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Exodus 20:1–17

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The Ten Commandments might be understood as a moralistic list of “do’s” and “don’ts.” That is, many people see the Decalogue as a reminder of ancient religious legalism. Thus, the usual impression of the commandments is unfavorable, and no true “good news” of the gospel or joy of Christian faith seems to be found in these verses.

However, when we carefully consider the historical context, we may find the very opposite. We may instead recognize the real joy of discipleship embedded in the commandments. With the historical context in view, the commandments may be considered an anti-imperialist (or post-colonial), anti-capitalist, anti-sexist, anti-materialist, and eco-liberative manifesto divinely sanctioned not only for ancient people, but also for the populace today.

Our inquiry into the historical context of the commandments can begin with the text itself. Verse 2 serves as a prelude of sorts to the Ten Commandments, where God introduces Godself as “the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, *out of the land of slavery*” (emphasis inserted). In this verse, the One who is granting the commandments is the one who liberates the enslaved, the marginalized, and the oppressed. God does this with compassionate love for humanity, universal righteousness and justice for the broken world, and, to borrow from Dr. Martin Luther King and Paul Tillich’s theology, with the goal of reconciling estranged and hostile individuals to each other.¹ Hence, the Ten Commandments should be understood not as an agitating list of do’s and don’ts, but 1) as our response to God’s good acts of liberation and 2) as a means of continuing God’s liberating work for us and our communities.

In the first and second commandments, God prods listeners to not put other gods and their images before the LORD (v. 3). Why is God concerned about this? Historically speaking, “other gods” is a reference to ancient Egyptian gods who were worshipped along with the pharaoh, who was considered a god or an incarnate godson, or at least the earthly image of a god. With v. 2 in mind, what matters is not the existence of other gods or their images, but what was being done in the name of the gods—especially by the pharaoh. The pharaoh could use his name and authority, as well as the money, labor, land, children, and property of the populace, to create and maintain a lavish palace life for him and his elite political group. The perils of the exploited slaves, as the book of Exodus attests, were particularly unspeakable. For example, their newborns could be murdered

¹ Paul Tillich, “You Are Accepted,” *The Shaking of the Foundations* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 153–63; Sunggu Yang, *King’s Speech: Preaching Reconciliation in a World of Violence and Chasm* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019), 83.

by a single reckless directive from the pharaoh for reasons such as slave population control (Exod 1:16). Unlike the LORD, who liberates and reconciles, those “other gods” oppressed, exploited, and murdered for the sake of imperial power.

In today’s world, we put other gods before the LORD, too. In particular, money, land, and material things have been our neo-capitalistic gods that create new forms of imperialism and slavery. Although often overlooked, it is well known that many goods consumed in the West today such as clothing, smart phones, coffee, bananas, bikes, TVs, and other things, are produced by cheap laborers in other parts of the world. In some places, these laborers work for under one dollar a day and work well more than forty hours per week in less-than-acceptable work environments. We should consider that the over-privileged West may have set itself up as a modern-day pharaoh.

Many atrocities, such as imperialistic slavery, were approved under Egypt’s pharaoh and sanctioned in the name of gods. Bluntly put, slavery and many other forms of bloodshed violence were considered *God’s will*—something that *God wanted to happen*. This means that the third commandment, to not misuse God’s name, is no less than a striking counter-imperialist, counter-religious, counter-capitalist, and counter-violence claim. In contrast to pharaoh, the people of YHWH should not misuse the divine name for their own advancements and advantages.

The fourth commandment is more easily regarded as liberating for the ancient Hebrews. Under the pharaoh, there was literally no rest. There was no day to get away from exploitive labor. Resting was only for the ruling elite, who would have never done manual labor. Meanwhile, the LORD was commanding full rest for all people in the community and even for animals (and possibly for all creation). During the pandemic crisis, many people suffer unimaginably. Yet, there was an interesting report from several news channels that wild animals in national parks like Yosemite and Yellowstone were enjoying an unexpected “break” or rest during the same period.² Due to the pandemic, millions of people stopped visiting parks, which enabled animals to freely roam around their *own* habitats without human interference. They were enjoying the rest without the ceaseless human exploitation of the natural world. Likewise, since the LORD commands rest for humans and nature, we should heed it carefully.

The fifth commandment through the tenth commandment all describe what happens in human society and personal relationships when we put “other gods” before us: money, land, material, power, and all sorts of greed. Thanks to the power-seeking ethos of Western culture, we tend to ignore, if not put aside, the precious senior members around us, the aged mothers and fathers who have no youthful power and privilege anymore. The LORD commands us to honor and protect them, which would guarantee healthier society.

It is no secret that through avarice for land, material, money, and sexual satisfaction humans have murdered, committed adultery, stolen from others, lied, and coveted each other’s belongings. Violent modern colonial history and today’s neo-capitalist inhumanity, not to mention the ancient imperialist memories, strongly testify to this covetousness. Womanists, probably better than others in the U.S., know about this ugly truth and boldly bring it up to our keen consciousness. They have

2 Katie Hetter, “With Many National Parks Closed, Their Animal Residents Are Getting a Break (from Us),” CNN.com, April 20, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/national-park-week-healing-trnd-wellness/index.html>; Susanne Rust, “Coyotes, Bobcats and Bears: Wildlife is Reclaiming Yosemite National Park,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-04-13/yosemite-national-park-closed-wildlife-waterfalls-muir>.

pointed out that black women have been murdered, sexually and economically exploited, lied to, and easily discarded from society under colonialist slavery and its continued legacy in the present time. People under the spell of modern gods have violated Black women's bodies, minds, and spirits.³ The LORD, through the Ten Commandments, seems to shout out, "Stop loving other gods, stop the inhumane treatment of others, and stop violating the natural world." These commandments reveal a caring and loving God. This truly benevolent God wants to bring us out of modern-day commitments to slavery.

A brief note on the little segment in the second commandment regarding children being punished because of the sins of their parents: this is also known as collective punishment. One may ask, "Is it really right to punish children because of the parents?" To better understand this matter, we need to put the socio-cultural context of the text into consideration. It is important to remember that we are dealing with the cultural context of three thousand years ago, a time when today's Western sense of individuality, including the individualism of a child, was not established. Children typically lived in their hometown for their entire lives, inherited the house and business of the parents, and continued the legacy of the parents. It was very likely that the sins of the parents, whatever those were (e.g., ownership of lands stolen from the poor), would be passed down to the children as a part of their familial legacy. The pharaoh, too, had to continue his father's imperialist legacy and architectural greatness, which inevitably included slavery of the ancient Hebrews. Simply put, sins of parents became those of their children. In that sense, this segment of the second commandment does not seem to be mainly about children punished because of their parents, but more about practical encouragement to the parents not to sin (i.e., put aside other gods) so that their children may not sin but live under the tremendous care and love of the LORD, the ultimate liberator and redeemer.

Contrary to the common misperception of the Ten Commandments as a punitive list of "do's" and "don'ts," the Decalogue can have a more constructive purpose directed towards great joy, thankfulness, and celebration. The commandments offer liberation, not spiritual-legalistic suffocation. Therefore, when constructing a sermon on the commandments, one may want to create sermon titles like "The Ten Commandments as the Liberation Manifesto," "Ultimate Joy and Celebration around the Ten Commandments," "God's Liberative Kiss with Humanity," or "Laughter and Dancing around the Ten Commandments." Such titles may well capture the original intent and spirit of the commandments.

3 M. Shawn Copeland, "Body, Representation, and Black Religious Discourse," *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Katie G. Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 98–102.