

“Law-Abiding”

Sermon – October 8, 2023 Stone Presbyterian Church

All of today’s lectionary passages deal with being “law-abiding.” That sounds vaguely negative in part because people often use it to justify behavior that is within the letter of the law, but not the spirit of the law.

In the epistle passage today from Philippians 3 Paul discusses righteousness that comes through faith in Christ.

And in the gospel lesson from Matthew 21 Jesus criticizes the religious leaders for not doing good in God’s name but rather good for themselves and rejecting the truth.

They each deserve their own sermon, but today our focus is on the familiar passage from Exodus 20 to perhaps shine some new light on it.

As a continuation of the past few weeks story from Exodus, it is now three months since the Israelites have left Egypt and they are all at Mt. Sinai. God calls Moses and says to gather the people. Then God comes in fire, smoke, and a loud trumpet on the mountain with only Moses and Aaron there and the people down below.

Then we get the start of today’s passage, “Then God spoke all these words.” There is no mention of stone tablets here or a name for “all these words” you heard earlier. That comes later in Exodus and Deuteronomy when referring back to this passage.

Then these words are called in Hebrew, *Aseret hadevarim* (ah-SEH-reht ha’-da’-vah-REEM), which means the Ten Things or Words or Statements. Traditionally, the Jews call them *Aseret HaDibrot* (ah-SEH-reht ha-dee-BROHT) or Ten Utterances. In the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures they are called the Decalogue—the Ten Words.

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It was only after the New Testament was written that the early church fathers started to refer to them (in Greek) as the Ten Commandments and for Christians it stuck through future translations.

Now for Jewish people, all the 613 commandments in the Hebrew scriptures are one package, but Christians like to cite these “Ten Commandments”—even put them in courts of law—and forget the rest of them—unless proof texting for things they are against, like homosexuality.

But these ten are not commandments in the same sense as the others. This Decalogue is more of a moral code than a legal code.

Legal codes often contain a list of consequences or punishments for violating any of the statutes or codes in “if/then” terms.

However, the Decalogue does not impose such conditions on the Israelites because its religious and moral qualities take for granted that these are beyond dispute. In other words, it is more than being law-abiding where you can go right up to the line; you have to consider the spirit of the law.

But what does that mean? Let’s go through these ten commandments and see, much of which I like from Matthew Schlimm, Professor of Old Testament at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary.

How we count the “ten” commandments differs among Christians as well as from Jews; I’ll number them as we do in the Reformed church

Starting with the Prologue, “I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

These words describe why God deserves our devotion. They explain that God is not the oppressive Pharaoh who wants to exploit them. This is the

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rescuing God who takes them out of the worst experiences of their lives. Why obey these commandments? Why do the right thing? Because God is one who saves and redeems.

First Commandment “You shall have no other gods before me.” Or literally “against my face.” Allowing another deity or power to obscure or obstruct God’s face prevents you from encounter and recognition of God. It leads instead to misrecognition -- falsely identifying God with powers that are not God, whether they be forces of nature, human inventions, temporal rulers, personified fears, or wish fulfillments.

Second Commandment “You shall not make for yourself an idol (20:4) This prohibition aims at not only the worship of other gods, but also potentially using images to worship the one true God.

Since the Renaissance, many Christian traditions allow artistic depictions of Jesus in worship. However, in recent years, it has become increasingly obvious that Jesus would not have resembled the pale-skinned, blond-haired, and blue-eyed figure on many stained-glass windows. How might history have been different with pictures of Jesus as dark skin, eyes, and hair. Maybe any depiction of Jesus is problematic.

Third commandment: “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God” (20:7)

This commandment prohibits not only disrespectfully using God’s name, but also using religion to harm others or for personal gain. A key biblical concern is leveling false accusations against others—swearing in God’s name that the accusations are true—while harming the innocent (see also Leviticus 19:2). This commandment prohibits such behavior, as will one of the last commandments (20:16).

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More generally, this commandment prohibits any use of God’s name for worthless, selfish, or harmful purposes.

When politicians say “God bless America” to garner more votes, they use God’s name wrongfully.

When parents use religious guilt to make their children do what they want, they use God’s name wrongfully.

When Christians make a show of their religion, they use God’s name wrongfully.

A good rule of thumb is that if you’re not using God’s name wrongfully: it will make you more loving and sacrificial instead of leading to personal gain.

Fourth commandment: “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy” (20:8–9)

The commandment is a pure gift. Unlike Pharaoh, who worked the Israelites to death, God both practices and requires rest.

The Hebrew word for “Sabbath” simply means “Stop”. The Sabbath day is an invitation to stop all work. We have a habit of making the day just about worship, but the commandment actually says nothing about worship. It insists that people stop their anxious striving and resist busyness. Rest.

Fourth commandment: “Honor your father and your mother” (20:12)

Two notes: one is that honor is not a synonym for obedience and second is that like the rest of these commandments, this is not addressed to children.

To honor someone is to consider them significant, important, and weighty. It does not necessarily entail obedience. Because this commandment, like the rest, is not addressed to children, it should be seen first and

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foremost as directing people to care for elderly parents or, frankly, our elderly in general.

Commandments 6, 7, 8, 10: “You shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, or covet (20:13–15, 17)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus doubled-down on these to say even thought of doing them was wrong. Rather than allowing people to walk right up to the very edge of disobedience, Jesus encourages people to run the other direction

Commandment nine: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (20:16)

This commandment is often mentioned in connection with the need to be honest. However, it deals with the most insidious use of lies: falsely accusing others and thereby using human legal systems to harm the innocent, something we see all too much today.

The Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, should not be understood as a strict list of laws given by God to the people to follow in blind loyalty or out of fear of retribution if they disobeyed. Rather, they should be regarded as the exercise of God’s free will toward the Israelites (and by extension for us through Jesus) and their acceptance of God’s gracious initiative to be in covenantal relationship with God as a new community—a community as the people of the Lord God.

Not just law-abiding, but spirit-abiding.

In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer. Amen.