

# The Ten Commitments, Part 1

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A few weeks ago, I read a Facebook post which extolled the wonderful spirituality of “Desiderata,” which begins with the words, “Go placidly amid the noise and the haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence.” If you are of a certain age (as I am), you will remember it, since posters of Desiderata graced many a dorm room or bedroom wall in the 1970s and 1980s.

Some people will dismiss it as a hippy–dippy piece of sentiment. It may surprise them to discover that Desiderata was written in 1927 by Indiana poet and lawyer Max Ehrman, some two years before the Great Depression really hit. People were already beginning to feel the economic pinch. Midwestern farmers were experiencing the early effects of the Great Dust Bowl of the 1930s, when dust storms damaged the ecology and agriculture of the prairies in both the USA and Canada.

Several people mentioned on Facebook that they had never seen the Desiderata before. One comment piqued my curiosity. It mentioned “the Ten Commitments,” produced by the American Humanist Organization (AHO) for the purpose of promoting a more humane world.

They claim on their website that “Our central defining focus is on this life, in this world. Each one of us is responsible for the collective welfare of humanity, other beings, and the resources of our shared planet. We value freedom, reason, and tolerance, and it is our responsibility to develop this heritage for ensuing generations. The Ten Commitments represents our shared humanistic values and principles that promote a democratic world in which every individual’s worth and dignity is respected, nurtured, and supported, and where human freedom and ethical responsibility are natural aspirations for everyone.”

As a progressive Christian, I can easily get behind these words. This kind of focus is at the heart of a healthy understanding of Christian faith. The sad truth is that throughout its history, the church has lost this focus. The church has been guilty of much that was wrong, from medieval Crusades to the Inquisition to forced baptisms of conquered peoples. These days, we hear about pedophile priests, pastors guilty of sexual abuse, financial mismanagement, misogyny, and the role of the church in the Indian Residential School system.

Indeed, the church has much to confess. The institution has been more interested in securing power than in seeking to raise up disciples who live the life to which Jesus called his followers.

I celebrate these Ten Commitments. They are a faithful way of following what Jesus called the “Great Commandment,” which is to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

While the church has tried to narrow the meaning of the word neighbour to include only those who believe and behave as we do, I think Jesus was much more expansive than that. He was always reaching out to welcome and embrace everyone, including those whom the religious people of the day called sinners.

In these next two columns, I will outline the Ten Commitments of the AHO, quoting from their website and adding my own comments.

## **Altruism: “I will help others in need without hoping for rewards.”**

This first commitment is “the selfless concern for the welfare of other living beings without expectation of reward, recognition, or return.” It acknowledges that we are interdependent, and that the welfare of all depends on the welfare of each. “We should always seek to alleviate the suffering and hardships of others with compassionate action. By caring for others around us and

lifting each other up, we reinforce healthy connections and contribute to the betterment of our community, society, and the world.”

Christian faith also emphasizes this kind of altruism. Unfortunately, the church has turned it into a matter of supporting the institution rather than giving as a way of making life better for the collective whole.

**Critical Thinking: “I will practice good judgment by asking questions and thinking for myself.”**

I have written about this second commitment many times before. Unfortunately, too many church leaders dissuade others from thinking for themselves. They claim that people simply need to believe, as if the gospel calls people to follow them rather than Jesus. These days, some political leaders also seek to impose their own ideological position on educational institutions by demanding they only teach certain things in certain ways. This commitment needs to be highlighted these days, in both church and society.

Asking questions and expressing doubts are holy practices. They lead us deeper into truth, and also helps us “rigorously avoid pitfalls like rationalization, conformity, and stereotyping.” When we exercise our minds by practicing critical thinking, we learn to see more deeply behind all the information that bombards us day by day and strive to become more open-minded in our multicultural society.

**Empathy: “I will consider other people’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences.”**

We become empathetic as we enter “imaginatively into another’s situation in an attempt to understand their experience as though we are experiencing it ourselves.” We walk a mile in another’s shoes. We seek to “consider someone else’s thoughts, feelings, or circumstance from that person’s point of view.”

It strikes me that this is the heart of the commandment to love our neighbours. As we do so, we build healthier relationships and a stronger community. We promote “tolerance, consideration, and compassion amongst us all.”

**Environmentalism: “I will take care of the Earth and the life on it.”**

We have learned in the last 50 years that we live on a fragile island home. This is the home we share with all other creatures. “Just as we depend on the planet to sustain us with its precious resources, this planet’s ecosystems depend on us to be good stewards and take responsibility for the impact human activity has on our shared planet.” Environmentalism is simply empathy on a global level.

These first four commitments are a good beginning. Next week, the remaining six.