

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA**

March 7, 2021 – LENT 3, YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Living the Gospel—through the Law*”

Exodus 20:1-17 (God gives the Ten Commandments)
Psalm 19:7-14 (Praise for God's Law)
1 Corinthians 1:18-25 (The wisdom of God—Jesus Christ—makes “foolishness” of the world's wisdom)
St. John 2:13-22 (Jesus cleanses the Temple, God's House, and prophecies that He is the new Temple)

“The Egyptians were all drowned in the dessert. Afterwards, Moses went up to Mount Cyanide to get the Ten Commandments. The first Commandment was when Eve told Adam to eat the apple. The seventh Commandment is: thou shalt not admit adultery. Moses died before he ever reached Canada, then Joshua led the Hebrews in the Battle of Geritol.”¹ This, according to some elementary students taking a parochial school's test on the Old and New Testaments.

We are amused when children don't know the Bible—after all, it is our job to teach them God's Word. However, according to the Archdiocese of Baltimore, in 2012, 76 percent of 1,000 Americans surveyed could identify all the ingredients in a McDonald's “Big Mac,” while only 45 percent were able to name even 5 of the 10 Commandments correctly. Survey participants also had an easier time recalling the names of all the kids on the old TV series, “The Brady Bunch,” but 29 percent—almost one third—had no idea that “thou shalt have no other gods” is one of the 10 Commandments.²

Well, you might ask, what difference does that make? Popular Christian novelist Frank Peretti has compared our culture starving for biblical absolutes to the need for authority on a school playground. Posted on the chain link fence are rules such as:

“No hitting. No chewing gum. No spitting. No profanity. Only age 10 and under on the monkey bars. Only age 8 and older on the basketball court. Ten-minute limit on the tetherball court.” These rules work well because mingling through the crowd of children is Mrs. Schmidt, who has a keen eye. And if you misbehave, she will give you a pink slip. Two pink slips and you're banned from using the playground during recess for the rest of the school year.

But take Mrs. Schmidt out of the picture. How long do you think it would take before those rules start to be violated? “Ouch, she hit me!” “Hey, he spit on me!” “Get those big kids off the monkey bars! Little kids are getting hurt!” and so on.³ Who will soon rule the playground? The biggest, the strongest, and the most antagonistic.

That's what's happening in our world, too, because there is no longer widespread regard for God's laws. Our culture has taken the rules off the fence, and many people no longer have any fear of God's authority. For example, take the eighth Commandment: “Thou shalt not steal.”

According a January 2021 post by a company specializing in facial recognition biometrics, “shoplifting is the most common crime in the U.S. with 1 out of 11 Americans” stealing from stores, depriving merchants of \$20 billion in profit a year.⁴ Blue Water Credit documented 50,000 shoplifting incidents *per hour*.^{4a} Yet, the National Retail Foundation learned that 44 percent of shoplifters surveyed said that they would be deterred from theft *if employees paid closer attention to them*.

Perhaps even more troubling is that some of us do not think of it as ‘stealing’ when we pilfer office supplies from work, or embezzle our employer's time by goofing off while on the job.

Or, let's take the ninth Commandment: "Thou shalt not bear false witness." Lying seems to be a way of life for many Americans. Apparently, we lie at the drop of a hat. A revealing book, titled The Day America Told the Truth, by James Patterson and Peter Kim, reported that *91 percent* of those surveyed (which, statistically, would have to include Christians and church-goers) lie *routinely* about matters they consider trivial, while 36 percent lie about important matters. Moreover, 86 percent lie regularly to parents, 75 percent to friends, 73 percent to siblings, and 69 percent to spouses.⁵ *Yikes!* With statistics like that, how can we believe what *anyone* says? Then there are politicians ... who should be in a separate category altogether when it comes to truth telling.

Perhaps the most frequently broken Commandment is the third: "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." The text message "OMG," meaning "Oh my God!" is ubiquitous these days, not to mention the all-too-common inclusion of God's or Jesus' name uttered as a swear-word. If we truly revered the Name of God, and feared His wrath should we abuse it, would we dare to speak it in any way except to begin a prayer? Pious Jews so dread breaking this commandment, they omit the "o" when writing the word "God," rather than inadvertently dishonor Him.

Too many Americans no longer know or obey the 10 Commandments, and no longer respect Scripture's authority, perhaps in part because the 10 Commandments have been completely removed from our public life. They are now even *outlawed* in certain places, such as courtrooms. Another reason is that not enough preachers in our mainline churches are preaching God's Word from the pulpit, or are willing to warn their congregations of the consequences of breaking God's law.

Right about now, you may be wanting to object, "But aren't Christians supposed to live by *grace*, and not by the Law?" This was a question the first-century Church also wrestled with, and which St. Paul—the paramount champion of salvation by grace and not by Law—addressed in his Epistle to the Romans. In Chapter 6:15, he writes, "What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!" He goes on to declare in Chapter 7:12, "The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good."

Father John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, saw no conflict at all between the Law and the Gospel. Rather, he wrote: "Neither of them supersedes the other, but they agree perfectly well together. On the one hand, the law continually makes way for, and points us to the gospel."⁶

Even Jesus Himself kept the Commandments of God. And in Matthew 5:19, He teaches: "Whoever ... breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called the least [by those] in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

So, having been saved from our sins by God's grace, then how do we keep His Commandments, and why should we? Let's address the "why," first: Because God's laws are for our own good, just as the laws of civil society—laws against speeding on city streets, dealing drugs to kids, or burglarizing a neighbor's house—are for our wellbeing and protection. God knows that every one of us is a sinner in need of help to live a better life. And yes, He has given us His Holy Spirit to guide us, but we still need a compass that will point us Spirit-ward, and that compass is the Decalogue, the 10 Commandments.

Next, we look at the "how": Well, first, we have to know what the Commandments are. Fortunately, today's lectionary for the third Sunday in Lent points us to Exodus 20:1-17, which is where they can be found in the Bible. Perhaps it will help us to keep these laws when we remember Jesus' teaching that the *greatest Commandment* is to love God, love our neighbor, and love ourselves.

The first four of the 10 Commandments—against worshipping other gods; against making an idol out of anything *or* anyone; against misusing God’s Name; and about keeping the Sabbath holy—are about loving God. The next six Commandments—about honoring our parents; not killing anyone intentionally or with malice; not cheating on our spouse *or* being intimate outside of marriage; not stealing; not lying about others; and not wanting what others have or are—have to do with loving our neighbor. And when we make a sincere and committed effort to keep all 10 Commandments, we will be loving ourselves. Not only will our lives go better, but also, God will be pleased with us.

When was the last time you prayerfully considered your thoughts, words, and deeds, within the framework of the 10 Commandments?

You think *those* are tough to keep? By the third century A.D., observant Jews were expected to keep not only the original 10, but 603 more, for a total of 613 commandments which highly esteemed rabbis had developed over time.

This season of Lent, when we are called to more prayerful self-examination, repentance, and self-sacrificing charitable deeds, is a good opportunity to revisit God’s Law and make a better effort to keep it, every day and in every way.

The good news of the Gospel is that when we fail to keep the Law—and all of us will, at some point—the mercy of God is ready to forgive us. He knows our weakness. However, let us not put God to the test any more than necessary.

May He give us grace, strength, and wisdom to obey His Commandments, as we continue to try to love God, our neighbor, and ourselves. Amen.

¹ Adapt. Michael McCartney, “Grading Papers,” March 2006, [SermonCentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/sermon-illustration-michael-mccartney-quotes-churchgeneral-26681.asp) <<http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/sermon-illustration-michael-mccartney-quotes-churchgeneral-26681.asp>> 6 March 2015.

² “Survey, Americans know Big Mac not Commandments,” [Archdiocese of Baltimore](https://www.archbalt.org/survey-americans-know-big-mac-not-commandments/), 19 January 2012 <<https://www.archbalt.org/survey-americans-know-big-mac-not-commandments/>> 19 February 2021.

³ Adapt. Michael Demastus, [SermonCentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com), October 2001 <<http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/sermon-illustration-michael-demastus-stories-truthabsolute-4315.asp>> 6 March 2015.

⁴ “Shoplifting Statistics,” [RecFaces](https://recfaces.com/articles/shoplifting-statistics#2), January 2021 <<https://recfaces.com/articles/shoplifting-statistics#2>> 19 February 2021.

^{4a} Adapt. Stacey Weckesser, “The Five-Finger Discount: 35 Facts about Shoplifting in America,” [BlueWaterCredit](https://bluewatercredit.com/five-finger-discount-35-facts-shoplifting-america/), 25 September 2020. <https://bluewatercredit.com/five-finger-discount-35-facts-shoplifting-america> 19 February 2021.

⁵ “Lie,” [Our Daily Bread](http://www.ourdailybread.com), 28 August 1992.

⁶ Adapt., Alison Bucklin, “The Law and the Gospel,” [SermonCentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com), June 2011 <<http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/sermon-illustration-alison-bucklin-quotes-law-79173.asp>> 6 March 2015.