

INTRODUCTION TO *THE COMMANDMENTS*

Following Jesus is about the way we act as well as what we believe. So how should Christians act and how should we live?

This part of *Pilgrim* explores that question through one of the core texts of the Christian faith: the Commandments. We look in Session 1 at the two commandments Jesus uses to summarize the whole of the Old Testament law: the call to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. In Sessions 2-6 we explore the remainder of the Ten Commandments.

The Ten Commandments and Jesus' summary of the law were at one time near the very center of our culture and civilization. They were learned by heart and often rehearsed in public worship. They were inscribed in public places and often displayed in the home. For centuries they were at the center of what Christians learned about their faith. Yet today they are little known and understood, let alone followed.

Another name for the Ten Commandments is the Decalogue or "Ten Words." The text of the Commandments is found in two places in the Bible. In Exodus 20:1-17, God speaks these words after the people of Israel have consecrated themselves at Mount Sinai. They are inscribed on two tablets of the covenant, "written with the finger of God," the first and most important part of the Law of God, and they are a gift of God to the people of Israel—and through them to the whole of humankind.

The same Ten Commandments are repeated in Deuteronomy 5:6-21 (with some variations). In Deuteronomy, Moses looks back and interprets the law for the people of God in every generation. Again, these Ten Commandments are in first place and given supreme importance in the whole of Scripture.

The Ten Commandments are a very short text and a memorable one. They are laws entrusted to a community of people who have been rescued from slavery, a people who have been saved from their enemies through the crossing of the Red Sea, a people called into a special covenant relationship with God, and who are now learning to live in freedom as they journey to the Promised Land.

In the same way, from the early days of the Church, they have been taught to those preparing for baptism as one of the foundations of our faith. Like the Israelites, we have been rescued from slavery to sin and death through the death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection. We have passed through the waters of baptism. We are called into a new covenant and a special relationship with God as part of the Church. We are learning to live in holiness and freedom as we journey through this life to the home God has prepared for us.

It is still helpful to think of the Ten Commandments as written on two tablets. By and large, the first tablet deals with our relationship and obligations to God and the second deals with our obligations and relationships to other people. There have been different ways of “numbering” the commandments in different churches down the centuries, but we follow here the numbering as normally followed in Episcopal churches.

Jesus’ great summary of the law is found in Mark 12:28-34, Matthew 22:34-40, and Luke 10:25-38. The first of the two commandments Jesus quotes is from Deuteronomy 6:5. It is from a passage called the “Shema,” still recited to this day by orthodox Jews (the title is taken from the Hebrew word “Hear,” which is the first word of the text). This first commandment sums up in a positive form the first tablet of the Decalogue.

Jesus’ second commandment, quoted from Leviticus 19:18, is taken from another great summary of the law sometimes known as The Holiness Code because of its frequent reference to the holiness of God. This second great commandment sums up in a positive form the

second tablet of the Decalogue about the ways in which we should act towards other people.

It's vital for our Christian lives that these two tablets and the two greatest commandments are held together. As Christian disciples, we cannot focus on love for God and neglect the way we act towards our neighbors. Nor should we focus on the way we act towards our neighbors and neglect our love for God. The two need to be held together. Our lives need to be shaped in a rhythm of worship and service: love for God and love for others.

Unlike Jesus' summary of the law, eight of the commandments are all framed in the negative: "You shall have no other gods but me... You shall not steal." The Church has always interpreted the negative in the Ten Commandments as having a positive emphasis and the positive as having a negative: both are implied. One of the old catechisms used in the Protestant Churches asks three questions of each commandment:

- What is the commandment?
- What are the duties required in the commandment?
- What are the sins forbidden in the commandment?

The Commandments, like all Scripture, need to be interpreted in order to be understood and used by the Church and by individual Christians. Our understanding of the Commandments is informed by other parts of the Scriptures. They especially need to be interpreted through the life and ministry and teaching of Jesus, who says to his disciples:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17).

We will explore in these studies the ways in which Jesus interprets the various commandments for his disciples and expands their meaning (see, for example, Matthew 5:21-30 for an interpretation of the commandments about murder and adultery). However, Christians also read the Ten Commandments today through the lens of the life

of Jesus described in the Gospels and the lens of the other New Testament writings. The Ten Commandments, in the form of the Decalogue, are often included in Sunday worship during Lent, the season of penitence (repentance for what wrongs we may have done) before Easter, helping us remember the commandments God gave to us. The people respond, "Amen. Lord have mercy" (see pp. 13-14).

In all of our reflections on how Christians are to live it is important to be clear that we are not made right with God through keeping laws and rules. We cannot earn God's favor or God's love in that way. As Christians, our lives can only be set right with God through God's grace and forgiveness extended to us through the death of Jesus on the cross. Our part in receiving that forgiveness, as we have seen, is repentance and faith and receiving God's gift of the Spirit.

Yet the Ten Commandments do have a part to play. They are given to remind us before and after we become Christians of how our lives fall short of God's standards and how much we need God's forgiveness in Christ. They are given to teach us how we should then aim to live as individuals and as a community.

The standards for life they hold out to us teach us that the Christian life is about far more than keeping external rules. The Commandments demonstrate that growing in Christian grace is about the forming of Christian character and virtue over the whole of our lives. We are not called only to obey laws, but to be Christ-like.

We simply cannot do this on our own. To live by these Commandments we need, in Jeremiah's words, a new heart and a new Spirit, to be transformed from within (Jeremiah 31:33). We need the Holy Spirit to grow within us the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). We need the love and support of a Christian community, however imperfect, to show us the meaning of the Commandments as they are lived out in the reality of life today.

May God bless you and those you journey with in this part of *Pilgrim*.