

**Sermon, March 15, 2009**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent**

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**Marion, MA**

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Why is “doing the right thing “such a challenge? Let’s look at the Ten Commandments. They are very direct and explicit in defining and directing us to do the right thing.

If I were to ask any random sampling of ten people in the United States, “Would the world be a better place if we all lived in accordance with the Ten Commandments?” I would probably get almost everyone to say, “Yes, of course.”

We could cite statistics of the cost to the nation in a quick appraisal of murders, break-ins, and robberies. We could cite the cost to each of us of security systems in our homes and in our cars. We could cite the cost to the world of fraudulent financial dealings, dishonesty and embezzling, broken agreements and punitive law suits, along with the sadness and hurt of those who live with broken promises. We know the strife, anger, and complexity of relationships when infidelity is introduced. Even without economics degrees, we could conclude that it is a frightfully costly thing when a society disregards the Ten Commandments.

If I were to sharpen the question then, and ask, “Do you think your life would be good if you kept the Ten Commandments?” I suspect we’d still get a majority affirmation: “Yes, it would be good if I kept the Ten Commandments.”

I’m here to tell you that in over twenty years of leading parents in baptismal preparation sessions in Canada and the U. S., not one person has been able to name all of the Ten Commandments. I did hear one participant speak of a relative who could, and did, once, name them all. But that is as close as we have come so far.

So I want to offer a quick sort of Catechism sermon that may help you all to remember the Commandments, with the ensuing possibility that we might observe them.

First off, observing the Commandments is not the goal of our religious faith, nor was it the goal of the Jewish people to whom they were first entrusted. They are

the practical guidelines meant to lead the people to **Shalom**. They are the steps intended to lead folks to right relationships with God and with their neighbors. Yes, Shalom is the word that we translate as peace in English.... But Shalom really means the productive integration of ones heart, head and will; the fruitfulness of families and communities interacting justly and graciously; of people in a right relationship of trust and joy in God.

The first four commandments address our relationship with God. The fifth commandment addresses our relationship to earthly authority. The following five all define what we have no right to take from one another. So let's see if we can remember them in that framework.

If I were to disappear in ten seconds, never to preach again, I'd want you to have this summary in your spiritual library.

Your life needs to be rooted by faith in God.

There are no suitable counterfeits of your own invention.

You need to represent this relationship with God truly when speaking of it.

You need to make time in your routine schedule to refresh and restore this relationship.

Honoring your parents shapes your soul in the faithful disposition of gratitude, submission to just authority and responsibility.

And you have no right to take your neighbors' life, his wife (or her husband), his or her property, his or her reputation...

And if we would be at peace within ourselves, and with our neighbors, we can not nurture the inward disposition to secretly long for any these.

**You shall have no other Gods before me.** This commandment establishes the center and source of our lives. God is revealed to us as The Creator, as our Redeemer, as the one from whom we come and the one to whom we go, as the one without whom we are not fully alive. Observing this commandment orders the competing priorities of our lives. It is the ultimate loyalty of our hearts that gives meaning and direction to all our lesser loyalties.

**Don't make for yourself any idols.** As those created in God's image, we delight in being creative. As spiritual beings, we are predisposed to worship something or someone. God simply waves us off the convenient and comfortable practice of

following the devices and desires of our own hearts as a substitute for seeking out the will of God.

**Don't take the name of the Lord in vain.** In the ancient Jewish culture that first received these commandments, there was not the division between language as symbol and the life to which the words referred. The objective reality, the thought that allows us to hold an image of that reality within us, and the words that gave expression of that were all inextricably linked. Consequently, it was of first importance that anything spoken about God, or any remark that invoked the name of God needed to be in one-to-one correspondence with the true and living God. Misrepresenting God, or using the purity and goodness of God to disguise our alloyed intentions is out of line.

I skip the fourth commandment, because I want to finish with that one. Incidentally, the fourth commandment is the one least remembered, least observed, and least understood by contemporary American culture.

**Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.** That one pretty well speaks for itself. Just do it. Train your children to do it. Train your grandchildren to do it.

Next follow the guidelines that define what our neighbor has no right to take from us, and what we have no right to take from our neighbor.

**You shall not murder.** You have no right or permission to take your neighbor's life.

**You shall not commit adultery.** You have no right, permission, or excuse to take your neighbor's husband or wife, nor to angle for their affection or preference.

**You shall not steal.** You have no right or permission to take your neighbor's property.

**You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.** This has more to do with a crime against your neighbor's reputation than with never telling lies. We spend the best part of our life's effort in building a reputation in our community. It is an intangible thing. A good public reputation requires the trust and agreement of

many others in the community. If we have an honorable reputation, we live well. If we do not, life is an uphill struggle in every respect. The real point and force of this commandment recognizes that grave harm that gossip, slander, innuendo, and false characterization do to a reputation. God reminds us in this commandment that we do not have the right to take and mishandle another's good name.

**You shall not covet.** This simply reminds us that the spring of our behavior is within us, in our minds and hearts. As Jesus reminds us throughout the sermon on the mount, our attention needs to be focused inwardly and spiritually if we would achieve an intimate fellowship with God.

**Remember the Sabbath, and keep it Holy.**

Time is the scarcest and most treasured commodity in contemporary American life. God wants us to enjoy a grand expanse of it reveling in the finest and sweetest things of life. God intends for us to---

Cease: Our identify is not in our productivity and achievement, but in our relationship as well-loved children of God.

Celebrate: The fact of being loved is to be celebrated with your loved ones, and with the whole community.

Refocus: Reminded of our true nature, purpose, and destination, we can redirect our energy toward what truly matters in life.

Refresh : Out of this pause in the routine, we're to experience afresh the Spirit of God as a spring of living water welling up within us, nourishing and bringing new life.

The Sabbath is God's gift to us. For Christians, the Sabbath is understood the first day of the week. Out of this time with God, we then can live out our several callings

Jesus, and in his physical absence, the Holy Spirit give us both the will and the wherewithal to actually live into and delight in God's commandments.

God, we pray: make us as wise as itinerant goat herders.