

Got Commandments?

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Exodus 10:1-17, Matthew 5:1-48

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In the *New Yorker*, the new translator of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* writes that in Tolstoy's early drafts, the husband is a saint and Anna is physically unattractive and a somewhat vulgar creature. But as Tolstoy worked on the book, he gradually enlarged the figure of Anna morally and diminished the figure of her husband. The sinner grew in beauty and spontaneity while the saint grew more and more hypocritical. The interesting part here is that a similar process occurs in the Bible. Read from Genesis to Revelation one could say that sinners grow in attractiveness – they are forgiven much for they loved much, says Jesus. But the law-abiding are portrayed as hypocritical and judgmental. The law-abiding are the damning older brothers; the repentant are the ones the angels rejoice over.

It seems the Bible subverts the very commandments it lays upon us by declaring the harlots and tax collectors shall enter the

Kingdom ahead of those who meticulously obey the written law.

As the implications of this became clearer I decided to explore law in both the Old and the New Testaments to see if the commandments are punitive and lead those who think they have observed them to self-righteousness and hypocrisy or whether, as the gospel of John puts it, the law is grace and truth.

But first let me share a cartoon that bears on the law. In the cartoon a crowd of people stand at the foot of a smoking mountain. A man holding two tablets is reading to the crowd. In the foreground one man says to his neighbor: "I'll buy that!".

The nonchalance of this reply is very contemporary. The man in the cartoon is no overwhelmed Hebrew humbled by an epiphany and acquiescent before the law. He is not an organic part of a people being formed by the giving of the law that will shape them for the ages.

The speaker is a modern person, very cool – to be unimpressed is his nature. He stands alone in his autonomy: it is his decision. He'll buy into it for the moment anyway.

The humor lies in the contrast between a biblical event that is all portent, power, symbol and destiny being turned into an incident where an unperturbed individual might be persuaded to go from Coca-Cola to Pepsi. To be honest,

to be unimpressed by smoking mountains; these are the strong virtues of our culture. Those of us enmeshed in our culture – and who among us does not live and move and have our being shaped by the culture that surrounds us? We reject religious cant and religious bluster. We reject having to take anything on authority. We want to be the autonomous master of our lives. We often reject anything that puts our individuality in question. Who in the face of today's obsession with individuality has the courage to say to anyone: "thou shalt not!"

But I believe the Decalogue and its commentary in the New Testament, the Sermon on the Mount, are not prohibitions imposed upon autonomous individuals. They are rather counsels to govern the covenantal life of Israel and those in the new covenant of the Gospel.

There is a classic distinction in law. Law can be understood as based on the authority of the giver of the law. Or law can be understood as the perceived good. This is an ancient distinction. Plato in one of his dialogues has the participants argue the question: Is the law good because the gods command it or do the gods command it because it is good? More than a millennium before Plato, Abraham raised the question directly to God: must not the Judge of all the earth do right? (Gen. 18:25)

The Ten Commandments can best be understood if we take seriously the preamble: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt and out of the house of bondage". Then the Commandments follow. It is the God who liberates who gives laws on how to live in freedom.

To truly understand the Decalogue one must have experienced first the liberating power of God. Of almost equal significance is that the Decalogue was addressed to a people – Israel. Initially the Decalogue came to Israel as a people in covenant. It was not a list of prohibitions imposed upon individuals. The Decalogue was guidance for a newly freed people. It is the law and order protocol for a free people.

Matthew is the bridge gospel between the Old and New Testaments (or covenants). You may remember Michelangelo's sculpture of Moses holding the tablets of the law. The author of Matthew intentionally depicts Jesus as a new Moses. Jesus goes up on a mountain; taking the posture of authority, he sits; his disciples stand and listen. Matthew's setting replicates the Sinai event.

Echoing the context of the preamble to the Decalogue, Jesus' sermon is directed to the new community of his disciples who have found spiritual freedom in the Gospel.

The sermon roundly condemns all those who pray and fast and give money to the poor but do so with an eye upon those who will give them praise for their actions. Jesus says they have received their reward from those who give empty praise for empty acts of piety. But before God they are hypocrites.

The sermon intensifies and internalizes the Decalogue. It is perhaps too great a simplification, but not an inaccurate one, to say the Decalogue governs behavior while the Sermon reaches inward to govern motivation. It is as Jeremiah prophesied: The new covenant will be written on the heart and not engraved in stone. (Jer. 31:33)

Here is Jesus' commentary on you shall not kill: You shall not be angry or insult or say "You fool" to anyone.

Here is Jesus' commentary on bearing false witness: I say unto you let your speech be yes and no for whatever is more than this cometh of evil.

The Beatitudes beautifully summarize the spiritual gifts that bring blessing.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the meek who shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers for they are the sons of God.

But who can obtain these blessings since the counsel seems beyond our keeping?

One Catholic tradition calls the Beatitudes counsels of perfection suitable for those called to the monastic life.

Protestant tradition following St. Paul and Martin Luther understands the Sermon's ethical teaching as binding upon all, yet recognize that they are impossible to keep. The perfection of the law leads to repentance as we acknowledge we cannot fulfill it. Out of our repentance comes forgiveness and renewal through the grace of Jesus Christ.

Finally, in summary, we need to avoid the pitfalls of indifference to the law and hypocritical self-righteousness in obeying only the letter of the law and ignoring its spirit. We need also to chart a course between extreme individualism and our participation in communal covenant. Our covenant is an old one, reaching back to Sinai and renewed in the Galilean teaching of Jesus.

The Passion and Resurrection of Christ witness to His love and power even over death. "Lo I am with you always". (Matt. 28:20) With that assurance even the

impossible becomes possible: "You shall be perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matt. 5: 48).

Nearly all bow before the ethical purity of the Sermon on the Mount. But often the general impression of the Old Testament law is negative. So then let the last word on the law be that found in Deuteronomy, the Fifth Book of Moses according to traditional understanding: "The commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven that you should say, who will go up for us to heaven and bring it to us that we may hear it and do it. Nor is it beyond the sea that you should say, who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us that we may hear it and do it. But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so that you can do it." (Deut. 30:11-14)

Like Anna, may we all grow in beauty as we grow in moral maturity. Amen