

# Recovering Our Moral Center

Good news! You and I have been made whole through Christ Jesus. The work of getting right with God is finished. Nothing you do can improve your standing with God. You're faith in Jesus puts you right with God. That's the joy and relief and wonder of the Gospel!

But there ARE some things you can do to improve your *neighbor's* life. God lays those things out in our Scripture text for this morning. I call them God's Ten Best Ways to Live. The 'Ten Words' as they are know in Judaism, are the ideals of right human conduct. By definition this make them the basic code for human morality.

Now notice, God gives us this moral code, not so I can make me a better me, or so that you can make you a better you. The Ten Commandments aren't about spirituality at all; they are about ethics. These are the ten best ways for me to live *so that my neighbor has the best life possible*. Keeping the commandments is about giving your neighbor an experience of God's love.

Using the Jewish way of counting the Commandments, the first three are about maintaining our relationship with God. God gave these particular commandments in order to give a previously enslaved people back their identity. They are God's free people. My living as God's person, makes my neighbor's life better.

Helping my neighbor experience God's love starts with me keeping my own relationship with God healthy and intact.

Because we can't really grow less of what we don't want, we can only grow more of what we DO want, I like to reframe the Ten Phrases affirmatively, like this:

1. I am the Lord your God	God first!
2. No other Gods (and no graven images)	Only God!
3. Do not misuse God's name	Respect God

One day...

<sup>16</sup> *Then [a rich young man (MT) or a rich man (MK) or a rich ruler (LK) - someone came to him and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" <sup>17</sup> ... If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments."*

<sup>18</sup> *[The one who came up to Jesus] said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; <sup>19</sup> Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

<sup>20</sup> *The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?"*

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<sup>21</sup> *Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."*

<sup>22</sup> *When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*<sup>1</sup>

The one who sought Jesus out had a god at least as important as the Lord - his possessions! And all the law-keeping in the world meant nothing until God came first, only God was his priority, and he respected God enough to live in ways that reflected the One he claimed to worship.

The test for keeping the first two of the 'ten phrases' is straightforward: *Does God get the leftovers or is God the getting best you have to offer?* More practically put, around what do you arrange your schedule? your kid's schedule?

The test for keeping the third commandment is how closely your language aligns with the image and character of God.

God's command to keep the Sabbath (#4 in the list of God's Ten Best Ways to Live) was interpreted in Jesus' day with long lists of the things one was not supposed to be doing because it wasn't restful. In Genesis God's resting wasn't so much about God needing a break or running out of energy, as it was about God taking time to enjoy and contemplate what had been imagined, made real, what goals had been achieved. God didn't retire on the Sabbath. God paused. And the writer of Genesis implies that God took up God's work again on the 8th day.

In Exodus 20, Sabbath begins as a time for enjoying God, the person of God, the Words of God, the works of God. ENJOY GOD! Take time to recover what gets lost when sin enters human experience. Humanity's responsibility to tend creation turned into burdensome toil with the arrival of sin. Sabbath was a time for renewal and appreciation, a time to experience pre-sin conditions.

As God's Law expanded Sabbath also became a time to care for the earth by resting the land every 7 years. And every 50 years to rest from the burdens of economic inequity as all debts were cancelled, lands were returned to their original owners, and a whole year of jubilee - a whole Sabbatical year for enjoying God - unfolded.

In Deuteronomy 5 God's Big Ten appear a second time in an interpretive context; the motive for keeping the Sabbath in Deuteronomy is based on Israel's experience of rescue from bondage: *"Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought*

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). (Mt 19:16–22). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

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*you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.” (Deuteronomy 5:15).*

While Exodus emphasizes Sabbath as blessing, Deuteronomy emphasizes Sabbath as an institution of justice -- the first fair labor law. With that interpretive step, God's Commandments take a decided turn from teaching a free people what it means to be God's people and how to relate to God, to teaching those same free people how to use their freedom in ways that benefit their neighbors.

Just because I am not harming my neighbors, does not necessarily mean I am benefitting them. There is a big difference between making sure I don't do wrong and giving myself passionately to doing what is right.

Jesus knew that difference when he told his followers:

*<sup>21</sup> “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ <sup>22</sup> But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.”<sup>2</sup>*

For Jesus, Thou shalt not murder was not just about not killing or taking the physical life of someone else, it was also about preserving a person's spirit and dignity! It wasn't enough not to murder; Jesus saw that commandment as being about respecting the life of someone else.

And so it went with the other commandments. Thou shalt not commit adultery wasn't really kept as long as one thought about someone else lustfully. For Jesus it was about keeping one's covenants and commitments in mind and spirit as well as in bed.

With Jesus' approach to the Ten Phrases in mind, what if, instead of devoting ourselves to not behaving badly, or to keeping the letter of the Law, or to using our faith to make ourselves better (read feeling good about how good we are), we devoted ourselves to:

5. Caring for the vulnerable (honor your parents)
6. Value life (thou shalt not kill)
7. Keeping our commitments and covenants (thou shalt not commit adultery)
8. Respect the property of others (thou shalt not steal)

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<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). (Mt 5:21–22). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

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9. Speaking truthfully in love (thou shalt not bearing false witness)

10. Being content (thou shalt not covet)

According to Jesus there was no way to live into God's moral code apart from the relationships we share with others. His religious experience was not all about him; Jesus's spirituality was all about the people around him.

Reading the Ten Phrases this way sets us up for a whole new way of understanding the history of God's people, particularly the violence with which so many of us struggle.

When God's moral principles are violated, the victims of the ones who violate them suffer indignity, injustice, and violence. And ones violating them lose a part of their humanity.

The people of God have an obligation to call into account ones violating God's Ten Best Ways to Live, and a duty as the Body of Christ in the world to come to the aid of the victims of such violations.

If...

- **Advocating for sanctuary for refugees,**
- **Protecting immigrants from Government harassment,**
- **Marching for full equality for women,**
- **Demanding affordable healthcare for every human being,**
- **Affirming religious freedom for *all* traditions,**
- **Fighting the degradation of our planet**
- **Defending our Press so that it remains free,**
- **[Demanding gun control legislation that has a real chance of reducing the number of violent death in our neighbors' families,]**
- **Standing with LGBTQ students,**
- **Championing [needs of] the vulnerable, the sick, the poor—<sup>3</sup>**

sound like nothing more than planks in one party's political agenda to us, we aren't listening very well, and we need to take another look at God's moral code. For every one of these social challenges has at least one of God's Ten Best Ways to Live attached to it.

When pastors preach God's basic Moral Code and Jesus's interpretation of it through the lens of the great challenges of our day, we need to applaud them for holding one's who wield power accountable to Divine ethics, not accuse them of bringing politics into church. For that is what Jesus's entire ministry was about: shedding the light of faith on the structures and abuses of power, standing up for marginalized ones, calling for and organizing systemic change. Every

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<sup>3</sup> <https://johnpavlovitz.com/2017/02/19/when-did-compassion-become-partisan-politics/>

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time a biblical writer penned the word 'Lord' that ink dried into an indelible statement of political resistance.

If only we *were* right in our thinking that faith is only about personal salvation and spiritual growth, and that church is a place to abstain from the political questions of our day. But those models are flawed. They impose a false dualism on the human experience. Those models are but constructs born out of the civil religion movement of the nineteenth century. The Jesus we know from the Gospels was crucified because he righteously challenged the political as well as the religious sensibilities of his day. The earliest Christians were persecuted and martyred because every utterance of Lord from their lips was an act of political resistance. And this they did because they had found their moral center:

- God first.
- Only God.
- Respect God.
- Enjoy God.
- Care for the vulnerable.
- Value life.
- Keep your commitments and covenants.
- Respect others' property.
- Speak the truth.
- Be content.

The Church in America has nearly lost her moral voice. Fears of various kinds have pushed her into irrelevancy.

The great need of our time is for the Church to find her religious voice, her spiritual vocabulary, so that we might once again boldly claim our moral authority.