

This is not a Test!

Sermon by John Strommen on Exodus 19:1-6, 20:1-2 May 27, 2018

Here we are: the Ten Commandments! The ultimate test of what God wants us to do. Many think that this will be the exam God will administer for admission into heaven. 10 questions, but how you answer doesn't matter, it's what you did. Your life was the test, right?

"I hope I make it. I've tried to be a good person."

So, how will *you* do? I've got the Ten Commandments listed on an insert for you, so let's do a trial self-grading exercise before you're really at the Pearly Gates. It could give you some things to work on!

But before we grade ourselves on this, I want you to look at the Gospel text with me. Jesus summarized the whole law – the Ten Commandments included – with two laws: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. And love your neighbor as yourself.

This means the point of these laws is not only to *prohibit us* from doing certain things: don't kill, don't lie, and the like. It also means to engage in positive acts of love toward your neighbor to help your neighbor's life to thrive and flourish. So, as Luther famously pointed out in the Small Catechism, yes, we are not to bring harm of any kind to our neighbor, but ALSO we are to help our neighbor with all of his earthly needs.

Yes, we are not to lie about our neighbor, but ALSO we are to defend our neighbor, speak well of her, and put the most charitable construction we can on her actions.

So as we go through these and I offer brief commentary on each, I invite you to consider the deeper meaning of the commandments that Jesus and Luther stated quite clearly: to love God and love neighbor, not just avoid doing bad things.

Here's one fun alternative today: instead of grading yourself, would be to let your spouse, or members of your family grade you. Your call.

OK, number one: *you shall have no other gods*, says God. In what or whom do you place your trust in life? Is God always no. 1 to you or do you put your trust in other things? Things like your reputation, your achievements, your money, or that one thing that can command your attention and devotion anytime, anywhere: your smart phone! Put down a grade for yourself.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God. How often do you blankety blank blank? We also make wrongful use of God's name if we use God's name to justify something we want, but God does not support. If we ever assert that "God hates _____," or "God wants me to be rich and you to be poor," we're probably using God's name in vain. Positively, do you call on God's name in prayer, praise and thanksgiving? Grade please.

Remember the Sabbath day and keep it Holy. Do you keep Sundays Holy, starting by going to church every Sunday? The idea is to rest to take care of yourself so you don't burn out, and also to take care of creation so it doesn't fry. The Holy part is to remember whose creation this is, to whom we belong, and to worship God. Grade!

Honor your father and your mother. Yes, it means respecting them even when you think you know more than them, young people! It also means when your parents are in a nursing home, you still honor them. And when your dad talks loudly in a movie theater during a quiet part of the movie because he can't hear that well and then everyone looks at you...you honor and respect him. How do you do with honoring your parents?

You shall not kill. But of course this one means, not only crossing the obvious line of killing someone, it also means hurting them in any way. Bullying comes to mind immediately. What kind of person are you: a life giving person or a life deflating person? It also means we help our neighbor in his/her every day earthly needs.

You shall not commit adultery. This is of course about being unfaithful, breaking, or helping someone else break, a commitment they've made to someone else. And if a commitment is not being broken, it also means using someone for sexual purposes without tending to their well-being and whole person. More broadly, this has to do with turning someone into an object, not a subject, by viewing them sexually without regard for their person. On the proactive side, it means doing everything we can to affirm someone's whole personhood as someone God made who is sacred and of great value.

You shall not steal. Taking what is not yours. This often gets put on petty thieves of some sort, but of course is relevant in higher places too, like hedge fund operators in '08, for instance. Some raise the question whether it is theft in God's eyes if someone has 10 coats while their neighbor has none. It also means helping your neighbor protect what is theirs and seeing to it that everyone. Has. Enough.

You shall not bear false witness. Not telling the truth. Lying to gain an advantage or massaging the truth to keep something concealed. The world is broken because it is not a trustworthy place and not telling the truth is the worst thing for it! On the proactive side, as we discussed, how can we defend our neighbor and give them the benefit of the doubt, because we want to them succeed in life, not be brought down! We are called to create a more trustworthy, dependable world.

And the last two I'll lump together, the "covet" commandments. *You shall not covet your neighbor's house or his stuff. Neither shall you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or servants.* This one may be more attitude than action, but oh how it shapes actions! To covet is to possess it in your heart, to want someone or something you don't have rather than celebrating what you do have. It leads to jealousy and envy and hearts that are unable to be grateful. Worse, it leads to greedy manipulations and using people for our own wants and needs.

So, how did you do? A's and B's? C's and D's? a mix? What's the curve? What is God's cut off point? B average? C? Or do you need all A's?

I think many people who fancy themselves pretty decent people will give themselves a respectable "B" or "B-", so they can be appropriately humble, but, you know, still be better than the real slackers.

OK, here's the bad news, and the first big point for today: the Ten Commandments cannot save you. If fact, they have nothing to do with saving you. If the Ten Commandments are a test and gateway to God and heaven, no one's getting in.

But that's not why the commandments are there. They're not there as a stepping stone for you. The commandments were, first of all, given for your neighbor, not you. And secondly, the commandments are a mirror in which we see how compromised we are, how broken we are, as we just saw with our self-grading. The commandments prompt us to look for hope outside of ourselves, which is an important step.

But even if you got an A on the Ten Commandments, even if you were able to perfectly obey the Ten Commandments, you're not gonna get into heaven this way.

Why? Because the law cannot save you! Trying to merit worthiness for salvation is like trying to build a warp speed spaceship out of plywood. Good luck! The law cannot save you. Only God can. And this leads to a fundamental misconception about God's law. A majority of Americans view the Ten Commandments as the way to establish a right relationship with God, by making yourself presentable before God. But the truth is - and this is the second major point of my sermon today - **only God can establish a right relationship with us**. And God already has, and we don't have to wait

until the New Testament to learn this. God's chosen people, the Hebrews, *already were* God's people or the Red Sea would have never parted, nor would manna have appeared in the wilderness.

In our text today, God says to Moses, "Tell the people, 'you have seen what I did to the Egyptians; I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and out of the house of slavery; who bore you on eagles' wings.'"

In other words, God is saying, "I've already saved you. I've got your back and always will. Now live like it." *Then* he gave the Ten Commandments to his people, not so they could become God's people but because they *already were* God's people. Because they had already been set free.

Even more so, we are free - wholly-completely-and-for-all-time through Jesus - free to not worry about ourselves and our fate. Free to trust God, not a self-improvement plan called the Ten Commandments.

And what are we free for? To love God, to love our neighbor and to give thanks that God loved us first. The Commandments helps us give shape to what that looks like in this world. Amen.