

November 8, 2020
Surprise! Ten Keys to a Better World
Exodus 20

Stuart Briscoe writes, *"Suppose you decide to attend a symphony concert. You arrive and discover it's not the normal concert at all. You notice the timpani player seems to be having a clambake in his drum – clouds of steam curl above it. That seems rather surprising, but even worse, the tuba player has cabbages and cauliflowers growing quite nicely in his instrument. Intriguingly, the harpist seems to have laundry draped over her harp. "It's my right," she stammers.*

"The conductor comes on, notice all this, and insists the three musicians clean up their act. 'It won't do!' he tells them. 'I will not tolerate this.' So they get rid of the clambake, the vegetables, and the wash.

"Everything's fine, right?"

"No, because they start to play, but as soon as the timpani player picks up his mallet, the trumpeter gets close to him and the drum player hits the fellow over the right ear with a resounding crack! This produces the wrong kind of sound..."

"The conductor says, 'Come on now! Cut it out and get your act together.' Now everything should be okay. Right?"

"Not yet. The conductor raises his baton and the brass starts playing the 1812 Overture, the woodwinds play a gavotte, and strings play Viennese waltzes. Each of these is very beautiful, but together they are totally chaotic. The bass player wants to play the blues: "Who says the conductor's the boss?" he huffs.

*"The conductor finally gets control: "Stop that! We'll play Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.' Now, if they cooperate, the orchestra has a sense of direction. The conductor has sorted out the individual instruments; he's considered the relationship of one instrument to another, and he's developed a common theme." (adapted from, *The Ten Commandments*, p. xv-xvi)*

These days seem a lot like that orchestra. As a culture, we value things like "self-fulfilment" and our "rights" – by which we mean what I want. We should be free to make our own choices, whatever we want, whenever we want, wherever we want, with whomever we want ... regardless of other people's wellbeing. We shouldn't have to follow government "rules": our "freedoms" are most important. We see it in the news all the time, don't we?

True, there have been times when some rules for society were defined unjustly. People suffered because the rules were evil.

There was a time in Nova Scotia, for instance, when, unless you belonged to a particular church, you could not receive post-secondary education. Baptists – significantly – were on

the forefront of the drive for "religious liberty" in Canada, arguing that all people should have equal opportunity for education, regardless of their religious affiliation.

There was a time when certain ethnic groups and cultures were considered inferior to others and systematic discrimination – even cultural genocide – was the order of the day. Thankfully, Baptists have been on the front lines, envisioning a society where all people – regardless of ethnicity, gender, or ability – are treated equally. With dignity, and respect.

The "good old days" weren't necessarily always so "good."

But we can take things too far. And we can think it "unjust" when we are simply asked to respect one another's welfare and wellbeing. We risk jeopardizing others' health to express our "rights." At some point we need to reach a consensus about what the "rules" for a civil society ought to be. And that brings us to the Ten Commandments.

1. Where do the Ten Commandments come from?

The Ten Commandments don't simply come from thin air. In the Old Testament, God established a covenant – a solemn, legally binding agreement – with Abraham, that his descendants would be the God's people, whom He would love, care for, and protect, and who would be God's good news to the world (Genesis 12:1-3).

The heart of the covenant is love: God's love for us, our love for God, love for one another.

Think first about God's love for His people. Love is not really some warm, fuzzy feeling. It's not fundamentally a romantic notion. Love is about action. It's a verb more than a noun.

God demonstrated His side of the covenant – His faithfulness to Abraham's children – by miraculously delivering them from slavery in Egypt through the Passover and the parting of the Red Sea. As the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, quarrelling and testing God (Exodus 17), God reaffirms His covenant with the people again and again, providing food, water, protection, and ultimately His Promise Land.

He rescues us from sin and the power of death through Jesus. God so loved the world, ultimately, that He gives His one and only Son – Jesus. God shows His love in action.

Second, think about our love for God. God emphasizes His people have a responsibility in the covenant as well – to love Him and keep faithful to Him. God says, *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength"* (Deuteronomy 6:5). *"If you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the peoples on earth; for all the earth belongs to me. And you will be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation"* (19:5-6).

But how would the people do that? What does it mean to love God? It's not a nice cozy feeling either. Remember love is about action. It's a verb more than a noun. We love God by showing He is supreme in our lives, by trusting Him, and obeying what He commands (*"If you love me,"* says Jesus, *"you will obey what I command"* [John 14:15]).

"The people want to know how to love me?" God asks Moses. *"Fine, I will give you some practical ways that they can show they love me – in deed as well as in word!"* The first four of the Ten Commandments give us practical ways we can express our love for God.

God's love for us. Our love for God. The third great covenant theme is love for other people: *"Love your neighbour as yourself"* (Leviticus 19:18). What does that mean? Who is my neighbour? – everyone (Luke 10:25-37). How does that "live out"? Remember love shows itself in action – it's a verb more than a noun – so, practically, how do I love my neighbour?

"Do the people want to know?" God says. *"Fine, I'll include that in some Commandments, too."* The other six commandments give us practical ways we can love our neighbour.

The Ten Commandments, then, outline our part of the agreement, God's covenant with us, His people. They do so by answering the basic questions:

1. What does it mean for us to love God?
2. What does it mean for us to love our neighbour?

These are practical guidelines for how we can live the kind of fulfilled, satisfying life that God created us to enjoy ... And how we can create a society that is just and harmonious.

2. Are the Ten Commandments Still Relevant?

We may think of the Ten Commandments are rather old-fashioned (they were given thousands of years ago). But as we read through them today, what do you think? Are they really out-of-date? Or, do they still make good sense?

The God who gave them back then is the same yesterday, today, and forever – He hasn't changed. People, created in His image, haven't changed. If the Ten Commandments were solid foundation stones for human society back then, they are just as relevant today. If we ignore them, society falls apart. Because they simply "fit" who we are, as people whom God created, so perfectly. Surely, we should expect such perfection from God?

Some folks do argue that for us, as Christians, the Ten Commandments now longer matter. After all, the New Testament emphasizes we are saved by God's grace, through faith (Romans 1:17, Ephesians 2:1-10), not by works (even good works, like keeping all the details of the law) – if you've been reading through Romans with us in the Reading Guides, you will have heard this theme over and over again.

But we need to be careful. In Romans, Paul is reacting to a group of people in the early church ("Judaizers") who insisted, in order to be saved, Christians had to keep the hundreds of picayune little rules the Jewish rabbis had developed over the centuries. Paul is saying that kind of self-righteous navel-gazing is not what saves us, as none of us can live perfectly (some weren't even biblical). We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus.

We are SAVED by faith, not rules. But then, because we love God, we obey God's commands. After all, God knows best how we as people, and society, work. The commandments don't save us. But if we love God, we will want to show that by loving Him with our whole being and loving our neighbour as ourselves – and society will be good. We live the commandments as our common sense, loving response to God's grace.

Jesus says, *"Do not think I have come to abolish the Law ... I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them"* (Matthew 5:17). The word "fulfil" literally means *"to give full meaning to."* Jesus has come to demonstrate what a life lived by (embodying) the commandments looks like, and to teach what God means by them (Matthew 5:21-48). That kind of way of living, shaped by God's will, gives us a full and satisfying life and gives life to those around us.

3. A Positive Take on the Ten Commandments

When an expert in the Jewish law asked Jesus, *"Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?"* Jesus replied, *"You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments"* (Matthew 28:36-40).

The Ten Commandments provide some practical guidelines – mostly in negative terms.

Jesus recasts the Ten Commandments for us in positive terms. Simply NOT doing bad things is OK, but what if we actually, actively aimed to do GOOD things? What if we're defined, not by what we DON'T do (what we're against), but what we DO DO (what we're FOR) – justice, peace, reconciliation, hope, mercy, forgiveness, joy, compassion, love?

The symphony does not work when people simply don't play the WRONG notes. The symphony works when everyone follows the director and plays the same piece. Community – be it a family, a church, a city, or all humanity – doesn't work well when just DON'T do ten bad things. Community works when we follow the same Director and play from the same score, too. What if we didn't just NOT do bad things, but actually did decent, good things.

- How can I actively love God with all my heart, soul, and mind? What does that mean in my life? For me, that includes being disciplined reading Scripture, praying as a dynamic conversation with God not a duty, caring for God's creation.
- How can I actively love my neighbour as myself? What would that mean in my life? For me, that includes being caring about issues like homelessness, social justice, and compassion. It means supporting a refugee couple to begin a new life. It means DOING things together to make the world a better place.