

THE TEN BEST WAYS*

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Every so often a new campaign comes up to put the Ten Commandments up in some public location and then the whole furor erupts. However I was wondering what would happen if we stopped talking about engraving these up on a wall somewhere and rather focused on engraving them in our hearts. How many of the people who want them posted actually follow them?

I am reminded of a story making the rounds on the internet. A woman is driving through traffic in a busy city. Yelling at drivers who are going to slow, cutting people off, telling people they are number 1 (if you catch my drift) in general being an angry aggressive driver. As she sat behind a car and blew her horn because they were too slow to start up when the light changed she noticed that the police car behind had turned on his lights. When she pulled over the officer asked for her license and registration. After a few minutes he came back up to the window and told her she could go on. She asked why had she been stopped. He replied, "Well, I saw all the Christian bumper stickers on your car Honk if you love Jesus, God is my copilot, and the one that said Follow me to the Fellowship Church. Given the way you were driving I assumed you had stolen the car."

The point being that she professed one way of being with her bumper stickers, but another way with her actions. A challenge today is that so many people claim to be Christians but their actions say something else. Their actions make others wonder if they have really read and understood the 10 commandments.

For many following the 10 commandments are a list of things we should not do and risk punishment from God if we do. What if we looked at them as a list of how to live and recognized that they are a gift from God because God loves us and wants us to get along?

So how would this change our view of the Ten Commandments?

The "Ten Best Ways" is the Godly Play terminology for the Ten Commandments. First of all please notice that they come in box that is shaped like a heart. This signifies them as a gift of love from God. When I tell this story I turn many of the commandments into positives. They become things we should do rather than things we should not. Ultimately the Ten Best Ways are about building and sustaining a healthy community and that is exactly what the Ten Commandments have always been about. This is all about a healthy God loving community.

How different might our world be if we operated out of an attitude of maintaining healthy community rather than cringing and living in fear? There are not ten in this list for some

have been combined, especially in the first three which all pertain to our attitude towards God. The second section is about how we live as a community with each other.

Love God; fear God, more than anything else

In biblical times the phrase no other Gods before me meant that the other gods who were worshiped all over the countryside were lesser powers. This did not mean that there were no other gods, but that God was the one to be worshipped and revered above all others. The part about making idols has to do with investing the power of God in a physical object. These objects then became the focus of worship and had great power over a person's life.

In our society we may not make physical wood or stone idols that we worship. However it is sadly true that many of us invest great power in objects of wood, stone and metal. The more we have of these objects the greater the power they seem to have to govern our lives.

I heard an NPR program this summer where the person being interviewed had written a book about how to become rich. Not just a little, but really wealthy. When people asked what was the secret he said, "You must sacrifice everything on the altar of money. If you are not willing to sacrifice everything than you may be successful, but will never be truly wealthy." I at least give him points for being honest. He also said that he had done this and did not recommend it to anybody.

The Rev. Nick White who preached at my installation here as rector always reminded his congregations during the Stewardship Campaign that a budget is a theological statement. They tell us with painful accuracy where our priorities are. Where your money is will show you where your heart is.

These commandments were all summarized by the shema, the oldest Hebrew prayer that says to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and all your might. This command begins the version of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy.

Be careful when you use God's name.

This is more than just swearing or taking the Lord's name in vain. People say and do things in God's name which are often not very Godly. I had a conversation on the field walking the dogs the other day with a woman who had been raised in a parochial school and had the fear of God beaten into her. She has not darkened the door of a church since then. The other day a minister walked into her office and asked if she was a Christian. She said most of the time. This started him on a rant that ended with him basically telling her she was going to hell because she hadn't been baptized by immersion etc. Now this minister undid about six months of work that I had done to try and entice this woman into coming to St. Aidan's. I was trying to convince her that God loved her.

This is about how we use God to back up "our side" in an argument. I almost always cringe when I hear someone say God told me that we should and then you can fill in the blank. You have a wonderful saying in this parish from a Shrinemont conference years ago that pops

up once in awhile, “Who said God said?” Before we say God is on our side, we should in the words of Abraham Lincoln ask, are we on God’s side? That is the bigger question. Much of what is wrong today would be righted if we would take more time to consider if we are on God’s side, doing what God desires rather than operating out of thinking God is on our side.

Remember to take Sabbath time

The commentary in the New Interpreters Bible states: Sabbath is the regular disengagement from a system that uses us up to the point of exhaustion. The Sabbath was one of those things that marked the Jews as different during the Babylonian Captivity. Today it can be and should be one of the things that sets us off from our consumer driven society.

Honor your family

This was primarily about caring for parents when they were no longer economically productive. Today our definition of family is changing and expanding. The easiest way to live into this commandment is to treat your family, however it is constituted like you would your friends or yourself. Stop and think about that for a moment. How much easier would our lives be if we simply treated all family members as if they were friends that we wanted to stay in contact with?

Be honest.

Oh if only we could get through a political campaign or any public debate without candidates, campaigns and people openly lying about each other. The original is about lying in court, but we need expand that to simply being honest in all of our dealings. So much of our discourse today is corrupted by half-truths and lies. Not to mention the economic mess we are in is in part because of less than honest transactions.

Be happy with what you have and rejoice at other’s good fortune.

These commandments are about coveting and are not a prohibition of desire. This is a prohibition of desire that causes harm to others. The harm is caused when we seek what others have by diminishing them or by driving ourselves to violate some of the other commandments that have already been examined. Many of us, not all of us to be sure, have more than we need yet we are programmed and sold a bill of goods that says you always need more. We have seen this always craving more in our story of the people of Israel wandering in the desert. God gives them what they need, but not necessarily all that they want. This is a very old problem. The point is that when envy drives us to harm others, we then harm the greater community.

Following the Commandments because we are afraid of God means that we do this because we are afraid of punishment. The difference in following the Commandments because we fear God is that are actions then flow from the heart. This is a heart that loves God and accepts that we are loved by God. We operate from love and gratitude.

A young man came up to one of the great rabbis of the first century and said, "Rabbi, I am a busy man, can you teach me all of the Torah while I stand on one foot?" The rabbi chased him away with his staff and said, "To learn the Torah takes a lifetime."

The young man then came to Rabbi Hillel and asked him the same question. Rabbi Hillel responded, "Certainly, stand on one leg. The Torah is this, Love God, Love your neighbor, everything else is commentary."

This exactly how Jesus summarizes all the laws and the teachings of the prophets. And I say, Amen to that.

*The Ten Best Ways is the title given to the Godly Play story about the Ten Commandments.