

Exodus | Ten commandments? No, ten signs of life

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Alison Sampson ~ Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Sadly, it's true: I'm one of those perverse people who can't stand being told what to do. If you tell me to do something, then because I've learned a modicum of politeness I'll grit my teeth and nod, and because for decades now I've been training myself to slow down and actually listen, I might even do it. But underneath my blood will be boiling and I'll be longing to do the exact opposite.

That's how I feel whenever I hear the Ten Commandments being pushed as rules. As a teenager I lived in the United States, and not a week went by that one politician or another didn't call for the reintroduction of the Ten Commandments into schools, into courthouses, even into law. Such calls are even more strident now, and in some places have been successful. Public schools in Texas, Arkansas and Louisiana require the Ten Commandments to be prominently displayed in each and every classroom. But whenever I feel like the commandments are being foisted on me, I become filled with rage. Immediately I want to rush out and bed somebody else's husband, go steal a car then take up a job on Sundays. (I figure ministry continues to be an option.)

The thing is, the Ten Commandments aren't actually rules. In fact they're not even commandments and the word 'commandment' isn't in the text. Jewish people refer to them as the Ten Words, and even a quick glance shows the foolishness of trying to mandate them. For, while it's easy enough to legislate against murder, rape and theft, how do we legislate the first three commandments, which are all about faith in God? And how do we legislate against human desire? For the tenth Word does not limit actions. Instead, it says that we shall not envy people's stuff, whether houses, spouses or livestock.

But if these Words aren't laws handed down from on high, then what, exactly, are they? It's true they refer to human behaviour. But, as the dearly departed Alastair might have put it, they're not really about who and how we are. Instead, they're about who and how God is. Rather than rules to be enforced, they're an indication of relationship.

‘God has come only to test you,’ says Moses. Like a woman who knows a good tomato or an assayer who tests the purity of metal, God has come to find out what we’re made of: and this will be revealed by how we live. For our living reflects the image of whatever we truly worship. Those of us who worship money and things will always be grasping and dissatisfied. Those of us who worship violence and war will wreak havoc wherever we go. Those of us who worship productivity and efficiency will act like the proverbial slavedriver. But those of us who worship the God of Exodus will embody these life-giving Words. Our lives will honour the God of freedom, show care for all people, and be punctuated by regular rest.

Indeed, Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann groups the Words into these three themes. The first three Words make up the first theme, which is God. We are always surrounded by invitations to idolatry, that is, invitations to devote our best time and energy to something other than God. For some of us, this might be an ‘ism.’ For those on the left, perhaps feminism, environmentalism, socialism or even veganism might take our best time and energy. For those on the right, capitalism, nationalism, fascism and white supremacy would seem to be all-absorbing. But even those of us in the middle are vulnerable to devoting too much of our time and energy to ordinary things: professional vocation; responsible economic management; the appearance of goodness, niceness or success; the performance of a particular role or identity; even our contribution to the church. There are many idols in our lives, many things we can be overly devoted to.

When things are an expression of a life lived in God, they have integrity. But when they become the focus or driving force of our lives, they hollow us out, and even the most wholesome thing can become an idol. So the first group of Words centre God and tell us exactly who this God is: the one who liberates us from Egypt. This is the God who draws us away from relentless demands and state violence, and who invites us into the new creation of justice, mercy and peace. When this God is at the centre of our lives, we will be free from idolatry. So that’s the first indicator of a life lived in God: Honouring the God of freedom.

The second theme is neighbourliness, and this is what the last group of Words relates to. Some of these Words are about doing no harm; others, about protecting the vulnerable, whether those who work for us or serve us, those who produce what we consume, those who have no power or rights.

They insist on the dignity and integrity of each person, no matter their age or social standing.

When God is at the centre of our lives, we will naturally honour all people as being made in God's image. And so we will not treat our neighbours as objects of desire or as rivals. We will never hurt or harm them. Instead, we will show them respect, we will have honest dealings, we will not subject them to predatory behaviour, we will ensure their access to regular rest. And that's the second indicator of a life lived in God: Loving people.

At the heart of these two sets of Words is the third theme: the radical concept of Sabbath. Now, Sabbath includes worship, rest and play, but it is also much bigger than these things. Sabbath tackles the big lie of Pharaoh's empire, the lie that keeps slaves making bricks and slavedrivers pushing them harder. And the lie is this: There is never enough. Because of this lie, oil rigs never stop pumping, emails never stop flowing, movies never stop streaming, AI datacentres never stop calculating, online shopping never closes and workers never truly rest; the lie infects every area of our lives.

And so most of us know the feeling that, whatever we do and however hard we try, we will never know enough or be enough or do enough or have enough to feel truly worthy or satisfied. Sabbath is a radical and prophetic challenge to this lie. It asserts that we are enough, and the world is enough, because God is more than enough without any effort on our part. It insists that we can stop, and that we must stop. And it insists that this gift of rest must be enjoyed not only by the privileged but by all: women, young people, vulnerable people, casual workers, foreigners, refugees.

Sabbath calls out our dependency on being seen to be Very Busy, Very Important. Sabbath disrupts our addiction to consuming and shopping. Sabbath announces our resistance to a system which exploits people and communities and land. It declares that we instead trust the God who sets a table in the desert, pours water from a rock, and keeps the world turning without us.

And it's all done by this practice of stopping. We stop working, stop shopping, stop volunteering, stop running around like a headless chook. At least once a week, we embody our trust by doing nothing. Maybe we gather to worship, sing and pray. Maybe we sit with a cup of tea, letting our minds and bodies and credit cards rest as we watch the grass and even the weeds grow. Maybe we 'don't do' something else.

Whatever, there you have the three indicators of a life lived in God: Honouring God. Loving people. Embracing the Sabbath.

Everything around us tells us to work harder, aim higher, take more, live forever. Everything around us tells to travel further; tick off that bucket list; there is not enough to go around; put yourself and your family first. Unless we fiercely resist these messages, embodying all three themes, we will end up devoting our best time and energy to all the wrong things and we might as well have stayed in Egypt.

For we will wind up hollowed out and miserable, the sort of people who work or shop or grumble endlessly and are never truly satisfied. We'll be the people who keep Pharaoh's labour mills running and Pharaoh's cash registers ringing and Pharaoh's bean counters eroding entitlements and Pharaoh's slavedrivers ignoring the right to switch off and Pharaoh's army in constant readiness to protect this shrivelled and destructive way of life. And we'll be the people who never pause long enough to be bored, to pray, or to notice the still small voice emerging, or to critique the powers and habits which shape and govern our lives.

But we are invited to be free, and to let God's life flow through us. So hear the good news: The Ten Words aren't a bunch of overbearing rules telling you what to do. Instead, they're a sign of God's life in you. So lean into God and allow the better way to unfold: the way of liberation, the way of community, the way of Sabbath. It's the way in which God is our focus and all people are cherished and we have the wisdom and grace to rest.

For our God does not seek human diminishment. Our God does not seek exploitation or violence or endless striving. Instead, our God desires only our fullness and flourishing. So let us embrace the Ten Words, the three themes, the never-ending flow of life. And let us walk together into God's new creation of freedom, justice and joy. Amen. Ω