

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

A commercial the Family Feud television game show has a contestant in the bonus round trying to guess how people answered the question “How many of the Ten Commandments have you broken today?” When she answers “seven,” the host pretends to be horrified and makes a wisecrack about what she’s been doing. The Ten Commandments, which we sometimes call “The Decalogue” are so well known—at least in their intent—that even non-religious folk know God meant them to be a set of rules for ethical, moral living for God’s people. When we hear them in biblical language as we do today, it’s not too hard for us to separate ourselves from their full meaning. After all, we don’t have slaves or oxen or donkeys; we long ago stopped keeping the Sabbath holy; covet isn’t a word we use in everyday conversation; and few of us would even consider killing someone, much less actually doing it.

I found a more contemporary version of The Ten Commandments written by Tennessee author and humorist Tom Cordle that might be a bit closer to what God would send Moses down the mountain to proclaim to us today:

- “Thou shalt not worship other gods, including a bouncing, bumptious, overbearing would-be buddha with a gold-plated microphone, or other villainous vipers and ignorant empty vessels who pollute the air with poisonous words that are but sounding brass.
- “Thou shalt not make unto you any graven image and bow down to them or serve them, including the almighty dollar. Nor shalt thou worship capitalism as a religion, for thy Lord is a jealous God.
- “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain, including to get elected to public office or as a just cause for pre-emptive wars.
- “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy, and attend thee not any major sport event at a stadium or racetrack.
- “Honor thy father and thy mother, but not their ignorant prejudices.
- “Thou shalt not kill even those thou callest baby-killers.
- “Thou shalt not commit adultery even if thou beest a sanctimonious defender of “family values.”
- “Thou shalt not steal by taking bribes from lobbyists, or by bribing congressmen, or by receiving a reduced tax rate, or by operating a ponzi scheme, or by creating dummy offshore tax dodges, or by manipulating stock prices, or by engaging in insider trading, or by voting thyself and thy board members exorbitant salaries and bonuses, or by *ad infinitum*.
- “Thou shalt not bear false witness; including calling those who disagree with you traitors.
- “Thou shalt not covet what little alms are given unto the poor, the needy and the desperate, for as it is written: “As ye have done to the least of these, so even have ye done unto me.”¹

Mr. Cordle has revised these in a way that may seem more political or cultural than religious. Even if we aren’t breaking the commandments in the ways he’s described, we can probably think of other situations that could fit on a more personal basis with what he’s written. Over time, we’ve become pretty good at finding ways to “bend the rules,” and even better at tolerating situations that blatantly break them. Our tendency is to just let things go by, rarely taking any stronger action than the shake of our heads. Perhaps that’s because The Ten Commandments don’t name punishments or repercussions for either ignoring them or breaking them outright. The ancient Israelites who heard them the first time and then taught them to the generations who followed considered them to be the sacred word of God, obligations for living in covenant with God. The Ten Commandments created standards, norms for living in God’s community, and when someone did break them, God’s people responded. The Old Testament is full of examples of that.

But somewhere along the line we convinced ourselves that as God’s people, particularly as followers of Christ, the appropriate behavior is to be nice. Always to be nice. We’ve been taught that Jesus was nice, the Good Shepherd who finds us when we’re lost, who leads us to peace and love, who lays down his life for his sheep so they won’t have to suffer, who forgives us and teaches us to forgive, no questions asked. That’s the Jesus we prefer to hear and learn about, and certainly the one that I would prefer to preach to you about. That Jesus is easygoing and easy for us to follow! But that image of Jesus doesn’t completely portray the nature of our Lord. And today we see the other side: the angry, righteous Jesus.

¹ Tom Cordle, found at open.salon.com/blog/tom_cordle.

The Cleansing of the Temple can be found in all four of the Gospels, which tells us that all of the evangelists considered it important for their audiences to know. In each of the synoptic Gospels, it's told in just a few verses as a turning point in the final week of Jesus' ministry. In that context, we can interpret it to be one of the events that sent the authorities into action; that led directly to the passion of our Lord. John handles it differently, which is not surprising considering his emphasis of Jesus' conflict with the religious authorities of his day. In John's chronology of our Lord's earthly ministry, this is Jesus' first public act of ministry in Judea, coming right after the wedding at Cana. John uses the cleansing of the temple to show us that Jesus' was always in conflict with the religious authorities, even from the very beginning of his ministry.

What more appropriate place could there be for this conflict than the temple that was the center of Jewish religious life. This temple that had been built after the Israelites returned from the exile provided a place for them to worship God. And remember, sacrifice was a distinct and important part of their worship. Their sacrifices honored God by showing their obedience to God. But people came from long distances to worship at the temple, and that created problems. Only unblemished animals were suitable for sacrifice, and not many animals could travel long distances and remain unblemished. So there was a need for acceptable sacrificial animals, and a need for sellers of those animals. There was also a temple tax to be paid, in coinage that did not carry Herod's image. Worshipers had to go somewhere to exchange their coins, and the temple was the most logical place. These "services" that were being provided in the temple were needed. So what was Jesus so angry about?

In their abbreviated versions of this incident, the synoptic gospels close with these words: "My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers." John gives us more details, calling it a "marketplace," enabling us to know that those animal sellers and moneychangers were there not only to provide a service, but to do so for their own benefit, their own profit. They were taking advantage of people who could ill afford to be taken advantage of. That, and the fact that this "marketplace" was set up in the Court of the Gentiles, the ONLY place where Gentiles were allowed to enter and pray, were likely what made Jesus so angry. The function of the temple had been corrupted and Jesus wanted it to once again be a place where true worship was the only business being done. And so we have one angry Jesus. No more Mr. Nice Guy.

Think about our Lord, entering the temple to worship just like the others, and the first thing he encounters is sacrilege. In your mind's eye, watch him as he makes a whip from cords, and imagine what might have been going through his mind as he did that. You can hear the sound of the whip as he uses it to chase both animals and people from the temple; you can hear the anger in his words as he tells the dove sellers, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" Is this the human side of Jesus? Or is it the divine side? We might answer those questions by asking others: Was he tempted to just "go with the flow" rather than rock the boat? Was he tempted to control his feelings, to keep a lid on his anger? Did he give any thought to how his words and actions might be perceived by others? Did that even matter to him? Perhaps the answers to those questions might be "yes" from his human side, but surely it was "no" from his divine side.

The Right Reverend John Hines presided over four General Conventions of the Episcopal Church from 1965 to 1974, ten turbulent years in American History that included the Vietnam War and the fight for civil rights, a time of unprecedented turmoil in our country. Bishop Hines took a "cost of discipleship" stand on the war and on civil rights in particular and endured several "crucifixion" episodes of his own. No doubt he was tempted to just be nice and go with the flow. But he followed Jesus anyway, and from his experience he said, "They did not crucify Jesus for saying 'Behold the lilies of the field, how they grow.' They crucified him for saying 'Consider the thieves of the temple, and how they steal.'"

It's been some years now since those "What would Jesus do?" bracelets and other apparel were so popular. They went the way of the temple marketplace, I think. But the question remains, "What *would* Jesus do? The answer doesn't always mean we'll be nice. More often than we'd like to admit, Jesus calls us to be strong and righteous, to set our minds not on human things, but on divine and Godly things. We're just like Peter; we must be reminded how to think and act, and we must practice doing things Jesus' way, over and over and over again so that it becomes our first nature. We must stop fearing what other people will think, and start fearing what God will think!

Today, I have some homework for you. First, think about those situations in your life that are calling you to ask, "What would Jesus do?" Second, and perhaps hardest, do what you think Jesus would do in one of those situations. Finally, share the story of your process with me or with someone else. In doing this last thing, the sharing of your experience, you'll find the affirmation and assurance to do it again, and you'll offer the courage and will for another to follow Jesus.

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*