

GOD'S TOP TEN

I am a morning person. Most days I'm up by 6:00 and out the door for a walk, so generally I don't stay up much past 11:00 PM. But on those rare occasions when I do, if I happen to be watching television, I try to catch David Letterman. I like Jay Leno, his monologue is always pretty funny. But I really love Letterman's zaniness. Even his disastrous turn as host of the Academy Awards a few years ago didn't sour me to his brand of humor.

Like many other folks, I especially enjoy his Top Ten lists. Often they are very topical and rather political. He spares no one—recently his Top Ten list was called “Top Ten George W Bush New Year’s Resolutions.” Number six on the list was “Stop using Situation Room monitors to play Xbox 360 [video games.” Back in the nineties, Bill Clinton was frequently the subject of the Top Ten lists. One list in 1997 was called “Top Ten Things that Would Be Different if Clinton Had Been Our First President.” Number ten on that list was “Instead of ‘President’ the highest office in the land is called ‘Burger King.’”

One of my all-time favorite Letterman lists was called “Top Ten Signs Your Neighbor is a Vampire.” Sign number ten, “Once a week a Domino’s guy enters [your neighbor’s house] and doesn’t leave.” Number eight, “[Your neighbor] always seems sad when you wear a turtleneck.” And reason number six, “He’s lived in that house since 1783.”

Just this week the NCAA Basketball Tournament, involving sixty-five teams from around the country, just got started. March Madness it’s often called. Last year at this time the tournament was the focus of Letterman’s list.

“Top Ten Signs Your Team Won’t Be Winning the NCAA Basketball Championship:

10. Your top player scores 20 points a game, but most of them are in the wrong basket.
9. You spend most of the game guarding the mascot.
8. Some of the players joined the team for the free headbands.
7. Instead of drinking Gatorade, team uses timeouts to moisturize.
6. Typical motivational speech: ‘Let’s hurry this up so we can shower.’
5. The scorekeeper doesn’t bother to turn on your half of the scoreboard.
4. In your region: North Carolina, Duke and the ’98 Chicago Bulls.
3. You lead the conference in nosebleeds.
2. Team refuses to attend game because they don’t want to miss the George Lopez Show.
1. Players ask themselves, ‘What would the Knicks do?’”

(Top Ten Archive, Late Show with David Letterman, www.cbs.com)

Letterman's Top Ten lists really are a lot of fun. And many of them are simply absurd and meant to amuse and entertain us. But the list we might call God's Top Ten, the Ten Commandments, is anything but absurd—and most certainly intended to be taken with great seriousness. It is not offered up for our entertainment; rather it is offered up for our edification. It is intended to provide a set of guidelines for life.

A close examination of the Ten Commandments reveals the fact that they are focused around to foundational concerns: how to relate to God and how to relate to your neighbor. The first four commandments lay out key principles relative to our walk with God. The last six instruct us in right ways to live in community. While they are thousands of years old, they are as pertinent today as they were when they were first handed down.

Journalist Ted Koppel mentioned them in a speech he once delivered: "In its purest form," he said, "truth is not a polite tap on the shoulder. Truth is a howling reproach. What Moses brought down from Mount Sinai were not ten suggestions."

They are, indeed, commandments—not suggestions. And while Christians believe that God's love for us is not dependent on our keeping the law, while we believe we are saved by grace, not by our good deeds, we are still bound to obey God's commandments. Jesus said "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot will pass from the law." (Matthew 5:17-18)

In many ways our world is far more complex than that ancient world of Moses and the Israelites. As one wag has noted, "If Moses had come down from Mount Sinai today the tablets he would be carrying would be aspirin." (Joe Ford, *Sourcebook of Wit and Wisdom*, 158) That said, however, the foundational truths offered up in this ancient list of dos and don'ts still ring true—and they still call us to task.

No doubt you have heard of Judge Roy Moore who had the Ten Commandments chiseled onto a stone monument and erected in his Alabama courthouse. When in the interest of the separation of church and state, he was ordered to remove it; he put up a fight, and eventually was thrown out of office. Today he travels around the country giving speeches and displaying the monument. It weighs some 5200 pounds and requires a crane to lift it. While I wouldn't begin to question the judge's faith, I wonder if lugging around a two and a half ton stone is the best way to emphasize the importance of the Ten Commandments for modern life?

The Ten Commandments are indeed valid today, and are worthy of our respect. But they call for more than mere respect. Our task is not to memorize the Ten Commandments and then slavishly follow them to the letter.

Once in a conversation, a man told Mark Twain, “My goal in life is to go to the Holy Land, climb Mount Sinai, and recite the Ten Commandments.” To which Twain is said to have replied, “I’ve got a better idea—why don’t you just stay right where you are and keep them?”

No the task is not about memorization, it is about understanding them, interpreting them and applying them to your own life’s situation, right where you are. They don’t cover all situations, like all laws they call for expansion and amendment, but they provide a sure foundation. The Bible itself bears testimony to this reality. After all, the Torah includes over six hundred additional laws, all written to further interpret and expand the original ten!

Scholar Terence Feitheim writes: “The canon of the ten commandments is an open canon But the ten . . . we do have are an indispensable starting point for our ongoing ethical task.” (*Interpretation: Exodus*, 222)

So let’s take some time to review God’s Top Ten and think about them in our own context.

After the Israelites are reminded that it is God who has liberated them from slavery in Egypt God tells them: “You shall have no other gods before me.” (20:3) Easy enough, you’re thinking. I don’t even believe in other gods. That may indeed be true when it comes to divine beings named Zeus or Aphrodite. But gods can come in all sorts of shapes and forms. Money can be a god. Family can be a god. Fame can be a god. Whenever something takes first place in your life it becomes a god. The first commandment says God and God alone, the one who liberated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, should take first place in your life. Here’s a way to check out your priorities and also to see if there are any other gods in your life. Look at your checkbook. Look at your credit card statement. Look at your PDA or your date book. How are you using your money; how are you spending your time? Where do the things of God fit in?

The second commandment, for those ancient Israelites, grew directly out of the first: “You shall not make for yourselves graven images.” Don’t make idols. Don’t make gods out of wood or stone or metal. It was a way of reminding them that there was no way they could capture the totality of God. And neither can we. I suspect our graven images are actually words. All too often we think we can fully describe God with theological terms like omnipotent, all-powerful, or omniscient, all-knowing. And then we tend to worship our description of God, rather than be in relationship to God.

The third commandment reads: “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.” The ancient Israelites believed that even using God’s name carried great power with it. If you said, “God damn you,” to someone you ran the real risk that God would do just that. This commandment isn’t about using bad language; it is about thinking we can somehow manipulate God. And, it is about not taking God seriously enough.

I suspect that here in Fairfield County the fourth commandment is broken more frequently than all the rest combined: “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.”

Yes, this is about attending worship on a regular basis, but it is also about a whole lot more than that. It is about recognizing that you can’t go one-hundred miles an hour, twenty-four/seven. It is about recognizing that we need to take time to rest, and simply enjoy God’s love. Frankly, I don’t do this very well—and I’m not alone.

The fifth commandment reminds us of our responsibility to family: “Honor your father and mother.” One Sunday School student is said to have once said the fifth commandment is “Humor your mother and father.” And that’s a part of it, for sure. But there is more to it. The truth is we are a very mobile people. We often live hundreds and thousands of miles away from our parents. Honoring them is more difficult than ever. Yet, even at a distance, even if they are deceased, the greatest honor we can pay our parents, is all wrapped up in how we live our lives. Every once in a while I stop and ask myself, “What would Dad think of what I’m doing right now? Would my mother approve?”

The sixth commandment is the shortest: “You shall not kill.” In the original Hebrew it probably meant “you shall not murder.” But what is murder? There are a wide variety of understandings of that in our society. Is abortion murder? Is capital punishment murder? Is euthanasia murder? Is war a type of mass murder? What does it mean to say don’t kill? Is that the same as taking a life? There is much to think about when it comes to commandment number six.

The seventh commandment reads: “You shall not commit adultery.” In the ancient context, when women were considered the property of their fathers or husbands, this was a commandment designed to protect a man’s property rights. But our context has changed dramatically. Women are not considered property—they are free and independent agents. So what does it mean to not commit adultery in 2006? No sex with others if you are married? No sex at all outside of marriage? Does it have any bearing on discussions of homosexuality? Is it about more than sex? Is it also about emotional commitments? Much to consider, isn’t there?

Number eight may be the most straightforward—and the most directly applicable: “You shall not steal.” If it’s someone else’s property, you have no right to take it from them. Of course, that’s easy enough to understand when it comes to things like armed robbery and shoplifting—but what about white collar crimes like embezzlement? If you cheat on your taxes, keeping money that rightfully belongs to

Uncle Sam, are you stealing? The paper this week indicated that pharmacies in Bridgeport charge 25% for prescriptions than pharmacies in the suburbs. Is that stealing from the poor? And what about ecological concerns? When we pollute the earth, are we stealing from our children? What's the old Native American proverb: "We do not own the earth; we are borrowing from our children." There are a lot of things one can steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," proclaims number nine. Don't tell lies about your neighbor. It's not just about court appearances, it is also about gossip—especially malicious gossip.

The final commandment is the longest: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or his maidservant, or his ox or his ass, or anything else." The little boy who thought this commandment read "Thou shall not take the covers off thy neighbor's wife," may not be far from the truth. But really this commandment boils down to this: live within your means, and be happy to do so. When was the last time you said, "I wish I could have a house, a car, a spouse, a kid, like that?"

Ten Commandments. God's TOP Ten. Not quite as funny as Letterman, for sure. But then again, they aren't designed for late night viewing. In fact they aren't designed for any kind of viewing. Rather they are designed for understanding, for interpreting, for living. For in the end, Mark Twain was right. The best thing to do is keep them.

**Amen
John H. Danner**