

If I were to ask you to help me name the Ten Commandments, could you do that? Was that something you had to memorize in confirmation classes?

Almost all of them are written in the format that says, “Thou shalt not . . .” at least, in our King James Versions they do. They are negative. They prohibit a particular action. Some have to do with our relationship to God, and others have to do with our relationship to each other.

And they’re important. They speak to how we are to live together ethically. But they’re written with negative instructions. Be absent of this. Be absent of that. And those who are legalistic can say, not terribly hard to follow. I mean, we’ve truly never, ever, ever murdered or stolen or coveted our neighbor’s male or female slave or ox! (But that’s primarily because we don’t allow slavery in 2026 and I’ve never had a neighbor who owned an ox that I just had to have!)

These prohibitions remind me of the anti-littering slogans states have. Here in Rhode Island, I see signs that say “Don’t litter our clean Rhodes – r-h-o-d-e-s.” Very clever. Very punny. In Texas, we have “Don’t mess with Texas.” Those slogans have negative commands – don’t toss your trash out of the window of your car.

And I’m very good about following those rules. I even chase napkins that get caught up by the wind and blow away in parking lots. I don’t add to the litter problem.

But has anyone noticed that litter still exists? It does! But I’m not responsible for it if I didn’t cause it, right?

Well, what if we retranslated that road sign and it said, “Keep our Rhodes beautiful?”

If we remove the negative and instead command a positive, then it really changes our obligation, doesn’t it? It now implies that not only are we supposed to avoid littering ourselves, but it also hints that we are supposed to proactively gather litter that we didn’t create. We’re supposed to both avoid causing harm and serve our community.

That kind of positive command opens up the potential to expand the responsiveness, to move from individualistic morality of avoiding specific sins and toward communal service and the common good, and that’s what we should be doing as Jesus followers as well.

Paul demonstrates this in Romans chapters 12 and 13. Up to this point, he has been writing an absolute beauty of a theological document. He has tackled the issues of

good versus evil, sin and grace. He has espoused the ideas of justification and faith. He has testified to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and lectured on Holy Spirit. And he has taught on the specific history of the Jewish people and their covenant with God while expanding the definition to include the non-Jewish people who are following Jesus Christ. It's a massively complicated document he's writing. And suddenly, he switches gears. These words don't sound like anything he's written before. They're these short and sweet instructions to the church. These are Paul's words from chapters 12 and 13.

⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ Instead, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Phew, what a mouthful that was. It's as if Paul looked at the Ten Commandments—those big, carved-in-stone, thunder-and-lightning instructions—and said, "Okay, now let's talk about what this looks like on a Tuesday."

The Ten Commandments give us the broad strokes: Don't lie. Don't steal. Don't kill. Don't make idols. Honor your mother and father.

But Paul zooms in and says, all of these things are summed up by loving, so just . . . love. He gives us the everyday version. The "how you treat the barista," "how you respond to your coworker's snippy email," "how you talk about people when they're not

in the room” version. The ten commandments are the foundation Paul studied as a Jewish authority figure; he was hyper fixated on legalistic rules about how to keep the sabbath and how to be ritually clean. He missed the forest for the trees. But the commandment to love is the commandment Jesus imparted to Paul when he literally saw the light, and it changed his perspective on absolutely everything.

Biblical scholar Beverly Gaventa, whose grandson Charlie we got to hang out with at the youth conference this summer, says that Romans 12 is Paul’s “portrait of a community shaped by grace.” Not rules for earning God’s love, but habits that grow out of having received God’s love. Grace first, behavior second. Always.

And that’s important, because if we read Paul’s list as a checklist, like the Ten Commandments, we are doomed. “¹² Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; pursue hospitality to strangers.” Phew, that’s a lot.

But Paul isn’t scolding. He’s describing what happens when love becomes the organizing principle of our communal lives as a church. “Owe no one anything,” he says in chapter 13, “except to love one another.” It’s the one debt that never gets paid off, the one obligation that never expires.

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright puts it this way: “Love is the fulfillment of the law because love is what the law was aiming at all along.” The Ten Commandments weren’t meant to be a fence to determine who was in and who was out, or a complete list of behaviors; they were meant to be a doorway into a life shaped by love.

And what does that look like?

It looks like choosing kindness even when irritation feels easier. It looks like refusing to let someone else’s anger dictate your own. It looks like remembering that every person you meet is carrying something heavy—even if you can’t see it.

It looks like genuine love. Not sentimental love. Not “be nice and smile politely” love. But the kind of love that acts. The kind of love that can hold a community together.

If the Ten Commandments say: “Do not bear false witness,” Paul says: “Let love be genuine.” Tell the truth, but tell it with tenderness.

If the Commandments say: “Do not steal and do not covet,” Paul says: “Contribute to the needs of the saints.” Don’t take what isn’t yours; instead, give what you can.

If the Commandments say: “Honor your father and mother,” Paul says: “Outdo one another in showing honor.” Expand the circle. Honor everyone.

If the Commandments say: “Do not kill,” Paul says: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil.” Don’t escalate harm. Deescalate. Interrupt it. “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Overcome evil with good. That reminds me of what MLK said, “Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.”

Paul isn’t replacing the commandments. He’s retranslating them through the language of Jesus’ love. Reading the other side of the coin. Instead of the do not’s, he’s offering the do’s.

So maybe the best way to summarize Paul’s teaching is this: The Ten Commandments are the big highway signs that say Don’t Litter! Romans 12 and 13 are the messages that say, “Keep our coastline beautiful! Care for the marine life. Do not judge the tourists who leave trash behind.” And in response, we organize a beach clean-up on Saturday morning and advocate for more trash receptacles and recycling and less single-use plastic because we care about our environment and we know that even though we didn’t leave the mess ourselves, we should do something about it for the sake of our community.

I’ll go back to Dr. Gaventa’s comment. These verses are about envisioning a community shaped by grace. Not heavy burdens. Not a checklist of things we’ve avoided in our individualistic lives, but practical, tangible examples of love born out in a family of faith — genuine, persistent, sometimes messy, always transformative love. And that’s a beautiful thought.

I don’t believe God ever intended for us to live a life of independent avoidance of sin in order to win God’s favor. Instead, we were meant to practice self-sacrificing love and that love was going to stretch us and push us to see God’s image in one another. And that’s exactly what we’re going to talk about next week.

Amen.