

“Jesus’ Ten Commandments”

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The place to start becoming more perfect is the place you’ve been making excuses.

Matthew 5:21-48

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(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

Order or chaos?

Having heard today’s Scripture reading, would you say that Jesus is more like Kermit the Frog or Animal? Ernie or Bert? Cookie Monster or Sam the Eagle? [A 2012 article in Slate](#), an online magazine, suggests that every human is either a Chaos Muppet or an Order Muppet. Order Muppets like Kermit and Sam the Eagle prefer their personal lives and everyone else’s to be governed by rules. Chaos Muppets like Cookie Monster and Animal are constantly breaking, bending, or changing the rules.

Order Muppets like me are obviously the godly ones while Chaos Muppets, like some of you sinners, can addict us to Xanax. Last year a social scientist named Katherine Fenton, reframed this same concept in a book called *Rule Makers, Rule Breakers*. She argues that every culture – be it a nation or family or club – needs to understand itself on a spectrum between rule-making and rule-breaking, and deal with the tensions created by that continuum. That is the dance of many a church, business, and home.

The rule maker says, “Rules are for keeping, and I’ll show you how.” The rule breaker says, “I am a good person even if I break your rules.” Order Muppets are self-righteous. Chaos Muppets rationalize their sins.

The rule maker says, “Be specific about what you want and I’ll get it done” while thinking “but no more than that.” The rule breaker will surprise you by not doing what you demanded but sometimes doing something better or in a different way.

The rule maker will keep the letter of the law with a spirit of resentment toward the rule and condescension toward the rule breaker. The rule breaker will deliberately break the letter of the law, sometimes just to get your reaction but other times just because it's more fun in the moment – but often will care more about the purpose of the law, which is so that we might have life and have it more abundantly (John 15).

Neither group emerges unscathed from Matthew 5. If you think the big difference between the Old Testament and Jesus is that the Old Testament is the bad cop that's all about Law and guilt and punishment, while Jesus is your cozy buddy who keeps telling you what a good person you are, let's turn to Matthew 5:21-48.¹

Copyists and enforcers

In the everyday world of Jesus, the Order Muppets were known as scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees. They copied the Law by hand, enforced God's rules, and governed the temple. They didn't always agree with each other about what order looked like, or even which rules were most important, but they had little fondness or tolerance for people they considered Chaos Muppets – prostitutes, zealots, tax collectors, and Jesus with his followers. The truth is that within those subcultures there was also tension between chaos and order – and tax collectors would only have thought of themselves as Order Muppets. But it wasn't the order preferred or taught by the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes.

It must have seemed odd for the crowd on the mountain that day to hear Jesus say, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and (scribes), you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). Exceed their righteousness? That's like saying unless you're a better quarterback than Tom Brady you can't play in the NFL. The copyists, enforcers, and governors thought of themselves as the supreme models of righteousness, and most people bought that.

Jesus' starting point for this portion of the sermon is the Torah, the Rulebook as commonly understood and taught in his days. Don't murder, or you deserve judgment. Don't commit adultery. If you divorce, do it legally. Don't break your vows. Eye for eye and tooth for tooth. Love your neighbor. The copyists and enforcers had created an entire case law tradition around the details of applying those rules – and of creating exceptions. Don't murder, but you can hate. Don't swear on God's name, but if you vow "by heaven" or "by Jerusalem" it's not as binding.

Jesus challenged their application of these half-dozen or so biblical laws, but in doing so he stated or implied, by my count, nineteen of his own commands. I've condensed them into "Jesus' Ten Commandments." Let's look at them more closely.

¹ We are taking a short break from our series on the Apostles' Creed, which will resume during Lent. We are studying parts of the Sermon on the Mount we did not cover in a recent series on Matthew's gospel.

Jesus' Ten Commandments

1. *Control your anger and your tongue (22)*. Murder, Jesus insists, is not only about an act of violence. Thought murder is just as serious before God's judgment seat. The NIV says "...anyone who is angry," but the verb tense implies ongoing anger – harboring resentment. It's not so much about getting angry as it is allowing anger to persist uncontrolled. Word murder also gets you in deep trouble before God. The word "Raca" is an Aramaic profane insult – like calling someone "sh**head." Verbally insulting anyone, even your political enemies or your ex-spouse or ex-employer, or that driver who cut you off in traffic, with "You idiot!" or "Stupid" or an ethnic slur invites God's judgment. If you don't say it but still think it, it's still murder.
2. *Urgently prioritize reconciliation (23-26)*. Don't come to worship with your generous donation to God as a cover up for the way you treat people. Is there anyone you avoid or won't talk to? Is there anyone whom you have offended? Are you estranged from someone in your family or at work or especially before some secular court? Get your horizontal relationships worked out now, because otherwise your pretense of loving God is a hoax.
3. *Eliminate all triggers for coveting (28-30)*. Adultery is more than just a physical act between unmarried partners. Long before you jump into bed you've been coddling thoughts that led to it, and they are just as serious. But lust is not just about sex, so Jesus speaks of gouging out your eye if necessary but also cutting off your hand. I don't know of anyone who thinks Jesus is speaking literally, but he is addressing any desire for something you have no right to. Keep your sexuality within the guard rails of marriage, but also be content with who you are and what you have. Ruthlessly eliminate or avoid any trigger that will cause you to covet. Don't blame someone else who caused you to lust. Be a man and own your sin. If Jesus were addressing our age, he may say throw out your television, discard your modem, stay wide of any person or situation that leads to unhealthy desires. No exceptions. Under the law, adultery was punishable by death. Jesus says uncontrolled lust is punishable by hell. So much for the soft and cozy Jesus, right?
4. *Don't cause someone else to sin (32)*. I could be wrong but I think we often focus too much attention on the subject of divorce in vv. 31-32. That's Jesus' starting point, but his response to Deuteronomy 24 goes so much further. When a man divorces his wife (and that's how it happened in Jesus' day, not the other way around), she will *have* to remarry. Women had no social safety net. When she remarries, you're causing both her and her new husband to live in a relationship that falls short of God's standard. What you're doing is creating someone else's wrong. Don't cause sin – not adultery, not greed, not lust, not hate, not division.

5. *Don't use or need oaths (34-36)*. When Jesus says, "You have heard it said, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made,'" he probably has in view not the 9th commandment ("do not bear false witness") but the 3rd ("you shall not misuse the name of Yahweh your God"). Some had come to believe that an oath made in God's name was binding, but saying "I swear by Jerusalem" or "by heaven" was like crossing your fingers behind your back. Jesus says all that is missing the point. Don't use oaths at all. You should never need them. The positive way to say it is....
6. *Always tell the truth (37)*. If you say "Yes" and no one believes it because you didn't first swear in God's name to tell the truth, you've compromised your integrity already. Followers of Jesus should be truth-tellers, period.
7. *Do not resist an evil person (39-41)*. If it seems Jesus is getting more and more challenging, I think it's on purpose. I believe this sermon is a crescendo of higher and higher demands. The common way of interpreting "an eye for an eye" is that fair retribution or revenge is legal and appropriate if not required. Jesus says retribution is not only not required, it's beneath his followers. Instead, when evil is done to you, let it go. Justice is not your responsibility. Turn the other cheek. Let yourself be taken advantage of, even in the courts. Give twice what they sue you for. If a Roman officer compels you to carry his burden a mile, which he is allowed to do under Roman law, surprise this member of the occupying army and volunteer a second mile.
8. *Give or lend to whoever asks (42)*. All of us are asked to give or lend to those who are undeserving, who might spend the money unwisely, or may not be honest about their true needs or desires, who may need again tomorrow or the next day, and then again. Stop being the judge of whether they are deserving or responsible. Give to them if they ask. Lend to them if they need. Don't expect or demand to be repaid.
9. *Love and pray for your enemies (44-47)*. The law clearly said, "Love your neighbor," but some had interpreted that as a rationale to "hate your enemy." Jesus' commands are shocking. Love your enemies. Pray for those who are trying to harm you. Pray for them, not against them, as even the psalmists often did. Why? Because the Father distributes his blessings on good people and bad. If you only show love to those who have loved you or are capable of returning the favor, well that happens in gangs and the mafia. How are you better than they are? Even pagans are kind to those who are kind to them. Treat every person as if she or he were your best friend.
10. *Be as perfect as God is (48)*. If we treat Jesus' ten commandments like Jews of Jesus' day treated the original Ten, and that's what many of us do, we have missed the whole point. If we start comparing Scripture with Scripture to come up with a checklist for when divorce and remarriage are permissible, or when we should give or lend money, we're off base. Then the question becomes, in essence, what can I

get by with? What's the limit of my righteousness? How hard do I have to try, and for how long? Just in case you missed the point, the overall conclusion of Jesus' Ten Commandments is that the standard is God. In your thoughts, your words, and your actions, be as perfect as God is. You've never changed enough until you're as good as God.

Never give up

It seems to me our first response to this part of the Sermon on the Mount is either to give up or to become defensive. Most often Christians read it and say of much of it, "He didn't really mean that. Maybe he meant it for someone else, but if he were addressing my situation he'd say, 'Except for you.' This has to be hyperbole, exaggeration. Even Jesus' own teaching offers a contrast to these demands. They are absolutely impossible." I hate to disappoint you, but I'm not giving you that pass.

From Jesus' perspective, neither Kermit the Frog nor Cookie Monster has it exactly right, but they're both on to something. God's rules are neither meant to be kept nor broken. Jesus said he came to *fulfill* the Law (Matthew 5:19), to complete it. The Law isn't going anywhere – not the Old Testament Law nor God's Moral law, written into hearts universally until the end of the age. There is right or wrong. But if you obsess on either keeping or violating laws, you will miss by a mile what it means to fulfill God's law. Don't turn Jesus' Ten Commandments into an update of the original Ten, thinking that if you keep every detail of what he said you'll be good with God

Still, the question remains, "Why?" Why did Jesus in this passage set the bar at an impossible height? We don't have to guess at why, because Jesus tells us in these same verses.

First, stop comparing. Never think of yourself as better, whether you are a rule maker, rule breaker, or somewhere in between.

Tim Keller tells about a woman who spoke at a Christian camp and changed his life. She said, "If the distance between the earth and the sun, 92 million miles was reduced to the thickness of a piece of paper, then the distance between the earth and the nearest star would be a stack of paper 70 feet high. (That's 12 feet higher than our sanctuary ceiling.) And the diameter of the galaxy would be a stack of paper 310 miles high.... (And) the galaxy is nothing but a speck of dust, virtually, in the whole universe."

Keller uses that illustration in reference to the greatness and power of God. I want to say that all the moral differences among us as humans are as wide as a sheet of paper in comparison with the perfection of God. How silly that we should see others as less good than we are. Take a moment today and let the Holy Spirit apply that principle to someone in your life right now that you have cut off. Where have you created barriers and distance because you're so sure that person is so much worse than you?

Second, bask in grace. When Jesus says that your Father in heaven “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous,” he’s pointing to how God treats us. “He does not treat us as our sins deserve,” as Psalm 103:10 says.

Make that God’s personal word to you. Maybe your first thought was that when God sends his rain on the good, that was you. Perhaps now we realize we are all among the “evil” who deserve hell. But the rain still falls on us, and the sun still shines for us. And later this will become even clearer through Jesus’ life and death and resurrection and the Gospel preached by Paul and others. Jesus is giving a glimpse. Maybe what you need most today is the refreshing reminder of what it was like this past Friday when after what seemed like weeks of rain you stepped out of your house to a Carolina blue sky and basked in light and warmth. That’s God’s reminder of how much he loves you.

Finally, never stop striving. With the humility of your own sin blanketed by the security of grace, never, ever stop pursuing perfection.

The Heidelberg Catechism says it this way in Question 115: “Since no one in this life can obey the Ten Commandments perfectly, why does God want them preached so pointedly? A. First, so that the longer we live the more we may come to know our sinfulness and the more eagerly look to Christ for forgiveness of sins and righteousness. Second, so that we may never stop striving, and never stop praying to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, to be renewed more and more after God’s image, until after this life we reach our goal: perfection.”

But won’t that make you insane? Isn’t it ridiculous to keep trying for a perfection you will never attain? I can almost guarantee that everyone here has some area of life in which you’re striving for a perfection you realize is impossible. Maybe it’s being the best financial planner you can be, or having the cleanest house, or being the best spouse or parent, or getting in the finest physical condition possible.

Isn’t it good enough to strive for perfection in one area? Well, no. There’s nothing that doesn’t matter to God – no thought, no word, no action. But won’t it drive you crazy to be striving for perfection in every area of life all at once?

Who said you have to do *that*? Just take the next step toward perfection. In what area? The place where you’ve been making excuses and exceptions. Today, undoubtedly, the Holy Spirit has brought to mind one particular area in which God has been nudging you – or maybe battering you. The good news is when you start dealing with that one, you will find that the same heavenly Father who blankets you with grace is ready by his Spirit to partner with you in your striving to be more like him. Don’t do it in your own strength and resolve. Admit you are powerless and need help, and let him help you through the body of Christ, through others who are strong in that area.

Just don’t give up. Don’t ever, ever stop striving to be as perfect as God. Amen.