

Mo Blessings Mo Problems sermon series  
God's Top Ten List - Exodus 20:1-21  
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Before we read the scripture passage, let's take a quiz: How many of the Ten Commandments can you name? Four? Six? I'll prime the pump for you a bit. "Thou shalt not kill" is in there. "Thou shalt not reply all" is not. "Do not bear false witness" – in there. "Do not leave your Zoom mic unmuted"...not in there. "Honor your father and mother" is in there. "Honor your barista and food server" is not in there...but it should be! Let's listen to the complete list as it's given in Exodus. (READ SCRIPTURE)

We continue our sermon series on the life of Moses by looking at this watershed moment in the history of the Israelites. When we left them, the Israelites had been delivered from slavery in Egypt, as Moses had led them through the Red Sea and into freedom. But the Israelites were an ungrateful bunch, and immediately started complaining about how life was better for them as slaves than as nomadic wanderers in the wilderness. God answered their grumbling by providing manna for them to eat, but also gave them strict instructions on when and how much to gather. God did this as a test to see if the Israelites were going to obey God and be faithful.

That quiz was just a precursor for the big exam, which we get today. Moses leads the Israelites to the base of Mt. Sinai, where God gives to Moses the laws that God wants the people to follow. Eventually they will receive over 613 laws addressing their clothing, their food, their work, and their relationships. But it all starts here with the Top Ten List.

Thousands of years later, the 10 Commandments have become a lightning rod in our culture. Their absence from schools and courthouses has been lifted up as a symbol of our increasingly de-Christianized culture (never mind that the laws are thoroughly Jewish). And yet, some of those same folks who are vitriolic about the absence of the commandments in the public square aren't always great at following them themselves. At times, it has felt to me like there's been more energy expended in fighting over the laws than actually following them.

There has also been a lot of debate on how to apply these laws. They are frustratingly ambiguous. "You shall not murder" – does that include self-defense? What about as an act of war? "Honor your father and mother" – even if one of them is abusive? I had a congregation member say to me this week he was afraid he was breaking the commandment to not covet because he really wanted a Ford Mustang like his neighbor's. I assured him that his spot in Heaven was still secure, but only if he gave me a ride.

That highlights one of the misuses of the Ten Commandments. When we read them, we immediately apply them individually, as if they are a checklist for our own personal spiritual lives. But that was never their intention. The commandments were not written for individuals; they were written for a community. In the Israelite culture, there was no such thing as making a name for yourself. Everyone was a part of family, which was a part of a tribe, which was part of the Israelite nation. Everyone was connected to everyone else, and individual actions had social and communal repercussions. God's focus here is not to make the Israelites really nice people. It's to foster social cohesion, to create a community saturated with godliness so that they can be agents of change, image-bearers of God to the nations around them. These are the instructions.

Have you ever tried to put something together without instructions? I've muddled my way through the construction of many pieces of furniture with nothing but a few pictures and some directions written in Japanese. After several starts and restarts, I usually end up with

several parts left over and a final project that looks like an MC Escher drawing. You can't overvalue good instructions, and that's what God is providing to the Israelites with the law.

It's important to note that the law is not a condition for the Israelites becoming God's people. "Do this and then I will love you." That's already happened. This isn't about winning God's favor; it's about being the people God created them to be. It's about helping them purge Egypt from their systems and live out the freedom God gained for them. As Brian McLaren wrote, "Through the 10 plagues, God got the people out of slavery. Through the 10 Commandments, God is getting the slavery out of the people." They are no longer beholden to the forces that kept them down. They no longer have to meet certain criteria or quotas in order to be deemed as valuable. That's important for us to remember when we turn faith into a to-do list, as if we can earn our way onto God's good side. We mess up and think God doesn't love us any more or we're not worthy of being God's child. But that's already been decided when Christ died on the cross. We're eternally on God's good side, which should compel us to live in a way that reflects it. By living out the law, people see God through us, as imperfect as that reflection may be.

OK, so let's take the scenic overview trip through the laws. Each one could be its own sermon, so I'll just hit some highlights on the tour. The first law sets the tone for the other nine. "You shall have no other gods before me." Notice God doesn't say, "There are no other gods." The Israelites spent the last 400 years in Egypt, where multiple gods was the norm. And they're about to move into territory where the surrounding nations will bow down to a number of deities. God is basically saying that other gods may exist, but none of them saved the Israelites from slavery. They may be tempted to worship other gods, but they need to remember to Whom they belong.

Well, it's a good thing we don't have to face that temptation anymore? I've never considered praying to Zeus or worshipping Ra or Osiris. But I am tempted to worship other gods, like money, power, security, property. "You shall have no other gods before me." What gods do we put before the One True God? I wonder if the need to be right is a false god we worship, or making a name for ourselves is a false god we worship, or the pursuit of comfort is a false god we worship.

The second commandment is related to the first: Don't make idols or graven images of God. As soon as we think we can capture God in a statue, we start think that actually represents God. When I was a kid, my favorite baseball card was a 1976 Topps All-Star George Foster. I worshipped that card! Then one day, it accidentally got torn, and for weeks I worried that the actual George Foster was going to have a bad season because I tore his card. Every time he struck out, I took the blame. If you put too much emphasis on the church or the Bible or a pastor, you start worshipping the wrong thing. With this commandment, God is basically saying, "You look silly bowing down to statues. You don't need them. You have me."

The commandment about the Sabbath is interesting because (1) it's a positive command and (2) the law is linked directly to the creation story, where God rested after six days of work. The Hebrew word "remember" is here an active remembering, not a passive one. It's the difference between remembering your anniversary – "Hey, I think today's my anniversary" – and actually acting on that memory, which I highly recommend doing! Interestingly, I would bet that this commandment is the one we break most regularly.

The first four commandments are about conduct toward God; the last six focus on conduct toward others, and this is where the ambiguity comes in. For example, "Do not kill," even though God and the Israelites do plenty of killing in the Old Testament. One commentary

said that this most likely refers to the type of killing God wouldn't allow. When you figure out what that is, please let me know, because I really struggle with how to apply this commandment. "Do not bear false witness" would be very important in the Israelite society for enacting proper justice. They didn't have DNA testing or video cameras back then, so guilt or innocence depended upon the reliability of eyewitnesses. False witnesses would actually have to bear the punishment intended for the accused.

The last commandment, "Do not covet" is a summary of the others. If you covet your neighbor's wife, you'll commit adultery. If you covet your neighbor's stuff, you'll steal. If you covet more substantial things, it could lead to murder. In other words, be happy with what you have, which is something we still need to hear today.

So, what do we do with these laws today? Jesus said he came to fulfill the law, which means technically we are no longer beholden to them. And yet, in the course of his teachings, he reiterated nine of the 10 as being important (the only one he didn't was the Sabbath). They are obviously still important to follow, or else the whole of society would disintegrate. It's easy for us to judge others who break certain commandments, while forgetting that each and every one of us has broken, will break, or is currently breaking one of these commandments.

Here's what I think we should do with them. I think we should keep them close to us as guidelines for who God is calling us to be and then focus on the ones that we find most difficult. I've done a pretty good job in my life of not killing; that's one I feel like I will be able to keep. But I haven't been so good about not coveting or about putting other gods before the One True God. And each time I break one of these, I'm not only hurting myself or others, I'm hurting my relationship with God.

Just as with the Israelites, how well we follow these laws has an impact on how well we reflect God's image. Like them, we are surrounded by people who don't know God, or worse, don't care. And one of the reasons they feel that way is that they've seen how Christians have acted down through the years. If we're honest, we've done our part to tear at the social fabric of America, praising God's name on Sunday and then worshipping false gods or using God's name in vain or coveting something or someone the rest of the week.

So the challenge given to us today is the same challenge given to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. God loves us and wants us to fulfill our potential as God's people, called to a higher standard of how we live our lives. Here is who God is calling us to be. Do these things and be blessed. Don't do these things and you will not be a blessing to others. The laws have been given, Christ has shown us how to live and love and serve others. So the choice is ours. When we leave this place, who will we worship?