

Third Sunday in Lent, B
Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19
John 2:13-22

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I'm often attracted to "life hack" articles that promise a simple, practical approach to complex issues. Titles like: *Improve your home with 5 easy chores... 5 workouts you can do in under 10 minutes... or 10 great soups to get you through the pandemic*. They often promise more than they deliver, of course, but when I'm dealing with life's challenges, I'm grateful for whatever help I can find. I'm looking for words that teach me how to live – but maybe not looking in the most obvious place.

The truth is, God cares very much about how we live. And when the Bible sets out to teach us, it starts with its own "top ten" list of sorts-- the Ten Commandments, ten "words" to guide us in honoring God and honoring other people in all aspects of life. They're intended as a gift-- so much so that when Pastor Dan Erlander drew a cartoon of Moses coming down the mountain from God, he didn't draw him sternly marching down with two big stone tablets. Instead, he drew Moses hiking down grinning with his arms wrapped around an enormous present decorated with a great big bow -- the Ten Commandments arriving as a surprise gift from God, to unwrap and appreciate year after year after year.

My guess is, most people don't view them as a gift. We don't like being told what to do. Besides that, we are rightfully wary of how some people use laws and rules like a baseball bat, judging others, asserting their own virtue while putting others down— too many of us have been personally wounded by this. It's this kind of rigid, lifeless legalism that we fear.

But the Ten Commandments were not meant for that. Instead, they are meant to provide a life-giving structure. We see their power when we notice how many "love songs to the law" are found in the Bible, like Psalm 19:

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul...

The decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple...

More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;

Sweeter [are they] than honey, and the drippings of the honeycomb. (Ps 19:7,8,10)

Now, how could anybody sing so passionately about a bunch of rules? It seems like this psalm was written by someone whose life has been full of uncertainties, enemies, and pain. In times of struggle, she has learned to hang onto God's wisdom. So she receives God's laws as something like reliable pavement underfoot after you've been sinking in

mud. God's commandments channel God's love into her life. They protect her from doing wrong and give her wisdom to understand her situation.

We all need wisdom that's rooted in a larger experience than just our own. And structure built on wisdom can be a wonderful gift.

Parents know that kids thrive best when they have a daily routine, including a comforting and predictable bedtime routine like a bath, jammies, a bedtime story, to help sleep come more easily. Knowing what to expect helps a child feel secure. And when children grow older and begin to test their independence, structure can be a loving gift then too. Reasonable boundaries are a way of granting them space to explore and test limits, while also staying related to the family in respect and love.

Structure can promote life and encourage a sense of purpose.

A friend told about how she took a new job and was totally confused for the first few weeks. Her confusion soon led to conflict and misunderstanding. The problem was, her new position had no job description, which meant she was always doing too much or too little or trespassing on other people's territory. When they finally created a job description, then she knew her role and could do it effectively.

We might think of the Ten Commandments as a job description for living as God's people. When the people of Israel were newly set free from slavery, it became their framework for building a nation that would honor God's truest desires for humanity, and bring all aspects of their life under God's influence.

During Lent we examine our own lives and strive to bring all aspects under God's influence. And for this, I commend these "ten good words" to you. I invite you to approach them with an open heart and see how they could mark out helpful boundaries and help you find purpose. I urge you to consider which of these "ten good words" hit home particularly -- as a guide, correction, warning, or path into a more vital life.

The first three "good words" have to do with our relationship with God. And let's just pause for a moment in wonder and awe at what that means.

We might forget sometimes what an incredible gift it is to know God and have a relationship with our Creator. To know our life is hid with One who will never leave us, in this life or the next. It's not to say we don't have questions or doubts. It's not to say we understand all of what God is about, or even 1/100th of what God is about. But we're together today because we believe Eternal Love is real, and every day Eternal Love is at work to heal, forgive, and work justice in this hurting world. When we cry out, God hears, and God helps.

There are so many people who don't have this awareness, or have not yet discovered it. They don't know what it is to call out to a loving Being who can be trusted. That can be such a lonely way to live, and we're called to do our best to share this light, this treasure with others.

And when we hear these first three commandments, we don't need to feel a burden but a lightness and joy:

I am the Lord your God—you are not alone, I know you, I made you

Keep my name holy – my name is a gift so you can call on me

Keep a sabbath day – it's a time set apart for rest and worship, so we can be together

There are two great loves within the Ten Commandments. Love for God, and love for humanity.

So the remaining seven “good words” speak to our relationships with other people. They are addressed to all of us in community. They give us structure and set boundaries so we can live in a way that is respectful and just.

Honor your parents. Do not kill.

Living in God's love means preserving life from one generation to the next. Not demanding absolute authority on the part of parents, and never condoning abuse of anyone vulnerable. But expressing a spirit that promotes life and does not destroy it.

Be faithful in marriage commitments.

True loving intimacy relies on trust. And to be “home” for one another, to be life-giving to one another, means being reliable and trustworthy and faithful to our promises.

Do not steal. Do not deceive or bear false witness.

The Hebrew words behind “Do not steal” more accurately mean “Don't be deceptive” or “Don't use your cleverness to hurt or manipulate people.” Love calls us to personal integrity. And integrity extends to the way we speak – setting aside any form of slander including gossip, rumors, and half-truths that damage people. (*“10 Keys for Life”* by Leonard Felder)

Finally, **Do not covet in any way.**

For love's sake, we resist envy and jealousy that poison relationships. Comparing possessions or anything else has a way of dividing people by competition instead of uniting us in common purpose.

God's "ten good words" teach us how to become truly human, how to live together in a truly human community. They aren't meant to be a burden, but a structure that frees us and lets us find our purpose – to love God with a whole heart, and treat others with love and justice.

There is one great love uniting all of them... and that's where our true hope lies.

In God's gracious promise to be our God, and allow us to be God's people. In the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, who unites us with God forever.

God says, "You are not alone in the world. I am yours. Now, won't you be mine?" And God proceeds to show us what our lives will look like when we live them not to our own glory but to God's glory. Amen.