

SUN JULY 2
9:30AM

BREAKING
T H E
LAW

“Breaking the Law”

July 2, 2023 | 5th Sunday after Pentecost

Charlie Berthoud | Matthew 5:17

It's July 4 weekend. Happy Independence Day! I love this country and I love God, but I try hard to not confuse or conflate those two things, because loving one's country and loving one's God are not the same thing.

We in the USA have a complicated relationship between religion and the government.

In recent months, some politicians once again think it's a good idea to post the Ten Commandments in schools and other government buildings. I don't.

I believe in the separation of church and state as articulated in our Constitution, and in the first amendment's establishment clause which affirms that the government shall not establish any sort of official religion.

The Cornell School of Law puts it well, on their website:

[The First Amendment's establishment] clause not only forbids the government from establishing an official religion, but also prohibits government actions that unduly favor one religion over another. It also prohibits the government from unduly preferring religion over non-religion, or non-religion over religion.

Even if we thought it was appropriate to post the Ten Commandments in school's there's also the question of which version. Did you know that the Bible doesn't say this is commandment number one, and this is commandment number, and so on?

And did you know that various strands of Judaism and Christianity have different ways of numbering the commandments?

We Presbyterians use the numbering common in many churches. But the Lutherans tend to use a different numbering. In our counting the first two commandments are in essence:

You shall have no other gods
You shall not make any idols

But the Lutherans consider these two as the first commandment.

In our counting the tenth commandment is verse 17 of Exodus 20

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, male or female slave, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

But the Lutherans make that into two commandments. You shall not covet your neighbor’s house is number nine. And You shall not covet your neighbor’s spouse, servants, animals, etc. is number ten. Interesting. The Lutherans might be on to something. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ten_Commandments

I think it’s fine to teach the Ten Commandments as part of a literature, history, or world religions class, but schools and elected officials should not be endorsing them as religious principles. We are not a Christian nation. We are not a Judeo-Christian nation. We are not a theocracy.

Sadly there are many who claim the name Christian who are trying to force their understanding of religion on the rest of us. The hypocrisy is often stunning.



Several years ago, comedian Stephen Colbert interviewed a member of Congress who had introduced a bill to post the Ten Commandments in schools. Near the end of the interview, Colbert asked the congressperson to name the ten.

He came up with three.

If people of faith want to learn the commandments, they should do so in church and at home.

Many years ago when boys were under the age of ten, one of them disagreed with something that my wife and I had said so he replied, “You’re not the boss of me, God is the boss.”

I was grateful for his theological thinking, but then I picked up my Bible and read from Exodus 20, where it says “Honor your father and mother.”

I explained that yes God is the boss, but parents are in charge of day-to-day operations.

To help us as Christians remember those commandments and to remember who we are, we include the Ten Commandments in our liturgy on the first Sunday of every month, as we shared earlier in this service.

And the placement of those commandments is important.

In the Bible, the Ten Commandments come after God has rescued the people from slavery, not before. God did not say to Moses “If you follow these commandments, I might save you.”

No. Instead first God saves the people from Pharaoh, rescuing them from slavery and oppression, setting them off toward the Promised Land, and then giving the commandments, to guide their new life.

The commandments are not preconditions for God’s love, but rather guidance for how to respond to God’s love. In a word, this is grace.

So on first Sundays, we affirm the commandments after the prayer of confession and the proclamation of God’s love, not before. We introduce them by saying something like: As forgiven people, as loved people, how then shall we live?

Former president of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary Albert Winn understands the commandments as Ten Promises. He suggests that as we are in process of being transformed by God’s love, changed into new people, we can affirm the promise that there will come a day when we will not worship false gods, when we will not commit adultery, when we will not covet our neighbors things. (See [A Christian Primer](#))

So yes the commandments are important, but they should be taught and learned in churches, synagogues, and homes—not schools or courthouses or government buildings.

We need to be regularly asking ourselves, as forgiven people, as loved people, as God's people...

- Are we worshiping other gods?
- Are we honoring the Sabbath?
- Are we honoring our parents?
- Are we honoring our marriage vows?
- Are we coveting our neighbors' things?

We need to remember that the Ten Commandments are just ten of about 600 laws that Jesus inherited from the Old Testament.

In the sermon on the Mount, he encouraged a deeper engagement with the law, not just a literal check list mentality.

Jesus began the section on law with these strong words:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
- Matthew 5.17-20

By this standard we're all breaking the law. But I think Jesus said these challenging words to wake us up and call us into the journey of transformation, to be open to changing and growing more just, more righteous, more loving.

So Jesus goes on to say:

- The law says don't murder, but I say, don't wallow in anger, bitterness
- The law says don't commit adultery, but I say don't lust, don't objectify
- The law says love your neighbor, but I say love your enemy, be kind...

Later in the gospel Jesus is asked which commandment in the Law is the greatest, and he sums it up for us, saying love God and love neighbor as the greatest commandments.

Then the apostle Paul, the apostle who loved the law and wrote a lot about the law, summarizes it for us by saying in Galatians 6:2:

Bear one another's burdens,
and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

As Christians, we are called to live as transformed people, as people becoming more like Jesus. That change happens day by day week by week, just as drips of water change a rock, smoothing it out and reshaping it.

But the rock doesn't change if the water doesn't touch it.

We change, slowly and surely, as we recite the law, and we read our Bibles, as we say our prayers, as we sing in worship, as we share the bread and the cup.

The good news for us is that God loves us, God forgives us, God has saved us.

And God has given us guidance for the journey, words to keep us out of trouble, words to help us find a life of meaning and joy and purpose.

May we have the courage to listen, to learn, to follow, and to really live.