

Some years ago, on Interstate 75 in northwestern Ohio, a series of billboards offered several messages from God. Each featured bold black lettering on a white background. Here are some I remember:

Have you read my bestseller? There will be a test. God

Pray. I'm listening. God

And my favorite: *The Ten Commandments are not multiple choice. God*

Presumably, the creator of the billboard campaign meant that you don't get to choose which Commandments to obey, since God commanded all of them. The campaign reflected a strand of Christian discipleship that takes the Ten Commandments as a test (pass or fail)—or a set of rules by which to measure your behavior (or that of others)—or a checklist for an application to heaven.

What do you think? Are the Ten Commandments a test? Pass or Fail? Multiple Choice? True or False? Short Essay—or Fill in the Blanks? Are they a rulebook to measure how you and others measure up in God's eyes? Are they a checklist that you can use to determine whether or not you qualify for entry into God's kingdom, God's reign?

Martin Luther, after whom our Lutheran church is named, would answer, "No. No. No." He described the Ten Commandments not as a test or a ruler or a checklist, but, rather, as "a public sermon from heaven" and as "the Word of God proclaimed by God to God's people." While he certainly taught obedience to the Commandments, he cautioned care in how to hear the Ten Commandments; he admonished his congregation to learn about God's intention for them and how to use them for good.

On one hand, when Luther spoke of the Ten Commandments, he was referring literally to the ten rules given by God to Moses on the two tablets at Mt. Sinai, the ten rules we heard in today's first lesson from the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, from Exodus 20. On the other hand, he also used the phrase "the Ten Commandments" as a kind of shorthand to refer to all of the rules, or laws, spoken and unspoken, written and unwritten, whereby we live our lives as people of God.

For Luther, there were two "uses" or purposes of this law, whether the actual Commandments in Exodus 20 or the 613 laws of Judaism or Jesus' Greatest Commandment. At least once he wrote of a "third use." The first use of the law, according to Luther, is to order creation; the second is to lead us to knowledge of sin; and the third is to offer a pattern for our daily life in Christian community.

In Luther's first use of the law, the law orders creation; it provides structure to human community. It exists to maintain external discipline so that we may live in community. An example of this first use of the law is legislation about automobile traffic. A stop sign or a speed limit or a yellow dotted line provides external discipline so that we may drive safely in community, at least most of the time.

In Luther's second use of the law, the law "drives us to Christ." It leads us to knowledge of our sin; it reveals our sinfulness, our inability to live fully. It convicts us through conscience. When we hear the Ten Commandments—or Jesus' Greatest Commandment, we become painfully aware of how short

we fall. We recognize our failure to obey God. Realizing that we, on our own, cannot keep the Commandments, we are thrown on the mercies of God.

Luther made clear how—and how not—to hear the Ten Commandments. What they are not is checklist or ruler. First, they are not a checklist of laws which gain righteousness if you keep them. Nor are they a ruler to measure progress toward heaven. They're not like a day-planner or an app in which you record, each day, how successful you are in keeping them.

Well, let's see... I haven't made any idols today. I haven't spoken God's name in vain. I didn't work on Sunday. Today I honored my parents. I didn't murder or commit adultery or steal or lie or covet. I guess I've done pretty well today. God must be really proud of me.

No, for Martin Luther the Ten Commandments are not a checklist to prove your goodness.

Neither are they a ruler by which you may smack yourself or a fellow believer on the knuckles—or rate your neighbor as lower on the Commandment Scale than you, in order to move yourself higher—or minimize the mistakes you have made. Here are some examples of misusing the Commandments, one example for each Commandment.

YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME. I don't worship idols, what a silly thing to say. I believe in God, and I love Jesus. What do you mean, I have another God? What? Nicotine?

YOU SHALL NOT TAKE THE LORD'S NAME IN VAIN. I haven't been praying enough lately (I know I should be speaking God's name more often by turning to God in prayer), but at least I don't use that foul language like my brother.

REMEMBER THE SABBATH DAY. I'm pretty good at this one! I go to church five out of six Sundays, but my husband never does; he either plays golf or binge-watches *The Simpsons*.

HONOR YOUR PARENTS. My Mom called to ask me to come over this weekend, but I'm so busy. I'm always there for my parents. I send them gifts for birthdays, Christmas, Valentine's Day—and cards on Hallowe'en, Thanksgiving, Easter, and Mother's and Father's Days. What more do they want? Right now I have so many important things to do; I don't have time to spend with them.

YOU SHALL NOT KILL OR COMMIT ADULTERY OR STEAL OR LIE OR COVET. I know I sometimes have lustful thoughts—or hateful feelings, and sometimes I yell at my kids. Sometimes I tell little lies or experience jealousy over someone else's good fortune, but, you know, I've never murdered anyone or cheated on my partner or committed perjury or shoplifted. Thank God I'm not a criminal.

No, for Martin Luther the Ten Commandments are not a checklist of actions to earn our own righteousness—or a measuring stick either to beat ourselves up or to find ourselves better than others—or to minimize the mistakes we have made.

In his treatise entitled, "How Christians Should Regard Moses," Luther rejects using the law, which he nicknames "Moses," as a means to prove our righteousness or to access God's love. In the realm of the kingdom of God, in the place where God reigns, Luther taught, the Commandments are as "refuse." They are useless. In his explanation of the Ten Commandments, he writes: "Moses has nothing

to do with us.... We will not have Moses as ruler or lawgiver any longer. Moses is dead. His rule ended when Christ came.”

For Luther—and for all of us who stand in his tradition—the Ten Commandments cannot be read in a way that suggests that following them earns salvation. They cannot be used for purposes of self-justification or self-judgment—or judgment of others. In fact, for Luther, the Ten Commandments—and the whole law—have nothing to do with salvation. They are neither a rule-book, nor a measuring stick, nor a checklist, nor an instrument of salvation.

Because salvation is a gift, not a wage. A gift of God, not a salary from God. A free gift for God’s people, not a prize for good behavior. A gift which is dependent not upon our earning it or receiving it, but rather upon God’s grace. Accordingly, the Ten Commandments are useless for salvation. They are, in Luther’s words, as “refuse” in any attempt to earn God’s love. There is nothing you can do to earn God’s grace. Nor is there anything that you can do to cause God to give you—or to withdraw—grace from you.

What, then, are the Ten Commandments, for people who have received God’s grace? Of what use are they to those who know God’s love in Jesus Christ? How are we to hear the Commandments as Luther did, as the “Word of God for God’s people” and as a “public sermon from heaven”? Luther writes, “The Ten Commandments are a mirror of our life, in which we can see wherein we are lacking.” Hear that again: “The Ten Commandments are a mirror of our life, in which we can see wherein we are lacking.”

This is Luther’s “third use of the law.” For you and for me, for all those who follow Jesus, the Ten Commandments—the law—are not useful for salvation or for judging self or others, but they may be useful for daily living. They may assist you, as a “mirror of [your] life,” to grow in righteousness. Once you know, as Luther taught in the Small Catechism, that you “cannot by [your] own understanding or effort believe in God or live as God’s [child],” you can believe—and you can live as God’s child, by God’s gift of the Holy Spirit. Once God makes you God’s own in baptism, God invites you to live in justice and righteousness. Then and only then do the Ten Commandments become a tool for right living. Once you have received God’s love, you may choose to live as God’s child, according to the Commandments. Once you are claimed by God, God expects you to live as God’s witness in the world—and God gives you the Commandments as a mirror to assist you, in reflecting on how to live, and in asking for forgiveness when you have failed.

And you will fail. I will fail. You may have the Commandments memorized. You may know the Catechism by heart. You may know that you are already saved by God’s grace and that keeping the commandments won’t save you. You may be mindful that you already have the gift of salvation, that you are already made right with God, that you are already claimed in the waters of baptism and reclaimed at the table of communion. You may be quite aware that you “cannot by [your] own understanding or effort believe in Jesus or come to him,” as Luther writes in the catechism. You may also know that, having received the gift of God’s grace, you are compelled to share it with others—and that the Commandments may guide you in doing so. Nevertheless, no matter how deep your knowledge or your awareness or your insight, you will fail. You will fail in keeping the Commandments.

In fact, you will fail every day. So will I. You and I fail in keeping the commandments, every day. Every day we turn away from God, and every day God invites us to “return to the Lord, [who is] gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”

You may fail, you may falter, you may fall; you may turn away from God, but here is the good news. When you turn away from God, God will not turn away from you. God, who wants to be in relationship with you, will not give up on you. One of the intern pastors I supervised at Salem was fond of saying, "God cannot bear to be separated from us." This is the good news, dear friends: God wants to be in relationship with you. God will not give up on you, because God cannot bear to be separated from you.

And so God is patient with you when you fail. God steadies you when you falter. God lifts you up when you fall. God invites you to return whenever you go astray. God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, always stands ready to welcome you back. Why? Because God cannot bear to be separated from you. God, who created you, wants to be in relationship with you, so God will not leave you. God will not turn away from you, because God cannot bear to be separated from you.

So hear the Commandments anew this day, dear members of the family of God. Let them be for you not a rulebook or a measuring stick or a checklist or an instrument of salvation, but, instead, a mirror. Look into the mirror of the Ten Commandments; use them as a tool. Hear them. Reflect on them. Lift them up as a pattern of God's desire for life in community. And when you fail, turn around, and return to the Lord, the Lord who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; return to the God who cannot bear to be separated from you. And then look and hear and reflect again.

Here is God's good news for you today, my friends. The Ten Commandments are not multiple choice. But God does have a multiple choice; can you guess what it is? You are! You are the multiple choice, the multiple choice of God! Because God, who cannot bear to be separated from you, chooses you, again and again and again, as often as necessary, you are God's Multiple Choice! AMEN