

1 Trinity 12 – 2 Corinthians 3; Mark 7

There is currently a lawsuit taking place between a group of families and the state of Louisiana. The state of Louisiana passed a law mandating that all the public schools display a copy of the Ten Commandments. Those who oppose the law see it as religious coercion and contrary to the First Amendment. But what is it about the Ten Commandments that would offend people? Any decent citizen would be all in favor of teaching children to honor their parents, not to kill, to remain sexually pure, not to steal, not to tell lies about other people, and to be content with what they have in life. Of course you have your militant atheists who are always raging against any mention of God, but most people don't have a problem with the existence of God. And most people are fine with the idea of prayer. According to a pew research poll, only about 23% of Americans say that they seldom or never pray. Even if people have no understanding or interest in what God promises in Christ or what the Bible actually teaches, most of them are totally fine with some kind of religious expression.

So why would the Ten Commandments offend people so much? I won't speak to everyone's reason for opposing this new law. But I can say something about human nature. Human nature is perfectly capable of living an outwardly moral and disciplined life. But human nature is completely incapable of fearing, loving, and trusting in God. Sure, folks can acknowledge an existence of some kind of God. But our natural senses are not capable of facing the living God. As the Lord said to Moses, "No one can see my face and life."

Consider the tax collector in our Gospel lesson from last week. He did what was truly impossible for even the most pious affections of man. He faced God. He humbled himself before the living God, acknowledging his sin and deep need for God's mercy, atonement, and forgiveness. The Pharisee couldn't do this. Despite his pious religious activities, despite his personal discipline, he did not have the power to face God in a truly honest way.

And this is what is so offensive about the Ten Commandments. It isn't so much about what they say about honoring your parents, not murdering, not committing adultery, stealing, bearing false witness, or coveting. No, what is truly offensive about the Ten Commandments goes back to the very first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me."

Yes, it's true that the culture around us increasingly rebels against these things. The authority of parents is undercut and even attacked by those who teach children how to fornicate, murder their unborn babies, and even mutilate their own bodies. Some children are purposefully deprived of a father and a mother while marriage is redefined and perverted in disgusting ways. Due process of law is trampled on as people are assumed guilty until proven innocent. Reputations are destroyed by media and social media, so much that some people are unable to find a job. And if someone doesn't have what his neighbor has, he is taught that he is a victim of some kind of injustice. And so, bitterly unsatisfied with his own possessions, he feels justified to covet what isn't his.

Of course, our surrounding culture would be a lot better off if people followed these principles of the Ten Commandments. It's truly amazing that people get so offended by them. But again, they are not all that offensive to our human nature, at least not outwardly. Lots of unbelievers can be convinced that fornicating, killing babies, and slandering people are bad things. What is most offensive about the Ten Commandments is the first commandment. It is that God, the Lord and creator of the universe, is the only true God. This commandment forces you to face God, just as that tax collector did in the temple. And no one wants to do that. Because when you face God, you must die.

2 Trinity 12 – 2 Corinthians 3; Mark 7

This is why people get offended by all the other commandments. It's because they all flow out of this first and greatest commandment. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and him only shall you serve. You must face him and his holiness, stripped bare before him. None of your own powers nor any of the power of this world can help you. God is good, and you are sinful. God is life, and you are bound to death. God is a consuming fire, and you are dust. This is the ministry of the Ten Commandments.

St. Paul calls it the old covenant. He calls it the ministry of condemnation. And it is glorious. It's so glorious that the people couldn't even look at the reflection of its glory on Moses's face.

Everything of benefit in the writings of the ancients is beneficial because it explains or applies the Ten Commandments. Consider the great fables of Aesop or the copybook headings of generations past. What virtue doesn't derive from one of the Ten Commandments? Reverence, piety, faithfulness, chastity, modesty, thrift, generosity, humility, honesty, integrity, bravery, hospitality, discretion, and any other virtue you can name are all taught in the Ten Commandments that God in his glory gave to Moses on Mount Sinai.

What if we were all in favor of posting the Ten Commandments at the schools? Let's say that we even agreed on the numbering of the Ten Commandments. What then? If everyone got on board with studying the Ten Commandments, then this would certainly benefit our communities. There is no self-help book, no life coach or teacher of good habits that can hold a candle to the law of God revealed on Mount Sinai. The Ten Commandments are glorious, and no amount of wisdom written by men can compare to this glory. A family, a town, or a country that reflects this glory is going to be much better off than those that don't reflect it.

And yet, this glory is passing away. It is a glory unmatched by anything modern or ancient experts can come up with. Those who live by it will be blessed in this life. And yet, this glory does not give life. All the good habits, virtues, morals, and works taught in God's law must ultimately teach you this most important thing: that you, a sinner, must face the one and only righteous God. And no one can face God and live. Do you want to do what the Ten Commandments say? Do you want to live by them? Then you must die. You must die to your own righteousness, die to your own desires, and face God's strict sentence against the sinner.

Who wants to do this? Who is even capable of it? Who can face God, not looking at the other guy, not being compared to other people, but stand before the living God? Can you stand before him who knows every one of your sinful thoughts, every selfish feeling, and every unfair judgment you have made against your neighbor? Who can face this God and live? None of us can, not in ourselves.

And yet, we must face him. We must face God. We must realize our sin and die before him. But even if we die before him, this doesn't give us life. The old covenant must point us to the new covenant. The glory that is passing away must give way to the greater glory. And this greater glory is found only in the works and words of Christ. He is the righteous one who gave his life up for all sinners. His Holy Spirit gives us life forever.

Jesus fulfilled the law by revealing the true face of God to all people. And yet, this face didn't look impressive to this world. Isaiah says that his appearance was so marred that people turned their faces away from him. They can't look at his bruised face. Because there they see all their sins, all their sorrows, all their guilt. But Jesus came to earth to reveal precisely this face, not to

3 Trinity 12 – 2 Corinthians 3; Mark 7

condemn us, not to kill us, but to forgive us, to heal us, and to give us eternal life. Look to his innocent face and see all your sin and sorrow. See your thorny guilt right there on his bruised head. Because he bore it willingly for you, not because you fought for him or were faithful to him, not even because you pushed to have his law posted in public. No, he took all that the law imputed against you. He fought for you. He bore all your guilt for you. Because he loves you. He is gracious toward you. He lifts up his countenance upon you to give you peace.

Who can face him? Who can look to this holy and innocent face of Christ? As we say in the Creed, “I believe that I cannot, by my own reason or strength, believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept me in the true faith.” It is only by the power of the Holy Spirit, working through this new covenant, this good news of the Savior, that we receive the gift of faith to look to the face of God in Jesus Christ.

Consider what Jesus did with that deaf and mute man. He took him away from the crowd. So that deaf man had no one else to look to, no one to consider, but Christ alone. Just like that tax collector in the Temple, this poor deaf and mute man stood and faced the living God. But what does the living God do? He spits on the ground and touches the man’s tongue. He looks up to heaven. He sighs. And then he speaks the language of the people, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.”

This is the ministry of the new covenant. It is what Jesus came into this world to do. He opens our ears to hear his Word in our own language, and he loosens our tongues to sing his praises. By his deep sighs on the cross he fulfilled the law’s demands against us. And by his Spirit and Word he gives us ears to hear, hearts to believe, and lips to confess his life-giving truth.

So now, through Christ who has made all things new, we can face God and declare that he has done all things well. We can face him, knowing our sin and unworthiness. And we can die before him, knowing that he gives us life.

What benefit is it to post the Ten Commandments in public places? Well, if people strive to follow them, this would be great! It would be glorious. But we are not saved by a passing glory. We are saved by the eternal hope of glory in Jesus Christ. We have already died with him in our baptism. We live in him by faith, and we walk in his commandments by love. While we learn to discipline our bodies and put to death our sinful desires, our confidence toward God is only through Christ. And by the grace of his Holy Spirit, we know that we will see him face to face. Amen.