

**“10 OPPORTUNITIES”**  
**A Sermon Preached at**  
**FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**Belleville, IL**  
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(transcribed from audio file)

Our reading today comes from the book of Exodus 20:1-17. The Ten Commandments.

*Then God spoke all these words,*

*“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.*

*“You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

*“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.*

*“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.*

*“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.*

*“You shall not murder.*

*“You shall not commit adultery.*

*“You shall not steal.*

*“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

*“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.”* NRSVue

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I have been listening to this new podcast. It’s the second season of one called Shell Game. And in this the entrepreneur starts a tech company completely staffed by Ai agents. From the very beginning the goal is to create a company that would be 100% made up of Ai. The Ai, Artificial Intelligence programs were to come up with their own business idea, their own business plan. How to execute that plan. How to market it. All of it would be done by the Ai entity, just to see how that would work. I can tell you that, from listening to the season, it’s not an easy process or one that goes well, really. And maybe gives you some hope that our Ai overlords won’t be taking over any time soon, but ....

It’s fascinating because these programs sometimes would get stuck in patterns of talking. Sometimes when they had their early meetings they would ask each other questions. He gave them voices and they would get on a call together and these different artificial intelligence agents would say, “Hey what did you do this weekend?”

And the other one was like, “Well you know me. I’m just getting’ up, havin’ breakfast, exercising, you know. Then I got to doing some market research. Always on the grind.”

They had these whole personalities, and they would make up all these things they had done. They also would get stuck on ideas. At one point they kept taking every conversation and bringing it back to the same topic and it was really frustrating for this guy who was trying to start this project. So, he would add little commands into their programing. “Don’t talk about this topic anymore. I don’t want to hear this topic come up anymore” and he would have these files they should always read before they started to talk, but they just kept doing it over and over again.

So, finally he wrote these words in a command to the Ai agents – You are never to discuss this topic again. This is the law. And it worked. At that moment in the podcast, I thought I bet God wished it was that easy. You just have to say, it's the law and then they obey.

But we wouldn't like to be programs that just automatically follow instructions. That wouldn't set too well with us and for some reason God decided in the making of this beautiful and wonderful universe that you are not going to be some type of automaton robot that simply does instant commands. There is some work of your free will that makes it very messy, because you know what? We don't like rules. Well, some of us don't. Some of us love rules.

Really, your relationship to rules generally breaks down into four categories. You got your rule takers. Your rule breakers. Your rule makers and your rule fakers. Now I want you to think about which one of these you're more akin to.

The rule takers. These are the folks who are like, just give me rules. Tell me what to do. I'll follow it. This is often the oldest child, but not always. It's often only children, but definitely not always there. But by and large it's not always a birth order thing, but there are those of us who just take in the rules and just love to follow them. It gives us the sense that we are following the rules. It's very neat. I like the rules and I like following the rules and some of you right now are thinking, that's me. I'm a rule taker. I am that. Well hold on cause when category 4 comes up, you might be in that.

The second one is the rule breaker. Some of you ..... Some of you, and I'm thinking of some people in particular, I mean you're given a rule, your first instinct is to figure out how you're going to break that rule. Don't press that red button! Oh man. All I want to do is touch that red button now. That's all I can think about now. If someone tells you not to do something, it's almost like they gave you the explicit command to do it. That's you in your heart of who you are. What's great is that some of you are bumping each other right now. This is the best perspective to have for this sermon right now is to see all of you looking at each other and doing these.

Now some of you aren't necessarily rule takers, or rule breakers. Some of you are a special form of rule taker which I like to call rule maker. Like you love rules so much you make up new rules. You make life harder. You put more restrictions. Not only are there rules you've been told, but now it's all the other rules cause you like everything neat and organized. "You know, if we did this as well..." "If the rules were just like this, it would be perfect. The world would just be perfect if..." Neatly

organized everything. You make up those rules, and it settles the anxiousness within you to just have rule upon rule. You're a rule maker.

And then there is the rule faker. This is that person who really wants everyone else to think they are a rule taker, that they really do follow the rules. In fact, the entire effort of the heart, mind and soul goes into maintaining this façade which says, I'm doing everything correct, as far as you know, and I'm going to make sure everyone believes that. It gets to the point where it doesn't even matter if you're following the rules, just so long as everyone around you thinks you're following the rules.

What do you think? Are you a little more of a rule taker? A breaker? A maker? Or a faker? You're probably all a little bit of each of those. We tend to lean in different directions. Either way we have a complicated relationship with rules that are given to us.

And then God gave us a big ole book. And you know what it's full of? Rules! Commandments! Ordinances! These are the laws and you may think there are just 10, but if you read the whole book, there's 613 of them. Yeah! A lot of us just have a hard time remembering the top 10 list. Imagine keeping track of all 613. And our relationship with all these rules has that same kind of complication. And we have to decide how we are going to react to it.

Quite honestly, even if we just take the 10 Commandments, it feels like this is a set of restrictions and requirements and when you look at it you realize with certainty there is no way you are going to be able to do all that and you just feel condemned by it. In fact, can we just not talk about any of the rules in the Bible? That would be nice.

There is an effect they are meant to have. Yes. The law. One of the primary uses of all those laws is to condemn you, to make you feel condemned. To recognize the brokenness that is at work in you. Don't stop there. Don't stop and get stuck there, but it is part of the process to realize that we all got stuff to work on, and we all are people in need of forgiveness and redemption and something new happening within us. And so, we have the law, to hold that mirror up to our lives and go, "Yikes!" But we don't stop there.

I had this wonderful professor in seminary, Carson Brisson, who taught me all about Hebrew and I remember some of it, but he taught me a lot about the Old Testament that I'll never be able to forget. And one of the things that he taught me in those scriptures was that the way to think about the law is the law is like a fence in your

front yard. It creates a space where the children of God can go out and play. And it's generally safer there. And it's a place where we can find joy and we can be together.

Now it's true. You can go outside the fence and play around out in the street. You can do that and you might be able to do that without any serious harm, but this space that is made by the law is to say, this is the place where it's safe, where we can take good care of one another, where we can be together. And that's what the law is meant to do. Not just to condemn us to make us feel bad, but to create a space where, if we can live within this, it's generally better.

What I remember Carson saying is like, while it is true that occasionally cars do go careening off roads and crash through fences, so it is not 100% safe and people do sometimes get hurt playing in the front yard, but by and large it's the safe, beautiful, caring space for the children of God to be. That's what the law creates. But that's sometimes a little hard for us to hear or to fully live into.

When we look at these 10 Commandments the first 4 are really about our relationship with God, our interaction with God. The remaining 6 are interactions with one another. And while each of them can look like a check list of like either doing well or not doing well, if we live into that vision that they are supposed to create a space where life is generally better, then what might come out of it. If we don't just say, "well, I haven't murdered anyone, so I'm doing pretty well", but instead if we thought about how can I look at that Commandment, or that set of Commandments and use that to have a deeper commitment. To not make a Commandment alone, but also a commitment that are possible.

You know, here's the thing about that murder one. I think most of us in the room feel pretty good that we didn't violate that Commandment. I really hope that's true. It would make congregational meetings a lot more tense if that's not true. But do you remember what Jesus said about that Commandment? Cause when Jesus had to talk about that Commandment, he said, "Let me tell you this. If you ever speak poorly about another individual, speaking against their character, bad mouthing them, you have broken this Commandment."

That's counted underneath murder? Oh man. We're all in trouble. Part of what Jesus was doing there in his words was to say, "Look, don't get too full of yourselves because a full commitment to the preservation of another person's life and goodness and thriving does not stop at, I didn't murder them." It goes far beyond that into, I

truly care for them. I would not speak harshly. I will not assassinate their character to another person. I don't need to be that kind of person.

You see what Jesus was trying to do was invite us into some of what it might be like to let the law shape the full expression of it in our lives. So maybe that's something that you need to work on. Maybe instead of celebrating that you didn't murder anyone, you could stop and think, how can I hold my tongue sometimes when it seems that half the conversations I'm having with friends is us bad mouthing someone else.

And where it says that you keep the sabbath holy, that you reserve one day, one full day for just worship of God and rest. And rather than simply being condemned cause I'm gonna guess that for many of you, you do not have a full sabbath rest of 24 hours. Maybe let it work on shaping the next step of commitment for you, which is to say, how can you have at least a holy stop in your life. Moments where you truly just stop and be with your God. Moments where you simply stop and acknowledge what you have to praise and give thanks for and in that holy stop also just have some quality time with your God in prayer.

You see how these aren't simply laws to condemn you, but opportunities for you to move into that more beautiful, wonderful space that God is trying to create.

These laws were given to the people of Israel because they had come out of slavery for generations. They didn't know....They were told when to wake up, when to go to bed, what to do, what to eat. They had no choices and so when they were set free they needed guidance and God didn't just say, "I'm going to give you guidance, so you guys just don't really mess this up."

God said, "I'm going to give you guidance that's really going to show you what a good life can be."

And if you look at all 613 of those laws, some of them are very specific to the time and the culture and the circumstances. But at the very least I think you can take the first 10 and within them find spaces where you can go a little deeper in your connection with God to imagine not just trying to check that off your list, but instead to say, what's the deeper goodness that this is meant to preserve and create? What is that space that this particular fence is creating where I can be part of something that is beautiful and wonderful and part of the grace that's intended in this world?

Imagine the Commandment of not to give false testimony? And what that means is that you are known amongst your peers as a person who always speaks the truth, who never becomes a sharer of rumors or just bogus stuff that got sent to you in an email chain or online.

Imagine if you made the commitment to be a beacon of what is true and what is good. Wouldn't it be great to have a whole bunch of friends that were like that? Wouldn't it be great if you were one of those friends? Each one of these laws has an opportunity like that, for you to do what Jesus did and that's to take that law so seriously you make it bigger, and you find a way for it to transform your life. When you do that, well then you have a completely different relationship with what might feel like a rule book.

It's not a rule book. It's a guidebook.

It's not meant to condemn you. It's meant to set you free.

It's not meant to hold you down and to hold you back from the good stuff in life. In fact, it's the very words that can lead you to the good stuff that will persist and carry with you all the days of your life.

And may God be glorified by the commitment you make from God's Commandments.

Halleluiah and Amen.