
Thanksgiving: Sharing Gratitude
Chapel in the Park United Church
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Based on Exodus 20:1-20 and Matthew 22:34-40

Have you ever heard anyone say - if only we followed the 10 commandments, our world would be a far better place. It's a tempting idea isn't it? To imagine that following a single short list of rules would lead to societal peace and harmony. And moreover, it's very tempting to imagine that someone else has already figured out this list of rules for us. We don't have to engage and think and create the rules ourselves. The hard work has already been done for us. It's a brilliant plan - if it works.

But since societies are constantly evolving, I have to wonder how practical that idea is. How are we to hear the 10 commandments today? How did you feel when you heard them a moment ago? I suppose the first issue would be: which version of the 10 commandments are we talking even about?

Quick quiz: How many versions of the 10 commandments are there?

I'm aware of 5 different versions. The 2 versions that are most similar are found in Exodus 20 and in Deuteronomy 5. When people make a general reference to the "10 commandments", they are likely thinking of one of these versions.

Interestingly, although the commands are similar some of the motivations are different. For example, both of those versions command to honour the sabbath. But in Exodus 20, the reason to honour the sabbath is because God created the heavens and the earth in 6 days. The sabbath therefore represents the day that God rested after creation. In Deuteronomy 5, however, the requirement to honour the sabbath was to remember that God liberated the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt.

So - what is a third version of the 10 commandments? I'm sure you remember the basic narrative of the mythical story we call "the Exodus". One piece of it is this: After leaving Egypt and wandering around for awhile, the people settled down for a bit. Moses went up a mountain. And while he was gone, the people decided to have a party. The people took some of the gold they had stolen from Egypt and created a statue of a calf.

Moses then returned from the mountain, bringing with him the tablets on which 10 commandments were written.

When Moses returned, he saw the people dancing around the golden calf. That action violated the commandments that Moses was carrying. Instead of realizing that the people had not yet heard the commandments and therefore could not violate them, Moses declared that the people were unfaithful. And in anger, Moses smashed the tablets. Then, two chapters later, Moses goes and gets new tablets. Exodus 34 gives the story about these “replacement” tablets.

Exodus 34 begins with “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets, which you broke’.” But the words that follow do not really resemble the earlier commandments. For example, in these tablets there is no general prohibition on either theft or murder. Instead, the text includes other concepts: Like, “Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord God”. And the most inexplicable commandment, “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk”.

If you have never heard of the version of the 10 commandments in Exodus 34 you are excused, because the commandments themselves are not very meaningful. They are nothing like the 10 commandments that you know. Incidentally, the version of the 10 commandments found in Exodus 34 is the only version that - in the Bible - is actually named “the ten commandments”.

So the Old Testament has 3 versions of the 10 commandments. And the only version that is actually called “the ten commandments” is bizarre. But if we consider only the version taken from Exodus 20, perhaps we can focus down on something we can at least discuss.

Apparently, some people believe that our society's laws are based on the 10 commandments. For example, some people believe that the US legal system is based on the version of the commandments as found in Exodus 20. It is interesting to wonder how people could believe that, because the idea is absurd on its face. The first amendment of the American constitution protects people's religious freedoms and freedom of speech. Those rights are clearly violated by the requirement within the 10 commandments to only

worship one particular god. And also the requirement to not blaspheme against that particular god.

According to an article on rationalwiki.org, “at the very least, the first, second, third, and fourth Commandments would represent clear violations to both Article Nine of the European Convention on Human Rights, and the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. As well as Articles Eighteen and Nineteen of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”.

But what about the commandments aimed at our social obligations? What about the more “reasonable” commandments?

Consider the commandment to not covet other people’s property. “Covet” just means wanting something that someone else has. It’s the basis of our capitalist economy. In modern terms, “covet” can be translated as, “I have a nice phone, but I just saw Jen’s phone and it’s way cooler than mine so now I want a new phone.”

Or, “I just saw this phone that makes coffee so now I need a new phone”.

I just do not understand this commandment at all. Some scholars have argued that wanting other people’s stuff is ok, but it may lead to theft, or if the object of your coveting is your neighbours spouse, it may lead to adultery. But there are already separate commandments covering theft and adultery. So why is there a restriction on coveting? I’d love to hear your thoughts over coffee time.

What about the commandment to not kill? What does that mean? Some scholars believe that the Hebrew word for “kill” would be better translated as “kill without moral justification”. But even then, who gets to decide what is justified? The victim or the aggressor? One difficulty with understanding this commandment is that the Old Testament is full of stories of killing and murder. Including stories where “God” specifically tells some people to go kill some other people.

Numerous passages in the Bible depict “God” commanding the slaughter of “followers of other religions, non-believers, homosexuals, witches, adulterers, women who are not virgins on their wedding night, and anyone working on the sabbath.” When we put it all together, it’s hard to know what was meant by the commandment to not kill. Unless it is simply a case of “do as I say, not as I do”. In which case it violates the

foundational principle of democracy we call the “Rule of Law”.

Quick quiz for you. Who was the first person to break the commandments?

Some scholars have argued that the commandment to not kill was designed to prevent Hebrews killing other Hebrews. But just a few verses after Moses smashes the original tablets, he orders the slaughter of his own people. Moses tells the sons of Levi “Put your sword on your side ... go back and forth from gate to gate and kill your brother, your friend and your neighbour ... and about three thousand people died.” And when that was done, Moses declared that the slaughter was “a great service to God”.

So Moses broke the tablets shortly after he made them, and then he broke the commandments themselves right after that. Moses was the first person to break the 10 commandments. If neither God nor Moses could keep the commandments, well, they just don’t seem all that useful. At least not those versions.

Anyway, that’s 3 versions of the 10 commandments. I will take a bit of a liberty and state that a fourth version of the 10 commandments comes from Jesus. Because there are a couple of occasions where Jesus encouraged people to follow “the commandments”. And then Jesus spelled out what those commandments were. Our reading from Matthew today is an example of that. Plus there are similar stories in the other gospels. And we will unpack that teaching shortly.

Oh - and a fifth version of the 10 commandments is what scholars believe to be the original text from which the Old Testament versions were plagiarized. The Egyptian “Book of the Dead” from about 1800 BC.

You won’t be surprised that of the 5 versions of the 10 commandments, I prefer the version from Jesus. First of all, it’s the shortest. Even I can memorize it. “Love God, love each other, and love yourself”. But wait - I hear you say - Jesus did not say that. And you are right.

For example, in today’s reading, Jesus said, “Love the lord with all your heart, and love your neighbour as yourself”. But I figure if we are supposed to love our neighbour as ourselves, then obviously we have to love ourselves too. So I prefer an even shorter version of the commandments. It’s a single word. A verb. The command is “love”. That’s it. Just “love”.

When we consider love - loving God, loving others, and loving ourselves, we should not overlook loving ourselves. The idea that we should love God seems sort of basic. I mean, I'm sure that nobody here disagrees with that. The idea that we should love other people reminds us of the "golden rule", the idea that we should treat other people the way we ourselves want to be treated. And that seems like a pretty obvious idea too. But in our modern world, for a variety of reasons, many people struggle to really love themselves.

And let me be a bit more clear. By "loving yourself" I do not mean in a narcissistic way. I do not mean that we should love ourselves by diminishing other people. I mean loving ourselves in healthy ways. I would go so far as to say that you cannot really love your neighbour if you cannot love yourself. Loving your neighbour is just an extension of the love that you have for yourself. So we need to love ourselves too.

We sometimes struggle to love ourselves because we have been raised to believe that we are not worthy. Or because we feel we are not living up to social or family expectations. Or because when we compare ourselves with others we see ourselves as inadequate. Or because we live with a great deal of negative self-talk. Or because of unresolved trauma or emotional pains. Or because we are perfectionists. Or because we believe we are supposed to put ourselves last all the time. Or because we never hear any positive affirmations - even from ourselves. I could go on. If you struggle with any of these things please reach out to me or someone you trust. Because you are worth loving.

Love yourself. For the simple reason that you are worth it. You are a child of God after all.

The good news is that when we struggle with loving ourselves, one way to move forward is in fact Thanksgiving. There - we finally made it to Thanksgiving. But actually, I do not mean the holiday. I mean the actual act of thanksgiving. Or in plain English, the act of giving thanks.

Thanksgiving is a time for - giving thanks. And we give thanks for things for which we are grateful. So the key to a meaningful Thanksgiving - and to loving yourself in healthy ways - is gratitude. But what is gratitude?

"Gratitude is the feeling or expression of thankfulness and appreciation for the

things, people, or experiences that bring positive value to one's life. It can be directed toward other people, oneself, nature, a higher power, or life in general. Gratitude often involves recognizing the good in life, even in difficult circumstances, and acknowledging that some benefits and blessings come from outside of oneself.

Key Aspects of Gratitude:

- **Recognition of Goodness**
Gratitude begins with noticing and recognizing the positive aspects of life, whether big or small. It could be as simple as appreciating a sunny day, a kind gesture from a friend, or the food on the table.
- **Acknowledgment of External Sources**
Gratitude often involves acknowledging that the good things in life are, to some extent, the result of others' efforts, or circumstances beyond one's control. This fosters a sense of interconnectedness and humility.
- **Positive Emotional State**
When people feel gratitude, it can evoke feelings of warmth, joy, or contentment. Expressing gratitude regularly is linked to emotional well-being and can even improve mental and physical health.
- **A Practice or Habit**
Gratitude can be cultivated through practices like journaling, prayer, meditation, or simply taking time to reflect on what one is thankful for. Many people intentionally practice gratitude to enhance their sense of fulfillment and happiness.

Benefits of Gratitude:

- Improves mental health, reducing feelings of depression and anxiety.
- Strengthens relationships, as expressing gratitude fosters connection and mutual appreciation.
- Enhances life satisfaction and resilience, making it easier to cope with adversity.
- Encourages a positive mindset and reduces materialistic or comparative thinking.

Gratitude is often described as a shift in perspective - choosing to focus on what you have rather than what you lack. It's an empowering mindset that can lead to greater contentment and joy."¹

Focusing on contentment for what we have rather than being jealous about what other people have ... perhaps that's the most helpful way to understand the commandment to not covet. It's ok to want what other people have, as long as it does not prevent you from experiencing gratitude yourself. It's ok to want what other people have, as long as it does not prevent you from loving yourself.

Today is Thanksgiving Sunday. And notice - it's not "Thanksbeing". It's "Thanksgiving". Being grateful is not enough. We have to actually share that gratitude. We have to actually tell somebody. Sharing gratitude can be done in lots of ways. Perhaps with a phone call or an email. Perhaps with a text or a card. Perhaps with an offer to share a meal. Perhaps with a donation to a food bank.

Today - I want to take a direct approach. In a moment I'm going to invite each of us to express gratitude to someone else. Whether you are online or in the sanctuary. You can express your gratitude for something in your life. Or - if you are really brave - tell the person you speak with why you appreciate them. Let's stand up move around (or move around the zoom windows) and express our gratitude out loud.

By some strange quirk of human nature, it turns out that the more we express our gratitude, the more grateful we become, the more we enjoy life, and the more we can love ourselves in healthy ways. Who knew?

Embrace the commandment - and the gift - of love.

Amen.

¹ ChatGPT's response to the question, "What is gratitude?"