

“On the Flipside”

Exodus 20:12-13/Luke 10:25-37/Deuteronomy 6:4-5/Leviticus 19:18

1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

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I. Introduction

So, does this sound familiar? “Two tastes that taste great together.” It is the “tag line” of the very effective Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup commercials from many years ago. In the commercials you would see someone eating a chocolate bar and someone else eating peanut butter. And then somehow they would stumble into each other. In the process the chocolate would be break off in the peanut butter, and the peanut butter would get on the chocolate. Each of the people would then reluctantly take a bite of the new combination and discover it was fantastic. Reese’s sold a lot of peanut butter cups with that ad. In fact, you still see an updated version every once in a while.

Chocolate and peanut butter; I was already a fan. I didn’t need the commercial to convince me. In fact, I find chocolate and peanut butter especially good when combined with a third flavor, vanilla ice cream. Now that is really something.

“Two tastes that taste great together.” In a strange way the 10 Commandments are like that. Historically the Commandments have been separated into two different tablets. Tablet one is about the commandments to do with God. Those are commandments 1-4. The second tablet is about community. Those are commandments 5-10. The Bible itself notes the 10 Commandments were on two stone tablets. And all the old paintings show Moses holding two stone tablets. So those are the “two tastes.”

But they also “taste great together.” It was never intended for anyone to pick and choose one tablet over the other. We can’t say “Well, I’m good with the first tablet, commandments 1-4. But the second tablet, 5-10, dealing with people...well that’s just too hard. I’ll take a pass on that.” That’s not an option. Rather both tablets, all 10 Commandments, are a good gift from a good God that goes together.

So today we start the “second tablet;” commands 5 and 6. They begin the second tablet addressing how to live together as God’s people. They are a different “taste” than the first tablet. But they are intended to “taste great together.” It’s the way of God’s people.

II. Brief Biblical Exegesis

“Honor your father and mother.” The 5th Commandment is stated positively like “Remember the Sabbath Day.” The other 8 Commandments are stated negatively; what you cannot do. It’s like the difference in road signs; one says, “Go This Way,” and the other says “Stop. Do Not Enter.”

In family and community no relationship is more basic than between children and parents. And at no age do people cease to be children of their parents. The responsibilities and relationships shift, but it is still fundamental to what it is to be human.

If this commandment were written today, it would certainly take into account child abuse and neglect. And that does impact today, and back then, what “honoring” means. No one should subject herself or himself to abuse in a family. And so, where there is abuse, “honoring” can mean a healthy distance and boundaries, and perhaps exploring the possibility of change, forgiveness, and healing. But “honoring” parents never is to put anyone in an abusive situation.

In more healthy family relationships, “honoring” is a more general and open-ended commandment. The idea is to do what’s positively needed: respect, have regard, caring for, showing affection, helping out, expressing appreciation, patience.

It’s a commandment more directed at adult children “honoring” aging parents with care, than young children “honoring” their parents with obedience. Of course, in ancient Israel there were no Social Security or Medicare or retirement accounts. So as aging parents’ physical and mental capacities begin to diminish, “honoring” looks like doing what’s needed in love. But even in modern societies where people are living longer and there are senior care facilities and care providers, there is diminishment of physical and mental capacities so “honoring” as care is still needed: balancing a checkbook, stopping by to visit, doing a little grocery shopping.

Often the “moral measure” of a religion and culture is “what type of care the weaker and powerless receive?” “Honoring your father and mother” puts the first level of that care within families. Life goes better in a community and family where aging parents are cared for by children where and when it’s possible.

“You shall not kill.” This commandment has “the spotlight shined on it” over the issues of war, capital punishment, suicide, euthanasia, self-defense, and abortion. So, the question comes up; “What does ‘do not kill’ really mean?”

The Hebrew word for kill in this command is “ra/tsach.” The word itself is used rather infrequently in the Old Testament. Other Hebrew words for “kill or murder” are more common. “Ra/tsach” itself appears to have an evolving meaning in its use. Often it is translated as “murder.” And sometimes that is right, and in other uses not so much.

In the older texts “ra/tsach” appears to refer to “blood vengeance or retaliation.” It’s about taking the law into your own hands and taking a life to get even. In ancient tribal communities bound to a strict honor system, “ra/tsach” would have been practiced. It still is in

some places. The commandment would prohibit that kind of killing and the escalation in violence it brings.

However, in newer texts the meaning of “ra/tsach” appears to have changed. In later uses the term refers more to killing due to jealousy, hatred, and deceit. Motivation matters. It would be more in line with our understanding of 1st Degree Murder.

So, in its earliest form, “Do not kill” prohibits blood vengeance. Not only does it protect life, but it also protects the community from sliding into chaos. In the later usages the motivation behind the killing matters. Killing due to hatred or malice or anger or jealousy or for personal gain is prohibited. Communities cannot function where that is allowed. This usage fits more with our definition of murder.

However, there’s more. The bigger theological understanding is that all life belongs to God. And that anytime a life is taken someone is acting in God’s place. Therefore, some deep questions should be asked about vengefulness and human arrogance. The divine intention is for life. And human beings are not God. Therefore, a person and human community need to be thoughtful and careful about taking human life. And for that reason, maybe the more general “kill” is the better translation of “ra/tsach,” as it humbly invites further conversation and discernment, rather than just freely “checking off a box.”

III. Brief Theological Discussion

Growing up for me in my earliest childhood meant music came on the radio or on records. So, musicians would record music on records, and those records would be sent to radio stations to be played “on the air.” And often in their production “Side A” of the record would have the song that the producer and musician thought had the best chance of being a hit. However, you had the whole other side of the record, so another song would be put on that side. The other side was “Side B.”

So, DJs would get the records and listen to them to put their radio programs together. And they always listened to “Side A.” But being curious, they also often listened to “Side B.” And if they liked the song on “Side B” they would play that on the radio also. And in the strange ways of life and music, sometimes it was “Side B,” the opposite side, that became the bigger hit. Some “Side B” hits include: “We Will Rock You” by Queen, “Revolution” by the Beatles, “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” by the Stones, “Black Water” by the Doobie Brothers, “Hound Dog” by Elvis Presley, and “Unchained Melody” by The Righteous Brothers.

“Side B” and playing “Side B” also became known as “the flip side.” It was the surprise opposite side that was as good, or sometimes better, than “Side A.”

I think the 10 Commandments have a “flip side.” We see a little of it in the Commandments themselves. Most biblical scholars think that all ten started out as negative, or as warnings: “Do not do this...” Do not worship other gods.” “Do not make idols.” “Do not kill.”

But in their usage the ancient Jews began to find “the flipside,” or a positive expression, or a “Do this” more helpful. So, 2 of the Commands are expressed as “the flipside;” “Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy,” and “Honor your father and mother.” Perhaps those original commandments may have said something like; “Do not forget the Sabbath” and “Do not dishonor your mother and father.” But in practice the “flip side” was more directive in our how live together as God’s people.

So, I think we might have “the flip side” of all 10 Commandments going on in the well-known text from Luke we already heard. Listen to part of it again and see if you can hear “the flip side” of the Commandments.

Read Luke 10:25-28.

Did you hear “the flip side” of the 10 Commandments? The summary of the law has two parts: love God with your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. “Love God” fits the 1st tablet of the 10 Commandments, or commandments 1 to 4. And “Love your neighbor” fits the 2nd tablet, or commandments 5-10. Both are just “the flip side.”

And as we see in Jesus’ parable of The Good Samaritan, “the flip side” makes all the difference. It’s not enough to say, “well I didn’t kill” and then pass by on the other side. Rather “the flip side” of “do not kill” is to help, to care, to be a neighbor, to love, to be the Samaritan. That’s what Jesus wanted people to see. And that’s what Jesus wanted his followers to do.

Yes, the 10 Commandments are directives for Jews and Christians. That’s “Side A.” But even more faithful is doing “the flip side.” Loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Both sides “play” well in life and faith.