

“The Backbone of Character”

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The Paraphrase Version of the Scripture Reading: Exodus 20:1-17

Introductory Piece:

Children, please gather ‘round for the Bible story. This fall, we are listening to the stories from the book of Exodus about how God freed the Hebrew people from slavery. Today the story tells us about the commandments that God gave the people to live by so that they would be known as *God’s* people.

The Story:

The people were still camping in the wilderness and learning how to trust God. They came to the high mountain in Sinai where Moses had heard God calling him to go to Egypt. It was an amazing, awe-inspiring place, and the people prepared themselves to meet the Almighty God.

These were the words that God spoke to them – commandments from God that told the people how they should behave:

1. Put God first. I am the one that brought you out of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.
2. Worship only God. You shall not make idols or worship images of anything else in my place.
3. Use God’s name with respect. Do not use it in inappropriate ways.
4. Remember God’s Sabbath. Work six days and keep the seventh day holy. On Sunday, you should rest and worship God, the Creator.
5. Respect your parents.
6. Don’t hurt others. You should not murder.
7. Be faithful in marriage. Keep your promise to stay true to one another.
8. Don’t steal.
9. Don’t lie.
10. Don’t be envious of others or grab after anything that belongs to your neighbor.

People describe these ten “words” that God spoke to the Israelites at Sinai in varied ways. Some are inclined to think of them as orders from the Supreme Ruler of the Universe, which are to be obeyed in “a no questions asked” manner. Others might describe them as a list of rules for good living in relationship with God and with others. More secular folks or agnostics might think of them as simply wise suggestions. I suppose that still others don’t know the Ten Commandments or respect them at all. But lest we feel superior, *all of us* may hold them up as ideals, while ignoring them or breaking them in real life!

This morning, I'd like to offer an additional way to describe the Ten Commandments. I want to use a metaphor from the human body. **These words from God form the backbone of character.**

(Screen share an image of the backbone.) The spine is one of the most important parts of your body. Without it you could not stand up or keep yourself upright. It gives your body structure and support, and enables you to move around freely, as well as to bend with flexibility. It is an amazing gift we take for granted!

The structure of the vertebrae is also designed to protect your spinal cord – a column of nerves that connects your brain with the rest of your body, allowing you to control your movements and your organs to function! *(Stop screen share.)*

What I am suggesting is that like the backbone, each of the Ten Commandments derive from the first commandment, which, like the spinal cord, communicates the character of God. Biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann, puts it this way: “[they are] not a series of rules, but a proclamation of *who God is and how God shall be practiced* by this community of liberated slaves.”¹

#1: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt. You shall have no other gods before me.” The character of this God that you and I worship is concerned for the well being of people, is a Liberator, who powerfully and patiently acts on the purpose of LOVE in relationship to us! This is the *only* One worthy of our attention, our allegiance, and *our* affection.

The character of our God is unlike the gods that the Egyptians worshipped. They were fickle and unfeeling, power-hungry, and exploitative. These gods, in cahoots with humans, constructed an unequal, racist, greedy, ruthless, and hard-hearted society. By contrast, “at Sinai, Israel initiates a revolutionary social experiment: [can] non-exploitative modes of social relationship be sustained in the world?”²

So like the spinal cord, protected by the backbone, we might say that **God's character is seen running through all the rest of the nine commandments.**

#2: Such a God deserves our worship and cannot be captured and domesticated in images or idols. #3: God's name should never be used for evil or hurtful ends. #4: God cares about creativity, which comes from keeping Sabbath in our week - a balance of work and rest. #5: Our God is like a good parent, so we respect our mothers and fathers. #6: God is not about violence and murder, so we should not hurt others. #7: God remains true to us in love, so we do not commit adultery. #8: The God we worship is not dishonest, so we do not steal from others, and #9: God always tells us the truth in order to set us free and so that we can trust. Therefore, you and I must not lie, deny the truth, or bear false witness against others. #10: God provides for our needs, so we need not want what others have; we can actually be content.

Through these commandments, God's character is transmitting signals to the rest of 'our central nervous system,' if you will, so that we can act with integrity, health, and strength! *(Screen share the diagram of the nerves from the backbone.)* It kinda looks like the diagram of the tablets. *(Screen share.)*

¹Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus,” *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 841.

²Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 200-226, paraphrased by Walter Brueggemann and further by me.

And when you and I connect to God's character by following these commands, the bonus is that *we then have backbone* for a time in the world when it is desperately needed! With God, we can even construct a society with this integrity too. Yay!!