

# The Eleventh Commandment

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*Related Texts: Exodus 20:1-17, Psalm 19, Romans 8:31-39, and Luke 16:19-31*

My friends have told me on various occasions that I have no appreciation for the tongue in cheek. They say I am too serious minded. When friends convey these types of criticisms, it puts you on notice. So I am put on notice that I have no appreciation for the tongue in cheek. I am put on notice that I am too serious minded. But just because you are put on notice does not mean you can readily change your basic disposition, even if you irritate your friends.

Well, I irritated them again last week. We were having a light conversation at a restaurant over a bottle of wine. One of them quipped, "Thou shalt not be bereft of wine on a lovely summer evening...It should be the eleventh commandment." "No, it shouldn't." I returned. "Do you have something better in mind?" she asked, expecting another quip. "Thou shalt not exploit the vulnerable," I stated definitively. "Thou shalt not exploit the vulnerable." she repeated. Then she shot me a look as if to say, "You wrecked the mood once again." She was right. So I picked up the check to atone for my sin.

But believe it or not I've thought a lot along the lines of an eleventh commandment, or a twelfth, or a thirteenth for that matter. I've thought about it for many years. She had unwittingly offered me a cue. So, I just couldn't help myself.

Moses, scholars tell us, received the *Ten* Commandments a long time ago -- around 1250 BCE. And we just heard something of the historical circumstances. Moses had earlier escaped with the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. And it was a close call. Pharaoh, King of Egypt -- who perhaps should have been called Pharaoh, King of Vacillation -- when Moses miraculously produced a plague, promised to let the Israelites go. But thereafter he hardened his heart and refused to let them go. This went on ten times before he finally, in a moment of weakness, actually let them go. But a moment of weakness is just that. It is a *moment* of weakness. The moment passed, and he hardened his heart again. He and his army took out after them. The Egyptians were in chariots. The Israelites were on foot. They found themselves trapped against the banks of the Red Sea, the Egyptians bearing down on them. But the wind was blowing and blowing hard. It dried a straight for them to cross. When the chariots attempted to follow, the wheels got mired in the mud. The Israelites were free at last.

But their problems had in a sense just begun. God charged Moses to lead them to the Promised Land, but the Promised Land was far off. To get there they had to wander for countless years, again, on foot, through the desert, beset by every hardship imaginable -- Hunger. Thirst. Enemies. Poisonous snakes. You name it. Morale was low by the time they happened into the Sinai wilderness. Then something finally happened to boost their morale. Some big. Something huge.

Something world historical. God gave Moses the Ten Commandments – laws that would fashion them into God’s people, laws that assured them that they had a future.

The Ten Commandments were given under these particular historical circumstances, these and these alone, and some of them reflect it. Of course, some of them are good for every historical circumstance. Like the first commandment. You shall have no gods before me. That one’s a constant. There’s one God. Therefore, he is first and foremost. Therefore, he is the truth. Therefore, he is the way. Period.

But what about the second commandment? You shall not make for yourselves an idol? Or as the King James Version puts it, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” The second commandment reflected those particular historical circumstances. The Israelites were heading into pagan territory. The pagans made idols – graven images – of their gods. Then they attempted to manipulate them to get what they wanted out of them. The God of Israel was not to be “worshipped” in that way. But for us today, in our own particular historical circumstances, this commandment is not all that germane. We are not heading into pagan territory. We’re not inclined to make an idol of God.

This brings me back to my original point, about what I’ve thought long and hard about. What if the Ten Commandments had been given to *our* particular historical circumstances? Or what if they could be amended to include our particular historical circumstances? What would they be? I have drummed up all sorts of contenders, for instance: “Honor God’s creation.” But the top contender for me is: “Thou shalt not exploit the vulnerable.” The Israelites did not need that one at the time the Ten Commandments were given. *They* were the vulnerable.

But not for long. Within two centuries or so the Promised Land had become a mighty nation, and a nation of social hierarchies, as are all nations. But no sooner were there power up and power down than the vulnerable appeared, and no sooner did the vulnerable appear than they began to be exploited. This in fact was why God called up the prophets. To expose the exploitation of the vulnerable. To condemn the exploitation of the vulnerable. “Rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow,” declared the prophet Isaiah. “If you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow....then I will dwell with you in this place,” declared the prophet Jeremiah. “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream,” declared the prophet Amos.

And why was this such a big deal? Because if you think about it, it’s hard to imagine anything more wicked than exploiting the vulnerable. It’s not as though the vulnerable have done anything to their exploiters for which their exploiters are seeking revenge. It’s not as though they were in their exploiters way. It’s not as though they posed a threat to their exploiters. It’s merely because they were weak and powerless and downtrodden. It’s merely because they were defenseless. It’s merely because they could. So their exploiters made their lives all the more sad and bitter and hopeless and miserable. That’s wicked.

And, as I said, all nations are nations of social hierarchies, and so it has continued down through the centuries to this day. The vulnerable are exploited. As it was in the Bible, they are yet the alien, the orphan and the widow, and add to that the working poor, trafficked children, refugees, minority races and creeds, the criminalized, veterans of war. This is why it is for me a top contender for the 11th commandment. The exploitation of the vulnerable needs perennially to be exposed and God's judgment declared upon it.

Perhaps though it is sufficient simply to say that Jesus deplored the exploitation of the vulnerable. This is why, above all, he condemned hardness of heart. This is why he told the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. This is why he healed the afflictions that made the vulnerable the vulnerable. This is why he blessed the merciful and proclaimed that the meek will inherit the earth. And this is in large part why he hung on his cross. To declare to the vulnerable that soon they would be with him in paradise.

I recently read about a man. There was much to commend him. He cut a fine figure physically. He was handsome, and his bearing and carriage were suggestive of one with military training. He was patriotic. He was a man of deep conviction. He was a diligent worker who achieved prosperity. He provided for his family. He loved his dog. But he also happened to be a Nazi prison guard at Auschwitz. He formed a part of the gauntlet through which women and children were forced to walk to the gas chambers. He exploited the vulnerable. So, clearly, all the other good he did was erased, not just erased, it was made vile. Because if you exploit the vulnerable, that's what defines you, that and that alone. It's the weak link that makes you a useless and broken chain.

"You will always have the poor with you," Jesus declared. Let us pray that as his followers we have the faith and the courage to protect and defend them. Amen.