

The Ten Commitments, Part 2

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Last week, I introduced the Ten Commitments produced by the American Humanist Association. I commented on the first four — Altruism, Critical Thinking, Empathy, and Environmentalism. This week, we will consider the remaining six.

Ethical Development: “I will always focus on becoming a better person.”

“The key to understanding ethical development is acknowledging that nobody is perfect or has all the answers.” We all have rough edges and incomplete perspectives. To make this commitment entails a process of ongoing reflection about the choices we make, and the consequences of those choices on other people. Key elements of this fifth commitment are the kinds of things we learned in kindergarten: be fair; cooperate; share. We learn these ideals early. Each new day brings new challenges and moral dilemmas. We commit to “continually adapt and rebuild our moral frameworks with the goal of becoming ever better human beings.”

Global Awareness: “I will be a good neighbour to the people who share the Earth with me and help make the world a better place for everyone.”

When Jesus taught that the heart of faith is found in the Great Commandment to love God and to love our neighbours, he defined “neighbour” very broadly. In the last century, our understanding has broadened even more. Through technology, the world has become so much smaller. We know now about events halfway around the world seconds after they happen. We live in a country in which different cultures and societies have to learn to live side by side. When we become aware of that rich diversity, we are also invited to pay attention to current events and become aware of historical events which led to things as they are now. We commit to becoming global citizens who seek to foster “a healthy and dignified life for everyone in our global community.”

Humility: “I will be aware of my strengths and weaknesses and appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of others.”

To be humble does not mean to have low self-esteem or to denigrate our talents and gifts. Rather, true humility means to have an honest awareness of our strengths and our limitations. Truly humble people know that they are growing in their ethical development. They commit to working on their faults even as they celebrate their merits. Humility also involves “setting aside personal pride and overcoming our egos to embrace gratitude for what we have and appreciate others for who they are.” We live, work, and grow together, and none of us are inherently better or worse than anyone else.

Peace and Social Justice: “I will help people solve problems and handle disagreements in ways that are fair for everyone.”

What a wonderful pair to put peace and social justice together. Indeed, as we have seen in recent events of political activism, we cannot have peace without ensuring the human rights of all people. When we desire peace, we must work for social justice which makes life whole for all people. We respond to injustice “through thoughtful conflict resolution that aims to repair harms and ensure a fair and equitable society moving forward.”

This kind of conflict resolution is known as restorative justice. In order to achieve a just, peaceful society, we all must take claims of injustice seriously and ensure that those who are impacted most by the violation of their rights determine the best course forward. This kind of restorative justice is at the heart of the truth and reconciliation process in which Canadian society is engaged.

Responsibility: “I will be a good person—even when no one is looking—and own the consequences of my actions.”

Someone once defined this understanding of responsibility as the essence of good character. A responsible person pays steadfast attention to what is right and lives according to the code of values which they have determined for themselves. When we live this way, we also take seriously how our code of life affects other people. We remember that we are global citizens, and that living as a good person includes such virtues as compassion, justice, and love for others.

This commitment also takes seriously that we are responsible for the consequences of our actions. To live this way means to be aware of the consequences, and to be willing to be held accountable even for unintended consequences. When that happens, of course, it is up to us to apologize without reservation, without making excuses, without seeking to absolve oneself of appropriate blame.

Service and Participation: “I will help my community in ways that let me get to know the people I’m helping.”

This is related to the value of altruism which I discussed last week, which is to show concern for the welfare of other living beings without expectation of reward. This commitment, however, emphasizes the ways in which we make a positive impact on the community and neighbourhood in which we live, and on society as a whole. We help others. We participate in community ventures. We give time and energy to make life better for everyone. We don’t simply insist on our own rights or our own freedoms; rather, we seek to enhance life for everyone.

At the same time, living this way often helps us “develop new skills, experiences, and personal satisfaction that all promote personal growth. We must all recognize that we are members of a group, and engaging in service to benefit the group and the other individuals in it makes us all better off.”

As I mentioned last week, these ten commitments are at the heart of a healthy understanding of Christian faith. I am grateful for the post on Facebook which led me to this document. Indeed, if more Christians sought to live with these commitments rather than insisting on their own narrow interpretation of doctrine and dogma, the world would be a much better place for all people.