**Exodus 20:1-17**

**1 Corinthians 1:18-25**

**John 2:13-22**

Have you ever noticed in the Ten Commandments, which we heard a few moments ago, that there is no punishment listed for failure to comply? There’s no “if-then” duality. If you do this, then; well, you’re going to hell. Or you’ll suffer damnation. There isn’t any such language written into this law code.

There is, however, penalty language written into secular law. The penalty for breaking a law becomes part of its statute and legislation.

So, if you are caught speeding, you will pay a fine. If your speeding has been egregious enough, you will also get points on your driving record, meaning that now your car insurer will also penalize you. And if you repeatedly drive too fast, the law has even stricter consequences for repeat offenders.

The Ten Commandments have no penalties. Of course, you could say that secular laws only have their penalties applied when a violator is caught! If you are anything like me, then the one or two times – or even five-to-ten times – you’ve gotten a speeding ticket in your life cannot begin to compare with the numerous times you’ve gone just a wee bit over the speed limit.

Speeding laws need to be enforced – for the safety of us all. Secular laws need to be enforced. But what about sacred law?

Many people view God as a stern judge who’s keeping track of all the times we trip up. Something of a “reverse” Santa Claus: making a list; checking it twice. Not to give out presents but punishments. A lovely way to challenge this persistent, ugly notion of God is to point out there is no penalty attached to breaking any of the Ten Commandments.

Rather, says Bible scholar Terrence Fretheim, Old Testament laws are a gracious gift of God for the sake of life, health, and well-being; for the sake of humans who, of necessity, must live with one another in community. Hopefully: in peace. These sacred laws take into account what all humans need to live the best possible life. All humans: not just Jewish people, to whom these laws were first given; and not just Christians, who have inherited them through our Jewish brother, Jesus.

We Judeo-Christians are not the only ones with sacred law, or principles, or moral guidelines. All religions have these. Most of them overlap; we people of religious faith share a lot of similarities. When sacred insight is found in one religion but not another, we have an opportunity to learn what they know that we don’t know. For example, there is a principle in Taoism that says, “Everything eventually becomes its opposite.” I haven’t found that notion in anything that Jesus taught but that doesn’t mean it isn’t true.

God’s introduction to the Ten Commandments, or Ten Words, reads like personal correspondence. “I am the Lord your God who brought you out . . . of slavery.” That’s what God says to anyone who finds “Unending Love” – which is simply a different name for God. “I have found you: you are free!” We could give God other names, like “Non-Stop Forgiveness.” Or “Breath of Life.” My favorite is: “The One Who When Laughing Creates Stars.”

God’s intro to the Ten Commandments keeps them personally oriented: “I am the Lord *your* (singular) God.” It’s personal. Following the commandments is a matter of relationship; not of enforcement. Just as there are no penalties associated with breaking one of these laws, neither is there an enforcer. There is only our personal commitment to a fair and fairly easy moral code meant to benefit everyone, including me – the one who keeps the code.

Many Christians do not realize that the Ten Commandments are stated twice in the Bible. The version we read today, from Exodus, is the first instance but there’s one in Deuteronomy. There are two interesting changes – slight, but important – in that second version.

The last commandment in the Exodus version puts “the wife” on a list of property not to be coveted. It reads: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

In the Deuteronomy version, “wife” is exchanged with house and given her own commandment. So in that text, the ninth commandment reads: “Neither shall you covet your neighbor’s wife.” Period. End of commandment. And the tenth one reads, “Neither shall you desire your neighbor’s house or field or male or female slave, etc.” There are still just ten laws in Deuteronomy; the first two are combined into one.

Professor Fretheim points out that this change means the Commandments weren’t believed to be chiseled in stone. Even though they were literally chiseled in stone. They were understood to be open to adaptation in new times and places. The wifely change – from property to individuality – might reflect a changing role for women in that culture.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The other difference comes in the Sabbath commandment. In Exodus, the motive for keeping the Sabbath is based on Creation: “For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day.” (Exodus 20:11).

In Deuteronomy, the motive for keeping the Sabbath is based on justice. It reads: “Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day” (Deuteronomy 5:15). The Exodus version emphasizes Sabbath as blessing; Deuteronomy emphasizes it as an institution of justice. The Sabbath was the first fair-labor law.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The law is given for the sake of the best life possible. It serves to create a stable, flourishing, and life-enhancing community. God's words surrounding the giving of the law, “I am the Lord *your* God,” show that this is not arbitrarily laid upon people, but is given “for our good always, that God might preserve us alive,” according to Deuteronomy (6:24). The gracious purposes of God show that the law is fundamentally gift, not burden.

1. Terrence Fretheim, “Commentary on Exodus 20:1-17,” March 4, 2018,

   https://www.workingpreacher.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rolf Jacobson, “Commentary on Exodus 19:1-6, 20:1-17,” June 15, 2014,

   http://www.workingpreacher.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)