

Todd's Decalogue
What Would I Have Written if I Wrote the Ten Commandments?
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When it comes to theology, the Hebrew Scriptures, often referred to as the Old Testament, are a mixed bag. On the one hand God seems brutal and unforgiving, on the other, kind and merciful. This discrepancy has led to a certain theological theory known as *Dispensationalism*: the idea that as humanity evolves out of its own brutality it becomes increasingly able to comprehend the loving nature of God. For this reason, it's also called *Progressive Revelation*. That seems a bit of a copout to me, in order to preserve the integrity of these scriptures. But the Hebrew Scriptures were written by many hands over a period of a thousand years, so it reflects lots of differences and contradictions, including different concepts of God.

Whatever our idea of the Hebrew God may cloud our interpretation of everything else written in these scriptures, including the Ten Commandments, which I'm going to talk about today. For some, these are a list of arbitrary authoritarian decrees that should have little bearing in a thinking person's life. For others, they are commands to live by, but are taken so literally as to have little practical significance. I take the perspective, as do many, that they were written by a group of former slaves and, when interpreted in this light, remain extraordinarily meaningful even after thousands of years.

Their perennial meaning, however, has gotten lost in translation over time, so I have rewritten them in a way I think helps us better understand how they might have been understood by their original hearers. As Biblical scholar Anthony Ceresko reminds us, *Exodus*:

... is the story of those who were at the very bottom of Egyptian society, effectively non-persons in the greatest empire of the day. It is not an account of a king and his battles or of great alliances and wealth. It is the story of a small group of slaves, their suffering and poverty and struggle, which later Israelites saw as the central moment and source which gave meaning and purpose to their life as a people.¹

So let's look at what the Commandments might mean from the perspective of oppressed people.

The first command, as it is written, states, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no gods before me."² A lot of people only recall the last line, "You shall have no gods before me," but

¹ Ceresko, Anthony, *Introduction to the Old Testament: A Liberation Perspective*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1992, p. 12.

² Exodus 20:2-3

the entire command is vital to understanding it's meaning. For it doesn't say, as many presume, there are no other gods, but admits there are many religious choices. It's point, then, is that we shouldn't accept any ideology, religious or otherwise, that limits our freedom and the freedom of others. The religious litmus test is liberation for us and others—have no other gods! So here's how I'd write this commandment today:

Your religion must free you from the yoke of fear, hate, and false certainty, and move you to work for the liberation of others. Put nothing before your freedom or the freedom of others and reject any beliefs that bind your heart and mind, or that lead you to oppress anyone.

The second command forbids worshipping graven images and is a continuation of this same principle. "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them."³ In a puritanical sense, it's just an odd law against making statues, but from a liberation perspective it's about not putting God in a box, and not being so certain of any of our ideas that we force them on others. Making idols of our ideas kills them and prevents us from growing and fully expressing ourselves. Only those who had been so enslaved, prohibited from choosing their own religion, their own beliefs, their words, could come up with such a liberating command. I think this command is about a lot more than erecting statues. It's about not institutionalizing any systems of injustice that prevent people from thinking for themselves or from being equals among others. So here's how I'd write it:

Do not be absolute in your thinking, causing you to create and uphold rigid systems of injustice that will burden your children for generations. Rather, let compassion guide your longings that all may endlessly enjoy the living, growing, changing realities of life.

The third commandment continues this emphasis on getting our minds straight. "You shall not make wrongful use of my name, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses my name."⁴ For some this simply means you shouldn't swear to God or curse in God's name. This command was taken so seriously that the writers of the Hebrew scriptures only put four unpronounceable consonants when referring to God, which translators eventually added vowels to resulting in the name Yahweh, or Jehovah, according to which vowels are used. And some Orthodox Jews only say, *Hashem* when coming across it, which means, "the Name." This is quite a contrast to many religious believers who have no qualms using the very word *God* as if it were a proper name, and worse, going on to discuss the will and mind of this definitive person named God. So, again, from a liberation perspective, the perspective of freedom, this command requires us to be humble about our beliefs, theological or otherwise. Because just as soon as we become convinced we are right, we behave self-righteously, violating the

³ Exodus 20:4-5

⁴ Exodus 20:7

first law of liberty, by forcing our ideas on the unrighteous, those heretics, apostates, and infidels we must wage holy war with in the name of God. My version of the command is:

Never speak as if you know the mind and will of your God, or think you can confine it within your books and creeds, or that you can attribute your own greed, hatred, and injustice to that which you can never comprehend.

The fourth Command is my favorite. "Six days you shall labor and work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns."⁵ I like to call this the first labor law in human history guaranteeing time off. It even includes clauses about child labor, equality for women, and animal rights. It was pretty progressive when it was written and, again, could only have been written by former slaves who never got a day off. Having known that horror, as soon as they became free, they made sure everyone and every creature got a break. But there's also something in this command about giving the Earth itself a break. These days we've found ways to establish perpetual harvest, with fresh fruits and vegetables year-round, and established an economic system that has to continuously grow or else it's considered a failure, creating everlasting summer through global warming in the process. COVID-19 is hurting our economy even as it's giving the Earth's systems a bit of a Sabbath from human activity. We need to emerge from this with a way to have a strong economy and a healthy planet. Here's my version of the Sabbath law.

Live sustainably with the land and your fellow creatures and make time to take pleasure in the beauty and harmony all around you. Do not let your shortsightedness upset this balance or destroy the world you are obligated to preserve for your children and your fellow creatures. Appreciate and protect this sacred harmony with all your heart and in all you do.

From a puritanical perspective, the fifth Command, "Honor your father and mother,"⁶ is about obeying the voices of dead ancestors, which simply doesn't jive with the first law of liberty. But, as Thomas Paine, a true freedom fighter understood, "The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave, is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies."⁷ So, from a liberation perspective, this command can't be about obedience to old ways. In the context of liberty, it must mean something else. Fortunately, in its entirety, the command says, "Honor your father and mother, so that your days may be long in the land." A long life is the consequent of honoring our elders. Surely this is a command to make sure we have systems in place to care for one another in old age. It's about establishing some sort of social security that everyone benefits from as we age. And that's exactly how I'd write it:

⁵ Exodus 20:9-10

⁶ Exodus 20:12

⁷ From *On the Rights of Man*

Maintain social security and healthcare systems to care for your sick and elderly, assuring that when you become sick or elderly you too will be cared for and able to enjoy a full and happy life.

The meaning of the sixth command should be clear enough. "You shall not kill." Yet how many times has religion been used as an excuse to do just that? We hear of Holy wars and the Just War Theory, first promoted by St. Augustine not long after Christianity became the official Roman religion. Even though Jesus said things like "Turn the other cheek," "Love your enemies," and, "Put away your swords," some have found ways to justify violating this most simple to understand command of them all. So I have a couple of rewrites. The first says:

Do no violence against anyone, neither against those you know, nor those against those you don't know; neither against those like you, nor those dislike you; neither against those near to you, nor those far away.

Or I'd simply improve upon the original by adding just one word, "You shall not kill, period!"

The seventh command, a prohibition against committing adultery, is usually interpreted puritanically to forbid extramarital relations. But it helps to remember that at the time it was written marriage was not a union between two lovers, but a financial arrangement between two men, as it has been throughout most of human history and remains so in many places today. In addition to freeing fathers from the burden of caring for their daughters, it was about the only means of social security for the unfortunate girls being traded through arranged marriages. Women weren't allowed to work or own property of their own. So if an unmarried maiden was taken advantage of, or forced into relations, and discovered, it was usually she who was accused of adultery. Even if she wasn't executed, she'd have very few ways to provide for herself once associated with the proverbial scarlet letter. So, again, from a liberation perspective, I see this a law about gender equality, about seeing women as fully human, and as equals. As a universal command, it's a law that points the finger at the men involved. Jesus himself turned this table by calling women the "victims of adultery," not the perpetrators. It's a complicated command to grasp from our modern perspective, but, from a liberation perspective, here's how I'd put it:

Make certain your relationships are equal and mutual, and never based upon the power of one over another.

The eighth command is also short and simple: "You shall not steal."⁸ Again, from a modern perspective this seems to be about petty theft. You shall not steal candy bars from the convenient store, rob a bank, or go joy riding in someone else's car." But stealing is a lot more complicated than that. If we erect systems that enrich some at the expense of others, it's also stealing. Gandhi understood this when he said, "If I take

⁸ Exodus 20:15

anything that I do not need for my own immediate use, and keep it, I thief if from somebody else.”⁹ Likewise, from a liberation perspective, written by former slaves who had everything taken from them, including the use of their own bodies and making their own choices, stealing from others means something much more than the petty thefts committed by those who are often so desperate precisely because society has taken everything from them and left them with little choice. This is a command written for the whole of society, to make certain no one is left out from its benefits and opportunities. It’s not an excuse to criminalize the poor and marginalized. Here’s how I’d write it today:

Do not diminish the lives of those who appear, or think, or live differently than you by stealing their rights, their opportunities, or their dignities from them, or by locking them away or harassing them in your streets.

The ninth command says, “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.”¹⁰ I’m guessing there was a lot of scapegoating going on when this was written. Who better to shift the blame onto than those who had no rights to begin with? The idea of a scapegoat actually comes from the Hebrew scriptures. In *Leviticus*, Moses’ brother Aaron, a priest, lays both hands on the head of a goat, then confesses all the iniquities of his people. *Leviticus* says, “The goat will carry on itself all their iniquities into a solitary place, and the man will release it into the wilderness.”¹¹ Oppressed people, no more so than the Jews themselves, know what it means to become society’s scapegoats. When we lie to ourselves about others in this way, especially whole groups of others, we not only harm them, we deceive ourselves. I think this commandment is especially important to follow today given how easy social media makes it for us demonize others with little knowledge of all the facts and the extraordinary damage it can cause. It’s more than giving grace, it’s about civil discourse and being as charitable toward others as possible. Here’s how I’d put it:

Do not blame others for your own shortcomings or be unkind to those you disagree with or are dislike you.

The final command is a prohibition against coveting the things that belong to others. To understand this, it is again worth considering it from the perspectives of former slaves. Coveting what others have often leads to the justification of taking what we want from them. Slaves and other oppressed people were most often the very occupants of the land and homes they are later forced to serve. Coveting what belongs to others leads to the worst kinds of oppression and injustice, just as it has for the original occupants of our own nation. And, as with false witness, the blame for their plight gets shifted upon the very victims of such injustice. So coveting isn’t simply about personal envy, it’s about entire societies fostering the motivation to take what already belongs to other people, to other communities, and to other nations. That’s

⁹ Gandhi, *All Men are Brothers*, ed., Krishna Kripalani, Continuum Publishing Corp., New York, NY, 1980, p. 119.

¹⁰ Exodus 20:16

¹¹ Leviticus 16:22

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my definition of injustice, forcing others to fight for what already belongs to them. Coveting is the root of injustice and war. So here's how I'd put the tenth commandment:

Do not take what you want at the expense of others or deny that you are responsible for the welfare and fulfillment of others in your community and throughout the world.

For me it's easy to understand the depth of all these commands, which otherwise sound rather puritanical and arbitrary, by beginning with the principle laid out in the very first. "Your religion must free you from the yoke of fear, hate, and false certainty, and move you to work for the liberation of others. Put nothing before your freedom or the freedom of others and reject any beliefs that bind your heart and mind, or that lead you to oppress anyone." Indeed, for me, this should be the first principle behind all we do.