

3 Lent B
More than "You Shall Not"

March 3, 2024
Exodus 20:1-17

The Ten Commandments contain some "You shall nots" or "Thou shalt nots," in older translations. Many of the commandments begin with "You shall not," but they are more than just prohibiting wrong behaviors.

Two of the commandments are shalls, "You *shall* remember the sabbath day and keep it holy." "You *shall* honor your father and your mother."

Secondly, and even more importantly, when we look at the biblical text, the Ten Commandments do not begin with a command. They begin with a statement, a declaration: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

Theologically, Lutherans divide the Word of God into Law and Gospel. Laws state what we are to do or not do – you shall or you shall not. Gospel or good news state what God has done, is doing, or promises to do. With this understanding, the Ten Commandments do not begin with a law, not even a command; but with the gospel. It begins by declaring what God has done, not what we are to do.

Three times in the Old Testament¹ the phrase "The Ten Commandments" appears in translations, but the literal Hebrew, which some translations will put in a footnote, says, "The Ten Words." Our First Reading begins by stating, "Then God spoke all these *words*."

In the Jewish numbering system of the Ten, which is slightly different than the two ways Christians number the ten; the first word is the word of what God has done: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." They do not begin the numbering with a command, but with the gospel – what God has done to save his people from slavery.

These words are more than just "you shall not," they are a declaration of the LORD God's choice of the people of Israel; of God's love for the people of Israel. They are a reminder that the LORD God has saved these people from slavery, given them the freedom of new life back in the land he had promised to Abraham. It's a reminder that they are God's own people and that God keep's his promises.

God seeks to protect that relationship by commanding his people to have no other gods. They shall not make or worship idols. They should not dishonor God's name; but as Luther commented: we should "call on, pray to, praise, and give thanks to God." More simply, we should talk to God.

Remembering the sabbath – take time to worship and listen to God is another command that protects our relationship with the God who has saved us.

God asks us to protect the relationship with God by talking to God and listening to God.

The other commands protect families and marriages, life and property; reputations; and even protect us from ourselves. Our own desires may be misplaced and lead us away from the love of God. It is God establishing a relationship and protecting the people that is primary – the reason for the shall nots and the shalls.

In a similar way, parents have rules for their children to protect them: don't touch the

¹ Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13; 10:4

hot stove; look both ways before crossing the street. Such commands grow out of their love for their children. If children only see parents as rule makers and punishers of disobedience; they miss the purpose of the rules as expressions of love and care and protection the parents have for their children.

In our gospel reading: when the temple and the temple sacrifices are no longer seen as gifts from God, as signs of God's love for his people; then they are not serving their proper purpose. The temple isn't "cleansed" by Jesus as the story is sometimes called; but Jesus replaces the temple with himself – he is the one who will be raised in three days. He becomes the ultimate expression of God's love and care and forgiveness for God's people. He is the holy presence of God rather than the mercy seat that was in the holy of holies in the center of the temple.

Jesus and his suffering and death is the supreme expression of God's love for us. Both Judaism and Christianity begin with the good news – what God has done, is doing, and promises to do for us.

That's also the emphasis in baptism. It's not so much something we are doing in obedience to Christ's command to baptize; it is an act of God, in a visible and personal way, to cleanse, purify, and assure the us that we belong to God. We are children of God.

Martin Luther when he had doubts or felt tempted, would shout, "I am baptized." His ultimate trust was not in his own faith, but in what God promised him in the sacrament of baptism. God had claimed him, and nothing would change that.

A third way that the Ten Commandments are much more than "You shall not," is in Martin Luther's explanations in the *Small Catechism*. Many of you learned these in confirmation classes. They have also been printed for you in the bulletin in a format that helps show some of Luther's genius.

First of all, he made the meanings of all the commandments dependent on the first word: The Lord is our God. The Lord is a just and powerful God. The Lord has saved us. Thus, we should fear and love God in everything we do. That is our first response in dealing all of these commandments. Our lives are lived in a response to what God has done for us. Our lives of obedience witness to the God who has claimed us in baptism, who has shown extraordinary love for us through Jesus.

Secondly, Luther came up with both things we should not do to obey the commands, and things we should do to obey the commands. Those are listed in separate columns on the chart. There are things we don't do and things we do do. (This is one time I can say "do do" in a sermon.) We sin when we do the things we shouldn't do. We also sin when we fail to do the things we should do. You can take them home and read and meditate on them later.

Someone once asked Luther, "What if I can't find any sin in my life?" Luther said to look to the Ten Commandments – and when you read the things Luther says we should be doing, most of us come up short. He also said, if after looking at the Ten Commandments, you still can't think of any sins you've committed, ask your spouse. He was sure that one's spouse could come up with some shortcomings.

He said this in connection with Holy Communion. He could not imagine why anyone would not want to receive God's grace given in this sacrament. How could any person who meditates the meanings to the Ten Commandments, not conclude that they have sinned and are in need of God's forgiveness given through Christ in the bread and wine?

The Ten Commandments are much more than “You shall not.” While they do tell us what we shouldn’t and should be doing for the good of our relationship with God and with other people and our self. Much more importantly, they establish a relationship of love and protection between God and us – like that of a parent and a child – relationship that we know offers us forgiveness and salvation through Jesus throughout our lives – even in those times we fail to do what the commandments tell us what we should be doing. Above all, we are to believe and trust the first Word: “I am the LORD your God who has saved you.”