

Sermon May 5, 2024
[John 15:9-17]

How Many Commandments Are There?
Pastor Dan Peterson

I told one of the parishioners that the eight o'clock service for today's message was special because I would be singing. That is not true. It was simply a ploy to get this person to attend church this morning. One commandment broken!

How many commandments are there? Well, in today's Gospel, Jesus refers to "keeping the Father's commandments." So what do you think he had in mind?

I heard it earlier [*Love your neighbor.*] Love your neighbor. So, does he have a number in mind? [*of neighbors?*] Of commandments! – How many commandments – this is what I get for interactive preaching... [*Ten*]

Yes. How many commandments does Jesus's father give him? Ten, right? So, the first thing that comes to mind for many of us are the Ten Commandments. And the Ten Commandments, as you probably know, beginning with Genesis 1, where the Lord says, "Be fruitful and multiply," These are the commandments that God gives directly to Israel. They are the first commandments of the law.

Can you name them? I'll give you some hints. A law is comprised of – what's called the Ten Commandments, rather, of what's called "the two tables": The first three commandments concern our relationship with God. And the remaining seven commandments concern our relationship with our neighbor – of whom we cannot count. Right.

So, what are the first three? "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with your innermost being. You shall have no other gods before the God of Israel."

Now this suggests that at the time, there's no denial of other gods existing; it's the God of Israel who's the one who is superior to all of them. So, love the Lord, your God with all your heart. That is the first commandment.

What about the second? [*Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy*]

What's that? Sabbath day? Yes, that is, I think it's the third but we're doing great – actually maybe second, so "Honor the Sabbath day."

So when I taught confirmation, I asked my students, as well as the parents who joined me, what the most difficult, what the easiest commandment would be, and the hardest one would be, to follow. And I got "not killing" as the easiest, which was quite a relief. But what was interesting is that most of the students said, "You shall not covet," which is the tenth commandment; but the *parents* who were present with us said, "observing the Sabbath." And I think about that. We live in what _____ calls an "era of distraction." How hard, in the midst of all our obligations, all our commitments, is it to honor the Sabbath, to take a day of rest?

All right, so we have a couple of them. There's one more concerning our relationship with God.

[*You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.*]

Yes. Perfect. All right, so “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.” Somewhere in there is also a reference to a prohibition of idolatry; you shall not make any graven image of God.

So you have the first several commandments concerning our relationship with God. Basically, God comes first; God rested on the seventh day, you should rest also.

Alright, that’s easy. The remaining seven are a little harder. Can you tell me what they are?

[*Honor your father and your mother*]

What’s that? Amelia has an answer. Do you have an answer, Ethan? Oh, okay. Ah, okay. This is good. All right. So, what are the seven?

[*Honor your father and mother*]

Honor your father and mother – that’s a tough one sometimes to fulfill.

What else? You’re a recent confirmand – what else?

[*“You shall not kill or murder.” “Not commit adultery.” “Don’t steal.”*]

Right. Now Martin Luther in his *Small Catechism*, which was a short work that was meant to help Christian parents raise their children in the faith, he says, my confirmation students might recall, that it’s not simply that you refrain from taking what does not belong to you, but you do what you can to help your neighbor maintain and preserve his property or her property.

All right, so: don’t steal, don’t murder, don’t commit adultery... We’re missing one. I named it a little earlier.

[*Thou shalt not covet*]

“Thou shalt not covet.” And this is the only command concerning intention. The others are all action. Right? Don’t steal, don’t commit adultery. But in the case of the tenth commandment, you have “Don’t covet.” What does that mean, and to whom is the commandment referring? “To covet” means to desire something that is not yours, right? And the commandment lists you shall not desire your neighbor’s property. Your neighbor’s wife comes second – because she’s property in the patriarchal context in which these commandments first appeared – then your donkey, then various other items that belong to you or belong your neighbor; you shall not covet those things. So there you have the 10 commandments, two tables three concerning our relationship with God, [seven] concerning our relationship with one another. Of course, yes.

[You forgot one]

Did I what is it?

[*You shall not bear false witness.*]

Oh, I know, but I did that earlier, so I thought I would skip it! Joel caught me!

Okay. Now of course there are more than ten commandments in the Torah, but let's start with this: what is the Torah? The word torah is often translated "law," but I prefer "teachings" or "instruction." So in what books of the Bible do the teachings, or instruction, of God understood as commandments? Where do they appear? The Torah refers to the first five books: Genesis, in which we have one commandment only, then Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. All the remaining commandments of the Lord appear in those five texts. Can you tell me how many there are?

[613.]

Oh, no! Yes, Joel is right: 613! (Now, I was all set up for you to guess 700, and then somebody gets 500 and then I would say lower or higher and I would fulfill my role as Bob Barker of "The Price is Right" at Queen Anne Lutheran Church – and speaking of "The Price is Right," I do believe there's a special place in hell for people who bid \$1 over their neighbor...)

So, we have 613 commandments... Joel, can you name them?

[laughter] [When we had our forum with Dr. Lawrence, she gave us the number 613...]

Ah, okay, so she actually helped me a bit with the sermon, Dr. Lawrence.

All right. So, we have 613 commandments. Assuming that we probably couldn't name them all ourselves, on your behalf, I performed a great sacrifice this week and read all of them for you. I read all 613 commandments. And so, over the next two hours, I'm going to explain to you each one of them...

Okay, that's obviously not going to work. So let me give you the "Cliff Notes" version, or "SparkNotes," for our millennials. Here are a few themes or examples of commandments in the Torah – and remember the Torah is the first five books of the Bible:

Number one: "Love your neighbor as yourself." We think Jesus was the first to articulate this commandment; it appears in Leviticus. What Jesus does, when it comes to his teaching, is he actually surpassed this commandment by saying, "You should not only love your neighbor as yourself, you should love your enemies."

That is an unprecedented teaching in the ancient world. So, when it comes to Jesus's teachings, there's almost something miraculous about them. It's not just "Love your neighbor," it's "Love your enemy."

The commandments also stipulate that you should not hold grudges; that you should not take revenge. These are all expressions of loving your neighbor.

Next, avoid mediums, fortune tellers, wizards – no wizards. And those who channel the spirits, those who channel the dead. Now why would that be prohibited? What's that? [takes the focus off God] That's exactly correct. So, the concern here seems to be that these things would distract you from fulfilling the first commandment. God is your focus, not fortune tellers and mediums who deal with the spirits.

What's interesting is that it's not as though these practices weren't effective. If you go to the book of First Kings, you have King Saul talking about how he wants to call Samuel up from the dead, the Prophet. And you know the story, some of you, he does so with the help of a medium, and the first thing Samuel says is, "Why are you disturbing me?" I almost think of it like, "Dude, why are you doing this to me?" Right? So it's not that these things don't work. It's that they distract us from our focus, which should be God.

Number three, restrict sexual relationships, no incest, no bestiality, you know, adultery, et cetera. Now, when I see prohibitions like that, I think to myself, these must be responding to something. There must have been a problem in this regard. So you have these prohibitions.

Pay attention, number four, to your physical appearance. And I learned this at the first service: You're not supposed to cut your hair at the temples as a man – so, I thought my temples were up here, but it turns out they're here. And if you look at Orthodox Jews, they often grow their hair here as a way of fulfilling that commandment. So I think this is fascinating.

Guess what else? You may not get a tattoo. Tattoos are forbidden, according to the Book of Leviticus. Now this would become a problem during the Holocaust, when Jews were forced to go into concentration camps, and were tattooed by the Nazis. So there are many Jews today who would say this prohibition no longer applies. So, if you have a tattoo, or if you have a friend, a son or a daughter, whatever, who has a tattoo, you're off the hook.

Also, be sure not to wear garments made of mixed fabric. Specifically, Deuteronomy says wool and linen. For those of you who are wearing cotton/polyester blends, you are in violation of God's law. I'm sorry to break it to you.

Next, observe Kosher or dietary laws. There are many laws concerning this, but I wanted to highlight several: Don't eat snakes. It makes me think there were people who were eating snakes, right? Don't eat worms. Don't eat worms, Ethan! This is directed toward you. As a young man, don't eat worms! (Your sister, however, can do what she wants.) Scorpions: Don't eat scorpions. And be sure not to eat the fat of even some clean animals. So that ribeye steak you love so much, that needs to go away as well.

Next, and I think this is really the most important: "Be charitable and just." Be charitable and just in you're dealing with others; care for the widow; care for the orphan; care for the poor, and care for the alien, which is to say the non-resident or the immigrant.

Let me give you a couple of examples. If you are a farmer, you are told to leave a corner of your field uncut for the poor. And that's because of a concern for justice. The poor live without means, and so the task and obligation of the farmer is to make sure that the poor now have food. Another one: the alien that is the non-resident, the non-citizen, or the immigrant who resides with you shall be "a citizen among you."

“You shall love the immigrant as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.”

Now Facebook upsets me in many, many ways. But one of my least favorite posts, concerns another book in the Bible that talks about denigrating aliens – that is foreign otherwise to the Torah. The Torah insists that we are to welcome the immigrant, the resident alien; it even has a provision for amnesty. You may not extradite, that is return, a slave who, because of abuse, fled to biblical Israel.

You are not to charge interest on loans for the poor. You are not to demand collateral from widows.

There are also rules concerning priestly sacrifices, rules concerning the importance of letting the land rest, when you farm, every seventh year, so that creation can rejuvenate itself.

There’s a reference to minimal temple attendance. Can you guess how many times, as an observant Jew, you’re supposed to go to the temple? Three times. That’s one more than the Christmas and Easter Christmas. Now, in the footnotes here, there’s a comment that says as Lutherans, you’re required to be in church every Sunday. But as a practicing observant Jew, you must attend the temple at least three times only.

There are many laws concerning court proceedings, damages, or even treatment of captive female slaves.

613 laws in the book of Torah. Now, here’s where it gets really interesting. You may not know that there is a 614th law that was added by a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust named Emil Hockenheim. And what he said was this, or he was rather always saying that “continuing the Jewish life and denying Hitler,” a posthumous victory, was the 614th law. In other words, “preserve our tradition; preserve our people,” as a way of defeating Hitler. So, 614.

Now let me step back once again. How do you summarize, briefly, how do you condense 613 or 614 laws into something that we can pack up and take with us when we leave? I think it’s an impossible task, but it *seems* like there’s a special concern here for justice, and for social harmony. Because it’s an impossible task, I asked myself, then, what would Jesus do? How would *he* summarize the 613 commandments? Any guesses. How does he condense all of these?

[Love one another as I first loved you.]

Yes, okay. You got to the answer, and yes, we’re going to come back to that in a second. So, I’m looking for two commandments...

Jesus says, “Love God and love your neighbor.” So Jesus, in this miraculous teaching, takes 613 laws, condensing them, distilling them into two: “Love God and love your neighbor.” We see that in the first three gospels: Mark, Matthew, and Luke. But in John’s gospel, things are different. In fact, in John’s gospel, I counted 33 additional commandments Jesus shares with his followers. Let me name a couple of them.

“Stop making my father’s house a marketplace.” Remember this? This is when Jesus enters the temple, or as my friend, Pastor Mark Griffith, likes to put it, this is Jesus’s “temple tantrum.” You shall not make my father’s house a marketplace.

Another one. Another imperative from John’s Gospel. “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” In other words, “be healed.”

Another commandment; I love this one. “Do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid.

Another imperative. “Do not complain among yourselves.” Do not complain among yourselves.

Another commandment, “Put your sword back in your sheath.” Some of you may not know this, but Christians were not conscripted for military service until the rise of Constantine in the fourth century. In the fourth century, we needed to learn how to accommodate state and the church. But before that, Christians were pacifists, going all the way back to Jesus Himself.

Another commandment, “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep.”

And then the last commandment of John’s gospel, two words: “Follow me.” Follow me.

Now, more specifically, Jesus identifies only one officially new commandment, and Peggy got the answer right. What is it? “Love one another as I first loved you.” It appears in verse 12 of our reading today. It also appears in chapter 13. “I have given you a new commandment,” Jesus says, “that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Now, do you see what Jesus is doing here? He’s taking 613 commandments, which includes the ten, and condensing them not to two, but to one, and that one commandment is encapsulated *in a single word*. Can you guess what it is?

Love.

That’s why we’re here. Love. What an incredible teaching; the entirety of the law, condensed and distilled into a single word.

Paul confirms the same in Romans 13. He writes, “The commandments – You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not watch sports games during church, You shall not covet, and any other commandment – are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to the neighbor, therefore, Love is the fulfilling of the law.

So, the takeaway here is this. You don’t have to memorize all 613 commandments, you simply need to know one: Love one another as God or Christ have loved you.

So, here’s my question. As followers of Christ, do you love one another, as God in Christ loved you? How do you treat your spouse, your partner, your child, your grandchild, your, your parents, your friends, your neighbors, your fellow parishioners, your pastor, your cantor, your parish administrator? How do you treat these people?

Do you treat them with love? Beyond that, how do you treat, let's say in a work environment, your clients, or in a classroom environment, your students, or more broadly, strangers, or the poor, or the immigrant, or the outcast, or the marginalized? You see, it all boils down to one word: love.

If you don't have it, if you don't exhibit it, then you need to ask yourself this question, "Why am I here in church?"

Now if your answer is, "It's because I struggle to love others as God loved me," then there's some great news for you here. You're in the right place. You're in the absolutely right place. Church is not a place for perfect people. It's what St. Augustine call a hospital for sinners. And I believe that healing that takes place here when it comes to mending broken relationships, can be distilled into four easy steps for you to consider both today and for the coming week.

Number one: In church, you have the rare opportunity in our culture to reflect. Is there someone you mistreated this past week? Is there someone you wronged? So, we start with reflection.

Then, repent. Acknowledge what you did. Take responsibility. Say I'm sorry. Ask God for forgiveness.

Reflect. Repent...

Number three: Remember. Remember your baptism. Lutherans baptize infants because our conviction is that *God loves us first*, which is exactly what Jesus says about himself in today's Gospel. Remember your baptism, and know that as a baptized Christian, you are loved. You are loved. And this love in turn, should empower you, as it does me, to try again.

Now because of that, there's the fourth – rejoice. (Actually, there are five...) So the fourth is rejoice. And why wouldn't you? You are loved by God and empowered to go out and try again.

And then finally, the last R, "repair." Go out to those whom you may have wronged, and become "ministers of reconciliation," as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5.

So, healing in the church happens in four ways. **Reflect** about someone you may have mistreated; **repent** for what you did; **remember** your baptism; **rejoice** in your baptism; and then **repair** the darn relationship.

We practice that every Sunday when we do the Sharing of the Peace. I've shaken hands with people who, outside of the sanctuary, I have disagreed with. And that's such an important practice. Be reconciled to your neighbor.

My prayer for you and for me this day, then is this. May God give you the strength and health to fulfill this one simple commandment: to love others as God first loved you.

Amen.