

Covenant and Commandments

Last week we reviewed the foundational story of how God rescued the enslaved Israelites by confronting and defeating Pharaoh. God then delivered the people by bringing them through the waters of the sea. After singing a song of victory, the Israelites began trekking through the wilderness on their way to Mt. Sinai. As they traveled, they got hungry and thirsty. They started criticizing Moses and God for rescuing them. They longed for the good old days in Egypt where at least they had something to eat and drink. In response, God graciously provided water, manna, and quail for them.

Now the second half of the book of Exodus opens as Moses leads Israel to the foot of Mt. Sinai. Here God invites them to enter into a covenant relationship. This develops God's promise to Abraham that God will somehow bless all nations through Abraham's family.

In the covenant found at the beginning of Exodus 19, the Israelites find out what it means to be God's people.¹

*You saw what I did to the Egyptians, and how I lifted you up on eagles' wings and brought you to me. So now, if you faithfully obey me and stay true to my covenant, you will be my most precious possession out of all the peoples, since the whole earth belongs to me. You will be a kingdom of priests for me and a holy nation.*²

Being a priestly kingdom means that God will be their king and they are called to be the intercessors for everyone else. They are the agents through which God will bless all people. Priests aren't superior to other people. They just have a particular job to fulfill. God chooses Israel as a way to bless the world. They are chosen on behalf of all other people, not instead of all other people.

Being a holy nation means that they will be set apart from everyone else by obeying God's commandments instead of following all the gods that other people are following. They will be so shaped by God's laws, teaching, and justice that they will become God's representatives and show all of the other nations what God is truly like.

The people eagerly agree to their part of the covenant. Do they really know what they're agreeing to? Did they read the fine print? They didn't exactly fly through their first three months in the wilderness. There was lots of peril and complaining on the journey. But they also had daily reminders of God's presence, smaller miracles that helped them in their new relationship with God.

After the Israelites agree to do everything that the Lord has said, God's presence appears right on the top of Mount Sinai in the form of cloud and lightning and thunder. Then Moses goes up the mountain as their representative. God opens with a list of the basic terms of how the Israelites and God are going to relate to each other. The Ten Commandments tell them how to act as a priestly nation through which other are blessed.

In our tradition, we treat Exodus 20:2 as a preamble. *I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*³

¹ Sources consulted for this sermon include: The Bible Project: Exodus Part 2, [Overview: Exodus 19-40 - YouTube](#); Pulpit Fiction Narrative Podcast, [NL 105: Covenant and Commandments — Pulpit Fiction](#); Working Preacher's Narrative Lectionary, [#506: Covenant and Commandments - Oct. 9, 2022 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#); BibleWorm Podcast, [Episode 405 Living the Ten Commandments \(Exodus 19:1-8 and 21:1-21\) \(biblewormpodcast.com\)](#); and Ericka Shawndricka Dunbar, Commentary on Exodus 19:3-7; 20:1-17, [Commentary on Exodus 19:3-7; 20:1-17 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#).

² Exodus 19:4-6, *Common English Bible*

³ Exodus 20:2, *Common English Bible*.

We then number the commandments like this.

1. You must have no other gods before me.
2. Do not make an idol for yourself—no form whatsoever.
3. Do not use the LORD your God's name as if it were of no significance.
4. Remember the Sabbath day and treat it as holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. Do not kill.
7. Do not commit adultery.
8. Do not steal.
9. Do not testify falsely against your neighbor.
10. Do not desire and try to take anything that belongs to your neighbor.⁴

Other traditions combine the 1st and 2nd commandments and split the 10th one into two.

1. You must have no other gods before me. Do not make an idol for yourself—no form whatsoever.
2. Do not use the LORD your God's name as if it were of no significance.
3. Remember the Sabbath day and treat it as holy.
4. Honor your father and your mother.
5. Do not kill.
6. Do not commit adultery.
7. Do not steal.
8. Do not testify falsely against your neighbor.
9. Do not desire and try to take your neighbor's wife.
10. Do not desire and try to take anything else that belongs to your neighbor.⁵

Let's go with our numbering and look at each commandment in a bit more detail.

1. *You must have no other gods before me.*⁶

The relationship between God and God's people forms the foundation for all the other commandments. Living in a way consistent with these commandments is evidence of the integrity of this relationship. This commandment reminds us that none of us is God. No human characteristic – color of skin, amount of wealth, gender identification, nationality – makes anyone equal to God.

2. *Do not make an idol for yourself—no form whatsoever—of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. Do not bow down to them or worship them, because I, the LORD your God, am a passionate God. I punish children for their parents' sins even to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me. But I am loyal and gracious to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.*⁷

Several weeks ago, we read from Exodus 32 and were reminded that the Israelites broke this commandment before Moses had finished receiving more of God's instructions. Peter Goerzen did an excellent job of helping us to think of the idols we're tempted to worship.

It's distressing to read that God would punish future generations for their ancestor's sins. Of course, we realize that people's actions affect the lives of those who come after them. This commandment reminds us that God is enormously compassionate. But that doesn't mean there isn't any judgement. God has both the capacity for graciousness and for judgement. The ratio is 1000 parts grace to 4 parts judgement.

3. *Do not use the LORD your God's name as if it were of no significance; the LORD won't forgive anyone who uses his name that way.*⁸

⁴ Adapted from Exodus 20:3-17, *Common English Bible*.

⁵ Adapted from Exodus 20:3-17, *Common English Bible*.

⁶ Exodus 20:3, *Common English Bible*.

⁷ Exodus 20:4-6, *Common English Bible*.

⁸ Exodus 20:7, *Common English Bible*.

We're probably more familiar with hearing this translated as "Do not take the Lord's name in vain." The interpretation I heard the most as a child was to not use God as a swear word. The text abbreviation OMG wouldn't be permissible.

There are other ways to make wrongful use of God's name. Sometimes we invoke God in things that God doesn't want to be invoked about. Think about the times the name of God is used to justify power, empire, domestic abuse, or political gain or agendas.

This commandment warns against using the name of God for something that isn't "of" God. Be careful claiming that something is done in God's name. There are many instances where people use God's name for their own purposes or to justify their own sins rather than proclaiming the good news. Don't justify cruelty and injustice in the name of God. Don't invoke God flippantly. Call on God's name for things that are truly important to God.

It's disturbing to hear that God won't forgive anyone who uses God's name that way. This reminds us of the seriousness of this issue. Keep in mind, however, that God's grace greatly outweighs God's judgement.

4. *Remember the Sabbath day and treat it as holy. Six days you may work and do all your tasks, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. Do not do any work on it—not you, your sons or daughters, your male or female servants, your animals, or the immigrant who is living with you. Because the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and everything that is in them in six days, but rested on the seventh day. That is why the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*⁹

Some would say this is the most important commandment of the ten because it's the bridge that connects love of God to love of self and love of others. Our relationship with God transforms our relationship with one another.

In Exodus 20, the instruction is to rest on the Sabbath because God did. We're not allowed to work ourselves to death. Neither can we work any other part of creation to death. In Deuteronomy 5:15, the reason for observing the Sabbath is in remembrance of being brought out of slavery in Egypt. *Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, but the LORD your God brought you out of there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. That's why the LORD your God commands you to keep the Sabbath day.*¹⁰

In either case, the motivation for keeping the Sabbath is in response to what God has don't. It connects our relationship with God to our relationship with each other.

This commandment may be the most debated about what it exactly means. It may even be the most disregarded one.

What does it mean to keep the Sabbath? Attending a worship service? Not working in a paying job? Not eating in a restaurant or shopping in a store? When I was in Jerusalem, I ate a Sabbath meal with orthodox Jews who would not drive, turn a light on or off, or cook during Sabbath. The meal we ate was prepared before the sun went down Friday night.

This brings up more Sabbath questions. When is the Sabbath? Two congregations worship in this building. For the United Church of God, Sabbath is on Saturday, so they meet for worship on Saturday afternoon. For us, it's Sunday. Many pastors, for whom Sunday is a working day, take some other day during the week as their Sabbath.

I'm not going to give you a list of dos and don'ts for Sunday. I will remind you that there's something inherent in the universe that requires rest. We need to step outside the world of constant productivity. It's important to pause and worship God. It's also important for us to take a break and care for ourselves and other relationships. Each one of us must figure out how that works best for us.

5. *Honor your father and your mother so that your life will be long on the fertile land that the LORD your God is giving you.*¹¹

⁹ Exodus 20:8-11, *Common English Bible*.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 5:15, *Common English Bible*.

¹¹ Exodus 20:12, *Common English Bible*.

This is another commandment that brings about a lot of debate. What exactly does it mean to honor your father and mother? What if your father or mother are abusive and not worthy of honor?

There could be a connection between this and the previous commandment. You keep the Sabbath because your value isn't tied up with what you produce. Productivity isn't a measure of someone's worth. So, honor those who are no longer productive. Be a people who takes care of the elders in your midst.

Honoring your father and your mother also provides a beginning point for love. If you can't love your family who are your closest people, then you don't have any chance of loving other people. Loving others begins somewhere. In the case where it's impossible due to the nature of your given family, then it can begin in a chosen family.

The final five commandments are short, so I'll keep my comments brief on each of them. Taken as a group, they are a good baseline for forming community. In fact, these aren't unique to "faithful" people. They're the basic necessities of having a well-functioning society. The bottom line is respect. These rules call us to respect the integrity of another person.

6. *Do not kill.*¹²

Respect life. Don't take life away from someone else.

7. *Do not commit adultery.*¹³

Respect the commitment you make to a life partner. Respect the commitments other people have made to each other.

8. *Do not steal.*¹⁴

Respect the belongings of someone else.

9. *Do not testify falsely against your neighbor.*¹⁵

Don't manipulate justice to take away the rights of others.

10. *Do not desire and try to take your neighbor's house. Do not desire and try to take your neighbor's wife, male or female servant, ox, donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.*¹⁶

It's human nature to look at other people, compare ourselves to them, and wish you had things that they have, including wishing for some of the relationships they have. This commandment is to respect people and the things that belong to them. Desiring or coveting prevents you from seeing and valuing your own worth rather than comparing it to others.

In addition, when you strongly desire for what your neighbor has, when you lust for it, that gets in the way of the thing you should strive for the most, your relationship with God. Nothing else should come between you and God.

Most translations prohibit coveting what your neighbor has. The *Common English Bible* expands that to "do not desire and try to take" your neighbor's house, wife, servant, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor. This could include scheming or stacking the deck, so I get what I want, and you don't get what you want. An example might be valuing my money so much that I scheme to avoid paying the taxes that give other people what they need. The bottom line is to be careful what you desire and always remember who the true God is.

After this list in Exodus 20 comes a collection of 52 additional commands which fill out the first ten in more detail. There are laws about Israel's worship, about social justice, about how they are to live together. Following these laws will shape Israel into a nation of justice and generosity that's different from the other nations.

¹² Exodus 20:13, *Common English Bible*.

¹³ Exodus 20:14, *Common English Bible*.

¹⁴ Exodus 20:15, *Common English Bible*.

¹⁵ Exodus 20:16, *Common English Bible*.

¹⁶ Exodus 20:17, *Common English Bible*.

Additional lists of requirements are found in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and in the prophets. Leviticus 19 contains some of the commandments found in Exodus 20 and also includes laws providing for the poor, protecting the handicapped, insuring justice without partiality, calling for love of neighbor, and protecting the stranger.

We continue to have many questions about the commandments. What exactly does each one mean? Why do we highlight some as more important than others and maybe even ignore one or more completely? How do these relate to the laws that follow in subsequent chapters? How did Jesus interpret and relate to them?

Jesus' instructions often go beyond the law. They are stricter than the law demands. On the other hand, we find many stories of Jesus breaking laws that are of utmost importance to his religion. He breaks the Sabbath by healing people and feeding his disciples. He breaks written and unwritten rules by touching people who are sick, eating with people who are considered unworthy, and speaking to women who he should be avoiding.

For Jesus, the bottom line is relationship. According to Jesus, the two greatest commandments are: Love God with all your being and Love others as much as you love yourself.¹⁷ Look at all the laws, instructions, and commandments with these two statements in mind. Is following a rule not enough to maintain a healthy relationship with God, with another person, or with yourself? Then go beyond it. What's right for someone else might be wrong for you. Is following a rule hindering your relationship with God, with another person, or with yourself? Then break it. What's wrong for someone else might be right for you.

It all comes down to valuing the integrity of relationships with God, with other people and with ourselves. In Exodus 20, the people have come out of slavery and don't know how to be in relationship with each other. These laws help form them as a community.

God genuinely wants to be in relationship with us. How do these laws form us as a community? How does honoring God make it possible for us to be better people and in better relationships with others?

Each week I listen to a variety of people commenting on the scripture of the day. One podcaster mentioned the way a student of hers was introduced to the Ten Commandments. They can be read as permission rather than as prohibition and summed up in seven phrases.¹⁸

We have:

1. Permission to choose God among the multiplicity of gods.
2. Permission to rest rather than to work as slaves.
3. Permission to celebrate our ancestry rather than be enslaved because of it.
4. Permission to value life rather than take it.
5. Permission to expect fidelity in our personal life as well as in spiritual life.
6. Permission to trust God will continue to provide rather than taking from others.
7. Permission to trust God to supply what we need rather than desiring what others have that we don't have.

I invite you to live in the joy and freedom that comes from living out these instructions rather than to be weighed down by them. I pray that we will be so shaped by God's laws, teaching, and justice that we will become God's representatives and show everyone what God is truly like.

Let's pray: God of the commandments, you gave the Israelites laws so that they might live in harmony with one another. Show us how to live in peace, so that all may know of your love. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.¹⁹

¹⁷ Matthew 5:34-40.

¹⁸ Working Preacher Narrative Lectionary, #506: [Covenant and Commandments - Oct. 9, 2022 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#), beginning at 12:11.

¹⁹ [Commentary on Exodus 19:3-7; 20:1-17 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)