

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: October 11, 2020  
Sermon: "A Ten Commandments  
Conversation with God"  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Alida In today's sermon, David will look at several of the Ten Commandments as a useful guide to any election.

The Ten Commandments were given by God to Moses just at the point when the Jewish people were trying to figure out how to be a nation.

Here are some of those Commandments, each followed by a little "tongue-in-cheek" commentary, imagining someone hearing them for the first time.

***"Thou shalt not covet anything."***

David: But there's stuff I want! Heck, things I need, I mean it!

Alida: Then work harder, or more, or save. Or be patient. Or grow up. But don't lust after, don't drool over, don't covet. Someday you'll thank me.

Alida: ***"Thou shalt not lie."***

David: Not even a little lie? A white lie? Even to make someone feel better?

Alida: Don't kid yourself. A lie only makes you feel better. For a minute.

Alida: ***"Thou shalt not steal."***

David: What about everyone else? Crooks? Thieves? Fraudsters? Scam artists?

Alida: I tell them the same. And I'm telling you, don't be one of them.

Alida: ***"Thou shalt not kill."***

David: (Silence) ah . . . well . . . but . . . I mean . . . except for . . .

Alida: Don't kill hopes. Don't kill spirit. Don't kill opportunities. Don't kill joy. Don't kill . . . people.

Alida: ***"Honor your mother and father."***

David: Agreed. That doesn't mean obey, right? Just honor. Be nice to. Take care of? Agreed.

Alida: Thank you.

Alida: ***"Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy."***

David: Can we move the Sabbath to Tuesday? There's so much to do on Sunday! I haven't got time for . . .

Alida: Really? You want to finish that sentence? You haven't got time for . . . Me? God?

Alida: ***"Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain."***

David: But "Gol dang it" sounds so silly!

Alida: The way you use God's name doesn't sound silly! O.K., think of the last three times you used God's name not in prayer. Proud of that? Don't waste my name.

Alida: And God spoke of all these words. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. Thou shalt not make any graven image of me. Or you're in big trouble."

David: Nothing? No big statue? No little painting? I mean, it would be nice, tasteful. Wait till you see Michelangelo's "Pieta"! Or Caravaggio. Oh, and the Sistine Chapel. You'll love it!

Alida: No! Nothing. No thing.

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I've been preaching since Nixon ran for president, so I have 13 presidential elections I had to wade through. In the old days you had to watch what you preached two or three weeks before the election. That's all. Now you have to watch what you preach three or four *years* before an election. "Don't get

political,” people have said to me for 50 years, and then everyone watches carefully for body language and coded words. If I pick up my hymnbook with my right hand, well, you know whom to vote for. If I take a drink of water with my left hand, “Oh, I always knew he was like that!”

Let’s have a little pre-election sermon fun (if anything about this election can be fun). We’re going to use the Ten Commandments as a guide to the election. And you probably think I’ll focus on Commandment #6, in the hope that neither candidate will kill the other. I’m aiming for a little broader perspective than that.

The Ten Commandments came about as God’s guide to being a civilized society. The Jewish people did not begin as a nation. Starting with Abraham, they were a wandering tribe; then an enslaved people in Egypt until Moses led them to freedom. On the way to the Promised Land to what would become Israel, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. Those Commandments fall into two categories: how to get along with God and how to get along with people.

Israel was about to become a nation; they were establishing a society, they would be choosing leaders. So with the Ten Commandments, God was giving some ground rules. First, for priorities. Second, for civic life. And most of them, if we stretch our imagination a little bit, most of them are good advice any time we’re picking a leader.

The first bunch have to do with God:

Number 1, “You shall have no other gods before me,” says God.

Number 2, “You shall not make any graven image. Don’t make God into an idol.”

Number 3, “You shall not take the name of God in vain.”

Number 4, “Remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy.”

You may remember the comedian Chevy Chase; when he was on “Saturday Night Live,” he’d come out on the stage and declare, “I’m Chevy Chase, and you’re not.”

The first four Commandments are God’s version: “I’m God, and you’re not.” Don’t make me into something. Don’t shape me. Don’t try to limit me. God is saying, “I’m always more than you can imagine.”

“I’m God, and you’re not,” And you’re going to show that by not turning me into a piece of wood or stone or by tossing my name around like a lucky rabbit’s foot; and by reserving one day a week—a Sabbath Day—as a day just for us,” God says. You know how married couples have learned to schedule a “date night” as a way to keep their spark alive? It’s a way of saying, “You’re important

to me." That's God's idea with the Sabbath. Let's have a planned, scheduled date each week, God says, to keep our spark alive!

I grew up in a house at a time when this stuff was still taken seriously. The Sabbath, Sunday, it was for God: Church, Sunday School, family time, quiet time. I never bought a Sunday paper till I was an adult. I couldn't play Sunday sports for the longest time. And, oh, my! We could not take God's "name in vain," in no way. That was a biggie. God's name is Holy. It's not to be tossed about, exploited, used as a vulgarity, turned into a curse.

Of course, we kids tried variations. Some silly, like "Jesus Christ peanut butter." Putting God's name in it made it sound adult and emphatic, but we hoped adding the "peanut butter" would get us off the hook with God and with our parents. Some were meant to approximate the real thing, like "Gosh darn it" instead of, well, you know; or "Geeeee," or the seemingly harmless "Gee whiz." But they were "stand-ins" for "Jesus." We all knew it; we all knew what we were trying to get away with. So in my house, no "Geeeee," not even a "Gee whiz."

When I went off to prep school, our lunches and dinners were formal affairs, and each meal began with a student-led prayer. Most prayers ended with a "for Christ's sake, Amen," said with an air of respect. But we competed with one another to get as close to a curse as possible. "For Christ's sake, Amen" became "for Chrissake," and then adding a tone and attitude, "for Chrissake!" Trying so earnestly to break one of the Ten Commandments, a lesser one, we thought, and yet have "plausible deniability."

But these four Commandments have a single purpose that is really useful as we come closer to Election Day. Don't let anything else or anyone else think they're God, act like God, or be treated like God. Nothing and no one is a stand-in for God.

Our human pre-election application of this can be "Don't put anyone on a pedestal. Don't make anyone into an idol." We people, we are always in a rush to make someone into a hero, to elevate them; everyone is the next great superstar up on a pedestal; people even mimic bowing down to their favorite idol. Only to discover later on, their hero wasn't so heroic, their idol was made of clay.

Remember O. J. Simpson? One of the greatest college and NFL football superstars of all time until he may or may not have murdered his wife, followed by a bizarre escape, a bizarre trial, a bizarre life. Fans all across America started to rethink the word "hero." Does carrying a football make you a hero? What puts a person on a pedestal? Whom should we bow down to? These four Command-

ments are God's reminder: humans are human. Don't worship them; don't idolize them.

Let's look at "Thou shalt not bear false witness," which is simplified to "Don't lie." But that may miss the point. Scholars tell us that this Commandment really is about lying in an *official* capacity. Society can't function; legal structures can't work if people can lie willy-nilly. This is why we make people swear an oath in court; this is why we have perjury laws. If your word means nothing, our societal relationships, our interactions in the community, fall apart.

Can you get up in the morning and tell the truth all day long? My father was my pastor growing up. I heard him preaching a thousand times. One has always stood out; it was called "The White Lie." This point was—and he lived by it—there's no such thing as a "white" lie. Every lie is a glimpse into a person's character. God is telling Israel, hey, you want your country to work? You want your businesses to prosper? You want your neighborhood to be good? Tell the doggone truth. Or else no one will trust you about anything.

Let's tackle "Thou shall not kill." Once America decided not to let Aaron Burr be president, we haven't had a real killer in the White House. Although, come to think of it, Teddy Roosevelt must have killed a few in his "Rough Rider" days down in Cuba. Ah, but there's the rub. That was war, in battle, mano a mano. Maybe that doesn't count.

As you can imagine, every Bible scholar, Church preacher, religious professional has turned all the Ten Commandments inside out, looking for exceptions and nuances. Like with "Thou shall not bear false witness," maybe that's not about lying to save face or to get out of a jam. Just don't lie *officially*. I don't buy that either. And with "Thou shalt not kill," plenty of folks say it really means, "Thou shalt not *murder*." But self-defense is O.K., war is O.K., collateral damage is O.K., executions are O.K., accidents are O.K.

That gets to be a lot. Why not take God at his word: don't kill. That's God's preference, standard, hope. The world would be better off if nobody killed. And, of course, we can all imagine necessary killings: just wars, self-defense, stopping a violent crime in action. But God, being God, is allowed to state God's preference: Don't kill. When we elect presidents and congresspeople, we are electing those who will decide, especially about war. Big wars. Little wars. Skirmishes. People get killed.

We often talk about electing a person who will "have a finger on the nuclear button," the one person with the power to start a nuclear war. More likely, we are electing a person who orders our men and women into battle, with their fingers on the triggers and buttons, their lives forever changed by killing or

being killed. Every president in my lifetime has called that the most daunting responsibility, to send our young people into "harm's way." We look for someone wise, judicious, a person of patience *and* strength, a person of faith *and* action to bear that daunting responsibility.

The last Commandment may be the most interesting of all: "Thou shall not covet," and it goes on to list everything from your neighbor's spouse to your neighbor's things. And I define "covet" by the amount of drool hanging from your lips as you consider something you want. To covet something is to want something so badly that you'll do anything, anything, *anything* to get it. Say anything. Hurt anyone.

My guess is coveting is at the root of half the Commandments. Killing. Stealing. Adultery. Lying. Why does any of that happen? You want something so badly, maybe you'll lie for it, maybe you'll cheat for it, maybe you'll kill for it. You want it, and you won't let anything stop you: ethics, morality, truth, reality—out the window. All that matters is that you get what you want. And nothing and nobody will stand in your way.

Let's admit it, we all have something we want but can't get. Maybe not now. Maybe not ever. Me? An apartment in Prague. And one in Greenwich Village. I always wanted to be married to Lauren Bacall my whole life, but our marriages kept us apart. You see, most of us have brakes on our wants. Call it ethics or morals.

God's Ten Commandments were a first universal attempt at brakes. Don't put anything first above God. Don't want something so badly you'll do anything. Don't fudge the truth. Don't treat life cheaply.

We often talk about American government as a "system of checks and balances." That way, no one part of government can get out of control. That's the idea behind these 3,000-year-old Commandments. God's checks and balances, keeping us in check and well balanced. In our personal life. In our national life.

The example I always use when teaching this in Bible Study is "Thou shall not steal." Imagine how your life would be different if you never had to worry about stealing. Not your car. Not your house, not your wallet. Not your identity. Nobody trying to hack into your account. No surveillance cameras everywhere. No locked doors. No theft insurance. No worrying about strangers in the neighborhood. Our world, our daily life would be transformed by adherence to just one Commandment.

That's what God was up to with the Ten Commandments. It wasn't to take our fun away! It was a way to say, "Hey, you want a great country? You want a great life? You want less stress? You want more joy? You want a good leader? A good nation? A good town? Get your priorities right. With God. With people."

Last week I was up in the Berkshires, writing, and visited with my friend who is a docent at the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, where I was staying. Rockwell is famous for capturing the American spirit, the American ideal, and perhaps no more clearly than his "Four Freedoms," based on a speech by President Franklin Roosevelt. Like the Ten Commandments, the Four Freedoms get to the heart of a good country:

Freedom of speech.  
Freedom of worship.  
Freedom *from* want.  
Freedom *from* fear.

The leaders we choose have the privilege of representing the best of us: the best of our principles, the best of our practices. Our privilege as citizens is to lead them, to inspire them by our best. Amen.

Today's hymn is "God of Grace and God of Glory."

*God of grace and God of glory,  
on your people pour your power;  
crown your ancient Church's story,  
bring its bud to glorious flower.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage  
for the facing of this hour,  
for the facing of this hour.*

*Lo! the hosts of evil round us  
scorn the Christ, assail his ways!  
From the fears that long have bound us  
free our hearts to faith and praise.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage  
for the living of these days,  
for the living of these days.*

*Cure your children's warring madness;  
bend our pride to your control;  
shame our wanton, selfish gladness,  
rich in things and poor in soul.*

*Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,  
lest we miss thy righteous goal,  
lest we miss thy righteous goal.*

*Set our feet on lofty places;  
fill our lives that we may be  
strengthened with all Christ-like graces  
pledges to set all captives free.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage  
lest we fail our call from thee,  
lest we fail our call from thee.*

*Save us from weak resignation  
to the evils we deplore;  
let the search for thy salvation  
be our glory evermore.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,  
serving thee whom we adore,  
serving thee whom we adore.*