

The Greatest Commandment

by Rev. Durrell Watkins Lent 2, 2008

There are actually hundreds of biblical rules, laws, prohibitions, and directives. Of all the biblical directives, the ten that are most famous are the so-called Ten Commandments. To hear politicians trying to court religious voters, one would think that everyone seeking political office not only believes in the Ten Commandments but also believes strict adherence to them is a prerequisite for being a good leader, a good citizen, or even a good person! I doubt if most people who claim to believe in the 10 commandments could even name all ten.

Of course, even the most devout Christian usually observes 8 of the commandments at best. For instance, if we decorate our homes or churches with portraits of Jesus or Mary, or if we wear crosses or have eagles adorning our pulpits or doves etched into stained glass windows...then we aren't strictly obeying the second commandment: to not make any graven images.

With the exception of our Seventh Day Adventist friends, most Christians worship on Sunday, the first day of the week rather than on the Jewish Sabbath. So we don't really obey the fourth commandment which instructs us to keep the Sabbath day holy.

As with most literature, the bible is complex and the Ten Commandments are not without their complexities and nuances. The third commandment forbids us from using the divine name in vain, but the first commandment tells us which divine name it means. The name that should never be used in vain, according to this biblical passage, is Yahweh. Most of us refer to ultimate reality simply as "God." The least religious among us wouldn't use the name Yahweh in vain because most of us wouldn't use that name at all.

The fifth commandment tells us to honor our parents. As a child, I was led to believe that was God's way of telling me to comply with my parents' wishes. But this text isn't written to children; it's written to and for adults. Children don't need God to tell them to behave; their care-givers will try to make sure they behave properly. The fifth commandment is telling adults to honor their elderly parents. In a world where there was no Social Security or Medicare, this commandment was meant to ensure a good quality of life for seniors.

The sixth commandment tells us to not murder, but every civilized society has figured out that murder is bad. It isn't bad because it wound up on this list; it's just bad.

The seventh commandment tells us to not commit adultery...but it comes from a society where a man could have multiple wives. Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. David had multiple wives. Jacob had two wives and had children with two of his servants. In a world that allows multiple romantic partners, what's adultery? There are several possible answers, but perhaps the spirit (if not the letter) of the commandment is to honor your commitments. When we enter into a covenantal relationship, our integrity demands that we honor the agreements we made in forming that covenant. Keeping the seventh commandment then requires more ethical work on our part than simply avoiding certain behaviors. It challenges us make our promises carefully, and then honor the promises we make...it doesn't necessarily tell us what those promises need to look like.

Well, you get the idea. The Ten Commandments are not just 10 rules to unquestionably obey. They come to us in their context, and it takes effort to then apply them in our context. This isn't just a short list of do's and don'ts. This is something more, and for these commandments to truly be guidelines for good living, we must allow them to be more than ancient do's and don'ts...otherwise they will be little more than obsolete expectations of antiquity that we have trouble even remembering.

Jesus gives us a clue about how to both understand and apply the spirit of these ancient directives. A Pharisee came to Jesus and asked him which of the hundreds of commandments of religious law were the most important. A strict legalist would be expected to honor all the laws and commandments. How can you say one is greater than another? So the question is meant to trip Jesus up. Using religion to control or manipulate or hurt others is nothing new...as long as there has been religion there have been people willing to misuse it.

So, in an attempt to trap Jesus, a religious legalist asks him, "which is the greatest commandment?" But Jesus doesn't think of religion as a prison that keeps people bound. Jesus uses his tradition to empower, to help, to heal, to inspire, to liberate. And so he says, it just so happens there are a couple of commandments that trump all the rest, because all the rest are just commentary on the two!

Which is the greatest commandment? Jesus doesn't even refer to the list of ten...instead he quotes Deuteronomy 6.5, "Love the Eternal with all that you are." There's another commandment that is equal to the first, he says. He then quotes Leviticus 19.18, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus has already said this in the Sermon on the Mount when he says, "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." He went on to say, "this is the law and the prophets," that is, the whole biblical message boils down to living lives of love. The prophet Micah said something similar when he wrote, "This is what God requires of you: Only to act justly and love mercy and live humbly." Another New Testament writer said, "God is Love and whoever lives in love lives in God and God lives in them."

Love God and love your neighbor...those are the greatest commandments for Jesus, and they are alike. How do you love God? Not by what you believe or by what you call yourself, but loving other people? In other words, "the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe."

Love isn't about conforming to someone else's idea of "nice." Love isn't always agreeing, always being in a good mood, or always being sweet. I know some very loving people who are almost never sweet. Love is simply caring about the welfare of another. Love disagrees without disregarding. Love confronts without attacking. Love can be tough without being mean. Love says, "I won't forget your sacred value; even when it's hard for me to perceive, I will still choose to know that you and I are both expressions of the love of God." As long as we are willing to love just that much, we can't really go very wrong, ever.

First, we learn to love ourselves so that we have love to give and so that we know how to express love. Then we love our neighbors as we love ourselves. And when we do that, we will be loving God.

Don't worry about the Ten Commandments, or any commandment, because if you love yourself you will be able to love others, and if you love others, you are loving God. If you love others, you won't break your promises to them, and that expresses love for God. If you love others, you won't rob them, hurt them, or begrudge their happiness. If you love others, you will support organizations and vote for candidates that promote peace and goodwill and justice for all people. If you love others you won't try to sabotage their success, you won't vilify them, you won't deny them their dignity. If you love others you'll want them to be healthy and happy and prosperous. If you love others, you'll fulfill the law of God because the law of God is the law of love.

Instead of insisting on the Ten Commandments being displayed in public, our more zealous friends should insist on the Golden Rule being displayed...because when we follow that rule, the so-call commandments are fulfilled without effort.

Learning to love ourselves means we have love to share with others; and when we truly love others, we are expressing love for God. When we allow ourselves to love and to express that love

in how we behave toward one another, we are living in communion with divine love, that infinite, unconditional, all-inclusive love that we call God...This is the Good News. Amen.

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Divine Love blesses my body.
Divine Love blesses my relationships.
Divine Love blesses my finances.
Divine Love blesses my endeavors.
Divine Love blesses my world.
I live in the power of love...
And all is well.
Amen.