

8 10 Commandments

What rules do you live by? I came across a few a couple of days ago, maybe they will be helpful for you. Here we go;

1. Never have more children than you have car windows.
2. Never loan your car to someone to whom you have given birth.
3. Pick your friends carefully. A "friend" never goes on a diet when you are fat or tells you how lucky you are to have a son who remembers Mother's Day--when his gift is a cordless screwdriver.
4. Seize the moment. Remember all those women on the Titanic who waved away the dessert trolley at dinner that night.
5. Never be in a hurry to terminate a marriage. Remember, you may need this man/woman someday to finish a sentence for you.

Well, OK, they are just a bit of – what's the word I'm looking for, Liz? – fun, that's right. But as we continue our journey through the Bible we come to the point where God lays down the rules; the 10 Commandments.

Time was when the 10 Commandments would have hung behind me painted on large wooden boards for you to all read mark and inwardly digest. They would have been prominently displayed in public buildings such as schools or court rooms, but rules have somewhat gone out of fashion in our post modern society and certainly in these politically correct days we can't be seen outside of our churches to be imposing our religious rules upon those of a different faith or no faith at all. So the 10 Commandments have largely disappeared from view.

Well what is the big deal? Are the 10 Commandments of any relevance today? To answer that, let's go back to when they were given.

You see, the Israelites don't head straight into the Promised Land, instead after two months of journeying they meet with God at Mount Sinai and there they spend nearly a year there as God instructs them in what it means to be his people. Now the first thing I want you to forget is that these are cold, hard, clinical rules. Above all else, these commandments are all about love.

You know, scientist released a study this week which claims that in the same way that South American society in Peru sees kudos in speaking Spanish rather than Quenchuan so society in countries like Australia, the Netherlands and Ireland will see more and more people regarding themselves as having no faith and so everyone will behave like sheep and therefore, in the near future, religion will die out in those countries.

But, I'm sorry, I think that it's a little like saying, men will stop loving women because they see more and more other men buying microwavable meals and women will stop loving men because they see more and more women doing car maintenance courses. I apologise for being sexist there, but I wanted to make a point – we don't love because it is convenient, or beneficial, we love because we are in love.

And in the Old Testament Law, God reveals that he loves his people and then how his people can love him in return. Yes, empty religion might die out because of social peer pressure, but true faith won't because true faith is rooted in love.

So first of all God reminds Israel that he loves them and how he demonstrated that by rescuing them and bringing them to Mount Sinai because in Exodus 19:4 God says; "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself."

Now it is in this demonstration of his love for them that God has set his people free; free to be his people. There is nothing more in what he is about to tell them that will achieve that. And this is a crucial point; the message here is not that rule keeping and dull obedience makes someone a member of God's people, it is that being brought close to God is done by God, it is through his grace and love alone.

So if the Israelites are already God's people – what is the point of the Law including the 10 Commandments? Well, rather than telling us how to get right with God, the Law teaches us to love God, how to live in a way which pleases God because it is right with him.

Verses 1-11 of Exodus 20 (the first four commands) are all about loving God, they are the bedrock of our lives, the foundation and once we understand the centrality of love in these commandments it will revolutionise them for us. It's a bit like marriage vows. If you read them as a cold hard contract to care for another person then you are going to focus in on words like "worse", "sickness", "poorer", "until death". It all sounds rather mechanical until you reinsert the crucial words like "to have and to hold" and "to love and cherish". I don't remember my phone contract or energy tariff agreement including those sorts of phrases – there's a huge difference!

So just as marriage vows are intrinsically different to your car insurance terms and conditions so too are the 10 commandments because they are all about how we can better love God;

"You must not have any other god but me.

You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea. You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods."

But the 10 Commandments not only teach us how to love God, they also show us how to love each other, the concluding six commandments are all about loving each other; your parents, your neighbours, your business partner, the shopkeeper down the road, your friend's wife or husband, even the person who annoys you or torments you, you can find them all covered by God's command to love.

God says "you need to love them with a godly, holy and righteous love" why? Because God loves them. If you married someone who already had children, but you hated their kids, would your relationship last? No, you could only seriously love that person if you were prepared to love their children too. Likewise if we don't love God's children, we can't seriously love God. That's why we confess our sins and share the peace before we gather at the Lord's table.

Love God – love each other.

So, do they apply to us today? Well, there are 10 whole commandments here, do you think any of them not so important? "I can keep about seven or eight of them, but everyone I know fiddles a little money here or there and I would make worshipping God a priority once a week but my life is so busy I can't fit all the things I need to do into a weekend."

Of course we can't behave like that. We can't pick and choose which commandments we want to obey and which we want to ignore, if we do we are not fully loving God, or his children.

Going back to our wedding analogy it's like saying "I promise to honour and protect this woman, but I'm not sure I can commit to forsaking all others – after all, take a look at the world around us!" The vows have to be taken in their entirety and so too do the 10 Commandments.

But actually, if you read through Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy you will discover a whole host of other commands and Laws. Why so many? Well, they were designed to act like one of those WWJD bracelets people wear today – when faced with a decision it reminds you to ask “What Would Jesus Do?” but it also marks you out as a Christian.

The commands of God not only instruct people how to live in a way which loves God and loves one another, the commands also mark them out as different, separate, God’s people, people who behave differently to the rest of the world. So when they are challenged by the world they are able to remind themselves that they are God’s people because they follow a different code of conduct.

So this is the big point about the 10 Commandments, they are not the key to being members of God’s people, but they are the rules by which God’s people are to live – do you see the fundamental difference? In our New Testament reading the rich young man thought that he could use the Commandments to earn his way into heaven, but importantly he didn’t really love God, his idol was money, wealth and possessions – Jesus makes that strikingly clear to him because all his life he has chosen to ignore the first four commands about truly loving God.

And that highlights one of the striking things which the Old Testament law does; it points out our sin, it makes clear to us that we don’t Love the LORD our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength (Deuteronomy 6:5) – it convicts us of our rebellion against him.

In Romans 7:7 Paul declares, “I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, Do not covet.”

That's not to say that sin didn't exist before the law, Paul makes it clear two chapters earlier that it did, but the law makes clear right and wrong, God honouring and God forsaking.

So this is the overarching principal of the 10 Commandments and of all the Law – it won't and it can't save you. You might think that you can answer differently to the rich young man, you might think that you are a good person and have kept all the commandments, but you're not, because you haven't.

You are a sinner and a rebel, just like me. If you had managed to keep all the commandments then any of us could have done it and if that were true, then it means that you are claiming that Jesus died needlessly on the Cross.

Remember, God's people are not saved by what they do, we are saved by what God has done. God has brought his people to himself, in Moses' day it was through the waters of death, in our day it is through the death of Jesus and his resurrection to eternal life.

The Law of God points us to Jesus because it highlights the fact that God wants us to do all that we can to love him and one another, God longs for us to be marked out as his beloved people, but because of sin we cannot manage it by our own strength.

Jesus, however, always pleased God, he never rebelled, he never sinned, he not only kept all of God's Law, he fulfilled it, he did what we could never do and became the ultimate safe passage for us to be brought into God's people for ever. And that is the wonderful thing, we are not living a cold religion of rules, but are in a living and loving relationship with the almighty God of eternity.

So, as we strive to live God honouring lives by obeying the 10 Commandments, let's never slip into the mistaken idea that through obedience we can earn our own salvation, but let's see how they point us to Jesus and live them out in an attitude of thanksgiving, praise and love.

Jesus said: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29-31) Amen.