

“Righteousness in Relationships”

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

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Prayer: God, your law is perfect and revives the soul; your commandment is clear and enlightens the eyes. Speak to us now words of life and wisdom through Jesus, the Incarnate Word; we pray. Amen.

As some of you know, Charlette Smith, our church Admin Assistant, records my sermon teasers. Sometimes, we use a prop that goes along with the theme of the sermon or the Scripture passage.

Well, today's Scripture is about the Ten Commandments. So last Friday, Charlette showed up with two stone tablets that she found in the basement of her house. And I said to her, “You know, you could have brought just one tablet. It would have been a lot easier to carry.”

She said, “But you told me to bring two.”

I said, “That's true. But then I thought, “Why didn't God just write the Ten Commandments in smaller print, so they would fit on one tablet? Then Moses wouldn't have had to carry two!”

All jokes aside, while Moses may have appreciated a lighter load, those heavy stone tablets point to a deeper truth: the Ten Commandments aren't just a list of rules. They carry some weight—literally, in the story, but also morally and spiritually. God gave these commandments to the people as they learned what it meant to live as a people who belonged to God.

But because we have heard them so many times, we can miss what they're really saying. Here's what we miss: the Ten Commandments don't actually begin with a command. **They begin with a story, a story of freedom and grace.** Before God says, “You shall not,” God says, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” In effect, God is saying, “Remember who I am.”

That's where the commandments begin. Not with rules, but with freedom. Not with punishment for disobedience, but with an invitation to a relationship. Not with, “Here are the things you must do to earn my love,”

but with, “This is who I am, and this is what I have done for you. They begin with God's action.

So the commandments aren't given as a way for Israel to earn God's love. God loved them first. That's important, because if we separate the commandments from that story, we can easily turn the Ten Commandments into a religious rulebook. And when faith becomes mainly about rules, we start asking, “What am I allowed to do? Have I broken this rule? Have I kept that one?”

But I don't think that's the main question the commandments are asking us. A better question is: **What kind of people are we becoming?** And maybe we should take that one step further: **What kind of community are we becoming?** That's where righteousness comes in.

We sometimes use the word “righteousness” to mean being a good person, following all the rules, or even being better than somebody else. And when righteousness turns into that, it can become self-righteousness. Legalism. Judgmentalism. Dogmatism. Moralizing.

But that's not the picture we get from Scripture. In the Bible, **righteousness has a lot to do with relationships.** Our relationship with God. Our relationship with one another. And, really, our relationship with all that God has created.

Bible scholar Terence Fretheim notes that the Ten Commandments were given in the context of worship, but they were never meant to stay in the sanctuary. The commandments were given **“to protect the health of the community from behaviors that could destroy it.”**¹

Think about some of the commandments. “Do not murder.” That tells us that human life matters. “Do not steal.” That tells us that our neighbor's property matters. What belongs to someone else isn't ours simply because we want it. “Do not bear false witness.” That tells us that truth matters. Our words matter. What we say about another person can help them, or it can hurt them.

¹Terence E. Fretheim, “Exodus,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 221.

So yes, the Ten Commandments have a lot of “do not’s”—and no, not the fried, sugary kind of sweet treats we sometimes eat for breakfast, although that should probably be the “eleventh commandment”: “Do not eat **donuts**.”

Kidding aside, behind those “do not’s” are some very positive guidelines—a healthy diet for the soul, if you will. If I am told not to murder, then I am being called to value and protect life. If I am told not to steal, then I am being called to respect my neighbor. Not lying about someone is to treat that person fairly. The commandments put boundaries around the things that can harm a community.

And we need those boundaries. Because communities don’t fall apart all at once. Sometimes they are damaged one lie at a time. One act of selfishness at a time. One betrayal at a time. One decision to look the other way when somebody else is being hurt. The commandments remind us that our choices affect other people.

Now, obviously, the Ten Commandments don’t answer every question we face in 2026. They don’t tell us exactly what to do with modern technology, social media, and artificial intelligence. They don’t directly address how we should respond to every environmental crisis or every complicated situation we encounter in modern life.

But that doesn’t mean the commandments have become irrelevant. It means we have to do what God’s people have always done: listen carefully to God’s Word and ask what faithfulness looks like in the circumstances we actually live in.

And Jesus points us in this direction himself. When he is asked about the greatest commandment, he doesn’t simply pull out one commandment and say, “This one is more important than all the others.” He brings the whole thing together. Love God. And love your neighbor.

That’s the heart of the Ten Commandments. If I really love my neighbor, I won’t want to hurt them, lie about them, or steal from my neighbor. I won’t use my neighbor simply to get what I want. Observing the Ten Commandments means not engaging in “**mining**” business. Yes, you heard it right—“mining” business. Not mining for gold or minerals, but constantly looking at what belongs to someone else and saying, “**That’s mine.**” In my home country, people often used that quip to describe greedy

and corrupt leaders who would point at a lucrative property and say, “That’s mine.” The expression was even used in reference to a very powerful female politician.

Look, the heart of the Ten Commandments is being in right relationship with God and with others. If I love God, then I want the way I live to reflect that love. If I love my neighbor, I won’t do anything that will hurt them.

But here’s the problem: none of us does this perfectly. We know that. We fail. We say things we wish we hadn’t said. We do things we regret. Sometimes we hurt people without even realizing it. And sometimes we know exactly what the right thing is—and still don’t do it.

That’s why we can’t hear the Ten Commandments only as a list of things we have to accomplish in order to be acceptable to God. Because if that’s all they are, none of us will make it.

The good news is that **God’s grace comes first**. God loved Israel before Israel could keep these commandments perfectly. And God loves us before we get our lives straight. As the First Letter of John says, “...*not that we have loved God, but that [God] loved us and sent [God’s] Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven.*” (1 John 4:10)

That’s grace. We don’t obey God so that God will love us. We respond to God’s love because God has already loved us. And that changes the way we hear the commandments.

So when we hear the Ten Commandments, perhaps we should hear more than a list of restrictions. We should hear an **invitation**. An invitation to protect life. An invitation to tell the truth. To honor God. To respect our neighbors. To live faithfully. To love.

Those stone tablets may have been heavy. But the life they point us toward is not a burden we are meant to carry alone. It is a life we share with one another—a life of love, grace, faithfulness, and community. It is an invitation to **grow together in right relationship with God and with one another**.

And that invitation is still worth hearing today. Thanks be to God. Amen.