

**LENT III, 2018**  
**Exodus 20.1-20**

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OK, folks. It is "Pop Quiz" time on the Ten Commandments. Let's see how we do. (No peeking in your Bibles or the bulletin for today!)

- Q: What is the first commandment?  
A: You shall have no other gods before Me.  
Q: As Luther asks in the *Small Catechism*, What is this?  
A: We are to fear, love, and trust God above everything else.  
Q: How are you doing with this?
- Q: What is the second commandment?  
A: You shall not take the Name of the Lord your God in vain.  
Q: What is this?  
A: We are to fear and love God that we do not use His Name superstitiously, to curse, swear, lie, or deceive, but call upon God in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving.  
Q: How are you doing with this?
- Q: What is the third commandment?  
A: Honor the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy.  
Q: What is this?  
A: We are to fear and love God that we do not despise God's Word and the preaching of it, but gladly hear and learn it.  
Q: How are you doing with this?
- Q: What is the fourth commandment?  
A: Honor your father and your mother.  
Q: What is this?  
A: We are to fear and love God that we do not despise or anger our parents and others in authority, but respect, obey, love, and serve them.  
Q: How are you doing with this?
- Q: What is the fifth commandment?  
A: You shall not kill.  
Q: What is this?  
A: We are to so fear and love God that we do not hurt our neighbor in any way but help him in all his physical needs.  
Q: How are you doing with this?
- Q: What is the sixth commandment?  
A: You shall not commit adultery.

- Q: What is this?  
A: We are to fear and love God that in matters of sex our words and conduct are pure and honorable, and husband and wife love and respect each other.  
Q: How are you doing with this?
- Q: What is the seventh commandment?  
A: You shall not steal.  
Q: What is this?  
A: We are to fear and love God that we do not take our neighbor's money or property, or get them in any dishonest way, but help him improve and protect his property and means of making a living.  
Q: How are you doing with this?
- Q: What is the eighth commandment?  
A: You shall not bear false witness.  
Q: What is this?  
A: We are to fear and love God that we do not betray, slander, or lie about our neighbor, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain his actions in the kindest way.  
(Let me repeat that: "and explain his actions in the kindest way.")  
Q: How are you doing with this?
- Q: What are the ninth and tenth commandments?  
A: You shall not covet.  
Q: What is this?  
A: We are to fear and love God that we do not desire to get our neighbor's possessions by scheming, or by pretending to have a right to them, but always help him keep what is his. We are to fear and love God so that we do not tempt or coax away from our neighbor their spouse or workers but encourage them to remain loyal.  
Q: How are you doing with this?

OK, how well did you score? Anyone feeling a little guilty?

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Today is the third in the series of readings on the covenants in the Old Testament. The first was God's covenant with the world in the time of Noah. Last week was the covenant God made with Abraham, through whom all the peoples of the world

would be blessed. The last Sunday of Lent speaks of the new covenant God will make with His people, prophesied by Jeremiah. All of this leads up to the Last Supper of our Lord, when Jesus establishes the new covenant by the gift of His own life to conquer sin, evil, and death.

The concept of covenant is very important in the Bible. A covenant is a pledge, a promise of faithfulness. In making a covenant God binds Himself to His people, and His people to Himself, as God says: "I will be your God and you will be my people." There are mutual promises, obligations, and responsibilities.

Today is the covenant God made with His people at Mt. Sinai, following the Exodus from Egypt. God had freed His people from slavery and led them out on a journey to the land first promised to Abraham centuries before. Now God tells Moses to say to the people:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

God made a covenant with the Jews to be His own people. God promised them His faithfulness and called them to the same. God chose His people for a special purpose: to be a kingdom of priests. What do priests do? They speak the Word of God to the world. And, they bring the prayers of the world to God.

This covenant in which God calls His people to a special mission in the world is, through Christ, now the Church's purpose, as we read in I Peter 2: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

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In making the covenant, God also gave His people His Law to live by. Why? The people were now free from slavery. But their freedom was not to do anything they pleased. That would only result

in a new slavery of a different sort. Now they had to learn how to live as a free people. They had to unlearn all the bad habits they had learned as slaves in Egypt. They were now responsible for their lives. So, they needed guidance in living. These commandments were (are) laws for free people, how to stay free.

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This is as true today as it was for the Jews after their Exodus from Egypt. Freedom does not mean doing anything you want. That is a frequent misconception in our time. Indeed, one of the contradictions of our day is the belief on one hand that I should be free to do whatever I want, but on the other that I should not be held responsible for what I do, because, as people will say, "I had no choice." You don't get to have your cake and eat it, too.

If you go back to the Founders of our nation, you will find so many of them said that our democracy can only work if the nation is a people of virtue. Self-government is not possible if people lack a moral compass. Virtue is rooted in the Ten Commandments, God's laws for how to live as a free people.

And as Luther notes in his Catechism, the commandments of God are both prohibitions and permissions. They instruct us not only in what not to do, but also what we are free to do to love God and our neighbor. Critics sometimes say Christianity is just a religion of "Don'ts": Don't do this, don't do that. But behind every "Don't" from God is His "Yes." Why does God forbid killing? Because our God says "Yes" to life. Why does God forbid stealing? Because God says "Yes" to personal property, one of the foundations of a free society. Why does God forbid false witness, not just in courts of law but more important in our daily life? Because God says "Yes" to truth, and no society can survive where lies and falsehood are allowed to dominate. What matters is not being on the right side of history, but on the right side of truth.

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"It is grace to know God's commands." wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "They free us from doubt and uncertainty to do as God wills. They free us to live as free people, to live for Christ." Amen.