

Pulled Apart, Put Back Together

Exodus 20:1-17

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*“Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king’s horses and all the king’s men
couldn’t put Humpty together again.”*

As a freshman in high school, I signed up for biology class with Mr. Gralman. I thought I would love biology, because I had an absurd fascination with animals but, more specifically, with animal trivia.

For instance, did you know that the Pronghorn antelope is the fastest land animal in North America? It can reach speeds of up to 60 miles per hour, and sustain that speed for up to a full minute or more. The only other land animal faster than the pronghorn is the cheetah – and it can only hold its top speed for a few seconds. How does the pronghorn do this? They have larger than normal lungs that allow them to provide an incredible amount of oxygen to their blood stream to fuel those muscles.

Also, they taste terrible. You can’t even hide how bad they taste in chili. That last bit is, confessedly, less of a fact and more of an opinion...

There was only one problem with high school biology. To my dismay, the exams never included random animal factoids. Instead they were filled with questions concerning actual science – questions about the anatomy of a human cell, questions about the process of photosynthesis, and questions about how dominant and recessive traits are handed down.

But there were a couple moments throughout the course of the year that caused me to perk up. The first time was when we dissected a sheep heart. The second time was when we dissected a frog.

There was a distinct difference between the two events. The sheep heart had been soaked in formaldehyde, making it stink to high heaven and look more like a prop from a movie than a real animal heart. The frog, on the other hand, was still alive when we dissected it.

I will never forget it. As I made the initial incisions and pulled back the skin of the frog’s soft underbelly, I could see the frog’s still beating heart. I watched with wonder as the lungs filled and emptied with air as the frog inhaled and exhaled.

I was fascinated. We examined the heart, the lungs, the stomach and intestines. We looked at the muscular system and examined the frog’s powerful hind legs. We talked about how frogs can breathe through their skin. We even examined its transparent

eyelids, that could close but allow the frog to still see underwater while it swam, like built in goggles. I could not get enough.

But then, at some moment, I looked down at this splayed open frog and I realized that its heart had stopped beating; its lungs had stopped inflating and deflating with every exhale. And that nursery rhyme popped into my head:

*“All the king’s horses and all the king’s men
couldn’t put Humpty together again.”*

There was no undoing what I had done. There was no way to put that frog back together again.

I sometimes wonder if we haven’t done the same thing with the Ten Commandments. Have we taken them apart — dissected them so thoroughly — that we can’t seem to put them back together again? Can they no longer breathe their living word into our lives?

When I was taking Old Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, our final exam required that we memorize and regurgitate the ten commandments in their most elementary form. The exam required no explanation or interpretation of the ten commandments; simply that we list them *and* that we list them in the correct order.

1. No gods before me
2. No idols
3. No taking God’s name in vain
4. Keep the sabbath
5. Honor father and mother
6. No murdering
7. No adultery
8. No stealing
9. No bearing false witness
10. No coveting

That was it — a simple exercise in rote memorization.

But if we were to examine them individually, even for a brief moment, we might learn some things. For instance:

1. The first commandment does not seem to deny the reality of other gods, just that *our* God expects *our* total allegiance.
2. The second commandment condemns the making of idols, particularly images of Yahweh, because Yahweh refuses to be “put in a box” that might give us a false sense of power over God.

3. The third commandment has a similar goal. Remember that in that time knowing someone's name was thought to give you power over them. The third commandment addresses the ancient practice of calling on a deity's name during magical incantations as a way of trying to get that deity to do what you want. Yahweh said, "Don't do it. Don't use my name in hopes of getting me to do what you want. I won't be happy, and you won't like how I respond."
4. The fourth commandment consecrates not just the material world, but also the ethereal one – that part of reality that can't be seen by the human eye or touched by the human hand or manipulated in any way that we know. Namely, it consecrates *time*. In Exodus, the sabbath is not presented as a day of worship, but as a day of *rest*.
5. The fifth commandment is particularly relevant in our day and time, because it asks us to appreciate and honor not novelty, but the collected wisdom of those who came before us. Honoring our father and mother reminds that we are not self-made, but that we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us.
6. The sixth commandment – "You shall not murder" – reminds us that others bear the image of God, too, and we are to honor it by not harming them.
7. At stake in the seventh commandment – "You shall not commit adultery" – are family integrity and the attendant question of the legitimacy of children – particularly as it related to inheritance laws and who had a legal claim to what. Don't commit adultery, and you won't have those problems.
8. The eighth commandment protects private property, which is a matter of interest for anyone who lives in a community with other people.
9. The ninth commandment prohibits more than white lies and casual gossip – though those aren't excluded. But it is particularly concerned with lying in court. How can courts ever be *just* unless if they aren't built on *truth*?
10. And the tenth commandment finally moves us beyond the actual act and into the inner condition that can also threaten community. To covet or to lust can be defined as "action in rehearsal," even if it just being rehearsed in our minds.

There you have it: a "Cliff Notes" version of the Ten Commandments. Now, you too, could pass an Old Testament Exam at Princeton Theological Seminary. I just saved you several thousand dollars in student loans. You're welcome.

But there is more that we could say about the Ten Commandments. For instance, what if we took a moment to examine their internal logic. If we were to categorize these commandments, we might note that the first four are about our relationship with *God* and that the next six are about our relationship with *others*.

Another way of saying that is: the first four lay out the basic guidelines for our vertical relationship with God; the next six lay out our horizontal relationship with one another.

In fact, there are theories around the two stone tablets on which the commandments were inscribed. Many scholars hold that the first four commandments were on the first tablet, and the last six were on the second – one tablet for our relationship with God and one tablet concerned with our relationships with others.

But there are other theories. For instance, we know from Exodus 32:15 that the two tablets were actually inscribed with the commandments on both the front and the back. This has led others to postulate that the first four commandments were written on the front of the tablets and the last six were written on the back – giving the image of the commandments being two sides of the same coin. How you treat God *is* how you treat people, and how you treat people *is* how you treat God. They are one and the same. And Jesus said something similar, didn't he? When asked about the greatest commandment (singular), he replied "Love God" *and* "love neighbor" – implying the two were inextricably bound to one another.

So there we have it: ten commandments across two tablets, addressing two types of relationships – that with God *and* that with other people.

Now don't you feel smarter now? Aren't you just itching to take one of those seminary exams??

I don't know. Even after all of that, it still feels kind of flat to me.

Don't get me wrong. I love this stuff. I love taking scripture and examining it, translating it from the original languages, reading about the historical context. I love splaying it open on the table and dissecting it. I love this stuff...

...but...

Does merely knowing this stuff make it a *living* word? Or did we just do to this passage what I did to that frog in biology class?

You see, if we're not careful we can leave it splayed open on the table, pinned down, dissected, and pulled apart – but no longer *alive*.

Do you remember how this story *begins* – the story of the ten commandments?

The book of Exodus doesn't just open with the Israelites standing at the base of Mount Sinai waiting to hear from God. It begins with slavery. It begins with God seeing the plight of God's people – the bondage, the abuse, the whips, the chains, the degradation of human life. It begins with an image of how dangerous the world can be for some people. It begins with God hearing the groans of their cries. And it begins with God *remembering* God's promise to them.

The story of the Ten Commandments begins with God bringing them out of slavery. Before any commandment is issued, there is first be *liberation*.

Even at the start of this list, the very first words out of God's mouth are: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery..." (Ex. 20:2).

The ten commandments aren't about behaving rightly. They're about being in relationship with the God *who sets us free*. You are *free* not to need any other gods. You are *free* to rest on the seventh day; *free* from the tyranny of lifeless idols; *free* from murder, stealing, and covetousness!

This isn't just a list of do's and don't's; it's a freedom song.

But here's the thing: it's hard to hear the melody of the song if we pull these seventeen verses out, splay them open on the table, and forget about the story that gave them birth.

Robert Wuthnow talks about how we transmit our ethical ideals to future generations not by giving them lists, but by telling stories. "Stories do more than keep memories alive," says Wuthnow. "Sometimes the stories become so implanted in our minds that they act back upon us, directly and powerfully."

"Wuthnow tells the story of Jack Casey, a volunteer fireman and ambulance attendant who, as a child, had to have some of his teeth extracted under general anesthesia. Jack was terrified, but a nurse standing nearby said to him, 'Don't worry, I'll be here right beside you no matter what happens.'

When he woke up from surgery, she had kept her word and was still standing beside him.

This experience of being cared for by the nurse stayed with him, and nearly 20 years later his ambulance crew was called to the scene of an accident. The driver was pinned upside down in his pickup truck, and Jack crawled inside to try to get him out of the wreckage. Gasoline was dripping onto both Jack and the driver, and there was a serious danger of fire because power tools were being used to free the driver. The whole time, the driver was crying about how scared of dying he was. Jack recalled what the nurse had said to him so many years ago, and kept saying to the man, 'Look, don't worry. I'm right here with you, I'm not going anywhere.'

Later, after the truck driver had been safely rescued he was incredulous. 'You were an idiot,' he said to Jack. 'You know that thing could have exploded and we'd have both been burned up!' In reply, Jack simply said he felt he just could not leave him" (Tom Long, "Dancing the Decalogue," *The Christian Century*, March 7, 2006).

That's the way the commandments work. That's how they are put back together and given life. First comes the experience of being cared for, the experience of being set free. Then there follows the life shaped around that experience.

Think about it.

Knows where FBC is; knows where you live; knows the names of your family members; knows where you hurt; why you ache; what makes you happy. God knows when the sparrow falls and God remembers *you*.

It's not just a list. It was never just a list. It's the way we live in response to being set free.

At the end of that class 25 years ago now, I remember wishing that I had the ability to put that frog back together and bring it back to life.

Don't leave these commandments laying there on the table — pinned down, dissected and pulled apart. Pick them up. Put them back together. And resuscitate them with your life. Because words on a page — even on a page in holy scripture — will never be living words. The only way they come to life is if we choose to live them.

Amen.