

THE NEXT TEN COMMANDMENTS

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
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In my sermon three weeks ago, I promised to open the cabinet of spiritual curiosities and, in the spirit of Charles Darwin, ask how religion has evolved in the past and how it should evolve now. Two weeks ago, I opened the cabinet and spoke about a God we can believe in—the idea of an immanent refuge for experience and a transcendent source of possibility. Last Sunday, I spoke about the collection of rituals, scriptures, icons and the like—the trappings many people refer to when they speak, often disparagingly, of organized religion. I asked what a religion for children of the Enlightenment would look like. Faith, I suggested, is a leap of the moral imagination. The goal of enlightened religion is to develop strong arms to hold faith up and keep it moving forward.

Today, a third and—at least for now—final curiosity in the cabinet: religious commandments and rules, along with endless interpretations. For many people, ethical guidelines stand at the center of their religious faith—the Ten Commandments handed down by Moses, for example, or Jesus’ admonition to love God and love your neighbor, and so on. At its best, religion creates a way of life that enables its adherents to distinguish right from wrong, good from evil, righteous from sinful.

But where do we look for moral guidance when many of the commandments in the cabinet seem outdated, or irrelevant, or even downright wrong? I’ve spoken before about the misadventures of the writer A.J. Jacobs, author of a quirky bestselling book titled *The Year of Living Biblically*. The book chronicles Jacobs’ attempt to follow the Bible as literally as possible for an entire year. As he discovered, this entailed not only obeying the Ten Commandments and loving his neighbors, but also avoiding clothes made of mixed fibers and stoning adulterers.

Jacobs began by making a list of every rule, guideline, and suggestion that he could find in the Bible. Some of the 700 rules, he admitted at the outset, would be illegal for him to follow, such as killing magicians and sacrificing oxen. Others seemed strange and unnecessarily obsessive, such as avoiding fruit from trees planted less than five years ago.

But overall, Jacobs thought that most of the rules in the Bible would be good for him, and that following them literally would, he hoped, make him a better person by the end of the year. No lying. No stealing. Love your neighbor. Honor your parents. As he put it, “I’ll be the Ghandi of the Upper West Side.”

I don’t think so. Jacobs may someday win the Nobel Peace Prize, but it won’t be because he blew a trumpet at the new moon, as the Psalmist instructs, or always wore garments of white, as Ecclesiastes commands. Jacobs quickly discovered that, if following rules is the point, the main dilemma in life soon becomes deciding what constitutes following the rules.

Take coveting, for example, which the tenth Commandment forbids by saying, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or

his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's." Does this mean that it's okay to covet an ox that doesn't belong to your neighbor? Perhaps. One rabbi told Jacobs that the commandment was meant to safeguard neighborly relationships. The rabbi said it's OK, for example, to covet a Jaguar that's sitting at a dealership, but not your neighbor's Jaguar. Other interpreters argued that all coveting is wrong, because it reveals an undue interest in the material things of this world. To play it safe, Jacobs tried to avoid both types.

I came away from Jacobs' book with the sense that he didn't quite know what he was looking for, and therefore ended up looking in the wrong places. It was as if he spent a year scrutinizing a piano— tracking down the source of the felt on the hammers, measuring the density of the wood that makes up the sound board, interviewing the technician who installs the keys—without ever figuring out that the point of a piano is the music. To be sure, a piano isn't music. Nor is the pianist, for that matter, or the composer, or the notes on a page, though each is necessary.

In a similar way, faith is a commitment from within that is sustained and renewed by the way of living we call religion. The reverse is also true: religious songs and stories help awaken faith, and the disciplines of religion help re-create it. When we speak of a religion for children of the Enlightenment, however, the question is where the rules come from.

Jacobs' faux literalism aside, it's worth taking a look at how the first Ten Commandments came to be the Ten Commandments. As told in the Hebrew Bible, the people of Israel had been liberated from slavery in Egypt, and the prophet Moses had led them east into the wilderness, toward the mountain of Sinai. Three months after leaving Egypt, they pitched camp in the shadow of the mountain. According to the story, Moses gave the people the following message from God: "You yourselves saw what I did to Egypt, and I bore you on the wings of eagles and I brought you to me. And now, if you will truly heed my voice and keep my covenant, you will become for me a treasure among all the peoples, for mine is all the earth. And as for you, you will become for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

The people agreed to keep the covenant. God subsequently detailed its terms in a long series of commandments headlined by an initial ten, today known to people and courts everywhere as the Ten Commandments. The important part of the story for our purposes, however, is the series of signs that showed the commandments came from God. Moses said to the people, "Ready yourselves for three days." The story continues:

And it happened on the third day as it turned morning, that there was thunder and lightning and a heavy cloud on the mountain and the sound of the ram's horn, very strong, and all the people who were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought out the people toward God from the camp and they stationed themselves at the bottom of the mountain. And Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the Lord had come down on it in fire, and its smoke went up like smoke from a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly... And the Lord came down on Mount Sinai, to the mountaintop, and the Lord called Moses to the mountaintop, and Moses went up... And God spake all these words, saying, 'I am the Lord your God

who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slaves. You shall have no others God beside me.”

The rest of the commandments followed: don't worship idols or take God's name in vain; remember the Sabbath; honor your parents; and don't murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet. That's it—Ten Commandments. When carved into stone, they became a visible symbol of the covenant and an enduring source of ethical guidance.

As a first draft of rules for living, the Ten Commandments are quite good. In fact, people who today take exception to the Ten Commandments do so not because they favor theft, adultery, and murder. Rather, they object to the idea that the sole source of ethical guidance in the world is the God of smoke and fire on Sinai.

Instead of focusing on God's role in the first Ten Commandments, let's look for a moment at the fireworks. According to the story, the people of Israel accepted the commandments as authentic because they were validated by the forces of nature—the thunder and lightning, the heavy cloud and the sound of the ram's horn, the fire and smoke, and the violent trembling. The divine commandments were believed to be true because nature said they were.

What happens if we view the natural world not as a validation of the Ten Commandments, but as their source? When children of the Enlightenment look for certainty, we don't look for a supernatural revelation from God. Rather, we look to our experience of the natural world, in the form of reason and scientific research. The next Ten Commandments will come not from beyond the fire, but from the fire itself.

In other words, we need ethical standards that emerge from the very structure of the world we live in. Which is what? The first principle of the universe, in my view, is utter dependence. Everything that exists is made up of constituent parts that are borrowed from, shared with, and related to others outside it. As humans, for example, we are utterly dependent upon the parents who conceived us, the plants and animals that daily provide our nourishment, the trees that give us oxygen, and the sun that warms the atmosphere and lights our path. We depend upon governments to provide for the commonweal, upon teachers for education, upon friends for love and companionship, and so on.

These constitutive relationships, along with countless others, make us who we are—not in the way a potter shapes a bowl, but in the way flour, butter, and sugar go together to make a cake. If you take away the ingredients that make up our lives, what remains has little meaning. We are made of, or constituted by, these relationships. As the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once put it, “we are dependent on the universe for every detail of our experience.” This principle applies to everything whatsoever. Nothing—not people, not rocks, not galaxies—is what it is strictly within itself.

The appropriate religious response to our dependence, I have suggested, should be gratitude. Gratitude links us to the past by revealing to us our identity: how we became who we are. And it links us to the future by revealing to us our duty: what we owe back in return. Our sense of obligation elicits a discipline of gratitude, by which we constantly acknowledge our utter dependence upon the sources that make our lives possible. It also elicits an ethic of gratitude that works for a future in which all

relationships—among humans, as well as between humans and the physical world—are fair, constructive, and beautiful.

The ethic of gratitude is both personal and universal. It stems from an insight that is simple, yet profound. You and I are constituted by the world we live in. The ethic of gratitude demands that we nurture the world that nurtures us in return. It is our duty to foster the kind of environment that we want to take in, and therefore become. Let me be clear: when I say that I am dependent on something, I mean that it constitutes a part of my world, and therefore constitutes a part of me.

Surrounded by ugliness, we come to embody callousness; surrounded by derision, we come to embody despair; surrounded by violence, we come to embody aggression. We cannot escape this cruel calculus. But there is another way. Surrounded by beauty, we come to embody hope; surrounded by order, we come to embody peace; surrounded by calm, we come to embody patience; surrounded by encouragement, we come to embody purpose.

The next Ten Commandments will seek to build a world constituted by relationships that are strong and constructive. They will forge lives that are vivid and beautiful, filled with meaning and purpose. Since I did not bring hammer and chisel today, the process of defining the next Ten Commandments will need to wait. Within their purview, however, will lie three domains of life that have been, at best, an afterthought for traditional religious ethics.

One has to do with the status of disadvantaged and marginalized people, especially women and people with disabilities. As the women of Afghanistan know as well as anyone, planet Earth is a dangerous place to be female. Whatever concessions President Obama may make to placate the so-called moderate elements of the Taliban, he must safeguard the freedom of women to work and be politically active, and the freedom of girls to attend school. We cannot continue to sacrifice the lives of women and girls on the altar of peace. The next Ten Commandments demand that we take the wellbeing of others as seriously as we take our own.

Another critical ethical domain has to do with the way we treat the animals and plants that provide our sustenance. Having grown up on a farm, I'm not being sentimental. I know how food happens. But I believe our lack of reverence for the way we grow and prepare our food is killing us, both in body and in spirit. The next Ten Commandments demand that we treat the organisms that sustain us with as much consideration as we treat ourselves.

A third critical ethical domain has to do with our care for the environment. At our peril, we have run out the string on the biblical command to subdue the earth. The next Ten Commandments demand that we treat our physical environment as the incubus of a fragile and precious gift: life itself.

After my sermon two weeks ago on "A God We Can Believe In," I received an email from a member of this congregation. With her permission, I share a portion of that email with you. She wrote, "This was a profoundly important sermon for me, and I thank you. Your characterization of God as analogous to beauty, 'needing to be made manifest through other forms as a quality of our experience,' and your reference to Alfred North Whitehead's notion of God as the consequence of experience, and your suggestion that this gives meaning to the child left to die in the elements and to each of us in our darkest moments, are an important shift from the notions I absorbed in my

childhood. And your suggestion that all humanity is the vessel of God, the face and hands of God in this world, past and future, suddenly invests our actions with frightening and boundless meaning.”

When the people of Israel stood before Sinai, more or less the same thing happened: their actions were suddenly invested with frightening and boundless meaning. They became people of the covenant. Our purpose here in this Sanctuary is to achieve the same realization in a different way. We have a covenant with each other, and with the people and world around us. Our enlightened faith and the religion that upholds it, the God we believe in and the commandments we follow—these remind us that much has been given to us, and much is required. To this community of faith and to the covenant that makes us one, I commit myself.