

Homily – Commandments

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How many folks here know the 10 Commandments by heart? Which one or ones do you find the most difficult to follow? Is it the 1st commandment about having no other gods but YHWH? This is probably the most difficult commandment for us Americans to embrace. The “gods” we worship are cleverly disguised, but we sacrifice to them and obey them every day. Some of the names of these gods are Wealth, Power, Body Image, Education, and perhaps our most cherished god, ‘The American Dream.’ We often sacrifice our children to the god of *wealth*, chasing after material riches or the god of *social media*, focusing our attention on our mobile phones while neglecting to spend quality time with our kids. Some of our children are being sacrificed to the god of *gun ownership*, where firearms are now the leading cause of death for children and teens in the United States.

Then there is the 10th commandment about not coveting. Coveting is desiring what others have. This is definitely a sticking point for us Americans as we continue to peruse Amazon.com in our desire to purchase bigger, better, faster, and more. Our economy flourishes on the principle of coveting, for without coveting, the US economy would go into a tailspin.

In today’s opening collect, we prayed: “O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection.” {BCP 230} Today I would like to focus my sermon on the difficulty of following the commandments of God and I will use the biblical reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans as my text.

In April of this year, Senate Bill 1515 sailed through the Texas Senate. The bill would have required public school classrooms to display copies of the Ten Commandments that are at least 16 inches wide and 20 inches tall, and “in a size and typeface that is legible to a person with average vision from anywhere in the classroom.” While there is nothing in our constitution prohibiting the display of religious symbols, spending tax money to exhibit them in public schools probably is. But the real question is this: Why? Why does Texas feel a need to post the 10 Commandments in every classroom? Would posting the 10 Commandments transform the student body into a more holy people, totally dedicated to God?

Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick believes that “bringing the Ten Commandments and prayer back to the public schools will enable the students to become better Texans.” David Barton (an amateur historian who has spent nearly four decades arguing that church-state separation is a “myth”), passionately supports the Ten Commandments bill. He and others believe it would “return morality to Texas classrooms and help prevent everything from school shootings to the growing acceptance of LGBTQ.”

Democrats in both chambers fiercely opposed the idea, saying it would be an insult to non-Christian Texans and an attempt to erode the separation of church and state. The Texas Baptists Christian Life Commission has concerns about taxpayer money being used to buy religious texts and that parents, not schools, should be having conversations about religion with their children. Some parents who are opposed to the bill believe that they should be ones to introduce their own children to the concepts of adultery and coveting one's spouse and that this "shouldn't be one of the first things they learn to read in their kindergarten classroom." Ultimately, the Senate Bill failed to pass in the House after missing a crucial deadline.

If only it were that simple to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength while loving our neighbor as ourselves. But for those of us who already know the 10 commandments, following them requires something a lot more than simply posting them on the wall.

In today's reading from the book of Romans, Paul speaks about the difficulty in choosing the right over the wrong as well as the difficulty in living in accordance with God's laws. Paul describes this tension in his own life: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me." {Rom. 7} "Sin is the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, other people, and with all creation." {BCP848}

On the one hand, we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. And on the other hand, we have these bodily cravings, negative thoughts, and uncontrolled emotions that hinder our ability to live a healthy and righteous life. These negative promptings make it hard for us to live up to our baptismal covenant, thus hindering the coming of the kingdom of God.

Have you ever had that experience when you have made up your mind to do the right thing and then failed miserably to follow through? I have. For 12 years I tried to lose 12 pounds. Simple. Right? However, I failed miserably even though I had sufficient knowledge of good nutrition and access to a good fitness center. The bodily cravings within me sabotaged my good intentions, cravings that kept me in bondage to my unwanted weight. I needed something greater than my ego strength alone to help me.

Maybe you have had a similar experience and are struggling with bodily cravings like alcohol, fast food, or excessive shopping. Or maybe your challenges are mental, like being a perfectionist and having a tendency to criticize others. You finally make up your mind one day not to be judgmental and before you know it, you are finding fault with a co-worker. Maybe you are having trouble with your adult children and have made a commitment to keep your comments to yourself and 'tend to your own knitting.' And then before you know it, something irks you. You open up your mouth, give unwanted advice, and end up ruining the visit with your family.

St. Paul says: "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." There is within each one of us, an active and aggressive power that can seize hold of us and

sabotage our desire to do and think rightly. Paul calls this power to defeat our good intentions, *SIN*. Sin is not just a series of personal indiscretions of failing to live up to some standard imposed by others. Sin is a real force that bends our willpower, saps our joy, injures our relationships with others, and destroys our sense of peace. Whether this force strikes us at the physical level with cravings, or the emotional level with fear, or at the spiritual level with a lack of trust, sin ultimately corrupts and destroys the creatures of God.

What are we to do? Paul asks the same question in his letter to the Romans: "Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" While there is much we can achieve on our own accord to eat, think, and act rightly, ultimately it takes grace to live up to our baptismal covenant to love, to forgive, and to thrive.

The problem (as I see it) is that our relationship with God is not strong enough to do the kind of healing we seek. God is often not the primary force that guides our decision-making. Some of us are simply "Facebook friends" with God where we check in every once in a while and reflect on some nice quote that makes our hearts feel glad. And while it is good to be a Facebook friend with God, it has little power to transform one's heart or mind. Some of us make coffee dates with God, where we show up at church a few Sundays per month and hope for the best. Some of us engage in serial monogamy, where we start out with a passion for God, earnestly being faithful and looking forward to a happy future. But over time, other lovers attract our attention, and before we know it, our jobs, our relationships, our houses, or our recreational needs take precedence.

So how do we proceed? Well, whatever we are currently doing is not working very well. As a nation, we are still trying to live into that dream of ensuring life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all people. This is an honorable endeavor. However, instead of ratifying laws for the benefit of the whole society, laws are being manipulated, changed, and hijacked by those in power for unjust purposes. If the people in Texas want to transform the hearts and minds of their students, it will take a lot more than just posting the 10 Commandments on a classroom wall. Ultimately, it is love that will save us all: Love of God and love of neighbor. This is what is required to make America truly great again!

So, thank you for coming here today to learn more about how to love more fully. Thank you for being willing to become more conscious of your own bodily cravings, negative thoughts, and difficult emotions. Thank you for taking the time to pray for the grace to resist sin and become the people that God wills for you to be. As each of us makes the commitment to move away from "me, myself, and I" as the center of the universe, our affection for God, for neighbor, and for all of creation will increase. And in that endeavor, we will become a holy people, "united to one another with pure affection."