

“Living Beside the Road”

Exodus 20:1-6/Mark 12:13-17

1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

February 22, 2026/1st Sunday of Lent

by Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Introduction

So, what do you think about putting the Ten Commandments up in court houses? It’s a big deal again now. It has been for a while. There are all sorts of arguments for and against it. In fact, it went to the Supreme Court last year and they ruled against it. On the one hand the United States legal system is based on common law and constitutional law, not the Ten Commandments. But on the other hand, the Commandments influenced the development of laws on theft, murder, and respect for authority. On the one hand the First Amendment of the US Constitution prohibits the government from making any law “respecting the establishment of religion.” But on the other hand, the Ten Commandments and religion encourage a necessary moral base that supports the US legal system. In fact, that’s a significant societal problem today; with the decline of religion we are losing that important moral base. So, what do you think?

Very honestly, I don’t think about it much. What I’m more interested in is do you know the Ten Commandments? Do you study the Ten Commandments? Do you live the Ten Commandments? Are they a part of your life? Do they shape your soul? Just putting them up on a wall doesn’t really mean much to me. It’s sort of like Christian bumper stickers or a bunch of Bibles on your book shelf or Christian jewelry; if you are not trying to live the Christian faith, who cares? Or worse, it can fool you into believing that is Christian faith. I think Jesus would agree with that.

So today is the 1st Sunday of Lent. And during Lent, Bill and I will be preaching a sermon series on the Ten Commandments. We’re going to try to take them out of the headlines and talk a little about what they mean for followers of Jesus in the 21st C. And I believe that matters a lot.

II. Text and Brief Exegesis

In the first reading from Mark 12, Jesus is in Jerusalem in the Temple arguing with the high-powered religious leaders. They would like to arrest him so to silence him. And in a few days they will when Judas betrays him. But they can’t yet because of Jesus’ popularity with the crowd gathered there.

So, what the religious leaders do is to try to turn the crowd against Jesus. Without the support of the people, he could be arrested. In the story the Pharisees and the Herodians raise a

very hotly debated question with Jesus: Should Jews pay the high taxes to the Romans? They think they have Jesus in a “tight spot.” If he says “Yes,” he will lose favor with the crowd and be seen as supporting the hated Romans. But if he says “No,” he can be reported to the Roman authorities as a rebel disturbing the “Pax Romana” (Roman Peace). The Romans will then arrest him. So, the religious authorities think they have Jesus publicly in a hard place.

But Jesus’ response is greater than they imagined: “Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” What Jesus is saying is that as part of the Roman Empire and part of civil society they do their part and pay taxes. They live in the world around them. Jesus is not like many “would be Messiahs” who tried to lead a revolt against Rome. So, pay the taxes. BUT, you also “give to God’s what is God’s.” So, what’s God’s? In short, everything. Elsewhere Jesus will say, “Love God with your heart, mind, strength, and soul and love your neighbor as yourself.” That’s everything. Pay taxes because you live in the Roman Empire. But you live in the Roman Empire as the people of God. That’s your identity. That’s who you are. That’s giving God what’s God’s.

So how did Jesus come up with this fantastic answer that continues to direct the people of God living in different societies? I think one of the sources of his answer came from the Ten Commandments. Specifically, the first two Commandments.

Hear are the first two Commandments from Exodus 20. **(Read Exodus 20:1-6)**

The Ten Commandments begin with salvation, mercy, grace: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt and slavery.” That’s the exodus. That’s salvation. They are the people of God only because God acted first to save them. So, God’s grace comes first. They don’t do the Commandments to earn salvation. They already have been saved. Rather they are people and a community that does the Commandments out of gratitude. And out of trusting God’s way in the world. And as a way to live into the salvation they have received. So, it’s important to remember God’s grace comes first.

And then we get the first two Commandments: No other gods, and no idols. Ancient Israel was to be strictly monotheistic; one God. All the pagan religions around them had different gods and different temples. And at times ancient Israel fell into that. But that was not how they were supposed to be. They were to have only one God; the one God who saves, and creates, and cares, and defends, and answers prayers. No other gods. One God. And this one, holy God is the one to worship, serve, obey, and love. One God, and only God. All the other commandments are based on this.

The second commandment is no idols. Certainly, the ancient foreign nations and pagan religions had all types of idols of their gods. And with those images the believers tried to limit and control their gods. But not Israel. Their God is named “YHWH;” which means “I will be who I will be,” or “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14). Their God is free and mysterious and beyond

all human comprehension and control. Their God will be God, and not controlled or manipulated by anyone.

And so, I think these two commandments shaped Jesus' answer about paying Roman taxes in a real and powerful way. As part of the civil community and Roman Empire they pay the taxes. But they pay the taxes as the people of God. There is only one God. And it isn't the Roman Emperor, or Rome's power, or the Roman army, or the power of the religious leaders in Jerusalem. There is only one God, and it is this one God they are to worship, serve, and love. Not Rome.

And they are not to bow to any idol. No bowing to the Roman Emperor. No bowing to the symbols of Roman power and Roman religion. No bowing to the denarius, or any money that Jesus held in his hand. No bowing to priests or the Temple or the empty promise of political and religious revolution. No idols which we make into gods.

So, pay the tax and live as the people of the one God in this corner of the Roman Empire. The commandments shaped Jesus' response to a question about faithful living.

III. Theological Reflections

There is a simple but deeply true story in the *Celtic Daily Prayer* book I have. It begins with a quote from Homer:

“He was a friend to all people,

and he lived in a

house by the side of the road. (It sounds a little like a Japanese haiku.)

The story goes on to say that in the 7th C a Celtic monk by the name of Cronan moved his small monastery from a remote location to a place along the public roadway. He moved it because people struggled to find it. But along a public roadway, strangers and the poor and needy could easily find it. And such a move led to the founding of Christian settlements along the main roads of Ireland, and the spreading of the Christian faith. And Cronan became Saint Cronan.

It's a simple but deep truth: “He was a friend to all people, and he lived in a house by the side of the road.” I think Jesus is saying something similar; simple but deeply true. We don't live our faith in some remote, quiet, private Christian space. Rather we live it in the busy, public spaces and roads of life. And so, the Ten Commandments that shape a way of life are lived out along the public roadway where taxes are paid. Pay the taxes. Money has the image of the Emperor. But you bear the “image of God” (Genesis 1:27), so give God everything and live as God's people along the side of the road.

“No other gods, and no idols.” These commandments have always mattered to Jews and Christians. They matter no less today. Just like “paying taxes to Caesar” we are to live our lives as responsible people of the United States of America. And so, we vote and pay taxes and serve

in the military and serve in public offices and obey laws. But the United States is not God. And the President is not God. And the whole American political machine is not God. Nor is money or fame or power.

And so, as we live our lives as responsible American citizens, we don't privatize or reduce our Christian faith. Rather we live with truth and care and kindness and respect for authority. And we expect our elected leaders to do the same. We don't call the anarchists who overran the Capital on January 6, 2021, patriots. We don't pervert the justice system to serve personal and political interests. We don't scapegoat the powerless who are different than ourselves. And very honestly, we need to be less concerned with getting the Ten Commandments on courthouse walls, and more concerned with the Ten Commandments on the walls of our hearts.

No other gods and no idols, so live your faith along the side of the road.