Commandments.” But the Hebrew word used is not the word for commandment! It is, instead, the word for “things” or “words.”<sup>1</sup> *Asheret ha’Devarim*. The ten words – the ten terms – the ten utterances – the ten things. We do not have a word in English to hold all of what this entails. However, Hebrew does have a word for commandment – and it’s one you’ve likely heard before. *Mitzvah* is one part of the promise that God offers Isaac in Genesis 26:4-5 – “I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky... because Abraham listened to my voice, kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.”

Hebrew is not shy about using the right word for the right thing. So, the ten

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<sup>1</sup> I continue to find it fascinating that the Hebrew understanding of words and things are contained in a single word! (עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים)

commandments should properly be called the ten words – and some English translations are starting to do this now, despite the weight of tradition against it.

So, the ten words are something like the overview of a contract, the terms and conditions of a website or app, or maybe like the outline for the lessons to follow. After all, all of the ten words are given greater detail later in Exodus and Deuteronomy. Like a list of terms and conditions, we often just skim through them to the bottom and hit “ok!” – but if we look carefully at them, we can learn quite a bit of what God’s expectations are for those who follow God’s way.

The first thing that God establishes is that this agreement is an exclusive one. If you agree to the conditions, then you must worship God alone. And who is God? “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” The very first statement establishes who God is – and what God has already done! Before the covenant has been established, God has already rescued the people from slavery. And God doesn’t want to have us confuse our actions with God’s actions. “You must have no other gods before me! Do not make idols and worship them, when you know me! Without me, evil and sin may take three or four generations to compound before it resolves, if at all, whereas with me, you will have steadfast love and grace for thousands of generations.”

So, first of the ten words – keep the covenant exclusively with God. Don’t let the things we make take the place of God in your life. Great – that’s easy, right? After all, the idol manufacturers guild has long been out of business. While we may not make literal statues and fall down to worship them, we certainly still make idols in the world. Maybe it’s the stock market – worshipping the bulls and bears. Maybe it’s not of the market, but offering devotion to work itself. “Nope, too busy working to care for neighbor!” Maybe it’s a person – “Mister Big Man on Campus can do no Wrong!” – or maybe it’s a group – “I have to have the solid gold toothbrush model 2050, since it’s the only one recommended by the American Dental Lobbyists!” – or maybe it’s an idea that you worship – “The pursuit of happiness is more important than any other thing. If I’m not happy, no one can be.”

Following up on that idea, of not letting anything get in the way of

worshipping God, the second of the ten words is, “don’t use God’s name lightly.” In ancient Egypt, where the Hebrew people had spent centuries, oaths and promises were sealed by invoking the name of the deities that were believed to ensure compliance. “By Thoth, I will not reveal this secret process for making beer.” But, of course, the Hebrew people followed only one God, so it became a reflex to offer oaths and promises in God’s name. The second word, then, is a rejoinder to think about what you promise in God’s name.

Of course, this means not using God’s name as part of profanity – but also to not claiming to represent God while acting against what God has taught. Don’t use God’s name to justify harmful actions that go against the principles of love, compassion, and justice. Don’t use God’s name to make yourself look pious, exploiting your religious ties for personal gain. And, following directly in the tradition of the Hebrew people, don’t use God’s name to make your own truth seem more genuine.

So, the ten words so far teach us that the covenant is exclusively with God, and we are not to invoke God’s name lightly. The third word reminds us to rest, remembering that God has freed us from endless work. “Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, but the LORD your God brought you out of there.” And the Sabbath Rest is not just for those in the covenant directly – but, as far as it is in your power, to offer rest to all, including foreigners, employees, and even the animals! Humans are not meant for endless grinding, but should instead emulate God, who takes time to rest. Maximum productivity is not the end goal – instead, we are called to balance work, study, and rest!

Worship only God. Think before using God’s name. Keep Sabbath, and give rest to all in your power. The first three words of the covenant with Moses and the people of God.

Jesus encouraged the keeping of these words, despite those then and now who insist that Christians don’t have to do anything from the “dusty old testament.” Indeed, Jesus specifically said, “Don’t even begin to think that I have come to do away with the Law and the Prophets. I haven’t come to do away with them but to

fulfill them.” Jesus took the covenant seriously, and extended the direct meaning of the words. He taught, again and again, that it was love that was at the very core of God’s covenant with us. Part of exclusively keeping the covenant with God is to recognize when our actions against each other prevent us from carrying out God’s work in the world. In Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus says, “If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that you have caused harm to your sibling, drop what you’re doing and go make things right – then, return and worship.” He’s saying, if you have caused harm to someone, that making that harm right, reconciling, healing, is of primary importance. It emulates how God has treated us. Just as God forgives us, frees us, and loves us, we are called to love, free, and forgive each other. That is how we keep God first – by remembering and honoring what God has done for us!

Today, we have discussed the first three of the ten words. Worship only God. Think before using God’s name. Keep Sabbath, and give rest to all in your power. These are the words that talk about our relationship with God – but the other seven deal with our relationship with each other. We’ll dive into those next week! For now, let us take time to worship and to rest!

May God free you from the burdens you carry. May Christ lead you in forgiving others. And may the love of the Holy Spirit shine throughout your life! Amen.