



# The Ten Words: Taking a Modern Look at Ancient Wisdom

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**D**URING THE PAST FEW YEARS, WHILE LAUNCHING A NEW BOOK CALLED *THE TEN Challenges*, I've been giving talks about how hard it is for most people today to live up to the ten commandments. For example, it's not easy to honor a difficult or demanding parent or to unhook one day each week to reconnect with one's spiritual side. Nor is it easy for most people to stop desiring what others have or to avoid the false idols of modern life such as workaholism, overeating, or using drugs or alcohol to take the edge off a pressure-filled day.

These talks haven't just been in religious settings, but also on radio interviews, morning TV shows, in newspaper columns, and on internet pages. I've found that as we reach the end of the century, millions of men and women are searching for guidance and many are looking to ancient sources like the ten spiritual principles listed in Exodus 20.

Since I am both a clinical psychologist and a person who values religion, my personal dilemma has been to talk about the "relevance" of the ten command-

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*A psychologist and spiritual counselor reports how, in his practice, he uses the ten commandments, words of tradition and revelation, also as words of healing and compassion to enhance the lives of modern people.*

ments without diminishing their spiritual holiness. That hasn't been easy. Listed below are a few examples of how complex it can be to walk the fine line between popularizing a sacred text and yet staying true to the original.

*Dilemma #1: Are They "Commandments" or Something Else?*

The first question I faced while researching and writing about the ten commandments is whether or not to call them "commandments." The Hebrew text in Exodus doesn't say "commandments." The actual words are "Ahseret Hadibrot," which can mean "the ten things" or "the ten words." Later they were called "commandments" and referred to as "mitzvot," but a better translation of "mitzvot" would be "ways of connecting with God."

So if we presented these ten ancient principles not as harsh, rigid commandments but rather as the ten things that can help a person connect with God or live a more meaningful life, would that help congregants stop being so rebellious and intimidated? Would it encourage them to study these ten spiritual ideas and use them more faithfully in their lives? Or would we simply be watering down the sacred commandments into what comedian Garrison Keillor has called "the ten suggestions."

For the title of my book, I decided to use the word "challenges," because they address the concerns of both the religiously observant and the not-so-observant. Whether a congregant thinks of these ten ideas as commandments or words of deep spiritual wisdom and healing, they are nevertheless challenges. They are not easy or automatic for even the most devout person. They require understanding and daily reminders. Otherwise we easily slip back into coveting what our neighbor has (or possibly coveting the paid-off mortgage and more pleasant board of directors our neighboring congregation has).

The goal of my writing has been to help people, whether they consider themselves religious or not, understand the steps and obstacles that face us when we try to live up to these ten wonderful guidelines. What obstacles are likely to occur when you attempt to honor a parent who is difficult to please, or when you try to make a sabbath to be with your loved ones and your congregation, but work and money issues keep creeping into your mind, or when you try to overcome a false idol that has been plaguing you for years or that won't let go? I decided to write about how to succeed at the process of taking these ten ideas to heart, whether you think of them as commandments spoken directly by God or as wise insights that God transmitted through the mind of Moses, Jesus, and others who have interpreted these holy teachings.

*Dilemma #2: Is the First Commandment about a Patriarchal "Lord" or about Something Far More Mysterious and Loving?*

English translations of the first commandment often begin, "I am the Lord thy God who brought you out of Egypt..." That may have sounded perfect to the ears of a renaissance Englishman who resonated to words like "Lord" and "thy," but to most modern ears it sounds distant and anthropomorphized. But I didn't want to disrespect the sacred text and offer some modernized jargon that would

also seem outdated in a decade or two. So I tried to understand the original Hebrew that was spoken by Moses and Jesus when they were exploring what these ten words mean to us. And I found the original Hebrew was a lot more fascinating, compassionate, and useful.

In the original Hebrew, the first commandment starts with, “Anochee, I Am, Yud-Hay-Vov-Hay, the unspeakable name of the Presence who is and will always be, Eloheikha, your God, asher hotsetekha mei-eretz mitzrayim, who brings you out of your mitzrayim (which can be translated either as Egypt or as ‘your narrowness, constriction or limitation’).”

Now there you have a most interesting spiritual idea to consider. The first commandment isn’t about the aspect of God who creates the world and can destroy it as well. It’s not the Charlton Heston/Cecil B. DeMille kind of God who threatens us with lightning bolts and thunder. Rather, this first commandment begins with a Presence that can help us open up and get beyond our narrowness, constriction, or limitation. In other words, the human mind tends to be anxious or to ruminate on problems in a narrow and repetitive way. But through prayer, meditation, hymns, and spiritual activities like walking in nature or giving service to the community we open up to a Presence and we gain a much larger perspective over our problems.

So when the first commandment says, “There is an Eternal Presence that can bring you out of your limitation. Have no other Gods besides the One who is and will always be,” it’s an invitation to connect. It’s a warm, compassionate reminder that we human beings need to open up to a larger perspective than our narrow, anxious minds usually allow us to have. It’s a God we can take into our hearts, or as the Christian theologian Henri Nouwen has written, “Prayer is standing in the presence of God with the mind in the heart; that is, at that point of our being where there are no divisions or distinctions and where we are totally one. There God’s Spirit dwells and there the encounter takes place. There heart speaks to heart, because there we stand before the face of the Lord, all-seeing, within us.”<sup>1</sup>

So instead of imagining a grandpa-like male deity throwing bolts of lightning, the original Hebrew of this first commandment describes a crucial partnership with a loving, caring Presence who can open us up and help us connect with our higher self. It is what Jesus may have meant when he said, “If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love, just as I have kept God’s commandments and abide in his love” (John 15:10).

### *Dilemma #3: How Do You Convince a Modern Reader to Unhook One Day a Week?*

I realized while interviewing people about the commandment to “remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy” that most of us grew up thinking of the sabbath as restrictive blue laws, harsh rules, and lots of fun things you can’t do because it’s the sabbath. How unfortunate. But originally sabbath was more about joyful celebration and family intimacy than about restrictions or things you can’t do.

<sup>1</sup>Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: Seabury, 1981) 76.

As Protestant theologian Harvey Cox wrote,

Few practices are more misunderstood by Christians than the Sabbath. One reason for this misunderstanding is that several of the stories of Jesus in the Gospels depict him as deliberately breaking Sabbath rules, especially by healing people. Because of the way these stories are often interpreted in sermons and church-school lessons, many Christians grow up with an image of the Sabbath as a compulsively legalistic straitjacket or an empty attempt to observe meaningless ritual rules. No doubt there were abuses of the spirit of the Sabbath in Jesus' time. But most Christian educational material fails utterly to point out why the Sabbath was instituted or to describe its ingenious blending of contemplative and ethical purposes.<sup>2</sup>

The sabbath is not a harsh set of restrictions but a loving gift certificate from God on how to nourish one's soul each week. The original Christian celebration of "the Lord's day" was to celebrate and be inspired by God's gifts to the world. Martin Luther wrote that the sabbath is a day in which Christians "might preserve in our minds a sure hope of the future and eternal life. All the things God wants done on the Sabbath are clear signs of another life after this life."<sup>3</sup>

Even if you look at the traditional Jewish practices on the sabbath, you will find a similar emphasis on celebration, joy, and imagining a messianic time when the world will live in peace and harmony. Traditional Judaism says that on the sabbath one should connect with God's way by: taking a walk in nature; being inspired by a spiritual text, teaching, or sermon; taking a nap; making love with your spouse; having a special meal with your family in which conversations don't get interrupted by turning on the TV or going back to work; and dancing, singing, and imagining what the world will be like when every person has enough food, clothing, and shelter.

Frequently I suggest to stressed-out couples and individuals who come in for counseling that they might consider making the sabbath a part of their healing process. Even though they came in for therapy about their marital or family problems, they usually describe how their lives feel empty or like an "endless treadmill," and so I ask them, "What might improve in your marriage or your family closeness if you set aside one day each week for reconnecting with each other and with your highest spiritual selves? Without being harsh or rigid about it, can you experiment with a day for nourishing the deepest part of your soul?"

Then we brainstorm together about what that special day might look like and we slowly begin to put it into practice as part of their overall therapy. I've found repeatedly that when people choose to explore the sabbath not as a harsh rule but as a source of healing and closeness, they tend to see each decision in a different light. For example, quite often men and women decide to unhook their phones for a few hours on the sabbath, or to turn off the TV for a while, or not talk about

<sup>2</sup>Harvey Cox, "Meditation and Sabbath," *Harvard Magazine* 80/1 (September-October 1977) 43-44.

<sup>3</sup>Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 1, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958) 80. Cited in *The Sabbath in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Tamara Eskenazi, Daniel Harrington, and William Shea (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 101.

work-related subjects. They make these choices *not* because they are obeying a restrictive commandment, but rather because they want to regain a healthier way of living.

As one counseling client told me recently, "I grew up in a non-religious home and I never thought I'd be practicing the sabbath each week. But after finding a church where I enjoy the singing and the inspiring sermons, I feel like I want more of that energy in my life. So my wife and I take our kids on a walk each Sunday where we really talk about what matters in our lives. And we use the church service and the relaxing family meal afterward as a chance to open up our hearts to the gratitude we feel. Yes, I've had to say no to playing golf, watching football, or surfing the internet on Sundays. But my marriage and my relationship with my two kids are so much stronger as a result of making each sabbath a day that feels joyful and meaningful."

*Dilemma #4: Does a Discussion About "Adultery" Have to Sound Prudish or Old-Fashioned?*

Prior to my research, I thought that the commandment "You shall not commit adultery" was just another example of religion being uptight and squeamish about sexuality. But from my studies of the deeper Jewish and Christian teachings about spiritual monogamy, I found out I was quite wrong.

The commandment to be honest, loyal, and caring to one's partner comes from a deep respect for the amazing power and joyfulness of our sexuality. As described by Walter Brueggemann, the adultery commandment "points to the recognition that sexuality is enormously wondrous and enormously dangerous....In its fullest interpretation, the command against adultery envisions covenantal relations of mutuality that are genuinely life-giving, nurturing, enhancing and respectful."<sup>4</sup>

In the Hebrew Bible, the word for sexuality is "yada," which means to know another as a complete and whole human being. That means going deeper with a person than a quickie or an affair or a short-term relationship would allow. The challenge of the commandment against adultery is that when we are journeying through life with a human partner who has good days and bad days, strengths and weaknesses, we will invariably be tempted at some point to imagine that some other person might be more exciting, attentive, or pleasurable. In those moments of imagining someone else as our sexual partner, we often begin to close our hearts or put up a wall of secrecy and sneakiness toward our true partner. And that's the greatest danger of adultery—that we will stop going deeper to know our beloved partner as a complete human being and instead go off on a quickie or fantasy that creates dishonesty and distrust in the primary relationship.

After years of studying how Judaism and Christianity look at sexuality as a sacred gift from God, I now have quotes and texts for discussing with couples and individuals the importance of valuing their sexuality and not turning it into a

<sup>4</sup>Walter Brueggemann, "Exodus," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 848, 850.

source of deception, sneakiness, or painful dishonesty. In a world where many people tell big lies or small ones to get someone into bed, the ancient commandment seems to be saying, "Don't be sneaky, manipulative, or superficial with something as wonderful and joyful as your sexuality. It's a gift that deserves special care, and it's the key for truly being known by another human being and for truly connecting with someone over a lifetime of partnership."

Yes, there are dilemmas in writing about an ancient text and its modern applications. But the more I learned about each of these ten spiritual principles from the Book of Exodus, the more I realized just how sacred, useful, and psychologically intelligent they are. It's quite remarkable that a list of ten ideas can not only survive for 3,300 years but also that they continue to be extremely relevant to our daily lives and relationships. My hope is that as men and women of the late 1990s rediscover the compassionate wisdom of the ten things revealed at Mount Sinai, they will no longer experience them as harsh "thou shalt not's" but as crucial guidance for living a good life. ⊕