

When I was growing up
I had to memorize the 10 Commandments
in my Sunday School class

The point of learning the 10 Commandments, I thought,
was to have them ready to use as a sort of check-list,
to go through them, one by one,
and figure out whether or not I had committed any major sins—
and so whether I had need of
repentance and “amendment of life”

So, you can imagine that when I first learned the 10 commandments as a child
I was quite pleased to discover
that I was, in fact, not a sinner, but a saint—
since I hadn’t broken any of them!

See, I wasn’t in the business of carving graven images
or worshipping false gods;
and I didn’t use the Lord’s name in vain,
(since that wasn’t allowed in my household)
and of course I kept the Sabbath—
because I didn’t have any work to do—I was only a child.

Moreover, I certainly did not murder, or commit adultery,
and I had never even had the opportunity to bear false witness
(since I’d never been to a court)
and I was not in the habit of stealing...

and, to my knowledge, my neighbor did not have any slaves,
or oxen or donkey, or a wife that I could covet.

The only commandment I sometimes had trouble keeping
was “honor your father and your mother” —
but even there, I thought, I was doing the best I could,
and anyway, 9 out of 10 wasn’t half bad!

As I got older, though, and matured *slightly* in my theological understanding,
I came to realize that the commandments
cover a lot more than I’d originally thought.

For instance, the commandment against idolatry
can be understood to prohibit not just bowing down before carved images
but making anything besides God
our “ultimate concern”
or the ultimate object of our faith and hope

And the commandment to keep the Sabbath
can be understood to require not just going to church, rather than work, on a Sunday
but devoting our *whole selves* to the worship of God

All of the commandments can be, and have been, interpreted so broadly,
in the history of Christian thought;

even such commandments as those against murder and idolatry
have been taken to mandate a total respect for life,
and support for all human relationships and commitments

Now, if we understand the 10 commandments
in such a broad way
it means that they don't just proscribe certain obviously immoral behavior
and leave the rest of our lives untouched

Rather, they touch the *whole* of our lives—
our internal attitudes and dispositions as well as our external actions—
and they demand *complete* and *total* devotion to God
and service to our neighbors.ⁱ

Now you'll notice,
if you take out the Prayer Book from the seat in front of you,
and look at the bottom of page 317—
which I encourage you to do—

you'll notice that the 10 Commandments are printed
for the church to read and reflect on
before the celebration of the Eucharist

And you'll see at the top of page 317
the "exhortation" that the priest is to say to the whole congregation:

"Examine your lives and conduct by the rule of God's commandments,
that you may perceive wherein you have offended
in what you have done or left undone,
whether in thought, word, or deed.

And acknowledge your sins before Almighty God,
with full purpose of amendment of life,
being ready to make restitution for all injuries and wrongs
done by you to others... etc"

This sort of self-examination and confession of sin,
used to be done regularly in churches
as a way of making people mindful of how
they'd fallen short of the life to which God called them

Such self-examination is meant to encourage us to more godly living,
but, it has the potential to make us think of God's commandments as heavy *burden*—
a burden we just can't bear.

For the commandments, of course,
when understood rightly,
make demands on us that we can never, of our own accord,
hope to fulfill.

They demand a kind of devotion and service
that is just not possible for us imperfect people

We can't even get past the first one—
for we're forever falling into idol worship
of one sort or another.

And so these commandments
can invoke in us more dread than delight,
making us fear God's *condemnation* and *punishment*

At least, the commandments have had such an effect on some people;
the Reformer Martin Luther, for instance,
was, in his early life, incapacitated by dread about his inability to keep them.

Luther was, in his early life,
the sort of scrupulous monk
who couldn't help finding grave faults in himself
every time he went to confession

In his later biography, he wrote:
"Though I lived as a monk without reproach,
I felt that I was a sinner before God
with an extremely disturbed conscience...."

I did *not* love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners
and secretly... I was angry with God,
and said, "As if, indeed, it is not enough,
that miserable sinners... are crushed by every kind of calamity
by the law of the Decalogue,
without having God add pain to pain by... the gospel
threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!

Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience."ⁱⁱ

Luckily for us, who are heirs to the Protestant Reformation,
Luther didn't remain forever in this guilty state of conscience.

Instead, after meditating on the scriptures "day and night" for many years
he came to a profound realization
which freed him from his anxiety and fear

Luther realized that we are not saved by our own keeping of the commandments—
by our own "righteousness," as he put it—
but we are saved by the perfect righteousness of Christ
who fulfilled the whole law for us
and so saved us from condemnation.

After this theological break-through,
Luther spoke much about the "freedom of a Christian"—
that is, the freedom from the burden that the law imposes
on those who *must* fulfill it to be saved

Now, you might wonder, then,
what place the commandments have for us,
if, as Luther thought, we are "freed" from their burden.

Well, Luther and the other Reformers
didn't think we could simply do away with the commandments
since Christ had fulfilled them

Rather, they thought that the commandments

were “another part of the... story of God’s... mercy” toward us
along with the gracious gift of salvation in Christ.

In other words, this God—
who brought the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt,
and who freed us also from the *burden* of the law—
this God did not leave us without direction
as to how we might respond to such gracious gifts;
rather, he provided us with
something like the outline of a response.

The commandments, the Reformers said,
are this outline.
They give our lives some structure and order
as we seek to respond in love to what God has done.ⁱⁱⁱ

And when we read and meditate on the commandments regularly,
we become shaped and formed by such love.

As the theologian John Burgess points out,
no matter how often we meditate on the meaning of the commandments,
“we will never exhaust [their] possibilities.”^{iv}

For each one suggests myriad different practices and disciplines
that have the power to reshape our lives,
and conform us ever more closely to the love of Christ.

Thus the Reformer John Calvin
moved the 10 commandments in the order of worship
from before the confession of sin, where they are in our prayer book,
to after the assurance of pardon,

so that instead of conveying guilt and need of penitence,
they would express gratitude and a delight in God’s mercy

And instead of simply speaking them,
Calvin and his followers *sang* the 10 commandments
to further express their great joy in these great gifts^v

So, in the spirit of Calvin, and Luther, and our Reformation heritage,
I invite you all, this Lenten season,
to read again, and mediate on these commandments
so that you might come to see them
not as a burden to bear, but as a gift to receive

and so that you might also come to rejoice
with the author of today’s psalm:

“The law of the LORD is perfect, *reviving the soul*...
the precepts of the LORD are right, *rejoicing the heart*.” Amen.

ⁱ This broad interpretation the Ten Commandments is given in John Burgess, *After Baptism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 31-32

-
- ⁱⁱ “Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings,” *Martin Luther: Selections From His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor Books, 1962), 11
- ⁱⁱⁱ This understanding of the law is described in *Exodus: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1991), 201-207.
- ^{iv} Burgess, 39
- ^v *Ibid*, 40