

Sermon The Ten Commandments

Exodus 20:1-17 Romans 1:18-25

Ten Commandments 1 Ser.doc Julian Templeton 15.03.09

God's commandments are the structure of trust on which human life is to be built.

We all need structure of some sort.

Buildings have a structure to keep walls upright and hold up roofs, like this Chapel that Roger Smith designed.

Go up into the roof space and you will see the beams that support the roof.

Go down into the hall and see the spans that support this floor that you are on.

Within the supported walls, roof and floor of this building we have the large, light and airy space in which to worship God and meet together.

Music, especially Jazz, subverts metre and melody in improvisation; yet the chord progression is the constant underlying structure.

Relationships, too, need structure.

How can people live together in community?

They need a basis on which the community, and relationships within the community, can function well.

God's commandments provide that basis or structure.

The *first commandment* gives us the essential context for how all God's commandments are to be understood: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery, you must have no other god besides me."

What God says in this first commandment is: 'I have freed you from your slavery; now trust me alone.'

Remember that these commandments are given to people who had until recently been slaves.

The Israelites had been at the beck and call of their Egyptian masters, and would have most likely been obliged to offer worship to Egyptian deities.

Having been freed from their slavery and they find themselves in the vast open space of the Sinai desert.

What do you do with freedom when all you have ever known is slavery?

The temptation to appease the local gods would have been great. Lest the Israelites fall captive to new masters or gods, God gives them the good news:

'I've freed you from your slavery in Egypt; you now need only me.'

This was a word of liberation for those who had only ever followed orders and known oppression from harsh taskmasters.

Still today, God speaks this same word of liberation to you and to me, for we are constantly tempted to place our main trust elsewhere: God says, 'Trust me and only me.'

Having established by this first commandment that trust in him is the grounding structure of his relationship with Israel, God then goes on, in the *second commandment*, to spell out the implications:

(paraphrased) 'You are not to make an idol out of something and worship it.'

Now, you might say that you've never ever made an idol and worshipped it.

However, an idol need not only be an image or sculpture or object that a person sets in a special place for the purpose of worshipping it.

An idol, in its broadest sense, is anything that tempts us to put our trust in it rather than God.

Martin Luther wrote, "Whatever your heart clings to and trusts in, that is really your god."¹

We all put our trust in certain people or particular things.

We cling to, or become devoted to, that which we desire or value.

Thus a relationship or family or work or possessions or sport or status or power or ideology or a particular self-image can assume first place in our priorities and affections.

For some it is their shiny sports car that is adoringly cleaned and polished on a Sunday morning.

For others it is a new person with whom they are infatuated and spend all their time thinking about.

Whatever or whoever causes us to put our trust in them rather than God is our idol.

¹ Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, 'Exposition of the First Commandment'

The *third commandment* is 'do not make wrong use of the name of the Lord'.

The Lord is holy and his name is holy: so much so that the Israelites then, and Orthodox Jews still today, do not pronounce the Lord's name in its entirety.

In fact the term 'the Lord' is a way of referring to God without uttering his most holy name.

God is to be worshipped and revered; he is not to be spoken of unworthily or unthinkingly.

Regrettably, where 'God' is referred to in common speech, it is often in an unworthy and unthinking way, such as in the exclamation "God!"

The name of Jesus Christ is used similarly.

But God is not an exclamation but our Creator and our Judge.

Therefore God is to be invoked reverently in prayer and praise.

The *fourth commandment* is 'keep the Sabbath day holy.'

Unless you devote from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday to the worship of God, you are not keeping the Sabbath in its original sense.

Christians from an early stage gathered to meet and worship on the day of Christ's resurrection, Sunday, called the Lord's Day.

The commandment of Sabbath worship and rest is one that raises the issue of trust in a very practical way.

You might think, as I have done myself, that surely no harm will be done by catching up with a bit of work on a Sunday?

Ours is a culture that values and rewards productivity.

Yet our seven-day-a-week ceaseless activity is exacting a terrible cost on our health and peace of mind.

For some, perhaps for many, the only time they really relax is when they go away on holiday; and even then they are wound up so tightly that it takes them a week to unwind!

This really does come down to a matter of trust: do we trust enough in God to let that piece of work wait?

Do we trust that time given to God in worship and prayer is not wasted time but is actually re-creative?

The *fifth commandment* is 'honour your father and mother'.

Ancient Israel was a traditional and hierarchical society in which respect for superiors and parents was assumed.

To honour one's parents implies respect, esteem, having regard and concern for.

In our time, when parents are living longer, and where their decline in health is often extended, this commandment is potentially very demanding of sons and daughters.

The fact that the state is often willing to step in with residential or nursing care for the elderly does not mean that their sons or daughters are relieved of their obligation to honour them.

Visiting, spending time with, including them in family life, and taking care to ensure their needs are properly met are all implications of God's command to honour our parents.

The *sixth commandment* is 'you shall not murder'.

Murder is a better translation than kill; for it is the unlawful taking of the life of another human that is here prohibited.

God alone has the power both to give life and to take life; any person who takes this power upon themselves is usurping God's place and fundamentally is showing lack of trust in God's justice: this is why murder is outlawed.

Rather like the commandment against idolatry, the commandment against murder is one that most of us don't regard as posing any great temptation.

However, Jesus famously extends this sixth commandment in his teaching: "You have heard it said 'You shall not murder' but I say to you whoever is angry with his brother has already committed murder against him in his heart."

There are some who are rather proud of their restraint, who don't show outward signs of aggression; yet there is something called 'passive aggression', and some Christians specialise in it!

They think, "I'll find a subtle way of humiliating or putting-down her or him."

That is passive aggression, and Jesus equates it with murder.

The *seventh commandment* is 'You shall not commit adultery'.

Positively, what this commandment commends is fidelity to one's spouse.

This commandment is also fundamentally about trust.

Those who are married should be able to trust the one another to be faithful.

Where such faith is betrayed, untold heartache and misery results. Jesus also, famously, extends this commandment to one's thought-life when he said 'You have heard it said 'you shall not commit adultery' but I tell you 'the man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart'.

The *eighth commandment* is 'you shall not steal' In other words, don't take what's not yours but respect the property of others.

Again, this comes back to the issue of trust. If a community is built on trust, then property is safe from theft. Where there is no trust, we have to hide and lock away our valuables and possessions because others are liable to steal them: which, regrettably, is precisely the situation in which we find ourselves today.

The *ninth commandment* 'you shall not bear false witness' was in the first instance concerned with giving testimony in an Israelite law court. Since the witness was in effect also the prosecutor, and since capital punishment was allowed, a false accusation could put not only one's reputation but also one's life in danger.

Jesus, in his forbidding of the swearing of oaths, was following in a tradition that extended the ninth commandment to apply to speech about others more generally.

If we are to live in community with others then we should be able to trust each other to tell the truth: when questioned our 'yes' should be trusted to mean 'yes' and our 'no' to mean 'no'.

The *tenth commandment* (paraphrased) is 'do not covet that which belongs to your neighbour'.

This is only one of the Ten Commandments in which it is not the act but the desire to act that is forbidden.

In one sense, it is puzzling why this commandment does not appear earlier in the list, for it is by first desiring what your neighbour has that some go on to commit adultery and to steal.

Yet even when the desire does not lead to the act, this commandment is significant in outlawing the desire itself.

Perhaps of all the Ten Commandments, this is the one we break most often: for who has not walked by a palatial residence and wished "If only I lived there!"

Or who has not looked upon the seeming happiness of a family out and about together and wished "If only my family were like that!" Such wishes and thoughts—especially if we become obsessed by them—lead to discontentment and unhappiness. This commandment forbidding coveting urges us to be contented with what we have.

Taken together, the Ten Commandments are the structure of trust on which human life is to be built.

Through them God says to each one of us: 'Trust me. Trust me alone, for these commandments are for your good and by keeping them you will find life.'

Blessed be God for ever.

Amen