

The 10 Commandments

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, July 5, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Exodus 3:1-10](#) and [Exodus 20:1-21](#)

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There was an important birthday this past week: Mel Brooks turned 100. Among his comic masterpieces is the 1981 film, *History of the World, Part I*. That was 45 years ago, so I don't expect you to have been alive when it was in theaters. And if we did happen to see it, I don't expect you to remember it, unless you have a sense of humor similar to mine. The film is a parody of film, particularly of the epic film genre, parodying the so-called sword and sandal movies and period costume dramas. In the process, he pokes fun at human history itself. For instance, there's this scene.

<https://youtu.be/I48hr8HhDv0>

I am not the only one who wondered what Mel Brooks carved in the tablet that "Moses" dropped and shattered. Scholars of biblical Hebrew have studied the tablets and discovered that, at least according to Mel Brooks, the missing commandments, numbers 11 to 15, are¹:

- Commandment 11. "You shall not pass." I wonder if that was a nod to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.
- Commandment 12. "You shall not cause to laugh," or perhaps, "you shall not laugh." Of course, causing us to laugh is exactly what Brooks is trying to do.
- Commandment 13. "You shall not buy." Who knows why Brooks picked that.
- Commandment 14. Unfortunately, the Hebrew really doesn't make sense. It *might* be "You shall not complain." It *might* be "You shall not spend the night."
- The funniest of the bunch (in my opinion, anyway) is Commandment 15: "You shall not shatter."

It is easy to hear the 10 Commandments as a restrictive list. Don't do this; don't do that. In fact, only two of the 10 Commandments are directives to do something: keep the Sabbath holy; and honor your parents. All the others are commands to not do something.

And the two that are commands to do something aren't obviously clear when it comes to understanding what they mean. What does it mean to "keep the Sabbath holy"? What does it mean to "honor your parents," especially if your parents aren't honorable? I know when I'm coveting. I know when I'm lying. Most of the time I know when I am worshipping a false god. I get that keeping the Sabbath holy has something to do with rest, but I don't totally get how that works. And all those "thou shalt nots" – Jeez, God, you never let us do anything fun.

Take the 10 Commandments out of the book of Exodus (or a somewhat different version out of Deuteronomy) and post them on the classroom wall, and you forget that these rules are actually a gift. Exodus doesn't tell us how many generations there were

¹ Daniel O. McClellan, video "reel" posted on Facebook, <https://fb.watch/I9p0gx7G40/> (accessed 4 July 2026).

between the days when Joseph interpreted the Pharaoh's dreams and the birth of Moses. All it tells us is that time had passed and "king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1:8). Time has passed. The descendant of Jacob, generations still living in Egypt, were thriving, and the Pharaoh found that threatening. Out of that fear, Pharaoh decided to disempower them by enslaving them. The conditions of that slavery became harsher and harsher.

And along came Moses, a descendent of Jacob who was adopted into the household of Pharaoh. It seems he grew up with one foot in the politically powerful household of Pharaoh and one foot in the enslaved community of Israelites. Eventually, he saw an overseer treating an enslaved Israelite harshly and Moses killed the overseer. That's why he was living in Midian when we get to our first reading today. He had fled Egypt to escape from the Egyptian criminal justice system. He found refuge in Midian and married a local girl. They had a child. The Pharaoh who was ruling when Moses committed the murder died. I guess things had cooled off enough in Egypt that Moses could return if he wanted to.

But it looks like he didn't want to – until he had that burning bush experience, until God called him to return to Egypt and work for the release of the Israelites from slavery.

It takes another dozen chapters detailing the battle of wills between Pharaoh and Moses (and God) for the Israelites to be freed. Another a half-dozen more chapters of wandering (and complaining) in the wilderness, God decides to give the Israelites the 10 Commandments.

They have gone from being an enslaved people to being a free people, and I think that in that context, the 10 Commandments are less about rules and more about relationship. They begin with the statement, "I am the Lord your God." Except that's not really how they begin. They begin with the statement, "I am Yahweh, your God" – or maybe even, "I am Yahweh, *your* God." God is saying, "I am yours and you are mine."



There are several traditions of how to count the 10 Commandments. This slide shows the way the majority of Protestants summarize and count them. You'll notice that they fall pretty neatly into two groups. There is a set of commandments about our relationship with God, and there is a set of commandments about our relationships with each other. The first set says: We are

to have no other god but God. We are not to make idols and worship them. We are not to take God's name in vain. These three are clearly about our relationship with God. The fourth commandment talks about how God rested on the seventh day and how we are supposed to keep the Sabbath as well – so I think it is also about our relationship with God. (I'll come back to the one about honoring parents in a moment.

Like all healthy relationships, our relationship with God is to be about trust and faithfulness. Being faithful in worshiping God alone isn't as simple and straight forward as

it first seems. We live in a society that worships many idols: wealth; social status; guns; technology; having power over others; security; production.

The admonition not to take God's name in vain is not about swearing. Rather, I think God is asking us to be faithful in how we talk about God. To claim that God wants us (whoever that "us" may be) to have political power, or dominance, or privilege is to take God's name in vain. Saying, "God told me to start this war," or "God says don't love those kinds of people," are examples of taking God's name in vain.

And in a society that says our security lies in our constant work to make sure we've accumulated enough, taking Sabbath time, taking time to rest is a countercultural act. It demonstrates our trust in God and God's faithfulness to us. It says that in the divine economy there is enough for everyone, especially if no one has too much.

Commandments 6 through 10 are some basics about being in relationship with each other. Don't kill each other; don't commit adultery; don't steal from each other; don't lie about each other; don't covet what your neighbor has and you don't.

Honoring your parents does seem to be about our relationships with each other, particularly familial relationships. However, from a symmetry point of view – making sure each list as the same number of commandments – it might actually be about our relationship with God. And if it is about our relationship with God, that might give us some hint about what honoring our parents is all about. It might have more to do with allowing our parents to teach us about God than about anything else.

Whichever way we understand the 5th commandment, commandments 6 to 10 are about helping us have healthy relationships with one another. And like a healthy relationship with God, healthy relationships with one another trust and faithfulness. Let's be honest. It can be scary to be in a close relationship with someone else. People can hurt you, steal from you, lie to you. God invites us to be in relationships with one another that looked a lot like the kind of love God has for us.

The 10 Commandments are God's way of showing us what that love looks like. The 10 Commandments are not a to do or not to do list. The 10 Commandments are a way of living and being in relationship with God and one another. They are a way of helping us to be more deeply grounded in connection.

With the semiquincentennial² of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence yesterday, I found myself thinking this past week about how that document serves a similar function for the United States as the 10 Commandments did and does for the Israelites and for Jews today. I've been thinking about how the Declaration of Independence helps Americans be more deeply grounded in connection. I think what Dr. Heather Cox Richardson wrote in her "Letter from an American" on Friday is very helpful.

"On July 4, 1776, the Second Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence, declaring: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created

² As a former mathematician, I love that the word that means the 250th anniversary literally means "half of a 500th anniversary."

equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.’

“For all the fact that the congressmen got around the sticky little problem of Black and Indigenous enslavement by defining ‘men’ as ‘white men,’ and for all that it never crossed their minds that women might also have rights, the Declaration of Independence was an astonishingly radical document. In a world that had been dominated by a small class of rich men for so long that most people simply accepted that they should be forever tied to their status at birth, a group of upstart legislators on the edges of a continent declared that no man was born better than any other.

“America was founded on the radical idea that all men are created equal.

“What the founders declared self-evident was not so clear eighty-seven years later, when southern white men went to war to reshape America into a nation in which African Americans, Indigenous Americans, Chinese, Mexicans, and Irish were locked into a lower status than white Americans. In that era, equality had become a ‘proposition,’ rather than ‘self-evident.’

“‘Four score and seven years ago,’ Abraham Lincoln reminded Americans, ‘our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.’ In 1863, Lincoln explained, the Civil War was ‘testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.’

“It did, of course. The Confederate rebellion failed. The United States endured, and Americans began to expand the idea that all men are created equal to include Black men, men of color, and eventually women.”

Then Dr. Richardson reminds us, “... [W]e are now, once again, facing a rebellion against our founding principle as a few people seek to reshape America into a nation in which certain people are better than others.”³

Just as the Israelites needed the 10 Commandments to help them be community, to live as a free people, I hope we in the United States will remember our founding principle: that all of us are created equal, and that together, we can govern ourselves with liberty and justice for all.

Amen.

³ Heather Cox Richardson, “July 3, 2026,” *Letters from an American*, <https://heathercoxrichardson.substack.com/p/july-3-2026> (posted and accessed 3 July 2026).