

One young boy’s interpretation of these commandments was as follows: “Moses went up to Mt. Cyanide to get the 10 Amendments. Then he told Adam and Eve to eat the apple and head for the Promised Land. The 5th is to humor your mother and father. Then God said to not admit adultery. Then God said thou shall not show faults in front of a witness.” Or we have the Ten Commandments, Cowboy Style. These were posted on the wall at Cross Trails Church in Prarie View, Texas: 1. Just one God; 2. Put nothin’ before God; 3. Watch yer mouth; 4. Git yourself to a Sunday meetin’; 5. Honor yer Ma and Pa; 6. No killin’ 7. No messin’ with another fellow’s gal; 8. Don’t take what ain’t yers; 9. No tellin’ tall tales or gossipin’ 10. Don’t be hankerin’ fer yer buddy’s stuff.

I wonder how many people today even know what the 10 Commandments are, let alone consider them relevant for their lives. I would guess that many people under the age of 40 view them as an outmoded relic of an ancient world view. On a recent episode of the *Tonight Show* Jay Leno did his Jaywalking segment where he went around asking some young adults to name one of the Ten Commandments. The only person who could even think of one said: “Freedom of Speech.” Even some people who actually know what they are consider them just suggestions or recommendations. They seem outdated, designed for a much simpler time when a common standard of behavior was necessary to hold society together.

The Bible tells us that the Ten Commandments were given to Moses as a continuation of the Covenant God established with the Hebrew people. God makes a Covenant with them to insure their safety and well being in light of all they had been through--slavery in Egypt, years of wandering as nomads in the desert, plagues, hunger, affliction after affliction. These rules were designed to give order and discipline to their lives, to create a new nation and suggest the sort of behavior that would grant them long, happy lives.

The Decalogue, as the Ten Commandments are called, can be divided into two sections: the first 4 deal with our relationship to God, and the remaining 6 deal with our relationships with others. These are deeply intertwined, and our relationship to God determines the way we treat others. These guidelines were meant to shape human behavior with a foundation of respect, loyalty and honor.

Think for a moment about some rules for living that shape your life and values. I was raised to place a great value upon honesty, and my dad always said, “You never take a paper clip that does not belong to you!” I guess he was afraid I would turn into a kleptomaniac. Also I was taught to eat every single thing on my plate because children were starving in China. I was taught to respect my elders, to never put off until tomorrow what could be done today, and to value punctuality. Now, these are still values that I hold dear, for the most part. By following them I have discovered the freedom that comes from discipline, the liberation that comes from structure. It does make life easier when you do not have to think—you just know what is right and what is wrong.

But every now and then I decide to take a shortcut, to play by my own rules. For instance, I can be very impatient at times, and I hate waiting in lines or in traffic. I think I should go to the front of the line! Or there are times when I think I deserve something for nothing, or I refuse to read the instructions on how to assemble something. I am notorious for having no patience with instructions, and on more than one occasion I have tossed the instructions in favor of putting something together on my own. I mean, how hard can it be? But I always end up paying for my impatience. It makes things so much harder, especially for the people who have to come along and fix my mistakes.

Rules and instructions are designed to help us maneuver through the uncharted territory of our lives. They are meant to make life easier, not harder. Now I do not think most people willfully set out to break the rules. What happens instead is a gradual erosion of values, a gradual lessening of standards to the point where it all becomes relative and a matter of personal preference.

Have you ever pulled a loose thread out of a piece of clothing, only to have it unravel completely? Sometimes bending and breaking the rules can undo us. In the end it can unravel the fabric of our lives and get us into trouble. Things like lying, cheating, backbiting, excessive self-indulgence, unhealthy addictions, slowly such things become more and more acceptable. Everybody else seems to act that way, society seems to condone it, and our standards of what is acceptable slip lower and lower like the limbo stick. And just like pulling on a loose thread, compromising standards of ethics and integrity can cause things to unravel.

The Ten Commandments were not meant to punish or make life harder for us. Just the opposite, they are meant to preserve our well being and contentment. At one point in the Book of Proverbs, the author, speaking for God writes, “Keep my Commandments in your heart, they will prolong your life and bring you peace.” In other words, there is a connection between being faithful to God and living a good

and happy life. There is a connection between being a person of integrity and having a life that is worth living.

Now, we all know that God does not always punish those who disobey God's commandments. We know how wicked and immoral people can prosper, while good and faithful people can suffer. God does not instantly reprimand our wayward behavior, we can get away with all kinds of things. But sooner or later it catches up to you and you reap exactly what you sow. Sooner or later it all comes right back to you. "Keep my commandments in your heart, for they will prolong your life and bring you peace."

I think in recent years we have seen the results of what happens when people choose to ignore spiritual values like the Ten Commandments. It results in social chaos, violence and promiscuity. One of the most frightening trends of a rule-optional society is the rise of a relatively new kind of criminal that sociologists refer to as a "super-criminal." These are individuals who are so morally bankrupt that they commit the worst of crimes for the smallest of reasons, with no remorse whatsoever. Some of these "super-criminals" are between the ages of 12 and 18. These people have never been taught what is right and what is wrong, but are at the mercy of their own emotions and behavior.

In Miami two brothers ages 15 and 17 celebrated their parents absence over a weekend by cruising the family Mercedes in a poor section of the city. They shot spear darts into the backs of people walking down the street, primarily elderly African Americans. After their arrest, their stunned parents apologized for their behavior, insisting that they were really good kids. The oldest boy expressed concern that this might affect his chances of getting into a good college in the Fall.

Often these are kids who were raised without church or synagogue, in Commandment optional homes. Nobody wants to restrict or limit them, they are not taught to respect authority, and so anything goes. And without the most basic sense of right or wrong, they are doomed.

A few years ago Ted Koppel was asked to give the Commencement Address at Duke University. Instead of offering the same bunch of cliches, he decided to talk about personal morality. When he was finished, he received a standing ovation. Here is an excerpt of that address: "We have convinced ourselves that slogans will save us. Shoot up if you must, but use a clean needle. Sleep with whomever you choose, just do it safely. Lie to your spouse, cheat on your taxes, just don't get caught. The answer is no, a thousand times no! Not because it isn't cool or smart or because you might end up in jail or dead, but because it's wrong! We have spend 5000 years as a race of rational creatures trying to drag ourselves out of the

primeval slime by searching for truth and morality. And in its purest form, truth is not a polite tap on the shoulder, it is a howling reproach. What Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai were not ten suggestions. They were Ten Commandments.” It is important to remember that these were not given to take all of the fun out of life. They were given by a God who loves us and wants to help us live lives that count for something beyond seeking our own comfort and satisfaction. They are offered by a loving parent to protect us. One of the things children need most is structure and discipline, offered from someone who loves them and has their best interests at heart. That is what the Ten Commandments do. Preaching Professor Thomas Long writing in *The Christian Century* argues that the Ten Commandments are not bad news but good news, and properly understanding them can set people free. He writes, “Understanding the Decalogue as a set of burdens overlooks something essential, namely that they are prefaced not by an order: “Here are my rules—obey them!” But instead by a breathtaking announcement of freedom: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” They point to a liberating life. “Because the Lord is your God,” the Decalogue affirms, “you are free not to need any other gods. You are free to rest on the seventh day, free from the tyranny of lifeless idols, free from murder, stealing and covetousness as ways to establish yourself in the land. These commandments are not weights, but wings that enable our hearts to catch the wind of God’s Spirit and soar!”

The final word on the Ten Commandments belongs to Jesus, for he had his own interpretation of the Decalogue. When a Pharisee tried to trick him by asking, “What is the greatest commandment in the law?” Jesus replied without hesitation, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. That is the first and greatest, but the second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. On these two Commandments hang the law and the Prophets.” Jesus knew that for rules to be effective, they should be motivated by love.

So today I would like you to think about what it is that helps you live a life of honor and integrity. What helps you feel good about yourself, so that you can respect yourself when you look in the mirror? There is a blessing found in following the rules God has established for humankind. There is a peace of mind and freedom that comes from being loyal to the laws of God. “Keep my commandments in your heart, and they will prolong your life and bring you peace.”

