

Commandments to Words; Exodus 20:1-4,7-9,12-20; Pent 19A/Prop22A
Second Presbyterian Church
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Scripture:

Then God spoke all these words:

2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me.

4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

7 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses God's name.

8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹For six days you shall labor and do all your work.

12 Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

13 You shall not murder.

14 You shall not commit adultery.

15 You shall not steal.

16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

17 You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

18 When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, ¹⁹and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.' ²⁰Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of God upon you so that you do not sin.'

Sermon:

The story of Moses receiving the ten commandments is told two different times in the Hebrew Bible. Once in Exodus and once in Deuteronomy. The story in Exodus is a bit hard to follow but the synopsis of the story is this: Moses receives the ten commandments from God on Mt. Sinai. The finger of God writes them on two stone tablets. When Moses comes down from the mountain to deliver the information to the people, he finds the people worshipping a golden calf. Moses is so angry he throws the tablets down on the ground and breaks them.

The story is sad and interesting at the same time, but I want to know what the ten commandments mean for our lives today. Before we can answer that question, I think it is helpful to know the context in which such commandments were received. That context might help us understand what it means for us today.

God has chosen the people of Israel for a special relationship. These people God has chosen are a difficult group. Despite God's faithfulness, they whine and complain and are not faithful to God. They don't seem to understand their role in this relationship, so they wander in the desert for 40 years trying to determine who they are.

The desert is often depicted in the Bible as a dry time of searching. For the Hebrew people, the desert is a place where they existed between slavery and the fulfillment of the promise by God to occupy their own land. Before they were able to receive the promise of God, the people needed to determine who they were in relation to God. Perhaps, God used this time to teach them what it means to be in a covenant relationship. After all, the only way we can know who we are as God's people is to know who God is.

God wanted the Hebrew people to understand that they were different from the surrounding cultures by their relationship with God. All other cultures at this time were not only polytheistic, venerating many gods, they were terrified of the unknown nature of these gods. There was no healthy relationship, only fear of those gods and what they might do.

First and foremost, God established this trusting relationship in which Israel could depend. It went all the way back to Abraham and Sarah. Later, God listened and heard the cries of the people when they were enslaved by Pharaoh. God saved them from Pharaoh and brought them out of Egypt. The Hebrew people could count on God's faithfulness. Now it was time for some guidelines for the people to help them with their part of the promise and to set them apart from other nations.

The first thing to note is that the Hebrew word we see translated as commandment, actually means "word." Saying The Ten Words instead of The Ten Commandments might give us a better understanding of God's intent for these laws.

First, the text reads "Then God spoke all these words..." (v. 1), but before God begins the list of words, God first reminds the people of who God is: *I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery* (v. 2). God establishes what God has done for the people, reminding them of God's faithfulness. *Remember, I provided you with love and care long before you did anything for me.* A relationship established before the commandments or words are even given, because the only way we can know who we are as God's people is to know who God is. Faithful.

Unfortunately, while Moses is gone to receive God's words, the people grow restless and fearful. They forget God's faithfulness. They want something that they can see, feel, and touch that will give them security. They ask Aaron, Moses' brother, to make them a golden calf. The people remove their jewelry and give it to Aaron. The gold is melted down into an idol the people worship. When Moses comes down the mountain with the two tablets of the law, he finds the people dancing, singing, and celebrating around the golden calf. In his anger Moses breaks the tablets written by God's own finger.

By this account, the people have already broken commandment one, have no other gods before me, and commandment two, do not make or worship idols. They have failed before they have received the actual words. But God is faithful. God takes Moses right back up that mountain and gives him the ten words again, beginning with "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in loyal love and faithfulness..." (Ex. 34:6)

On that second trip up the mountain, God reiterated the covenant God made with the people. I have already saved you. You can trust in me. I will keep the covenant I promised to Abraham and Sarah.

Covenant is the key term here. Covenant in the Hebrew Bible comes from the Hebrew word *berit* and "refers to two or more parties bound together."¹ There is a slight problem, however, with the word covenant. A human covenant refers to a relationship between two equal parties who are bound to one another. The relationship of covenant described here between God and humans cannot possibly be an equal relationship.

Does God understand that there is no way the people can keep these ten commandments? It's not even possible; we are human.

Perhaps, using words instead of commandments helps after all. The ten words might help us to know how God loves us perfectly, and therefore, how we should love even if it is imperfect. God reacts in love no matter what we do, or how much we complain, or how many golden calves we might worship. To know God is to better understand how we should act as God's people. If the ten words are the ways God loves and the ways that God acts out of faithfulness to us, they are also the ways we can act in faithfulness to God. These are the ways God expects us to love as God's people, people set apart by God. Set apart not because we are special, but because we remember that God has brought us out of Egypt and given us everything we can ever need. God has chosen us, called us to be people recognized for acting as God would act, loving as God would love, no matter what.

What do the ten words mean for our lives today? Perhaps, the ten words are more ways for us to understand how God loves, so that we can emulate that love as

¹ Bakers Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology—Covenant, from Bible Study Tools website, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/covenant/> accessed 10/7/23.

best we can as God's imperfect people. God has saved us before we even knew God; before we could possibly deserve such amazing love.

In the name of God who spoke the ten words of love, Christ who showed us what God's love looks like, and the Spirit who gives us grace when we fail. Amen.