

Dear Friends,

Exodus 20: 13-17

Most of the commandments are "Thou shalt not's". They are prohibitions. They show us what not to choose. They point out the paths in life that are to be avoided, the drives and instincts within us which need to be carefully managed. It's interesting also however to work out if these prohibitions have opposites. If the commandments show ways to avoid, what are the alternative ways to embrace? Can we use this list of "Thou shalt not's" to help us develop another list, one of principles which help us to live well?

The first two commandments, to have no other gods and to make no idols, would then become the principle of letting God alone be God. The commandment against making wrongful use of the name of God would become the principle of showing reverence to God.

Perhaps we can keep an eye on that as we look at the remaining commandments.

You shall not commit murder.

There is a discussion about whether it should be "You shall not kill" or "You shall not murder". There are some who argue that all killing, any taking of life, is wrong. Those who are pacifists might take this view. For them it is a matter of conscience to refuse to take up arms in times of war. Their view is to be respected. It finds support in the Bible. That however was not how things were seen at this moment in the biblical story. We looked recently at a battle between the Israelites and the Amalekites. On that occasion Joshua got together an army who fought against those who had attacked them. At this time capital punishment was also accepted. For example, anyone who touched the mountain where God was meeting Moses was to be put to death, as were those who did not keep the Sabbath. There were therefore acts of killing that were allowed, but beyond these the taking of life was prohibited.

What positive principle can we draw out of that? How about show reverence to all life, live carefully? There are very practical ways in which you can do that. At the moment you can wear a mask, keep your distance, wash your hands. You are not responsible for the virus or for any of the deaths it causes, but you can do your bit to protect life by stopping it from spreading.

When Jesus talks about this commandment, he takes it deeper. He tells you to be mindful of your thoughts. Notice if you even begin to feel angry with someone. Don't let that build up. Jesus says don't even insult them. And if you are aware that someone has something against you, waste no time, go straight to them and settle the matter, find a way to become reconciled. Do your best to live in peace with everyone.

You shall not commit adultery.

Be faithful in your relationships. Give your attention to those closest to you. Open your heart to them, listen to them, appreciate them. Choose to act in ways that are for their well-being, that enable them to flourish. Sometimes you will need to forgive them. It's pretty likely that sometimes they will need to forgive you too.

And Jesus also takes this one deeper. He says that if you look with lust at another person then you have already committed adultery in your heart. Some of us may be thinking "Goodness, I think I may have committed quite a lot of adultery". But hang on, the word translated as lust means to fix the desire or set the heart upon and it can be healthy or unhealthy depending on the desire. Jesus is making a similar point to the one he made when he talked about murder. He is asking you to stay aware of what is going on within you. Watch your thoughts and the stirrings of your heart. If they are beginning to drive you in directions which will cause hurt and damage to others then change course.

You shall not steal.

Don't get rich at the expense of others. Remember the manna, collect what you need for the day, but no more. As far as you can, make sure there's enough for others. If you take what you don't need but others do, that may be stealing. The principle to live by is generosity. It is better to err on the side of being generous than that of being mean.

You shall not bear false witness

Be trustworthy. Show care in what you say about others. May what you say be for their good. Maybe you know some damaging truth about someone. Some of this may need to be shared for the safety of others, but sometimes it may be kinder to keep what you know to yourself.

You shall not covet

If you like the look of what others have, be happy for them, let them enjoy it; but be careful about hungering for it for yourself. If you have the simple things that you need, be content with them.

God gives the people these commandments. They are prohibitions of ways to avoid and principles which guide them to the ways to take. If the people could live these commands, the land to which they are going would become a promised land. The people know that the instructions make sense. They raise their voices and say "All that the Lord has said we will do". Let's see how long it takes before their resolve falters and they break the commandments.

God bless you,

Tony