

Preaching the Ten Commandments

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Without any concrete data to support it, my hunch is that the degree of preaching of the Ten Commandments is in inverse proportion to the degree of cultural interest in them. That is, the Commandments are widely a part of the political and cultural scene but less clearly the subject of proclamation or evident in the liturgy of the church. They are an icon or a potential icon, but that role seems to have been taken over by socio-political uses of the Commandments more than by religious expressions. There are still churches that have the Commandments in some public place, but they are probably not as numerous as those churches that have the national flag prominently displayed in the sanctuary. Meanwhile, outside the churches there are strong movements to have the Commandments prominently and conspicuously present in schools, courtrooms, legislatures, and post offices. Zeal for the transformation of the Commandments from a religious directive to a cultural icon, whose public display is believed to have potential for changing public behavior, is very much on the part of religious persons, who have a hunch that these fundamental guidelines for behavior that arise out of the story of a particular community of faith have a public significance and should not be confined to the religious or cultic spheres.

Perhaps they are on to something. Or it may be that our conversation about and attention to the Commandments has fixed itself on questions of the public function of the Commandments, their place in civil society versus their restriction to the community of faith, because the Commandments have become a given in the life of the church, but not a given that presses for much discussion or interpretation. Within the Reformed tradition as well as the Lutheran, such inattention is a little surprising. The interpretation of the Commandments is a central part of the catechetical tradition, reaching back to earliest stages of the Didache and the church fathers and becoming prominent already in Augustine's catechesis.

Our tendency to assume the givenness and obviousness of the Commandments without much elaboration probably is rooted in various realities. We take the Commandments for granted in the church and so assume their importance without talking about them. At the same time, there are many persons who find the Commandments reductionistic as an approach to dealing with moral issues of any significance. That is, they are too simple to give much help beyond the very basic issues. What they deal with are moral verities that are so accepted that they do not need serious discussion. Where they need to be lifted up is in those segments of society or those situations and circumstances where they do not seem to be operative. Presumably church people have and know the Commandments, so nothing more needs to be said there except to reaffirm the obvious to which all are agreed. The knotty matters of moral decision-making and acting cannot be dealt with simply on the basis of the Commandments. Thus such hot topics as abortion or homosexuality are not subject to scrutiny via the Commandments either because what they have to say is so obvious and uncomplicated, for example, do not kill, or because they simply do not address the crucial issue and so cannot be of much help. Still others, within the community of faith

and without, object to the negative and obligatory character of the Commandments that seems to brook no qualification and couches theological and ethical matters in largely prohibitive terms. They place obligations without taking account of situations and presenting factors. When Joseph Fletcher wrote his famous little book *Situation Ethics* a generation ago, he took particular aim at some of the Commandments and their failure to deal with the complexities of moral decision and asserted as their subservience to or replacement of an ethic of love.

A Recovery of Teaching and Preaching

If any of this be true, then what are we to do with the Commandments? At least one avenue worth considering is the church's recovery of a tradition of teaching and preaching the Commandments.¹ There are several reasons for this, some of them quite pragmatic:

- The Commandments are not self-evident and self-interpreting. Their simplicity should not disguise the need of the church to clarify their meaning and force and instill their practice through its preaching and liturgy, indeed through the practice of the whole of its life.
- The familiarity of the text invites the hearer into thinking about the known and accepted in a fresh way. The point of such preaching is not the novelty of the text but exploration in a deeper way into that which the congregation presumes to know easily.
- Preaching the Commandments keeps the proclamation rooted in the biblical text but it now engages also that which has its place as doctrine and teaching. So preaching in this instance is not directed by the lectionary but by the catechisms of the church.
- Theology and ethics are thus pushed to the front of the preaching enterprise by the very nature of the material.
- The nature of the material also creates the possibility of an extended series of teaching or preaching occasions in which the congregation knows what to expect and can anticipate and the preacher/teacher has a plan for a prolonged study that is given to her by the text itself. Whether this means ten sermons/lesson plans, less than ten, or more than ten remains to be decided by the preacher/teacher. But any serious engagement with this text in either its Exodus or Deuteronomic form will have to involve a number of sermons or lessons. One of the problems with staying with the lectionary at this point is that the Commandments come there only as a whole and as the basis for a single Sunday. It is hard to conceive of doing less than ten sermons because of the congregation's expectation, created by the text and their familiarity with its content, and it is more likely that one will do somewhat more than that.

What is being suggested in the rationales offered above does not mean that one cannot preach a single sermon on the Commandments as a whole or a sermon on one of the Commandments apart from treating the whole. That is, the moral and theological issues of the commandments, whether they have to do with the nature and value of human life, truth-telling, sabbath observance, or the like, are large enough that

one may quite well take up one of these issues on the basis of the appropriate Commandment(s) without having to go on and teach or preach on all of them. And even a prolonged series of sermons on the Commandments would probably need to take one occasion to think about them as a whole.

There is need, however, for a *strategy of preaching* and one that recognizes the comprehensive character of the Commandments that tends to impose certain directions on how we take them up. It may be that one will want, either at the beginning or perhaps as a conclusion to preaching the Commandments, to take up the character of the Commandments as *law* or the issues of the *place of the law* in the Christian life. Reformed Christians have tended to see the Commandments especially in relation to the third use of the law as a guide for the sanctified life.² While Luther did not develop a so-called third use, he saw in the Commandments both a form of natural law manifesting God's moral will for a fallen humanity but also, with Paul, the practice of God's love command by the Christian. He also saw how the Scriptures in a broad way provide the rich interpretive exposition of the Commandments: "Now Paul shows beautifully on the basis of the Decalogue what it means to be a servant through love.... All the admonitions of the prophets in the Old Testament, as well as of Christ and the Apostles in the New Testament, concerning a godly life, are excellent sermons on and expositions of the Ten Commandments."³ It is out of just such a conviction that Luther could say, as he did in the Preface to his *Large Catechism*, "Anyone who knows the Ten Commandments perfectly knows the entire Scriptures."

Luther and Calvin offer a shared way into the Commandments, one that is present in the later confessions and may be central for the preaching of the Commandments. For Luther, this way is perhaps best exemplified in his interpretation of the First Commandment: The *negative* of the Commandment prohibiting the worship of other gods is really a matter of the *positive* placing of one's trust wholly in God. More self-consciously hermeneutical, Calvin suggested a method of approach to the interpretation of the Commandments in which he drew on the familiar figurative approach known as *synechdoche*, that is, seeing a larger whole in the smaller part, a larger meaning in the specific and seemingly confined Commandment, what I would call a trajectory of meaning flowing out of the particular Commandments. Calvin's approach may be suggestive for preaching on particular commandments. He proposed a three-part approach: examine the *subject* of each Commandment, that is, what it is talking about; ask after the *end* of each Commandment, that is, what it indicates to us is either pleasing or displeasing to the one who gives the law; and develop an argument from the Commandment to its *opposite*. In this last move, Calvin suggested we discern the positive obligation that flows from a negative command and the prohibition that may be implicit in the positive commands (sometimes even explicit as in the "do not work" dimension of the "observe the sabbath"). In Calvin's terms, "[A]n injunction of any thing good is a prohibition of the opposite evil.... a prohibition of crimes is a command to practise the contrary duties." So the interpretive and preaching task is to help the congregation see both aspects of the Commandment's force, its positive and its negative, its do's as well as its don't's.⁴

Any preaching of the Commandments will find in such a proposal a way into the Commandments that opens them up and moves from reductionistic and negative interpretations to rich and complex ways in which the Commandments create an ethic of love for the Christian. Thus the commandment not to steal unfolds an ethic of

neighbor love that has to do not only with making sure that one does not illegally and stealthily take what belongs to one's neighbor but also with protecting the goods of one's neighbor, being available for safekeeping of the property of another, and avoiding legal acts that endanger the economic well-being of the neighbor.

Preaching the Commandments probably involves some effort to lay out the *ground* for the ethics of the Commandments. The Prologue offers the best entrée into that subject. It is easy to get hung up on whether the Commandments are duty or response, obligations laid upon us or grateful response to our redemption and freedom in Christ. The Prologue to the Commandments (Exod. 20:2//Deut. 5:6) suggests that this is a false distinction. Or to put it another way, the Prologue may help us understand the distinction properly. The Commandments come in the form of command or prohibition, placing certain obligations or duties upon those who hear and receive them. So the first hearers responded to the word: "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Exod. 19:8). Living in obedience to the expressed word of the Lord is incumbent upon the community that receives the Commandments. But the Prologue lets us know that such obligations grow out of the gracious and redeeming love of God that has set this people free: "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 other gods before me." The acceptance of the obligations is an expression of deep gratitude, and the stipulations provide a way of living under the rule of the one who has set us free. The covenantal structure in which the Commandments are to be understood makes this clear.⁵ The covenant begins in the gracious acts of God for the people, by which God becomes their and our God. It is completed in the response of the people to live as God wills them and us to live, which is the way in which they and we become the people of God. Is that obligation or gratitude? It is both, and the Reformed confessions confirm that. Take, for example, *Geneva Catechism* Question 139:

M. Why does He mention this at the beginning of His law?

C. To remind us how much we are bound to obey His good pleasure, and what ingratitude it would be on our part if we do the contrary.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* places the Decalogue under the rubric "Thankfulness" and sees in it an explanation of "what *gratitude* I owe to God for such redemption" (Question 1—italics mine).

Out of all these hints and guidelines from the tradition, one may develop a comprehensive approach to preaching the Commandments. Thus, they may be seen as a fulsome response to the question each Christian, consciously and subconsciously, asks: *How then shall we live?* The Commandments present themselves as guidelines and directions for the Christian life, and preaching them may be shaped to raise and respond to that question at every point. If that is the case, one may want especially to look at the Deuteronomic version of the Decalogue (Deut. 5) and the way in which the chapters before and after the preaching of the law (chapters 1-4 and 29-30) set the offer of life as God's good gift to the people and see the law as the means and the way to the good life and to God's blessing (for example, Deut. 30:15-20).

Another possibility of framing the preaching of the Commandments arises out of the tradition, but expressed in the language of Paul Lehmann, interprets them as "*a primer for learning to spell, and especially to spell out freedom.*"⁶ Here, one will help

the congregation find in the Commandments an understanding of that service that is perfect freedom. The preacher may want to set the Commandments in the context of the Exodus story and what the Lord tells Moses to give to Pharaoh as a reason for letting the people go out. It is that “they may worship/serve me” (Exod. 7:16; 8:2; 9:2; 10:3).⁷ As the story makes very clear, such service is the way of freedom from human tyrannies that oppress. True freedom is in the service of God. What does that mean or imply? The Commandments help us figure out that freedom/service. They teach us how to spell and especially how to spell freedom.

An alternative strategy might be to set the preaching of the Commandments *in terms of the Great Commandment* so that one sees all the details of the Commandments as an articulation and spelling out of what it means to love God and to love neighbor. These by themselves are very general notions. What is the content of loving God? What is the way I love my neighbor other than having a generalized good feeling about those around me and trying not to do anything bad to them? Is it possible to be more specific about loving God? How is that demonstrated concretely? The Commandments are not the last word on this, but they are the primary specification of what such love of God and love of neighbor are all about, as Paul says in Romans 13:8-10.

A not dissimilar way into the Commandments is to try to lay out the way in which they provide the marks for *the good neighborhood*. Here the image is one of moral space, and the preacher’s aim is to show how the Commandments fill up that space, making the neighborhood a good place to live. Such an understanding can be placed in relation to a similar image that permeates the psalms in their depictions of what God has done to deliver and set free those who are oppressed or suffer in some fashion. Often one hears that God has set the suffering one in a broad place (e.g. Ps. 4:1; 18:19; 31:8; 118:5). The freedom is a kind of elbow room for the one who felt hemmed in, drowning, caught in a net. Now how does one live in the broad place of God’s freedom? That is what the good neighborhood is all about, and the Commandments are the neighborhood rules. As they are operative in the lives of the neighbors, the neighborhood, however large or small, really is a better place to live.

Two Approaches

Whatever the overall rubric or framework for directing one’s preaching the Commandments, two particular moves can be helpful in preaching the individual commandments. One is to *investigate the ways in which the lawcodes of the Old Testament give some specification, elaboration, and illustration of what the generalized and non-specific Commandments are after*. Looking at these other texts is not a simple operation and so will demand some time on the part of the preacher. Pay particular attention to the specific cases or laws in the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 21-23), the Deuteronomic Code (Deut. 12-26), and the Holiness Code (Lev. 17-26). In these bodies of law, the statutes and ordinances, many of the kinds of issues and cases that grow out of the basic guidelines of the Commandments are set forth. It has been suggested that the Deuteronomic Code has been ordered according to the sequence of the Decalogue. That proposal has some plausibility, but it is not always clear exactly which specific statutes and ordinances fit which Commandment, even if one is moving through the Code with the sequence of the Commandments in mind. Nevertheless, the very possibility of working this out is heuristic as it suggests that we look in these ancient cases for how Israel worked out the details of its obedient

response to God embodied in the ten words, the covenant (Deut. 4:13). For example, when one looks at Exodus 21:16, one discovers that the prohibition against stealing was first aimed at the stealing of a person, what we call kidnapping. Further, in that same context, it is clear that the purpose of the theft is economic gain at the expense of the freedom of the neighbor. The interrelationship between slavery, theft, and economic issues begins to unfold in this particular case. Then, as one looks at Exodus 22:1ff., where theft is explicitly the topic, one discovers there is a particular concern in these specific cases for theft of the means of production, the work animals of the neighbor. In the Deuteronomistic Code, the section that would seem to correspond with the commandment to honor parents has to do with various officials in the public life of the community: elders, prophets, priests, the king. Here is the basis for the tradition's finding in this commandment some direction about how we are to relate to various kinds of authorities, beginning with parents but extending to others who have some proper role over us. Or a look at Deuteronomy 15 in relation to the sabbath commandment helps to see in that commandment the beginning of a large sabbatical principle that suggests there may be all sorts of ways in which economic bondage is broken open when the Commandments are directive of the community's life.

The examples above only intimate the large possibilities for drawing upon the Scripture itself for clarifying and interpreting the Commandments. One obviously may move into the teaching of Jesus for further specification of the force of particular commandments. Further, the fact that there is seen to be a stream of interpretive tradition from one time to another helping the community determine in each time and place how the Commandments function as direction for life suggests that this stream continues on into new times and places, including our own. The specification and particularizing of the Commandments is not confined to referencing backwards. There is also the interpretive task of determining in the present moment specific ways and illustrative cases that help us understand how we live in freedom and service through the Commandments. The presence in the Bible of a changing and developing legal/moral tradition out of the Commandments is an implicit authorization for that to continue in our own time.

There is another way in which Scripture provides food for the homiletical enterprise of preaching the Commandments. That is in the *stories* of Scripture as illustration of the force of the Commandments. The stories not only make concrete the way a particular commandment is to be appropriated; they also give some context, show the way in which circumstances affect the obedience to a commandment, and indicate outcomes and consequences when the Commandments are in play, or as is often the case, not in play. The stories are most often of disobedience, for example, the stories of the theft of Joseph by his brothers (Gen. 40:15); David's coveting and committing adultery (2 Sam. 11-12); Ahab's coveting of the vegetable garden of Naboth and the subsequent acts of false witness, murder, and theft (1 Kings 21); and Jeremiah's general indictment of the community for violation of the Commandments (for example, Jeremiah 7). From such stories, which may also include prophetic indictments and psalmic narrative laments, one learns something about the way in which life and death are the outcomes of the way persons respond to the Commandments and we perceive the seriousness of covenantal existence.

Suggestions

Finally, a few simple suggestions for working on particular commandments:

- investigate the various possibilities inherent in the Hebrew expression translated in the NRSV as “before me” and what they may suggest about the way in which other loyalties may compete with one’s ultimate loyalty;
- note how the question of idolatry becomes more prominent in those numerations of the Commandments that separate having other gods from making and worshipping images;
- ask what difference it makes whether the images are of other objects of devotion or of the God we worship and what kinds of images seduce us from the true worship of God;
- note the negative and positive dimensions of the jealousy of God, the positive ones more often denoted by God’s “zeal” rather than jealousy;
- ask yourself what’s in a name and what mischief is possible with the name of God in personal and corporate life;
- pay attention to the purpose of the sabbath command in the Deuteronomic form: provision of rest for those who cannot gain it for themselves or without the effort of others to secure it for them (“your male and female slave who are like yourself”);
- note the starting point of honoring parents in the way in which adult children treat their aged parents, a starting point that is not the last word in the trajectory of the commandment, as Paul reminds us (Eph. 6:1-9);
- wrestle with the restrictions and openness of the term that is sometimes translated “kill” and sometimes “commit murder,” avoiding an overly simple resolution in either direction but attentive to the church’s tradition on this commandment;
- ask where the neighbor is in the commandment against adultery;
- start with the courtroom and the significance of false and true witness there and then see if there is something here about lying in a more general way;
- see how the Exodus and Deuteronomic forms of the commandment against coveting serve to suggest categories of things that “belong” to us (and so push us to ask how that belonging works) and also point us to both external acts and internal attitudes as outcomes of coveting;
- do not be suckered into thinking that coveting and theft are prohibitions primarily aimed at the have nots, who surely are the ones who want their neighbor’s property and move to take it! If you think that is the case, read the stories mentioned above a little more carefully.

Notes

¹ A useful and classic example of the tradition of preaching the Commandments is *John Calvin’s Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, edited and translated by Benjamin W. Farley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1980). The sermons are preached on the basis of the Deuteronomic form of the Commandments.

² Calvin’s treatment of the uses of the law and of the Commandments may be found in Book II of his *Institutes* as well as at the end of his commentary on the law in his *Harmony of the Pentateuch*.

³ The quotation is from Luther’s *Lectures on Galatians* (*Luther’s Works* 27:51). Other places where

Luther takes up the Commandments in an extensive way are his *Small* and *Large Catechisms* and his *Treatise on Good Works*. For a very helpful comparison of Calvin and Luther on the law, see the essay by Edward Dowey, "Law in Luther and Calvin," *Theology Today* 41 (1984), 146-53 (accessible on the web at www.theologytoday.ptsem.edu under "Archive").

⁴ The Reformed confessions and Luther's *Large Catechism* are helpful in seeing the details of both positive and negative specifics that are implicit in the particular commandments.

⁵ In Deut 4:13, the "covenant" is defined as "the ten words/commandments."

⁶ Paul Lehmann, *The Decalogue and a Human Future: The Meaning of the Commandments for Making and Keeping Human Life Human* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 5.

⁷ The verb '*abad*' means both worship and serve. The coincidence of meaning is, of course, critically important in understanding what is meant. The service of God and the worship of God are one and the same, and the Commandments have their locus in the service/worship of God and so are expressions of a single reality experienced in various ways, liturgically, ethically, politically, and the like.