

I would like now for your edification and delight to announce The New Ten Commandments. You will not find them inscribed on stone tablets as in the days of Moses or even in our own age preserved in the digital cloud. They are embedded organically in the spirit of the age as taught in universities, glorified in movies and TV, and articulated by editorial policy. We may think of them as the centerpiece of a new covenant: made between the governing and the governed in matters of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, sanctified by the Supreme Court, and regulated by anonymous government agencies. Drumroll please!

1. Thou shalt not speak about God in the public square.
2. Thou shalt not claim to speak truth for everyone.
3. Thou shalt be cool.
4. Thou shalt not remain a virgin.
5. Thou shalt not be racist.
6. Thou shalt not speak against gay marriage.
7. Thou shalt not act like thou art rich, even if thou art very rich.
8. Thou shalt believe in man-made climate change.
9. Thou shalt recycle.
10. Thou shalt look for extra-terrestrials.

It is not my task today to take to task the credentials of this new covenant delivered to us from on high. My task is more humble. It is to caution these new puritans about the risks inherent in imposing these commandments on 300 million people. As a teacher in the kingdom of God, I draw on a 3000-year tradition that illustrates the risks of imposing moral commandments on human beings who don't want to be told what to do. I would strongly suggest to their delicate secular minds that they consider long and hard the Sermon on the Mount.

At least, I would if they were my audience. They are not. You are my audience – you whom I love and long for, you who are my hope and joy, when our Lord Jesus Christ comes again. So, I direct my cautionary words to you, who feel disenfranchised by this new, secular covenant and perhaps rejoice to be so disenfranchised.

You are citizens of a better kingdom. **You have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly ... you have come to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant.** (Hebrews 12:22-24) In the Sermon on the Mount Our Mediator speaks with wisdom to all who are morally earnest, even to those who refuse Him, if they but had ears to hear. I know you have ears to hear what the Spirit says to us.

Mercy

You know the trap that is laid for those who are morally earnest. They just can't understand why other people don't agree with them. Educated atheists like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris sound like bigoted fundamentalists, when they attack people who disagree with them. Outstanding Christians sound just like them, when they criticize those who advocate abortion. Whatever the moral issue, it is easy for the morally earnest to descend into intolerance, innuendo, and an inability to hear what other people say.

Such incivility drives people away. They say to the zealots, "Why don't you lighten up?" Jesus said something far more trenchant and life changing. What He said stops zealots in their tracks, and it can waken a disturbing moral awareness in people who

never say anything about any moral issue. If you are looking for one foothold from which you can make your way through the Sermon on the Mount, here it is.

Jesus says: **“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”** (Matthew 7:1-5)

Never stop looking for **the plank in your own eye**. Before you judge another person, before you get angry with another person, before you reject another person, ask yourself, “What in my life is displeasing to God and to other people?” It is the hardest lesson to learn that you always have a plank in your eye, and you are the last person to see it, until you learn to look for it. Identifying the **plank in your own eye** is the single most effective step to living the Sermon on the Mount. Let’s go back and read two Beatitudes with Jesus’s words about planks in mind.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” (Matthew 5:7) Could we hit the pause button for a moment? There was a dramatic event in the life of King David of old that brings this Beatitude to life better than I ever could. King David committed adultery with Bathsheba, and to cover it up he assigned her husband, Uriah, to a dangerous military action in which her husband died. That was the king’s plan.

The prophet Nathan took David to task for his sin with a kind of riddle. He told the King about a rich man whose herds were large. Nearby lived a poor man who owned one female lamb. A traveler stopped at the rich man’s home. The rich man served lamb for dinner, but not one of his. He took the one little lamb of the poor man and served it to the traveler.

David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, “As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die!” (2 Samuel 12:5) Those are words of a morally earnest man. He has heard about a great injustice, and he calls for the severest treatment of the unjust man. Perhaps we all have moments like that. The speck in the brother’s eye is so obvious.

Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man! ... You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own.” (2 Samuel 12:9) Confronted with the plank in his own eye, **David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the Lord.”** (2 Samuel 12:13) His moral indignation disappeared like a hailstone in summer heat. Perhaps we all have moments like that when our dark side is exposed and our moral earnestness severely compromised.

Nathan replied, “The Lord has taken away your sin.” (2 Samuel 12:9) If, like David, we receive mercy, we are more ready to show mercy. Never stop looking for **the plank in your own eye**, if you want to experience the mercy of the Lord and be merciful yourself. “Is my eye a forest from which are hewn and stacked these planks of evil? Then take these planks, O Lord, and with them build in me a House of Mercy.”

Peacemakers

The seventh Beatitude says: **“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”** Peacemakers build bridges to people who are alienated from each

other. Peacemakers never stop looking for the plank in their own eye. Because they have received mercy, they know that mercy builds bridges.

I shared with this congregation last Sunday that the Sermon on the Mount has hit me harder than anything in the Bible has hit me in decades. It's not just that I fell short when measured by God Himself. It's that the righteousness Jesus commanded us to seek did not have my serious attention. I don't know if I didn't see it or didn't pay attention to what I saw. In either case, the Sermon on the Mount stopped me cold. It said, "You are going the wrong way. You are going away from me. Change course!" And that's what I've done. At least, that is what I've begun to do.

This Beatitude has hit me especially hard. Here's why. When people you have known and loved for years, and who have made your life better die, their absence causes sadness, because death is an "irrevocable and irreversible" evil. There is nothing more you can do. It is very different when people you have known and loved for years just walk out of your life. Their absence also causes sadness. It is like death. The seventh Beatitude holds out hope that their absence is not irrevocable and irreversible.

This church, like all churches, has people who just walk away as if their past ten years or past 30 years in this church didn't happen. They are nearly always angry, sometimes justifiably angry, and often frustrated and disappointed. Most of the congregation has no idea why they walked away. The result is confusion, anger, and sometime a sense of being betrayed. The whole package of emotions conveys the perception that there is no "tie that binds our hearts in Christian love."

Peacemakers don't have a job until there is strife. Bridge builders don't have a job until the bridge is washed out. I want to say to the people who have walked away from this congregation in the past five years, "Why didn't you stay and work through whatever made you angry or frustrated or disappointed?" I want to say to those of us who stayed in this congregation (to me as the chief offender), "Why didn't we challenge those who left with the seventh Beatitude?" Why didn't we put our sermons and surveys and service projects on hold – why didn't we sacrifice a thousand lesser priorities in order to make peace? I don't like strife and angry people any more than the next person, but the path to peace goes that way, or we never reach peace. The alternative is a polite and sullen indifference to each other's lives. Aren't we commanded to do better?

Pure in Heart

There is another Beatitude that has great relevance to what we've talked about today. "**Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.**" Jesus tells us what it means to be **pure in heart**. He said: "**Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.** His dynamite one-liner goes like this: "**Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**" (Matthew 6:21) Tell me what you love more than anything else, and I'll tell you where your heart is. Loving Christ more than anything else is what it means to be pure in heart.

So, how do we store up treasures in heaven? Jesus told us: "**Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness.**" (Matthew 6:33) "Place your life under God's authority. Make His righteousness your priority." Doing that gives feet to our faith that the kingdom is coming to earth some day, and that the kingdom makes its presence felt in a

neighborhood near you, when you remember the plank in your own eye and mercifully build bridges that bring people back together.

Take Away

Jesus said over and over, **“The time has come. The kingdom of God is near.”** (Mark 1:15) In other words, watch Jesus, and you will see what God’s authority looks like in human life. You will see God’s priorities on display. As we have learned today, God will contradict human authority and human priorities.

Unlikely disciples become extravagant disciples as they allow themselves to be corrected by the Lord they follow. They learn sooner or later that His thoughts are not their thoughts, and His ways are not their ways. They learn sooner or later that they are doing Him no favors by following Him. Jesus is pouring out the new wine of heaven on the earth. It remains to be seen, if disciples then and disciples now are wineskins that can stretch and not split under the pressure of His expanding presence in their experience.

The Lord is here with us by means of the Gospel of Matthew. We hold in our hands the revelation of Him who said to then and says to us, “Watch me, and you will see what God is like. God is with you. Don’t miss Him!” We won’t miss Him, if we keep in step with the Holy Spirit. We keep in step with the Spirit, when we lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven. There are many ways to do that. Let’s talk about one.

Last Sunday, I said to this congregation that I regret that I have been so cavalier about the righteousness Jesus is so intense about. It makes me sad that I have not been a better example for you by how I have lived taught the righteousness of God. My shortcomings are why it is likely that what I have said today calls for repentance on your part as well as mine, if we are to keep in step with the Spirit. Last week, I asked anyone who sensed that call to repentance to stand with me in front of the congregation, while I prayed for us. I was deeply moved by your quiet and powerful response.

It seems good to me to ask for your response again. Again, I do not ask for, and I do not expect anything spectacular or ostentatious. Again, I will stand down here before you and God and confess publicly, “I will always look for the plank in my own eye. I will be merciful. I will be a peacemaker.” If you want to stand with me before God and this congregation and make the same confession, I will pray for us. That’s it.