

I'm wondering when my ongoing journey with Charlton Heston will come to a close? The '10 Commandments' Movie is still competing with the Book of Exodus in my imagination. Charlton, er Moses and I were together at his birth, later at the Exodus event, and now he is coming down the mountain, face aglow, holding the 2 tablets of the law – what we now call the 10 Commandments.

I confess at the outset that preaching on this text was not my first choice. But I have been enjoying the continuing narrative through Genesis and Exodus and there is no doubting that the 10 Commandments are absolutely critical to our understanding of the Judaeo-Christian tradition – and our place within it.

Growing up Presbyterian, we only celebrated Communion 4 times a year – so these were high and holy days. Often, the 10 Commandments would be read in unison reminding us of the First Covenant as we prepared to celebrate the Second – the Covenant of Grace.

In Sunday School we got a star for memorization of the 10 Commandments – no small achievement, I thought. And it was always fun to ask our teacher what 'adultery' and 'covet' meant.

It's a long time ago since I read the novels of Mordecai Richler, but in one of them Dudy Kravitz is having a pang of conscience knowing he is really not keeping all the Commandments. His Uncle took him aside and said, "Look, Dudy, at school if you have a test and get 8 out of 10, you're a star! Even 6 out of 10 is a pass. So if you get to heaven with at least 60% God's not going to throw you out!"

And in our post-modern world where nothing is absolute and all is relative – who needs commandments anyway?

I had a wake-up call one day, though. I was a Chaplain at the University in Lesotho and, honestly, didn't have much to do. There was an Anglican Seminary there and the dean asked me to teach a course on Mark which I accepted eagerly. One day we were looking at "Jesus and the Law" and I made reference to the 10 Commandments, assuming there would be little to add to their knowledge. But a number of them started to complain: basically, they didn't like these laws, they were sick and tired of all laws – including God's. I was incredulous, so I asked, "Well, what about "You shall not murder? Surely, we can agree on that one?" One of the students looked at me and said, "You've never been desperate, have you?"

This student was a wanted person in South Africa in the dying years of Apartheid. He hated the laws that ruled his life and made him less than a full human being. Resistance to those laws could take one to desperate places.

I still think about that student whenever I read that Commandment.

These commandments were given for living in the real world. As someone commented, "They are not meant for contemplation but for action." Our world has changed in many ways over the centuries, but it is still a world where the faithful people of God face the real temptations of idolatry, self-interest, and the desire to hit back, get even, take your share. Living our faith is not for the faint of heart!

But here's a question: *Can keeping the Law also become an idolatry?*

It seemed to have been the case with Paul. In his own estimation he was blameless before God.

Think about it! Standing before everyone and saying '*My life has been blameless. I have never sinned!*' This smacks of more than a little arrogance. That is why Paul's conversion was so dramatic. He literally died to the old and was born to a new life. It could not have been easy. All the old securities were gone – he was no longer a prince among the blessed but a blind pauper being lead to a person he did not know.

Now Paul counts his past glories as rubbish! The treasure, the joy of his life is experiencing the grace of God in the person of Jesus. Liberation!

Grace – the unearned gift of new life!

Faith – also a gift, the way to live the life God desires for us.

We keep the law of God not because we have to, but because we want to.

Still, the Law was a burden to the poor and oppressed in Jesus' time.

The Law became judgment upon the life and teachings of Jesus, so he had to be killed.

The Church by the 16th century was based on Laws that rewarded the Popes and Princes and oppressed the poor and unlearned. It was Luther, Calvin and others who rediscovered the liberation of grace, the blessing of a personal relationship with Jesus.

The Law can protect, it can also imprison.

We see in the growing authoritarianism around the world, the imposition of laws that deny freedom. We see elites who think they live above the Law and call the rest of us fools and suckers.

We see minority communities pushing against the Law. Black Lives Matter, Indigenous resistance in Canada and the Americas in general.

Laws that protect wealth but not flora and fauna – not the poor and oppressed.

There is no easy way out of this conundrum. We need the Law for a stable society.

We need Law for a Church to function properly.

But let us be aware of those who are desperate, for whom Law can be a prison.

And let us remember Jesus and Paul and St. Francis: we bear our burdens in love and faith. We oppose oppression with love, courage and faith. Judgement is God's.

God's Law, good law, brings order, protects freedom, limits power, and protects the least, the lost and the lowly.

We resist those who use law – even God's Law - to favour friends and oppress enemies.

Delving into the Scriptures Jesus found the balance Israel had neglected. The whole Law can be summed up like this:

Love God with your whole heart, mind, soul and strength; love your neighbour as yourself.

And, may grace abound!