

# **Sermon on Wednesday 12 June 2024**

## **by Rev. Bill Church**

*Readings: Deuteronomy 5. 6-21 & Matthew 5. 17-24*

### **Commandments**

The first reading is instantly familiar. It lists the Ten Commandments.

Traditional country churches often display prominently the Ten Commandments painted on two boards, mirroring the two tablets Moses brought down from Sinai.

If you look at the Ten Commandments:  
8 are purely negative – you shall not....  
1 is mixed – do and do not....  
1 is positive – you shall....

And some of the commandments are an object lesson about not being too specific.

I doubt many in Hertford are tempted to break the requirement in the tenth commandment not to covet your neighbour's donkey. But there may be a good few who are tempted to covet their neighbour's Mercedes.

And it is notable that only two commandments give any reason.

The second commandment (you shall not make or bow down before idols) gives as the reason that God is a jealous God who will not tolerate that.

And the fourth (you shall observe the Sabbath and allow no work that day) has one reason in Exodus (the usual text for the Commandments) and another in Deuteronomy (which almost exactly repeats them).

In Exodus, there is a theological reason – because God rested on the seventh day of creation.

In Deuteronomy, there is a social reason – because you were slaves in Egypt, implying a concern for those who would otherwise be doing the work and a concern that slaves be treated fairly.

Depending on which reason you think underlies the Commandment, the way you work out exact details of what you can and cannot do on the Sabbath will differ.

The tension between detail and purpose was one of the things which led to arguments between Jesus and the Pharisees.

To give them the benefit of the doubt, the Pharisees genuinely tried to work out what God wanted and tried to live by those rules. Hence rules about the Sabbath, about ritual washing and about tithes and so on.

One problem was they were perhaps a bit too keen on checking up on whether other people were keeping to the rules as well.

And another problem was that they tended to ask WHAT while Jesus preferred to ask WHY.

So, Jesus commended the shorter twofold commandment – Love God and love your neighbour.

And he urged his hearers to ask themselves – what is the spirit, the reason lying behind this commandment?

So, if we follow the discipline of self-examination at the end of each day....

We could say - well, I have not murdered anyone today, so that's OK then.

But we ought to ask – have I been so angry with someone that I wanted to do violence to them?

We could say – well I have not stolen today, I have not shoplifted at Tesco, so that's OK then.

But we ought to ask - have I done something that takes good things away from others? Or have I failed to do something that would bring them good things?

Of course, that is actually more difficult than just following the rules.

Hence Jesus' exhortation that our righteousness should exceed that of the Pharisees.

Which is also more likely to lead to the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.