

July 1, 2018
Leave It to Jesus
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Exodus 20:1-17

[The Ten Commandments]

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

⁴You 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. ⁵You 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, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

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

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But 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. ¹¹For 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.

¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. ¹³You shall not murder. ¹⁴You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵You shall not steal. ¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷You 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.

Of the ten, commandments 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 are the easiest to remember and the hardest to keep. Leave it to Jesus to make them even harder. It's not enough just to not kill my neighbor (who hates my dogs and chickens); Jesus says I can't secretly hate her in my heart. And my brother! I risk hell just being angry with him! The law says *no adultery*. Jesus says *no window shopping*. Leave it to Jesus to know internet porn would someday be a thing.

Leave it to Jesus to ruin everything. Holding us accountable for what we say. Making the biblical law not just about what we do, but about what we think, about the secret conversations between me, myself and I, the internal talk by which I justify and sanctify every word and deed that flows out of this human package called Annette.

I may fool others. I may fool myself. But leave it to Jesus to remind me that there's no fooling the One who offers us a life of joy, freedom and contentment – in this language of covenant, language so economically packaged in these seventeen verses of Exodus, chapter 20.

God's proposal to the Hebrews in the desert: *The world has offered you security for the (ridiculous) price of perpetual enslavement; slavery of you, your children, your grandchildren, and their grandchildren. I offer you freedom. Freedom from fear mostly. Freedom from the anxiety life in this world will generate in you, in your children, your grandchildren. My price? Faith. And fidelity. This is an exclusive covenant. All of you and all of me* – an offer God makes to every human.

And I've no firm numbers on this, but I'll guess, based on thirty years in this business, humans choose security over freedom 90% of the time. Resign ourselves to slavery, rather than persist in faith. Yet, God is ever on God's knees, proposing.

There is a sequence to these ten words, this covenant, that is unbending. *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the house of slavery.* That's first – the taproot upon which the whole law depends. (See sermon from June 3, "Ten Words for Free People.") The first four commandments, sometimes called *the first table*, govern our relationship with God. We live by God's priorities and God's economy. (See last week's sermon, "Why This Great Migration?") God's priorities are holiness, justice and fidelity.

The four commandments of the first table: only God saved us, other beings aren't God – God is God; things aren't God – only God is God; God's name is only for God – don't put God's name on stuff that isn't God's; Sabbath is to be set aside – time, energy, resources all laid down for one day out of seven in remembrance that we do not keep ourselves, God keeps us.

Table Two contains five commandments: respect the elders; no murder; no adultery; no stealing; no lying. Table Two governs our relationships with others – *good news for the whole neighborhood*, as one preacher said. Not *your* best life now, but *your neighbor's best life now!* [The last of the ten commandments – *don't covet* – is Table Three.]

Fidelity governs our relationship with God. When God is our God, we don't need our neighbors to be God to us. When God is God, we don't go around begging our neighbors for what only God provides. What does only God provide? Freedom from the fear of death; the providence to live in this world free of that fear; freedom to love and serve others as God loved and served us in Jesus Christ. Sounds good. One hitch. God doles that freedom and providence out a day at a time. Remember the manna and quail? It drove those Hebrews crazy. They built golden calves and had wild parties. We are no better.

In place of *freedom from the fear of death* or *confidence in the daily providence of God*, we also settle for far lesser things – things like financial security and emotional safety and physical satisfaction. Thus, the rebellion, murder, adultery, theft and lying. All the

things that kick up our dopamine and trick us into thinking that the satisfaction of this moment will somehow reconstitute as certainty for the future. It doesn't, of course. But it's so affordable and so accessible, we know we can get more tomorrow. The momentary fear and shakiness become bearable – until 3 AM, gathered round the kitchen with me, myself and I, drowning our fear and doubt in Chubby Hubby ice cream.

The problem is obvious. People aren't God. People can't be God. They are destined to disappoint us. My daughter was two weeks old her first Easter, which was also her very first Sunday to go to church. I dressed her in the tiniest dress which my mom had gotten and put the tiniest clip in her black silky hair. I turned around for a minute and when I turned back, the clip was in her fist along with a wad of her own black hair. She had ripped it out and she didn't even cry. And I learned that unless you're willing to beat them, you can't make your own child do anything they don't want to do, even if they only weigh eight pounds. And I realized for the first time, as a 28-year-old, that if I can't make an eight-pound person do something she doesn't want to do, I probably can't make anyone else do anything they don't want to do either.

I'm telling ya, it was a little disappointing. I had an entirely different vision of parenting, of being a competent, effective adult in this world. I did not enjoy realizing that living around other people is practically impossible. Being married is practically impossible. We need other people, and we can hardly stand them. We love them, and sometimes the way they chew can have us fantasizing murder. They comfort us. They protect us. They shock us. They bore us. They amaze us, in the best and the worst of ways. They charm us. They encourage us. They use us. They betray us. They heal us. They harm us. They can be home to us or we can feel utterly alone in the same room with the ones who know us best.

But until we get all our relationships – every last one of them, from our spouse to the kid bagging our groceries – within the context of our relationship with God, we will always struggle more than necessary. Remember, shoes on the right feet won't make your day easy, but shoes on the wrong feet will make everything harder. Our relationship with God goes *here*; relationships with people go *here*. These five commandments cover different behaviors. But they all – each and every one – come down to fidelity. Fidelity governs our relationship with God, which governs our relationships with others. Every relational transaction is an invitation from God for me to keep covenant.

Respect your mother and your father – the most easily abused commandment, with multiple sermons to be preached, depending on one's stage of faith. I've traded the wording for “respect the elders” for people at the beginning of faith, simply because some parents are, in fact, imposters. They may have biological or legal right to the title “parent,” but they haven't assumed the moral, tactical, spiritual responsibility that goes with the title. *Parents* are people who protect, nurture and nourish children. If you don't do that, you aren't a parent. And your kids aren't bound by this commandment.

But all of us have been parented by someone. If we are alive, someone somewhere protected, nurtured and nourished us, and they are due the respect accordingly. They may be a stepdad, foster parent, residential director of a group home. My brother and sister-in-law raising grandkids. A coach. A neighbor. *Elders* is my chosen summary label for them all. Respect them. Regard them as your teachers of holiness, justice, and fidelity in this world.

No adultery – the easiest one to preach, if it weren't for Jesus and his commentary. Adultery is lying and theft, for sure. And murder, in some cases – the murder of trust, maybe a relationship, maybe a family of relationships. Which isn't to say that life doesn't come from death – of course it does; that grace isn't greater than all of our sin – because of course it is. But neither let us pretend that the top-shelf meaning of the word *adultery* is the only shape infidelity takes in our most committed relationships.

What about all the OTHER very unsexy promises you made to your spouse? Like *help-mate*. Remember *help-mate*? Other words or phrases for help-mate? **Trash guy*. **Diaper guy*. **Guy who goes on vacation with my sisters and pretends he's having a ball*. **Woman who takes gross, wadded-up socks out of the laundry basket and pulls them apart for the five-thousandth time*. **Woman who laughs like she hasn't heard that story forty-three times already*. ALL CHEERFULLY – because that's fidelity too! Always, always, always recognizing that's a human being – not just MY husband, MY baby daddy, MY roommate, MY financier. I love him and I respect him; but I must NOT NEED from him what only God can give. Therefore I don't have to be so forever clutch-y and grabby and controlling of his personhood. Which is all so easy to type on a computer and slightly harder to say up here. But still a hundred million times harder actually to do in real life, when he sings songs that aren't songs or looks at his phone when I want him to look at me. Adultery is big, no doubt. But who keeps the promises of every relationship they're in?

What does your word mean to the people around you? To your co-workers? To your kids? To your students? Leave it to Jesus to point out that all of us have covenant to keep in the relationships of our lives. And if we lean on our own strength – or even only on each other – there will inevitably be hell to pay.

No stealing and no lying – Don't take what isn't yours. If it were only candy in a candy store, wouldn't that be nice? I still have Janet's keys. (I lied and said I'd given everything back.) It's that internal conversation convincing me that what isn't really mine actually sort of is. *If I asked the deacons for it they'd probably say yes, so taking it myself is really no big deal*. *It's okay if I skip out early because this job barely pays me anyway*. Or, like my nephews on vacation who filled their pockets with saltine crackers at the restaurant, *“because they were free anyway,”* they told their dads, who said, *“not for you, you little freeloaders. You didn't pay for dinner!”* The boys had the choice to take the crackers back or give their dads \$1. Because we aren't robbing liquor stores doesn't make us

unacquainted with the impulse. All of us are looking for the greatest return on the least effort. Right? We don't call it stealing; it's "efficiency."

Again, Jesus is the one who says, "No looking" – because we already have all we need. And if we believed that, friends, there would be nothing in this world we'd think worth stealing. Maybe no two words in modern usage have lost their meanings as much as *stealing* and *lying*. They don't mean anything, really. I believe rich people steal far more than poor people. For example, a CEO who makes over \$480 million dollars, while full-time employees have to get food stamps to feed their kids, is stealing. Stealing from me and you. But they aren't even breaking the law, while a poor person who steals to eat can go to jail. What's worse?

The poor person testifies to the failure of the church. Testifies to the failure of the people of God to act out the generosity of God. If we were on our game, no poor person would have to steal, and rich Christians might even hear more convicting sermons. Who's to say? I mean, other than the prophets; and Jesus; and the apostles. You know, those guys.

Lying – to be lied to by someone with whom you are in covenant, then to be lied to about being lied to – in my experience – has the effect of making one feel insane; of being invited to join the lie and maintain the pretense of covenant or insist the truth and expose the loss of covenant, neither of which feels like the faithful choice. Possibly because *faithful* has been conflated with *not causing any trouble and getting along with everybody all the time*.

Words. Words HAVE to matter. If words don't matter, *covenant* is five consonants and three vowels. Without words, we have no means of covenant. Without covenant, we have no means of community. Without community, we have no relationships. Without relationships, we are what we most fear: alone. Even God didn't want to be alone. Seems like that makes "alone" something to avoid. We are afraid to be alone and afraid to be found out when we are with others. So we use our words to invent some other self we hope and pray might be more interesting or attractive or acceptable than the terrified or hurting self inside. And out come these words.

The three sets of people we interact with – you know those folks. You're in a meeting and they're talking and you smile and you nod and you play along. But you've known them awhile, and you know not to hold them to anything they are saying, 'cause they are just talking. And that's okay because you love them, and they are your sister or brother. And then there are the other types, who truly believe the things they are saying and expect you to believe them too. But it doesn't feel right, but you can't pin down what isn't right, and there's a slightly sinister edge to it that nobody talks about. And then the smaller set of folks, the ones who say what they mean and mean what they say. Generally, they talk less than most other people – go figure. Solid folks, we call them, dependable.

The best way not to lie: talk less. Not my advice – Jesus's. Don't make promises at all, he says. When you mean yes, say "yes." When you mean no, say "no." Don't say yes when

you mean no, 'cause that's a lie. Don't say you'll do what your own calendar clearly says you cannot do – that's a lie. You may feel better for a minute, but it's going to mess up at least two other people, probably more. "No" is not a bad word – especially if it's the truth. Then it is the most godly word of all and the easiest. Isn't that awesome, when the godly way works out to be the easy way too?

Why do we lie? Fear. Fear cloaked in other language. "Oh, I can't say no. I just have a servant heart." Maybe – or maybe you need to feel needed, because you don't trust others to love you if they don't need you. Or maybe, you haven't yet believed that God just loves you as you are, so you wear yourself out earning what you already have.

To tell the truth, we have to know the truth. And to know the truth, we have to hear it. And to hear the truth, we have to do two things: we have to be where the truth is told – that's fidelity; and we have to listen every single day of our lives – that's faith.

Would you pray with me?