

SWEETER THAN HONEY  
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A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church  
in Brookfield, Connecticut  
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Text: Exodus 20:1-17

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 worship 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, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

A lot of people today describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious." In fact, survey after survey reports that that's the fastest growing demographic within the American religious landscape.

I don't think there's a standard definition of what "spiritual but not religious" means, but if I was going to take a shot at it, I'd say it means having your own personal faith vs. adhering to a formal faith tradition—the implication being that these are completely different things, and you can be one or the other, but you can't be both. So being spiritual is about what you feel on the inside; being religious is about what you do on the outside. Being spiritual is about

following your own path; being religious is about belonging to an institution. Being spiritual is about finding your own truth; being religious is about accepting someone else's dogma. Being spiritual is about experience and relationship; being religious is about rules and obedience.

Now, obviously, as a pastor in a mainline denomination, I'm a little bit biased. But I honestly do think this is a false choice. Can religious traditions be stuffy and rigid? Can religious practices be empty and sterile? Can religious institutions be bureaucratic and rule-bound? Absolutely. One-hundred percent. But that doesn't mean religion can't be deeply

spiritual. That doesn't mean the outer forms and structures of religion can't help people develop an inner awareness of God's presence in their lives.

In fact, the church is in the middle of a season right now that's all about developing our inner lives and growing in our personal relationships with God. Lent is a time when we pay special attention to clearing away whatever debris may be blocking our connection to God. It's a time when we focus on opening ourselves up to the Divine through prayer, reflection, self-examination, fasting, and other disciplines. It's a time when we talk about repentance, which has a negative ring to it, but it really just means "changing our hearts and minds" (CEB). All these are pathways to a having closer relationship with the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. All these are resources to guide us on that journey. And today, especially, we have a reading that provides a space for that to happen.

**T**he Ten Commandments, as we call them, or the "Ten Words," as rabbinic tradition refers to them, lay a foundation for spirituality to blossom out of religion, and they give us a process for making that happen.

First of all, before God names even a single commandment, God says, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt," and that one little statement is maybe the most important part of this whole passage because it frames the intention behind everything that follows. It tells us this isn't just any old god who's giving us these commandments. This is the God whose desire for our well-being is stronger than the mightiest empire on earth. This is the God who went to the mat for us against Pharaoh, delivered us from slavery, and led us through the wilderness to a land of promise. And so, surely this is the God we can put our trust in. Surely this is the God who will always be there for us. Surely this is the only God we need. Which leads right into the first commandment: "you shall have no other gods before me."

So the commandments start off with a little preface that tells us who God is and why we should follow God. God is the one we can count on. God is the one who acts decisively on our behalf. God is the one who wants nothing more than to see us flourish as a people. And the first commandment tells us how to start building a relationship with God. Step one, make God our top priority. Put God above all the other things in life that take up room in our hearts, and steal our attention, and demand our loyalty.

And the next two commandments show us what that looks like: "You shall not make for yourself an idol," and "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God." In other words, if God really is our top priority, then we shouldn't give our devotion to anything other than God, and we shouldn't use God's name carelessly. We should honor God with our worship and our words.

From there, the next two commandments go a step further. Now that we've made God our top priority, ahead of money, power, status, influence, and whatever else we might spend our lives pursuing, and now that we're honoring God in the way we should, the next step is to plug ourselves into God, so that God's life flows into us.

The first way we do that is by keeping the sabbath—setting aside regular time to spend with God, as well as with one another. Sabbath-keeping isn't something we do in isolation. It's something we do together, as a community. When we gather for worship and study and fellowship, we encourage one another, we support one another, we learn from one another, we inspire one another, and in so doing we give and receive God's loving care.

The second way we plug ourselves into God is by honoring our mothers and fathers, which I think includes, not just our biological parents, but all of our elders—all those who pass on their faith to us; all those who hand down their beliefs and traditions. When we listen to them, when we respect their wisdom, when we take their guidance, God speaks to us through their

voices and nurtures us through their experiences.

Okay, so we've made God our top priority, and we've opened up these channels for receiving God's love and care and guidance. How do we take the final step? How do we let down our guard, drop our defenses, and bring our true selves to our relationship with God? How do we show up as we really are? That's what the last five commandments are about.

Brené Brown is a psychologist and a researcher, and she says that if we don't have a basic level of trust in the community we belong to, we'll never feel safe enough to expose our authentic selves. We'll always keep parts of who we are hidden—maybe the parts we don't like, because we're afraid of being judged; maybe the parts that are vulnerable, because we're afraid of being hurt.

So the last five commandments aim to create a space where we feel secure and protected, a space where we don't have to worry about our physical and emotional security, a place where we know that no one is going to harm us or deceive us or take anything away from us: "You shall not murder." "You shall not commit adultery." "You shall not steal." "You shall not bear false witness." "You shall not covet." These are the basic ground rules for a community where we can be open and honest with each other, and open and honest with God.

**S**o these Ten Commandments, or Ten Words, are very religious. They're a big part of, not Christianity, but also Judaism. They're about as religious as you can get. But they're also deeply spiritual. They are a list of rules we have to obey. But they're also lead us into a profound relationship with God—a relationship that's life-giving and transformative. That's why the psalmist describes commandments and all the law as more desirable than gold, even much fine gold; and sweeter than honey, the drippings of the honeycomb.

So in my view, you can't separate the inner life we experience with God from the outer life

we share with each other. The outer life gives shape and form and substance to the inner life, and the inner life makes the outer life worth living. And that's what this season is about—making that connection and seeing how far it can take us. Amen.