

TEN WORDS

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LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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My morning routine often includes at least three cups of coffee and a tour through four or five major news sites. On Tuesday morning, I paused on the following headline from the *New York Times*: “A Generation Emerging from the Wreckage.”¹

I am drawn, like a moth to a flame, to sunny headlines like this. ☺ Naomi tells me that I need to read happier things to start my day. She’s probably right.

At any rate, the author, David Brooks, spent some time going around to college campuses in America asking undergraduate and graduate students how they see the world.

His conclusions are based on the American context, but I think are applicable in our context as well. Here is some of what he found:

- **“A generation with diminished expectations.** Their lived experience includes the Iraq war, the financial crisis, police brutality and Donald Trump—a series of moments when the big institutions failed to provide basic security, competence and accountability. ‘We’re the school shooting generation,’ one student told him. Another said: “Wall Street tanked the country and no one got punished. The same with government.”

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/26/opinion/millennials-college-hopeful.html?mtrref=undefined&assetType=opinion>

- **Little faith in large organizations.** “I don’t believe in politicians; they have been corrupted. I don’t believe in intellectuals; they have been corrupted,” said one young woman. Indeed, it seems that the only group that hasn’t been corrupted is university students!
- Brooks asked a group of students from about 30 countries which of them believed that the people running their country were basically competent. Only one young man, from Germany, raised a hand. “The utopia of our parents is the dystopia of our age,” a student said, summarizing the general mood.
- **Little faith in the tech industry.** They had it, but many had lost much of it.
- **A deep sense of disillusionment:** One lamented “We don’t even have a common truth. A common set of facts.”

The overall impression that Brooks walked away from his campus tour with was of a generation that has little to no faith in institutions which they see as untrustworthy; a generation that sees a bleak future full of violence and corruption; and a generation that sees even the idea of a common “truth” as unimaginable—there only various *versions* of truth that are reduced to the interests of this or that group identity and how power and rhetoric can be manipulated to get what they want.

It’s not just students that I hear this from. I have heard comments like these from across the generational spectrum.

A typical response to this diagnosis—perhaps it is the one that you were thinking of as you listened to my summary of Brooks’ article—goes something like this: Well, we need to get back to truth! We need firm anchors amidst the shifting tides of pluralistic culture where. When everything seems to be falling apart and breaking down, we need something strong and solid!

Something like, say, the Ten Commandments!

As I mentioned last Sunday, our Scriptures throughout the season of Lent all connect in various ways to the theme of “covenant.”

On this third Sunday of Lent our readings lead us to one of the most famous covenants in all of Scripture.

In Hebrew: *aseret ha-d'varîm*; in Greek: *deka logous*. Translated literally, both mean something like “Ten Words” or “Ten Sayings.”

Ten Words to shape the life of the people of Israel. Ten Words that have echoed down through the ages.

Ten Words that have often been forgotten or ignored, that many think we need to get back to before all is lost.

I'm sure you've heard responses like this, right? In response to a world where things seem to be falling apart and nothing is trustworthy or solid... *Well, this is what happens when you take the Ten Commandments out of public places... Or, Well, we used to have the Lord's Prayer in schools, didn't we? Things all started going downhill when we took it out!*

I've certainly been on the receiving end of many of these kinds of cultural diagnoses. I heard this week of one pastor in America who frequently had people coming up to him attempting to enlist him in various efforts to get the Ten Commandments back in public spaces as a way of combating the moral drift of the nation.

His response was genius. "Sure," he said. "I'd be glad to help. I promise I'll go march and picket with you if you can name all Ten Commandments for me in order right now."

He has yet to find himself marching or picketing. 😊

But the idea is that we need to get back to a common foundation. And it's a very understandable idea.

Any community, whether a family or a church or a nation, needs a common moral framework, a shared set of assumptions, an agreement to live by certain rules to function well.

If each person is operating according to their own idea of what's right and wrong or what is or isn't permissible, chaos and relational breakdown will almost certainly follow.

A relatively trivial example: A few years ago, our family all signed a "covenant" for technology usage in our house. Pretty basic stuff about using phones and computers responsibly, leaving phones on the counter overnight, etc. But we all signed it and it's on our fridge to remind us.

The Ten Commandments, along with the rest of the Torah provided this common moral framework for the people of Israel. They had spent nearly half a millennia in slavery in Egypt. They had never had to think about this kind of thing before because they were a subjugated people.

Now, in the desert, God gave the Law. Ten Words, to start with.

As many commentators have noted, these Ten Words break into two categories. The first four deal with being properly related to God.

- **No other gods**—this is the very bedrock of who Israel is, of the entire Judeo-Christian tradition. *One God*. Faithful Jews recite the Shema daily: *Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One*
- **No idols/images**—a prohibition against the common human temptation to worship that which can be fashioned, that which is made, rather than the Maker. This can and has been taken to some fairly ridiculous extremes, abolishing all crucifixes or art or whatever because it is a temptation toward idolatry. But this command is linked to the first one. God alone.
- **Don't misuse the name of God**—we often think of this as swearing, using the name of God to curse, and this is true; but in many ways it's an easy and convenient target; there is more than one way to misuse God's name, isn't there? Using God's name to justify our ideology, our politics, talking endlessly *about* God while not bothering as much to actually obey God—these are also ways of taking God's name in vain, I think.
- **Remember the Sabbath**—The need for rest is woven into the very fabric of creation. God rested, so you must rest, too. Rest and worship are guards against coming to idolize ourselves, imagining that everything depends on us. This commandment invites us, again, to remember that God is God and we are not. And to trust.

The remaining six commandments focus on proper relationship with the neighbour.

- Honour your father and mother
- You shall not murder
- You shall not commit adultery
- You shall not steal
- You shall not give false testimony—tell the truth, don't gossip

- You shall not covet—don't always be casting a glance at what your neighbour has; be content

Together, and in very broad terms, these Ten Words cover the totality of Israel's life, how they are to relate to God and to each other.

But we are not the people of ancient Israel. We are Christians.

How do we think about these Ten Words? What role ought these commandments to play in our own lives?

Well, for starters, we ought to keep them! The fact that we've never been particularly good at keeping the law doesn't mean that we ought to stop trying.

But we should also recognize that the movement of Scripture is a move away from following laws for the law's sake to understanding the *spirit* of the law.

When we get to the New Testament we see a curious dual approach with respect to the Law.

On the one hand, Jesus intensifies the law.

You think that just avoiding murder is what God wants? I say, don't even be angry or speak harsh words!

You think that you should get a gold star for not committing adultery? I say that if your hearts are full of lust, you've already committed it in your hearts.

You think that a tit for tat system of reciprocity is what God wants? Where you love those who love you and hate those who hate you? I say love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you because your Father in heaven causes his sun to rise and his rain to fall on both the righteous and the unrighteous.

He says that he has not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Mat. 5:17).

Jesus calls us to be *perfect*—complete, whole—as God is perfect.

But then, Paul reminds us that we can never fulfill the law and points us toward grace. He does this most famously in Romans 7. I want to read a few excerpts of this well-known passage:

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

I suspect that Paul is describing a spiritual, psychological, and moral experience that many of us are familiar with. Knowing right from wrong doesn't automatically lead to doing what is right.

Paul knew the Law better than anyone. He was a well-trained Pharisee. He would likely have memorized not only the Ten Commandments, but also quite likely the entire Torah! And yet the Law wasn't enough even for him.

So, Jesus seems to ratchet up the demands of the law and tells us to be perfect; Paul tells us we can never keep the law. Are Jesus and Paul at odds with one another? I don't think so.

Jesus points us to the vital truth that following laws for laws sake was never what God had in mind. God wants human hearts and minds that love God and neighbour because they realize that this is what an authentically human life looks like. Jesus forces us to dig around in our hearts and see the motives and the desires therein. He focuses on what causes the behaviour, not just the behaviour itself.

Paul is honest about the human condition this side of eternity. We are still sinners in need of grace. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot become what we were made to be through sheer effort and will and striving. Saying, “let’s just go back to the law” will never produce the kind of change—culturally or individually—that we desire.

And Paul talks a lot about grace. It’s mentioned at least fifteen times in Romans alone. But perhaps the most famous passage in Paul’s writings comes from Ephesians 2:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. **But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions**—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.** For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

The same Paul who lamented his inability to keep the law, who spoke of his enslavement to sin, speaks at the same time about being alive in Christ and dead to sin.

The grace of God provides the foundation from which to press on into the good works which we have been created for in Christ Jesus.

On this Third Sunday of Lent, as we continue to journey toward the cross, we are invited to look inward. As always, the call of God is personal.

We can agonize about where our culture is going, about what it has forgotten, about what the cure for our ills might be. But cultures change as people change.

Our task is to be humble, to repent of the ways in which we do not fulfill the law of Christ which is the law of love.

Earlier I said that Jesus intensified the law. But he also made things pretty simple for us. Two stone tablets were reduced to two commands.

Love God, love your neighbour.

Ten Words became one.

Love. This is the point of it all.

So our task is to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, to seek to want what God wants for our lives. It is to allow the Holy Spirit to convict us and to shape us. It is to move from following God's law as a grudging duty to recognizing that the law was given for our sake, for our benefit, for our life and our flourishing.

It is also to give thanks that in Christ, God has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He has fulfilled the demands of the law on our behalf. He has absorbed the punishment for failure to keep the law in his body. He has been raised to new life and offers the same to us. And he will come again and make real the hope of the prophet Jeremiah, who spoke of another covenant.

“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time,” declares the Lord.

“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God,
and they will be my people.

May God give us the will to be perfect, complete, lacking nothing, fulfilling the law by loving God and neighbour, just as Jesus taught.

May God help us to cling to grace, as Paul taught, recognizing that our salvation is a gift of love that we can never earn.

Amen.

