

“Don’t Keep the Commandments”  
Exodus 20:1-17  
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A machete is a pretty useful tool. I use mine all the time at the farm to keep the grass under control. But it is also a pretty dangerous weapon. Many of the killings in the Rwandan Genocide were performed with machetes and they were also the distinctive weapon of the Tonton Macoute who terrorized Haiti in the 60s and 70s with them. What makes them so effective in either agriculture or violence is, of course, their sharp edge.

The Ten Commandments also have a sharp edge to them and that makes them dangerous as either a tool or a weapon. On one hand, they are dangerous because they offer us a pretty radical vision for how to live the way God wants us to, and that usually gets people into trouble when they really do what God wants them to do. But they are also dangerous because they come in such a neat and tidy package of dos and don’ts. They make it seem like life and faith are just as neat and tidy if we would only follow the rules. I mean, there are only ten, right? We can wrap our minds around ten. If everyone followed those ten simple rules, everything would run smoothly.

A few years back, around the turn of the Millennium actually, there was a group that showed just how dangerous the Ten Commandments can be, in the worst sense of dangerous. Maybe you remember the Movement for the Restoration

of the Ten Commandments that grew up in Uganda. It's a really tragic story of people who got caught up in some really bad theology pedaled by some really manipulative people. The goals of this Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God were to obey the Ten Commandments and preach the word of Jesus Christ. They taught that to avoid damnation in the apocalypse, one had to strictly follow the Commandments. The emphasis on the Commandments was so strong that the group discouraged talking, for fear of breaking the Ninth Commandment, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor," and so on some days communication was only conducted in sign language. Maybe if they had spoken a little more openly and honestly, the almost 800 people who lost their lives to a combination of murder and suicide by poisoning and arson might still be around. Somehow this doesn't seem like the idea behind God giving Moses those Ten Commandments.

Martin Luther, on the other hand, knew just how dangerous the Ten Commandments were for the right reasons. That great German reformer, who took on the Roman Catholic Church of his time and helped to start the Protestant Reformation, loved the Ten Commandments. He thought they were the greatest thing since justification and sliced tortillas. So primary were the Ten Commandments that in his Large Catechism, his primary instrument for instruction on the faith, he placed the questions concerning these Old Testament laws before such profoundly New Testament concepts such as the Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's

Creed, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. And Martin Luther did this because of his profound insight about how dangerous are Ten Commandments, in that positive sense, that far from limiting our freedom, they are a means of expressing our freedom in Christ. And when we know how free we truly are, we become truly dangerous.

That's probably not how you have heard the Ten Commandments explained before. Usually, we read the Ten as if they are a checklist for religious behavior with the implicit threat that if you break them, "God's gonna get you!" This makes the Commandments only slightly more appealing than the tax code or a speed limit sign. Coupled with the Church's traditional emphasis of grace over law, there's not much to like about the Ten Commandments at all, unless they can serve some purpose for you. Many places in the United States are still campaigning for the use of the Ten Commandments in schools even though it amounts to little more than an attempt at social control of children, putting God's scary laws up on the wall next to the Declaration of Independence in an effort to keep them in line. They might as well put up one of those paintings of a scary looking guy who has eyes that seem to look at you no matter where you are in the room and save the legal fees incurred by the inevitable challenge by civil liberties groups.

Yes, the Ten Commandments are dangerous either way, but whether we will use them as a tool or a weapon is up to us. But how do we tell the difference? How do we know how we are wielding that machete? Let me suggest that the distinction

is subtle, but worth wrapping our minds around, since there is enough death and destruction already in this world, and we need more kingdom builders. So this is what I want you to know about the Ten Commandments, that they are better obeyed than kept. Better obeyed than kept. What's the difference? Well, let me go back to that example of traffic laws. To keep the commandments is like driving around and always looking over your shoulder wondering when the police are going to pull you over for speeding since it is they who are keeping you from getting where you want to go faster because of their stupid speed limit signs. To keep means to observe, to make sure you don't transgress the letter of the law because there is a penalty or a judgment attached to being caught. It's like the apology of the child caught breaking the rules. Little Johnny isn't sorry he hurt another person; he is sorry he was caught breaking the rules and sorry he is getting punished. Not much of a deterrent against future crimes really.

However, to obey the commandments is like making driving the speed limit a way of life so that you do not endanger the lives of the children who are riding their bikes, or getting off the school bus, or jaywalking across whatever street you happen to be on. To obey the commandments is to have respect for the One who placed them in our lives and to understand that they are not there to limit us, but to free us. To obey means to live the purpose of the Commandment in the first place which is to make human life more human. This was Luther's great insight about the Commandments: that they are a statement of freedom, not a list of potential

violations. They give us freedom to love. I suspect Luther loved Psalm 19: “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving my soul. The ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold, sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.”

There is so much to say about the Ten Commandments and why they are desired more than fine gold, and sweeter than honey, but we can't do it all tonight. So what I want to do is kind of offer a brief overview of what Moses brought down from that mountain, and how that meets us here tonight. You know the story I'm sure, and not just because of Charlton Heston. The Israelites have been led out of Egypt by the outstretched arm of the Lord, and they have sung their songs of victory, and they have complained about being hungry and thirsty, and God has provided for their basic needs with manna and quail and at last they have come to Mt. Sinai where God gives them these commandments we have come to cherish. It is a transformational moment; the Israelites will never be the same. The freedom they experienced leaving Egypt is now given a form for their future together.

And so Moses comes down the mountain with two tablets. Legend has it that the tablet in Moses' right hand contained the first four commandments and the tablet in his left hand held the final six. This is significant not just that they are on different tablets, but because the Hebrew language is written from right to left, and that means that the first four commandments are really the first four. They are first because they detail the relationship between God and humans, while the final six

detail relationships among humans. The two tablets are very different but they are related in the most profound way. When we “get” the first four, we can “get” the last six. When we know who God is and what our relationship with God is, we can then begin to know who our fellow human beings are and how we are to behave toward them.

Knowing who God is is indeed a difficult task, but our first four commandments give us something of what we need to know and maybe this is why they are sweeter than honey. God gives us a personal introduction: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the house of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.” Simple enough right? But notice that it recalls all the wonderful events of recent days and the horrors of the previous 400 years and it helps Israel, and us, to realize that there is no other God who can compare, and certainly no other god worth having in the place of so mighty and gracious a God as Yahweh. It is a claim of exclusivity: I am your God, you are my people.

Then God says more: “I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.” This God is jealous for *you*. This God wants you, and loves you and will allow no other god to claim you as its own. This is a God who loves you so much that steadfast love is more powerful than

punishment. Friends: Please do not be caught up in the “unfairness” of three or four generations of children being punished for the sins of the fathers. Instead, be caught up in the grace of steadfast love flowing to a thousand generations. Those who would reject the Lord, reject the Lord for the generations in their household, and generations will suffer from not being a part of the community and from not having the law. When grandpa says no to God, the result is a whole family, three or four generations, which does not know God. But when grandpa says yes to God, God’s love flows to a thousand generations. This is what divine jealousy is all about.

I could go on about these first four commandments but it will be enough to say that they speak volumes about God’s loyalty to us and the loyalty God demands from us. They tell us of the intimacy available to us from a jealous God, an intimacy that endures, and an intimacy we are called to share. There may be no better place to recall all these things than at the Communion table, when we celebrate how Christ lived his life obediently, but with the greatest freedom and dangerously, in that positive sense. It is here that we see that same divine intimacy and jealousy. Jesus’ last supper with his disciples was not just a farewell dinner for a friend leaving on a long journey. That supper was a celebration of the same grace God showed on the night those Hebrew slaves became free so many years earlier. That supper was an echo of the Ten Commandments that gave yet another new form to their freedom for their future together. In Christ’s words, “each time you

break this bread and drink this cup, remember me,” you can hear the same sharp edge that presents us with the choice to use them as either a tool or a weapon, to obey them or to keep them.

We are not required to keep this commandment to remember Christ as a condition of our relationship with God. Rather, we choose to obey it because of our relationship with God. If we keep that commandment, all we do is eat and drink. All we do is go through the motions. All we do is congratulate ourselves that we kept Christ’s commandment again this month. But when we obey it, when we get to its heart, it opens up so much for us: it provokes us to act on behalf of the hungry, to remember our unity with Christians far and near, to rejoice that we have a freedom to love and serve others as Christ loved and served us. As we come to the table once again tonight, let us do so with gratitude for the choice God gives us to obey the commandments, and to live dangerously free. Amen.