

The Decalogue According to Todd

By

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In my March 8th sermon, “Pathway or Pathology,” I gave my translation of the Ten Commandments, after which someone said, “We need to hang those on our walls.” So, I’ve decided to discuss them at more length today, including why I consider them a more accurate translation than any other.

I’ll begin by talking about my unusual methodology. When I was studying the Bible in college and graduate school, students were required to take courses in hermeneutics—the study of interpretation. This is where I learned that most people who think they know the Bible, don’t. They don’t because they’ve never studied the various ways of interpreting it, along with the drawbacks and strengths of the different approaches. Nor have they faced the fact that the meaning of its writings are usually vague, uncertain, and seldom historically or literally true.

Most “Bible believers,” as some refer to themselves, adhere to what Biblical scholars call the “canonical approach” to interpretation, which is the most erroneous and unreliable approach there is, but also the most common. “Canon” comes from a Greek word meaning “law.” When used in reference to the Bible, it refers to the entire body of literature that is considered the legitimate word of God according to Church authorities. This is so even though its contents were written and rewritten by many different authors and editors over a period of centuries.

The very term “the Bible” is indicative of the problem with this approach to interpreting it. It means “the Book,” implying that it’s one book with a clear and coherent theme from beginning to end. That’s why I prefer to call it “the Binder,” which is a more accurate description of what’s inside this leatherbound, gold-leafed collection of unrelated writings.

Its first book, *Genesis*, for example, begins with two different creation accounts in chapters one and two. Scholars believe *Genesis* is a compilation of various origin stories and myths from different groups of people who had merged together by the time it was assembled. *The Book of Isaiah* is another good but different kind of example; it was written by at least three different authors over the course of an entire century. These are from the Hebrew scriptures, which also have very different meanings to the Jews—their originators—than they do to the Christians who have appropriated them as their Old Testament. Their New Testament begins with not with two but four different origin stories of Jesus. I once saw a funny cartoon making this point: Just as Jesus is about to deliver his Sermon on the Mount, he says, “Now listen up everyone, I don’t want to end up with four different versions of this.” Additionally, only six of the thirteen letters attributed to Apostle Paul in this collection of

writings are considered authentically his. And in some instances, those that are authentic have been altered by outside hands.

So, to interpret this assortment of various writings as if they are all part of one book with a comprehensive message authored by one person—God—is the worst method because it is the most misleading approach there is. Yet, as I said, it is the most common approach, which is why I say most people who think they know the Bible, don't. Other approaches are more valuable, although each provides unique insights into the meaning of these writings that the others don't. Using a variety of these approaches, then, is the best way to understand the various writings contained within the Binder.

In brief, these main approaches include the *historical-critical* method, which seeks to understand a text within its original context of authorship, audience, and circumstances. It mostly seeks to understand what it mean to its original audience based upon what we know was happening when it was written. This is akin to the *sociological* method which seeks to understand these writings in light of the cultural norms, economic conditions, and power structures that existed when they were written.

The *literary* method considers the elements of writing, like plot, character, and the rhetorical devices used. Take the story of Jesus' encounter with a woman a well who gives him a drink of water, then runs home to tell others about this remarkable man. Many simply read this as real event, but the literary approach helps us understand that it's a familiar type-scene found elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures, just as gunfights, barroom brawls, and the cowboys riding off into the sunset are familiar type-scenes in western movies.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, Isaac meets Rebekah at a well, who then runs home to announce the stranger, whom she later marries. Jacob also meets his future wife Rachel at a well, as does Moses. This tells us the account regarding Jesus isn't meant as literal history but was a type-scene used to imply something the ancient reader would associate it with; namely, that there was something special about Jesus akin to the greatness of Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. Although Jesus doesn't marry the woman he met, that she was a Samaritan, whom Jews were forbidden to associate with, may have implied that in Jesus' world we ought to set such differences aside and come together as one people.

There are other methods I won't go into, except to mention the *Liberation* method, which treats the stories contained within the Binder as if they are meant to aid in the liberation of the oppressed. This is my usual approach, which is why my favorite book interpreting the life and teachings of Jesus is William Herzog's book, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; and my favorite book regarding the interpretation of the

Hebrew scriptures is *Introduction to the Old Testament: A Liberation Perspective*, by Anthony Ceresko.

Herzog, says, for example, “One clear implication of this study is that Jesus’ ministry was concerned with political and economic issues. Matters of justice were not peripheral to a spiritual gospel but were at the heart of his proclamation and practice.”¹ And Ceresko writes, “The Scriptures themselves seem to suggest, then, that we should read the Bible and its history from the bottom; that is, from the underside, through the eyes of the powerless and the poor, from the point of view of the oppressed.”²

My goal is always to convey the meaning of these writings in ways a modern audience might feel their meaning similarly to how they were experienced by those who first heard them ages ago. I call this the *impressionistic* method, a term I have coined myself, although it borrows from all these hermeneutical methods I have mentioned, with the exception of the useless canonical approach. I also like the term because “impressionism” implies artistry. Impressionistic interpretations require playfulness and creativity. How many religions do you know that say, “Hey go have fun with the Bible. Play with it. Get creative with it.”

But before giving my impressionist interpretation of the Ten Commandments, here’s how they are presented in most modern translations;

- I. You shall have no other gods before Me.
- II. You shall not make for yourself an idol.
- III. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain...
- IV. Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy...
- V. Honor your father and your mother...
- VI. You shall not murder.
- VII. You shall not commit adultery.
- VIII. You shall not steal.
- IX. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
- X. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife... or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Although it’s been removed from its context, this is the list conservatives want to display in our schools and other public buildings. To the modern eye, we understand their essential meaning, but they still sound hollow to us, a bit arbitrary, and somewhat ambiguous. *You shall not murder*, for example, sometimes translated as “You shall not *kill*,” obviously doesn’t mean what it says at face value, or else those claiming ours is a Christian Nation would be more upset by all the wars and extrajudicial killings that go on in their name.

And what does it mean to “Honor your father and mother?” Does it simply mean we must obey them? Or to listen to what they teach us? Or to pass on their ways, ideas, and rules of

our own children, generation after generation, even if their old habits are no longer useful? As for making graven images; our homes, communities, museums, governments buildings, and graveyards are filled with animal figurines and statues of people we admire. Is this wrong? Is it a sin? And what does it mean to take the name of God in vain? Do we even know the name of God?

The meaning of these simple commands seems straightforward until we start asking ourselves what it means to actually put them into practice. Yet I propose that those for whom they were written more than a millennium ago had no such difficulty understanding precisely what they meant within the context of their ancient lives. My impressionistic translation of them represents my effort to help us understand them in the same way they did within the context of our modern lives. So here goes:

- I. Don't revere anything more than freedom.
- II. Don't take your ways and ideas too seriously.
- III. Don't act like you have all the answers.
- IV. Make sure workers have the rights, resources, and time they need to have good lives.
- V. Make sure you have a social security system in place to take care of your senior citizens.
- VI. Don't destroy the lives of others.
- VII. Don't dominate others.
- VIII. Don't take what you want from others.
- IX. Don't demonize and dehumanize others.
- X. Don't profit at the expense of others.

These are a version of the commandments that makes sense today because we can understand precisely what they mean in modern life. But why do I think this is what their original audience would have also taken them to mean? Because, as I said, I approach these writings by asking why they would have meant to those who experienced severe oppression and injustice.

The first command, for example, "Have no other gods before me," when taken out of its historical, social, and literary context, sounds to us to be the words of a jealous, perhaps, insecure, narcissistic, and authoritarian personality, like those of the Trumps, Netanyahus, Ayatollahs, and Putins of our modern age. But if we remember these commands were created by various people who had escaped tyranny, slavery, oppression, and poverty, among other injustices, worshipping a punitive authoritarian god doesn't make much sense. What the command actually states is, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." So how do we know when something is worthy of our devotion and reverence? When it liberates us and others from all manner of bondage and oppression. So *Don't revere anything more than freedom.*

I take the second and third commands, “Don’t make graven images” and “Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain,” to mean that we shouldn’t care so much about our ideas, especially our religious beliefs, that we are willing to attack and punish those who see things differently. How many people have been exploited and abused because the dominant culture looked down upon them because of their backward ideas and heretical beliefs? How many have been persecuted because they were called godless, heathens, infidels, and the like? So, as I frame these commands, don’t *take your ways and ideas too seriously*, and *don’t act like you have all the answers*.

The fourth command, *Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy*, is the clearest example of what I’m talking about. Only a group of former slaves who never got a day off could establish the first labor law in human history. This command was so liberal, in fact, that it even included animal rights, perhaps because its creators knew well what it was like to be treated like animals. “On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.”³ Or, as my command says, *make sure workers have the rights, resources, and time they need to have good lives*. This, incidentally, is why my first command doesn’t say don’t revere anything more than *your* freedom. It’s just freedom because our devotion to freedom must be to the principle of freedom; to freedom for all—freedom *from* oppression, inequality, and injustice, and freedom to participate in all the benefits of human society for everyone.

The abbreviated fifth command, the version they want to hang on classroom walls, simply says, *Honor your father and your mother*, but the rest of the command reads, “so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.” The result of honoring our elders is that when we become elderly, we too will be cared for. It’s systemic. It’s about putting a process in place to care for those who can no longer work; an idea that once again was established by former slaves who would have had to watch the suffering, perhaps the executions, of those who became too old or too infirmed to work. So, *make sure you have a social security system in place to take care of your senior citizens*.

Since the meaning of the simple phrase, “Thy shall not kill” is too complex for many followers of the Hebrew scriptures and the Bible to grasp, I’ve tried to make its original meaning more pointed, *Don’t destroy the lives of others*; whether it’s by killing them, bombing their homes, cities, schools, hospitals, roads, and bridges, or by ruining their reputations on social media, or in any other way. Don’t kill people. Don’t attack them. Don’t *ad hominem* attack them either. Just don’t. *Don’t destroy the lives of others*. I hope that’s simpler to understand, but probably not.

The context of the seventh command, *You shall not commit adultery*, is complicated. In short,

Condemnation for sex crimes in ancient society was usually directed at those who had been the victims of sexual exploitation and abuse. Even today there are some societies that justify what they call the “honor killings” of girls and women who have been raped. This is barbaric! To point the problem to adultery, at least to what it meant in ancient times, redirects the matter to everyone involved, including those in powerful positions who exploit and abuse others. This is why I translate this command more broadly as, *Don't dominate others*, not sexually nor for any reason.

“Thy shall not steal” remains the most understandable command in today’s parlance, but I prefer to say, *Don't take what you want from others*. For stealing merely implies the taking of objects, leaving out those who are victimized by such behavior. By referencing others, my version puts a human face on such crimes, something I’m confident the Decalogue’s framers would appreciate as people who knew what it was like to be so objectified that they were treated as possessions yet had no true possessions of their own.

I don’t know how big a problem false witness was at the time the Decalogue was drafted, but it must have been bad enough to have included it in their commandments. As I see it, the problem is just as bad or worse today given the advent of social media and the so-called cancel-culture it has led to. Maybe I should just rephrase it to say, “Don’t cancel anyone.” But more broadly speaking, *Don't demonize and dehumanize others* best gets at the original meaning in a way we can relate to today. As one who has been condemned as “racist, homo- and transphobic, ableist, and classist” by my own religion for writing a book criticizing it for such intolerant behavior, I know how damaging “barring false witness” can be. So *don't demonize and dehumanize others*.

Finally, I translate the tenth commandment, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife... or anything that belongs to your neighbor,” to simply say, *Don't profit at the expense of others*. As with stealing, this better gets at the human impacts of such behavior. For it’s one thing to want what others have, but another to take what you want from them. For those living under oppressive circumstances with no right to anything of their own, what little they did have—a blanket, a tunic, a memento from happier times—could be taken anytime by anyone, including by their own, equally as desperate, neighbors.

Today there are countless ways to profit at the expense of others, sometimes without even realizing it. Our economy is so widespread, after all, that we are unable to see its full impact; nor to fully understand how achieving our interests may negatively impact the interests of others. It’s impossible to know, but we must do our best to pay attention and not profit at the expense of others.

In closing, it's easy today to think of the Ten Commandments as a worn-out relic of religious authority, a set of arbitrary rules etched in stone by a jealous God, a list that many authoritarians today wish to impose upon our entire society. No wonder they mean so little to us freedom lovers.

But look at them now. Don't revere anything more than freedom. Make sure workers have the rights and time they need to have good lives. Don't demonize and dehumanize others. Don't profit at the expense of others. These aren't the words of oppression. They are the words of people who knew oppression firsthand and refused to let it have the last word.

The irony is that the loudest voices calling for these commandments to be posted in classrooms and public buildings would be the first to oppose them if they understood what they actually say. Labor rights. Social security. Animal rights. The dignity of foreigners. That is the Decalogue — not as religious decoration, but as a radical manifesto written by former slaves who dared to imagine a different kind of world.

As much as I believe in the separation of Church and State, I'd consent to hanging them just about anywhere; if doing so also means we finally have to start following them.

¹ Herzog II, William R., *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1994, p. 264.

² Ceresko, Anthony, *Introduction to the Old Testament: A Liberation Approach*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1992, 2001, p. 343.

³ Exodus 20:8