

10 Words for Life - Exodus 20

Series: Out of Egypt - Exodus

Date: 16 August 2026, 8th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Exodus 20.1-21; Romans 13.8-10; Matthew 22.34-40

In our Deeper Conversations book club we've been reading, *Fully Alive* by Elizabeth Oldfield. She talks about the power of repetition and ritual to form us and orient our lives. Culture is the water we swim in that shapes us in all sorts of ways we're not aware of, nor do we consciously consent to. Here's what she writes about going to an Anglican church. "I now see participating in church liturgy as a form of pushback, another little resistance. I am making a free(r) choice about what I want to shape me, what values and desires I want inscribed on my heart and mind." And she goes on, "Every week I give ... my attention to a ritual that reminds me of the things I'm in danger of forgetting."¹

This is actually one of the reasons I became an Anglican. I grew up Presbyterian, but through my theological studies I came to see the Prayer Book services as a powerful means of corporate and personal spiritual formation.

We're continuing our series in the book of Exodus. Exodus has 3 great themes: Redemption, Covenant and Presence. It's the story of God's Redemption of his people Israel from slavery in Egypt. It's the story of his making a Covenant with his people, where he would be their God and they would be his people. It's the story of how he desires to be Present, living among his people. We've come to the high point of the book, where God met with his people at Mt Sinai and called them to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation by keeping his covenant. And 2 weeks ago we saw that we, as God's New Covenant people, the church, we still have that same vocation - to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Today, in chapter 20 God gives Israel the terms of the Covenant, what is traditionally called the 10 Commandments. This is how Israel was to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. By keeping these commands she would bring God's blessing to the world.

In the TV show *Fleabag*, the main character goes to a confessional with a priest. Up to this point in the show she's been flirting with him, but this gives way to a deeper spiritual yearning. She says to him, "I just want someone to tell me how to live my life, father, because so far I think I've been getting it wrong." This scene gives voice to a deep longing in our culture. We're told, "You're free! Do whatever you want so long as it doesn't harm

¹ Elizabeth Oldfield, *Fully Alive*, Brazos, 2024: 116-117

anyone else.” But we have no idea what to do. We’re desperately hungry for moral and dare I say spiritual guidance because left to our own devices we end up harming others and ourselves. That’s the mess we’re in. I think this is one of the reasons Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson became a youtube superstar, because he is not afraid to tell people what to do. He even released a book called, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote for Chaos*. He then went to rehab for addiction to anxiety medication, and then followed up with a book called, *Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life*. Now I confess I haven’t read Peterson, but I feel like he’s a little late to the party. God gave us the 10 commandments over 3000 years ago. And I don’t think his are quite as clear or world shaping.

But is that what the 10 Commandments are? Rules for life. Do this and you will live? What about when you fail? And what do we do with the 10 commandments, this side of Jesus?

Sometimes people think that in the Old Testament salvation was through obeying the law but in the New Testament salvation is by grace through faith. But this simply doesn’t pay attention to the text. Did you notice how the commandments start, verse 2?

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. The context for the Law is Grace. That is, these commands are based on Who God is and What he has done. He is Yahweh, the LORD; who revealed his Name to Moses; who made his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And what he has done is remember his covenant and rescue his people from slavery. Now as his Redeemed people, God is telling them how to live, in light of and in response to his saving Grace, how they can worship him with their lives. It’s the same with us. In Romans Paul spends 11 chapters telling the story of God’s Redemption, his Saving Grace shown to us in Christ. It’s only then that he begins chapter 12, saying, “Therefore, in view of God’s mercy [which I’ve just spent explained at length], offer your bodies as a living sacrifice to God. This is your spiritual act of worship.”

Ok, so what are the 10 Commandments? You’ve heard them a couple of times already today.

- *I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me.*
- *You shall not make idols and worship them.*
- *You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.*
- *Observe the Sabbath by keeping it holy.*
- *Honour your father and mother.*
- *You shall not murder.*
- *You shall not commit adultery.*
- *You shall not steal.*
- *You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.*

- *You shall not covet anything that is your neighbour's.*

We cannot go explain each of these in detail - that would be a whole other sermon series. They are however expanded upon and applied through the rest of Exodus. But for the moment let us ask "what do they teach us?" These are the terms of the covenant. If a covenant is an agreement, a constitution if you like, between God and his people, then these outline what that relationship should look like: our relationship with God and with our neighbour and how this plays out not just individually but corporately in society. They're often divided into two tablets. The first 4 are directed towards God and the back 6 are directed towards our neighbour. Jesus sums them up as loving God and loving your neighbour as you love yourself. Actually, those two summaries are quotes from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, so Jesus is not saying anything new.

We've had a go the past few years using the Catechism to teach people the basics of what it means to be a Christian. Here's what the Anglican catechism has to say about the Ten Commandments and its very helpful:

What do you learn from these commandments?

I learn two things: my duty towards God, and my duty towards my neighbour.

What is your duty towards God?

My duty towards God is to put my whole trust in him, to respect and love him with all my heart, mind, soul and strength; to offer him my praise, thanks and prayers; to honour his holy name and word, and to serve God truly all the days of my life.

What is your duty towards your neighbour?

My duty is to love my neighbour as myself, and do to others what I would wish them to do to me; to honour my parents and others in positions of responsibility, showing respect and courtesy to all; to hurt no one by word or deed; to bear no ill-will nor hatred in my heart; to keep my body pure, and be true and fair in all I say and do; not to desire things that belong to others, but to work honestly, and do my duty as God guides me.

You can see how this brief explanation shows that the Ten Commandments give a window into the moral order of the universe. The commands are not just arbitrary rules. They show how life is meant to work. And not just for individuals. These are what you can build a society on. That's what the rest of the Laws of Moses will seek to do as they flesh out these 10 words. It's what we've been doing for thousands of years, and we're trading on borrowed capital when we reject them.

A moment's reflection on them will show that they go beyond the surface behaviour to the

motivations of the heart. Jesus' himself famously said, "You have heard it said ... 'You shall not murder' ... but I tell you that anyone who is angry with their brother will be subject to judgment. ... Anyone who insults someone will be in danger of the fires of hell."² The commands show themselves to be just as relevant today as they were when they were first heard at Sinai.

Someone may ask, "Why do we need the Ten Commandments? Surely things like not murdering, not stealing and honouring your parents are obvious to everyone? And yes, cheating on your spouse is bad, except if you don't love him any more, and when you've actually discovered who you are and you need to be true to yourself. And a little softcore porn is ok, because it's empowering, and consensual and everyone's doing it. And taking snacks home from the work fridge is fine, because I work from home. And I've just got so much to do that I can't imagine having one whole day off a week, it's more the principle of the thing. And, my question on the radio this week, I can do the job, so it's fine if I massage my CV to give me the best chance of getting it. And in any case isn't the summary of loving God and loving your neighbour enough?"

Well yes and no. St Paul argues that the law is written on our hearts and yet at the same time we exchange the truth about God for a lie and so our thinking becomes futile and our hearts darkened. The 16th century theologian John Calvin writes that we are "so puffed up with haughtiness and ambition and so blinded by self love," that we're unable to discern the Moral law, let alone obey it.³ The Ten Commandments give clarity in a sea of moral ambiguity. We only need to look around us. People are crying out for moral guidance. They don't intuitively know these commands. We're all committed to loving our neighbours, but we need to be shown what that looks like concretely. I won't embarrass you by asking you if you know all 10!

And the commands run against what we sometimes want to do.

I don't know whether you've had this experience, maybe at an airport toilet. You go in and you see a sign that says, "Don't squat on the toilet seat". Now all of you who grew up in Australia are saying to yourself, "Why would you want to squat on the toilet seat? I didn't know that was an option." And if you've grown up in Asia, you're thinking, "Yes, that is a really helpful sign. Australian toilets are weird, and I didn't know that I was meant to sit on the seat, and that's totally gross." The Commandments are a bit like that, they're saying, "You know that thing that you want to do? Well, it's a bad idea. It will hurt you and those

² Matthew 5.21-22

³ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.VIII.1

around you. It's not how to love your neighbour or yourself, no matter how much you think it's the right idea." Or, "That thing you're tempted to forget, because you're tired, or hungry, or bored, or lonely or full up and content and can't be bothered, you need to do that, because actually it will give you life, and without it you'll die."

When we think about them, we almost always focus on the 2nd tablet, the horizontal commands, the commands about human relationships. But they start with our relationship with God. And that's their secret power. Because we can all do the horizontal commands. I'm guessing none of you have broken number 6, do not murder. Well done, pat yourselves on the back. But number 10, you shall not covet, shows us that they are not just about external actions. The commandments are also about inner motivation, about the heart. The word translated covet could also be translated as desire or even lust. That is not something anyone sees. And it's the same with number 1, "I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me." Only God sees the heart. But if we attend to him first, if we seek him first and seek to worship and serve him, if we seek to love him, then all the others will flow from this because we'll want to please God by obeying his commands. And the Holy Spirit empowers us to do his as he fills us with God's love.

Except what happens when we don't? I mean maybe you're an exceptionally holy person and you're kicking goals here all the time. I love the clarity of the 10 Commandments, and they are so helpful, and I'm committed to obeying them, but when it comes to my heart and getting them right on that level I'm all mixed up. This is the fundamental disagreement between Jesus and Jordan Peterson. There's no grace in what Peterson offers. By contrast, God's call to obedience is in response to and enabled by his Grace shown to us in Jesus.

This is where I love the structure of the Anglican Prayer book service. We're in the middle of a service of Holy Communion. We don't do this often, but the service is meant to begin as we did today, by reading the 10 commandments. What did Oldfield say? "Repetition forms and orients our lives." "I give my attention to a ritual that reminds me of what I'm in danger of forgetting." What did we say after each one? *Lord, have mercy on me and incline my heart to obey this law.* What a terrific prayer! Obeying these is hard, so let's ask for God's help to turn our hearts to love these commands. And then, what about after the last command? *Lord, have mercy on us and write your law in our hearts by your Holy Spirit.* Again, terrific prayer. And this one echoes God's promise in Ezekiel 36, to do just this, remove our hearts of

stone and give us hearts of flesh so that the tablet God writes on is a soft heart which he will move to obey him.⁴

And that's not all, we've also got the confession, where we can acknowledge where we have broken God's commands, and we can ask for his forgiveness which he freely gives us in Jesus. It's ok if you've stuffed up! There's always a new start possible! And then he invites us sinners to his table to feed in our hearts on his grace and mercy offered to us in Jesus, with tangible tokens of his love to strengthen and comfort our weak and weary hearts. And as we feed we share in a promise and foretaste of his heavenly banquet that we will one day enjoy in his presence. Then having tasted God's mercy, we finish our service with a prayer, offering ourselves as living sacrifices to love and serve God as we go out into his world.

That day at the mountain Israel said to Moses, "We will do everything the Lord has said."⁵ Brothers and sisters. God has redeemed you at the cost of his Son. He has shown you how to live as his children. Will you do everything the Lord has said?

⁴ Ezekiel 36.26-27

⁵ Exodus 19.8