

Ten Commandments, Special Sauce, Lettuce, Cheese...

^{NRS} **Exodus 20:1** Then God spoke all these words: ² I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³ you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴ You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷ You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸ Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰ But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work-- you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹² Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³ You shall not murder. ¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵ You shall not steal. ¹⁶ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷ You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

The ten commandments are popular. Moses receiving the law from God and the two stone tablets- this is one of the most well known stories of the Bible. Even people who know NOTHING else from the Bible know about the ten commandments.

Of course while the ten commandments are well known- they're not always that well remembered. In my reading this week I came across several humorous and disturbing surveys. One survey asked people who self-identified as religious people about their knowledge of the ten commandments and their knowledge of the big mac and

the Brady bunch. Well it turns out we are really good on the big mac. About 40% of the people responding could nail all the ingredients in a big mac. And we're pretty solid on the Brady bunch- 30% of folks listed off every family member- even Alice. But the ten commandments- well, we really like them, they're popular- but when it actually comes to remembering them...not so much. Not even 15 % of the responders could list all ten.

Now if you're kind of sitting there thinking, WOW I'm glad I wasn't in that survey. Don't feel too bad. Another group polled pastors in the UK. Only 34% were able to list off every commandment. However, and I'm not sure what this says, just over 50% said they believed in space aliens. So if you interested in the commandments we may not be that helpful, but if you think you may have been abducted by aliens you may want to find a pastor as fast as you can. ☺

But still, we do like the commandments. We are really interested in the commandments. You know this is true because of how we fight about them. You know you only fight over things you care about. And we fight all the time about the ten commandments. Different denominations argue over how to number them. And we are forever fighting over where we should display them. And we don't care if these fights make any sense or not- we're not going to let that get in our way.

Take the big brouhaha over whether to post the ten commandments in courthouses. Now, I have to tell you, this has to be about the silliest fight going on. I know everyone gets worked up about the legal issues, with some folks talking about religious freedom and other folks talking how the government can't establish religion. But really, I think we've got it all wrong with those arguments. I think the problem is

more practical than this, really. I mean think about it. By the time I've been hauled into court, by the time I'm up there before the judge- I gotta tell ya it's a little late to be looking up and see those commandments, isn't it? I mean by the time I'm there, it's like, "Oh shoot, I wish I had seen those a little sooner," you know what I mean? I mean we shouldn't be arguing about whether to have them in court houses or not- we should be talking about whether to put them up at Fry's and Best Buy, you know, places where you might actually want to take something.

But we fight about them, and I suspect we're going to keep fighting about them- because you fight about things you care about, things you sense are really important. And in the ten commandments we sense something really vital, really crucial about the faith. And I think we're right. I think the commandments are absolutely vital to our faith.

The essence of the commandments- they speak to us as much today as they did in Moses' day. Now, I say essence. I say this because I don't think that it's the literal sense of the commandments that we find so meaningful. For instance one of the longest commandments is the second commandment about not making graven images- no images of things that fly in the air or creep on the ground or swim in the sea. Now that WAS a literal, an actual, big deal back in the 13th century BCE. But today I would guess that there just aren't a whole lot of you who are sitting on a secret stash of little carved idols of Astarte and Kumarbi you're just terrified someone is going to stumble upon and find you out. No our idolatry is a little more sophisticated- less literal and more figurative.

Same with coveting our neighbor's livestock. Again, this is probably not a huge problem for a lot of you. Not once has someone come into my office and confessed that they just couldn't get their neighbor's longhorn out of their mind. Not even in Texas. ☺
No, we covet- but what we covet has changed over time.

So, it's not the actual, literal list that is SO important to us. No, it's the essence of the commandments- it's the essence of them and the role they play in our lives.

And the essence- the essence of the commandments when you boil them down, they all come down to telling us that the lives we have, the people we are- that it is enough. The commandments warn us against our seemingly endless hunger for more and more and what seems to be this innate belief we have that bigger and newer is always better. So, let's take a look.

The first commandment is you shall have no other gods but me. This isn't a slam against other faith traditions. This is simply saying that the God who brought us out of slavery, the God of our ancestors- this God is enough. In the ancient world the thinking was that if having one god is good- then having a hundred gods must be GREAT! Of course when do you stop? Where do you draw the line? No, one God is enough.

The second commandment against graven images- this sounds the same but it's slightly different. See, the huge change in the Hebrew Bible is that the God who creates the world and everything in it- this can't cannot be seen and this God has a name we cannot say. And this is hard for us- we really want something we get our hands on, something we can figure out. We really, really like sight more than faith. But this commandment against images- it's telling us faith...it's enough.

And believe it or not the third commandment against using God's name in vain- it falls into this category, too. Most of us have this idea the third commandment is against saying bad words or saying "God" when we hit our thumb with a hammer. Now, I'm not saying go out and do that- there are probably better, more colorful expressions you could use at those times anyway. But scholars agree the third commandment really isn't about this. No, originally, wrongful use of the Lord's name meant making an oath and then invoking God's name to show people how apparently serious you are. "I didn't do it- I swear to God!" We'll say. One of my favorite TV shows growing up was WKRP- this show about a radio station. And at one point it's Thanksgiving and the station wants to have a promotional event- so they planned to drop free, live turkeys out of a helicopter for the people in Cincinnati. In a great TV moment Mr. Carlson the station owner went on the air at the very end apologizing for what was obviously a terrible disaster. His final words: "Ladies and gentleman, as God as my witness. I thought Turkeys could fly." Sometimes we feel like when it's very, very important that someone believe us- we wheel the name of God to kind of underscore our sincerity. Basically, it's a way of using the word 'God' as a kind of tool. The point of the third commandment- our word is enough. It's enough. We don't need to add God's name as some kind of trump card. Indeed, it's a kind of misuse of God's name when we do.

And keeping the Sabbath. Wow, our Puritan ancestors really did a number on us on this one. In Puritan America Sabbath wasn't so much about taking a break from work, but taking a break from fun. God was considered serious business. And anything that might smack of frivolity- certainly things like movies or playing cards. We decided these things were absolutely verboten. But of course in the ancient Hebrew world- this

commandment was about freedom not about constraint. It freed people from the tyranny of working every minute of every day just to scrape by.

The fifth- honoring our mother and father. This is so interesting. This is a commandment you have to pay very close attention to the language. It says we are to honor our mother and father. Honor them. Not like them. Not even love them. And certainly not obey every little thing they think we should do with our lives. No, we are to honor them. And the word for honor here- it's a very specific word. The word is cabod. And cabod means weight, heaviness. The image here one of measuring. Cabod means to weigh something, and to acknowledge the heaviness of it.

To honor our parents means to acknowledge them as our parents- to acknowledge them as they are. And to acknowledge that who they were, what they did- imperfect as it no doubt was, that it was enough.

You know, the Bible is full of parents who weren't perfect. Abraham didn't stand up for Ishmael and wound up putting a knife to Isaac's throat. Lot offered up his daughters to a mob in order to protect strangers he didn't even know. David's negligence time and again set a chain of events in motion that lead to his son's death. And I could go on.

The Bible is full of parents that aren't perfect- are far from it, really. And ours are no different. The fifth commandment does not call us to pretend they were, it doesn't call us to love them, like them, or even to forgive them- but it does call us to acknowledge them, to honor who they were or are, whatever it is we think about it. And honoring this fact- this is enough. Honoring means learning to accept who our parents are, warts and all, and learning to accept that this is enough and move on with our lives.

For those of us who may have some kind of conflict with our parents, living or dead- and I'm sure there just probably are just a few of us out there, right? This is such a liberating word because it means we don't have to mope around and complain about what they did or didn't do. We can honor who they are or were, meaning acknowledge it- and then go forward. Honoring, acknowledging- this is enough.

And ten every other commandment- do not murder, do not steal, do not commit adultery, do not covet. They are all variations on a theme- the life you have, the people we are- it is enough. If someone wrongs you- the law will be enough. Don't kill. If you want something so badly you're thinking of taking it- know that stealing that thing won't satisfy you. Not for long. When you're relationship has grown cold and that person you knew from high school that finds you on Facebook just seems so much fun and exciting. Well it might be fun- but it won't satisfy that empty part of you, not ultimately.

Again and again and again the essence of the ten commandments tell us- what you have, who you are- it is sufficient. It is. And until we get this, until this becomes a part of who we are- then no matter what we do, what we try, what new thing we get excited about; it'll always be fun at first, and then we're grow tired of it just like we have every time before. And we'll be back to being hungry again- looking for more.

And here is where the commandments really blow me away. If this is all they did- if they just were these constant reminders to us to be thankful for the things we have, and not always lusting after the things we don't- if this was it, they would still be great. They would be super important. But they do more than this- the commandments don't merely diagnose our problem, they actually act as a kind of solution, too.

See, this part of us that is always wanting more and more- it makes us comparative. We are comparative creatures. As we are always hungry for more, we are forever looking around us and comparing ourselves with everyone we see- we check out who has what, to see if they have more than we do.

I'll give you an example. A pathetic example. Some of you know I've been coaching Will's soccer team this Fall. Go Firedragons. So, Will soccer team is basically 6 five year old boys, with five year old being the real key here. They are in kindergarten. Most of them are still learning how to spell their names. And soccer- well, let's just say our main objectives are to stay upright and make sure we're going for the right goal. As I told all of my parents when we started- hey, I'm out there to make sure the kids are safe and that they have fun.

So our first game rolls around a few weeks ago. It was a massacre. A couple of their kids had the unfair advantage of being able to run and kick the ball at the same time. One guy on our team was still kind of kicking the ball and patting the ball with his hand from time to time. So we were getting clobbered. And as the game wore on our kids kind of wore down. A few started crying. It was ugly.

And do you know, as I'm watching all this, I'm thinking in my head- this is all my fault. What am I doing? I don't know what I'm doing. I literally look over at the other coach, a tall, confident looking guy, who was just quietly ordering his troops into battle and mopping up against my bad news bears. And I'm literally comparing myself to him in my head- wondering about all the things he obviously knows that I don't.

Now, it doesn't get much crazier than this, does it? Comparing myself to a guy I don't even know over five-year-olds who are playing a game with no official score.

And it hit me this week- the problem isn't so much that we are comparative. The problem is what we're comparing ourselves with. And we're always comparing ourselves to each other. And you know what- there just is always going to be someone smarter, faster, better looking, or who has more stuff, or whatever is we're hungry for. If we're comparing ourselves to one another- we're never going to get off this wheel.

No, the only people we have to compare ourselves to is ourselves. The only person you have compare yourself to is the man or woman in the mirror. And the commandments give us a way to do that. The commandments establish a standard, a standard all of us can look to, as a way of helping us stop comparing ourselves with one another all the time. The commandments are like par in golf. That's the thing about golf. You can play against other people if you will- but what golf is really about is that you are really only ever competing against one person- and that's yourself. And you can play with others or by yourself. There's always par. There's always a standard, so when you're playing with Tiger Woods you can't stop worrying about beating him. You won't. And that doesn't make you a bad golfer. What you worry about is par- and whether you're playing as close to par as you think you can. It's the same with running. When my brother and I ran our marathon together one of the things we heard over and over and over again was "Run your own race." Run your own race. Don't get caught up in comparing yourself to other people and how fast they're going, especially at the start. Run at your own pace- because you're going to be running for a long, long time.

You know the rabbis tell a story about the commandments. The first tablets were broken when Moses came down off the mountain. He found the Israelites worshipping a

golden calf when they couldn't wait for him to get back. Moses was so mad he just threw them down and destroyed them. But, a few chapters later God gives Moses a second copy. Well the rabbis say that when the people put the stone tablets in the ark of the covenant- they also put the fragments from the first tablet in there, too. They didn't do this as a reminder of our failure, but as a reminder of God's grace. For even if you try your hardest to keep the commandments- someday you'll keep them, and someday you'll break them. But, even when we smash them into pieces- the God we trust in is the one who is able to make all things new. Even our very selves. **Amen.**