

'Relationship advice from an old man on a mountain' (or 'Why is Jesus so surly?')

The commandments have a strange sort of currency in the modern and post-modern Western world.

They have served as a starting point for various legal systems – they offer a moral compass too, for some cultures – but the debate over their place in North American society often causes some challenges.

First and foremost – what role should God play in the civic arena? Can legislation be driven by the premise that 'I am God, you shall have no other'? – the short answer is no, but that's not a very simple thing to sort out. The list of things 'thou shalt not' do is otherwise pretty sensible: don't kill – don't steal – don't covet (which often leads to stealing.) The Law – as described in Exodus and the law of the land in this country share similar purpose: Good public order.

The problem with waving the ten commandments around as though they were some sort of magic formula is that they are not. They serve as the outline for a contract – a reminder of a covenant with God. The Hebrew people will spend a long time working out the intricacies of this contract. The book of Leviticus is full of rules for behaviour, for worship and for daily living – all developed from these ten commandments – but what these ten 'lessons/laws/commandments do represent is relationship advice.

Not insignificant is the story that tells of the people falling into anarchy while Moses is up the mountain basking in God's glory. Human behaviour tends to find common low points more often than not. The misery, fear, and self-centredness pools easily around groups of humans who are up against a challenge...and without a good leader.

Aaron is ok, but he's no Moses. The fear that the people carried with them out of Egypt erupts, and the commandments are broken before the chisel even cools in Moses' hands.

The story of the people's backsliding and God's disappointment is for another day, but it does help us unpack this particular story of Jesus' roaring through the temple.

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Jesus walks into a holy place at the most holy time of the year - the Passover was approaching, and just like Christians at Christmas (or Easter) the rituals of faithfulness are being observed

Tables are overturned – coins are scattered. People and animals are driven from this place of safety by Jesus' frustration. Not because any particular 'law' is being broken, but because the spirit of the law is being mocked.

The rituals that had been established in the service of the law no longer point directly to particular transgressions. There is supposed to be a "spiritual benefit" attached to the variety of sacrificial options that are on offer, but the rituals now support a 'worship industry' for which only certain kinds of animals (and certain kinds of coins) are acceptable. Those who trade in coin and critters are making out like bandits.

Laws are being observed, but at the expense of relationship.

The old man on the mountain – the reluctant friend of God – Moses (the law-giver) is the one who brought us the boundaries of our relationships. Commandments, we call them. Ten phrases that are meant to guide the people on a journey with God.

Love God - first and foremost. If you can't honour the four commands, the rest won't matter. If you can't entertain the notion that you are NOT the centre of the universe (therefor NOT the centre of every relationship) you are not likely to consider the needs of others.

Jesus' anger that day in the temple reflects the broken heart of God. The relationship has become twisted. Our greed - our desire to be known and to be important - this is what keeps God on the perimeter. There is a way to change that - Jesus later spends some time summarizing these rules for relationship: Love God...love your neighbour. Simple. Direct. Putting things in perspective. But to get there, Jesus first tries to undo all that we have built into our public faithfulness. Zeal for the Father's house, they call it. Heresy, say others. But for Jesus, it is a fundamental thing. Love God. Honour your fellow

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human. Get along and recognize that you are not the most important being in the universe.

We see in the world a desperate desire to be on top. To control. To gain support by instilling fear. 'Other' is suspect. Different is bad. Even in Canada - there are those who hear questions as rejection. They want the world broken into 'yes' and 'no'. There is little appetite for compromise. Consensus seems impossible.

And yet, all is not lost.

Some of us experienced a celebration yesterday. We attended the wedding reception for Drij - our church caretaker - and his wife Hanan. We were early. We were obviously different; not part of the immigrant community. Everything about us screamed 'outsiders.' And still, we were welcomed. The rituals explained. We were given first chance at the buffet (which was incredible!) We were included.

The community that offered us such warm hospitality are also heirs to Moses' ten rules for living. Our shared humanity was honoured without the unruly requirement of understanding (or observing) one another's religious rules or rituals. Jesus would not need to flip any of those tables. He would have been invited to sit.

The things that Jesus railed against - the system of nit-picking ritual that too often defines the behaviour of those who call themselves faithful - is the opposite of hospitality. That system - in Jesus' day - would soon resolve to do away with this trouble-making rabbi; The ultimate, inhospitable act. But God would, once, and for all, turn the tables on our lack of hospitality. Jesus' resurrection would show the world that a gentle, loving gesture has power - power to change minds and lives, and indeed - the world.

Relationships matter - and good relationships are the foundation of God's promised, peaceable kingdom.