

Commandments Through the Ages
Deuteronomy 5:6-21; Matthews 5:17-20
West Valley Presbyterian Church
February 19, 2023

1. So far, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount has been about blessing: God loving us enough to connect with us, and making us into the salt and light that Jesus tells us we are. Now, we start getting into the practical details of how we are to live.

A. As Matthew scholar Dale Bruner puts it, "God loves me enough to accept me the way I am (the beatitudes), but too much to leave me that way."

B. The commandments have been given to us as a gift; so today we will remind ourselves of them, and we'll hear about how highly Jesus values them. Then we'll reflect on the challenges of holding grace and law together.

2. Deuteronomy 5:6-21

There are two versions of the Ten Commandments in the OT: one version in Exodus, and one version in Deuteronomy. The commandments themselves are the same; but there are different comments on them. For example, regarding the Sabbath, in Exodus we are told to observe the Sabbath because that is the day that God rested from his work, and we therefore do the same. In Deuteronomy, we are told that when we observe the Sabbath, we need to make sure that EVERYONE gets a chance to rest, including both the people and the farm animals who serve us. I am reading the Deuteronomy version because interpretation of Sabbath laws were a major point of contention between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day.

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbor's house or land, his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

3. Matthew 5:17-20

Here, Jesus makes very clear that he is not setting the Old Testament aside, and especially not the Commandments. Jesus says,

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

4. Is the solar system still here? Do human beings still live on this planet? Well, then, according to Jesus, who should know, the commandments are still in force. The reasons for them might shift, like we saw with Deuteronomy's version of the Sabbath law. Our application of them might shift. But they are still applicable and we ought not to set any of them aside.

5. But, wait. Didn't we talk two weeks ago about how we are already blessed by being connected to God? And didn't we just agree last week that Jesus says we are salt and light, right now? Then why is law even applicable to us?

6. Well, have you ever raised a child? Or owned a dog or cat? What happens if I love my dogs but I don't teach them to behave? Then they don't have very good lives.

A. Rob and I have two large cattle dog mixes that we adopted when we lived in Sonora, and had three fenced acres for them to run around in all day. That worked out fine for them, because cattle dogs need a lot of exercise. They were bred to herd cattle in all kinds of weather in the outback of Australia.

B. Well, now we live in Japantown with a tiny little yard, so we take them for long walks at least twice a day instead.

C. But in order to do that, they have to behave according to the laws of San Jose. That meant that we took them to lots more obedience classes and trained them to behave reliably in the city. City laws are different than country laws. It's because we love them that we've gone to a lot of trouble to teach and enforce the city laws. Obeying the laws are for their own good. They would be miserable if they had to just stay in our yard all the time.

- D. Law and grace go together. That's even more the case with children than it is with dogs.
1. We love our children more than we love our own lives. We extend all kinds of grace to our children. We would do just about anything to protect them and ensure their well being. Right?
 2. Well, what happens if we don't teach our children the unwritten social customs of our society? Like, how to look at someone when you speak to them, but not stare at them? We want people to look at us, because that's considered friendly; but we don't want people to stare at us, because that's considered aggressive. If children don't learn social customs, they don't make friends; and if they don't make friends, they have tough lives. God created us as social creatures, and it's very hard for us to be lonely.
 3. And what happens if we don't teach our children to obey the written laws of our society? Like, you can't go into a grocery store and put a candy bar into your pocket and walk out of the store without paying for it? "You shall not steal?"
 4. If we don't have that common understanding and behavior, then we can't have businesses, because businesses depend on cooperation, and cooperation depends on honesty. And if we don't have businesses, then everyone has to make do with everything for themselves. We'd have to build our own houses, grow our own food, raise our own sheep, make our own cloth, and so forth. God has created us to cooperate with each other, and our lives are much better if we do.
 5. It's because we love our children that we teach them the laws of our society, both written and unwritten. It's because we love our children that we as parents enforce the laws while they are young.

7. And it's because God loves us that he has given us laws to live by. It's because God still loves us that the laws are still in effect. It's because God will continue to love us that the law will not disappear until everything is accomplished.

A. That is why Jesus first makes it very clear that we are blessed, because God has chosen to connect himself to us; and when we are connected to God, we have our identity as salt and light through him. God is in us, and we are in him.

B. And because God loves us, the 10 Commandments are still commandments and not suggestions. Later on in Matthew 5 we will see that God's law covers a lot more things than we might have expected. Which will in turn lead us to rely upon God's grace, again. And love will rescue us. Love gives us the commands we need. Love continues to give us the commands we need.

Ordination Promises 2 and 3

#2 Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be the Word of God, and, inspired by the Holy Spirit, the unique witness to Jesus Christ and the authority for Christian faith and life?

#3 Will you receive, adopt, and be bound by the Essential Tenets of ECO as reliable exposition of what Scripture teaches us to do and to believe, and will you be guided by them in your life and ministry?

8. When Kevin and Nancy were ordained and installed as elders, and Debbi was installed as a deacon, amongst all the questions they were asked, two of them had to do with their willingness to live by God's commands:

A. #2 Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be the Word of God, and, inspired by the Holy Spirit, the unique witness to Jesus Christ and the authority for Christian faith and life? And,

B. #3 Will you receive, adopt, and be bound by the Essential Tenets of ECO as reliable exposition of what Scripture teaches us to do and to believe, and will you be guided by them in your life and ministry?

Essential Tenet example

The 3rd Commandment is "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name."

In the Essential Tenets, the self-evaluation of "misuse the name of the Lord your God" is interpreted to include, "eliminate from both speech and thought any blasphemy, irreverence, or impurity."

C. The Essential Tenets include self-evaluation based on the 10 Commandments. And that self-evaluation is very thorough. For example, the 3rd Commandment is "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name." In the Essential Tenets, the self-evaluation of "misuse the name of the Lord your God" is interpreted to include, "eliminate from both speech and thought any blasphemy, irreverence, or impurity."

D. Wow. Speech and thought? Can I possibly do that? No. But fortunately, I can turn to God and depend on the love and grace he has shown us in Jesus.

9. And that is true for all of us. In the weeks ahead, as we look at what Jesus has to say about murder and sexual behavior and dealing with enemies, we're all going to realize that we can't live up to God's commands on our own. Fortunately, we don't have to. God loves us, and so he gives us commandments to live by; God loves us, and so he pours out his grace upon us; God loves us, and so he picks us up when we fall and sets us on the right path once again. Stay tuned, as we continue listening to what our Lord has to say to us!