

The Ten Commandments

We all know the ten commandments, off by heart, do we not? When I was at school, they were still the groundwork of human morality – a set of timeless commands to guarantee that you are a good person. And in school a few times, we were asked if we could remember the ten commandments. They were the basic guidelines on how to be good. But, the ten commandments are not so fashionable any more. Especially since, most of the time that you hear them quoted, they are quoted as Victorian morality principles dressed up in Shakespearian English – and it's usually the negative commands that you hear: "thou shalt not... something or other."

So, the ten commandments are perhaps not as popular as they used to be. In fact, most of the time they are quoted today I think is in ridicule. And there is a fairly simple process to whittling down the ten commandments to just a couple, making the whole thing sound pointless.

First of all – why ten? Why these ten? Why are there some important things left off the list? Why not nine, or eleven commandments? It sounds to many people, like a marketing decision. Er – Moses went up into the clouds – where no one else could see – and emerged with ten commandments – which God gave me. Yes, there are ten, ten commandments, steadfast and true. A good round number that fits with the decimal system. So let's just run through them and see how they fit with the contemporary world:

The first three – No other God's before me, no misusing of God's name, keeping the Sabbath holy. Those are the kinds of things that make little sense in the modern world. It all sounds a bit supernatural and spooky. And as for the Sabbath – where would we be if the shops were shut on Sunday?

What else? Honour thy father and mother? Well, obedience and respect, for many in modern society should be earned, not simply expected. Obedience and respect should not be automatic. They should be based on the parents' performance. Some parents deserve respect. Most of them don't.

What else. Thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not offer false testimony. Well, actually it seems that these two belong together – and if the commandment was a positive call for honesty, would there be a need for these two? They both prohibit the same basic behaviour. They could be combined.

Two more that could be combined: thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife. Well again, they are both about marital unfaithfulness. A call to faithfulness would make these two redundant.

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's goods? Well, doesn't the economy depend upon coveting our neighbour's goods? It is crude, but it's everywhere. Why do we want the shiny new sports car? Because we want people to covet us! We want people to respect us. And respect is not automatic, it is earned. And the playground of the school where my children go is a showcase of coveting thy neighbour's everything, in the most crude way.

And, as for, thou shalt not murder ... well, throughout history, religious people – it seems – don't seem to have had much of a problem on the whole killing people front. The old, 'more wars have been committed in the name of God than for any other reason' thing.

So what you're left with from the ten commandments for modern intelligent people is, be faithful to your partner and be honest. At least, if you want to argue that the ten commandments are a set of timeless aphorisms that were dropped from heaven like emergency aid.

But we all know. The ten commandments come as part of a story. They come to a people who have just fled from centuries of slavery, and who are now on their way to a promised land. And in the midst of it all, comes a set of commands that are to mark out this people's identity. Now, if you know the Bible, you know that there are countless other commandments. And Jesus himself summarised them into two – loving God and loving our neighbour. But on their journey from slavery to the promised land – the Hebrew people – we can't call them the Israelites yet, are given these commandments.

And when you hear them within that context – perhaps we encounter them differently. Because if you look at the commandments, rather than being some top-down ideology to control people – which is how they are sometimes read – they instead trace a journey from self-centredness to selflessness.

But, living in a self-centred age, it is hardly surprising that the ten commandments do not go down well! Think of the 'honouring thy parents' command. Rejected because respect should not be automatic but should be earned. Well, the commandment is not actually given to parents. It is given to children. The basic command is not to demand respect, but to offer it. Because, what kind of a world would it be, if our basic way of relating to people was not to give them respect until they earned it? What kind of a vision for humanity is that?

Coveting thy neighbour's stuff! Not to covet our neighbour's stuff is counter cultural in a self-centred culture. A culture in which we measure ourselves by the stuff we have compared to those around us! Are we ever going to function well as human beings when that is our world?

And then there is the thou-shalt-not murder command. Is it just to tell all people everywhere that it is just wrong to kill! Well, to begin with, the command is not to refrain from killing, but to refrain from murder! Slightly different thing at work there I think. But why do people murder? It is either for self-centred gain – or perhaps, more understandably, for revenge. And revenge is just a coward's way of coping with injustice.

What we see in the ten commandments, are particular dimensions of a people whose ideology is under transformation – a people moving from slavery to freedom are the people moving from self-centredness to selflessness. That for me, is the job of bringing up children. When a child is born, the world revolves around them – and rightly so. And I think the job of a parent is to bring those children to a selflessness that marks true humanity.

In fact, yesterday, I took the children to one of the parks in Ely, and at the top of the park is an old Mot and Bailey castle, still with a very steep hill. And we were running up and down this hill, to see if anyone could defy gravity and keep up with their legs. And Stefan couldn't, he twisted his ankle, and it ended in tears with me having to carry him on my shoulders.

Now, Alice – the gymnastic lamb from the nativity play – Alice, noticed that Stefan was being carried, when she was the little princess. So, she runs past us at high speed, throws herself to the ground, and rolls over clutching her leg and saying – “I’ve twisted my ankle and I need a carry!” How do you react to that kind of behaviour? Well, that’s what we see with the Hebrew people – and in the midst of it all, they receive these 10 commandments.

But the ten commandments are not simply about this golden rule of making life work well. Do as you would be done to! They are rooted in a relationship with a holy God. The first three commandments, being utterly God centred, speak of a relationship with God that undergirds and enables these commandments to become reality. They are not pillars, not cold rules of right or wrong. They are a way of being. And if the God dimension of the that way of being is unpopular with a self-centred world, so be it.

And from a Christian perspective, this escape from the slavery of the self to the promised land of self-lessness, is impossible without God himself. A holy God, a God who is the ultimate Other in a relationship. If we believe in this God, then our way of being is inevitably going to be shaped by a going out of ourselves, relating fully to those who are “other” than we are. When this profound otherness shapes our understanding of life, the universe and everything, then we are led inexorably towards a selflessness in living.

Let me make a distinction between not believing in God, and actively working to promote the cause of atheism. Because the latter, for me, is very different. It says that the world is OUR property, the property of human beings. And it leaves no logical basis for a drive toward selflessness. There might be those who achieve it without God, but they will not convince many. And the result of secularism is utter-self-centredness. We see it everywhere.

We see it in an educational report published this week, lamenting that the emphasis upon building self-esteem in young people has taught them to be so self-centred that they are unable to function properly as human beings. Children who are over-praised develop an “all about me” mentality which makes them awful parents, relationship partners, employees.” That is the narcissistic world that is left once a holy God has been excommunicated from it.

But it’s not only secularists that do this. Self-centred Christians who re-cast God in their own image are perhaps the worst culprits. They would treat the ten commandments, not so much as a way of relating to God and to others, so much as a set of rules, handed to us by God so that we can forget about God and instead live by something called principles.

No, these commandments come as part of a story, a story about how God is remaking a people – and they show something of who God is and who he calls us to be today. And they are relevant today. I give just one example. Barak Obama, in relation to stem cell research, has argued for a way of doing science that is free from ideological constraints! Let me say that again – that science should be free of ideology.

Now, I am surprised at that kind of claim. Because science is never free of ideology. And what happens when you ban ideology from science, is that you are simply left with the invisible ideology that quietly shapes the way that we all think – and in our era, that will be a largely narcissistic one! When you ban ideology from science, you are destined to replace it with a profound lack of ideological awareness.

Now, I would argue for a science that is based on the ten commandments – because it puts scientific research in the service of a drive to promote a healthy and happy and communal way of being human beings on the earth. A consciously held ideology is always preferable to one that invisibly binds you. It's just an example,

But the ten commandments are not rules based upon some hidden set of right or wrong hidden somewhere in the mystery of a divine will. They are manifestations of a way of being human, that allows the humanity of all to flourish.