

Ten Commandments for Fun? – Lent 3, 2021

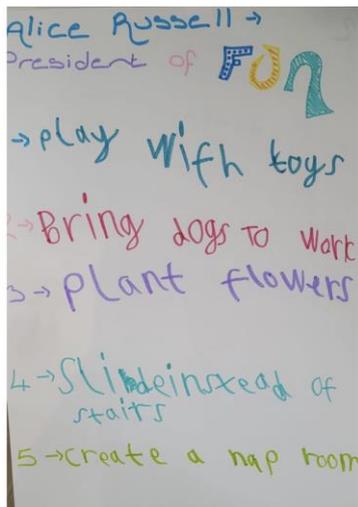
St Matthew's, Westminster

Many of us have spent the last year adapting to new way of living and working. It has been a challenging and strange time for nearly all of us, and especially hard on those who have become isolated, cut off from loved ones and their usual support networks. My own children are in their late teens and early twenties so home schooling and university studies from home, whilst not ideal, have been manageable. But one of the groups of people I have the most sympathy for are those who are attempting to work from home whilst home-schooling with young children. This week I was delighted to hear a story of how one employer was still showing creativity and empathy even after a year of all this strangeness.

A team leader was in a Zoom or MS Teams meeting with a team member. Her 5 year old daughter, Alice, kept interrupting wanting her mum's attention. So the team leader paused the meeting to offer Alice an interview and then appointed her as 'President of Fun'. Alice was given the task of devising a 5 point 'Fun at Work' action plan. This is what she came up with:

1. Play with toys
2. Bring dogs to work
3. Plant flowers
4. Slides instead of stairs
5. Create a nap room.

Isn't that great?! So much better than many of the 5 point plans and organisational strategies I have heard over the years. If you think about it has lots of great elements: recreation, care for the environment, step free access (at least for going down) and even a rule of rest to help with work-life balance.



(Ricky Somal via Twitter @RickSomal 2:49 pm 3rd March 2021)

I wonder if you have ever noticed how many books there are which offer us numbered plans that promise to help us flourish?

7 Habits of Highly Effective People (Covey)

10 Steps to Success (Anderson and many others!)

12 Rules of Life (Peterson)

18 Rules for Happiness (Moore)

Jews and Christians have their own in the Ten Commandments. These are, as it were, our 10 Rules for Life and Happiness. That is not probably how you see them. You may not have thought about them very much before as they are not such a prominent element in our churches and our public worship as they once were. There was a time when every church had a board with the Ten Commandments displayed and they were read as part of the public worship. Just as a little aside, I learnt this week that, when it was built, St Mary le Strand was the only church in London that did not have a table of the commandments displayed.

These days we are more used to hearing summaries of the Law. One summary which was used at the time of Jesus and that Jesus himself cited was "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength. And love your neighbour as yourself." (Mark 12.29-31)

Another summary that I once heard of the Ten Commandments was: Have a day of a week and don't kill anyone. The implication being that if you don't take a day off a week you might end up killing someone!

The most important thing to realise about the Ten Commandments is that God creates a covenant relationship with his people, and keeping the commandments is part of their response in love and joy. Keeping the commandments maintains right relationship between God and people, but it is not what creates those relationships. It is God's faithfulness that makes and holds it all. The other thing that is essential to remember is that this was corporate and not individual. If you as Jew broke one of the commandments it did not stop you being a Jew, because this is about the relationship of the whole people to God. Just to emphasise something I said a moment ago, because as Christians we so often misunderstand this: the law was not a burden it was a joyful response of love. This comes out clearly in the Psalms when the psalmist talks of meditating on the law being his delight (e.g. Psalm 1.2; Psalm 40.8; Psalm 119).

Many people (perhaps us included) see the Ten Commandments as a restrictive set of rules; a list of thou shalt nots... They can seem very at odds with our contemporary attitudes and rules of life which emphasise positive thinking as the way to fulfilment and happiness. It is, of course, possible to rewrite the prohibitive commandments as positive instructions. For example, 'You shall not murder' could be framed as 'You shall preserve life', or, 'You shall not commit adultery', could be, 'Be faithful in your relationships'. They all have a positive angle.

However, there is an interesting link here with some contemporary approaches to the pursuit of human happiness. Setting out a personal plan for making yourself happy can be surprisingly elusive. Think of the many examples of people who think that becoming rich or famous is what will lead to happiness, only to find that once they achieve their goal, life is hollow and empty. So at least one approach to being happy is to stop doing the things that make you unhappy. The list of 'thou shalt nots' in the Ten Commandments covers most of the things that can mess up our human relationships. Stopping doing the things that harm us creates the safe space in which well-being, flourishing and happiness can emerge.

But the greatest difference between the Ten Commandments and all the other numbered plans for personal effectiveness, success or happiness is this. The Ten Commandments, the whole Law and the Prophets, and, indeed the teachings of Jesus and writings of the apostles are not about our individual happiness or self-actualisation. They are about right-relationship in community. The way to human flourishing and well-being is in communion: what we need is friendship, trust, belonging, compassion, love.

We don't need more personal effectiveness and individual success; to flourish and thrive (as well as to survive) we need co-operation, contribution to a greater whole, being part of something bigger than us, a seeking of the common good. We need each other to be ourselves.

God in Christ, calls us into relationship with him and creates a new community of love, the church, which is the body of Christ. We are members of that body through adoption and grace not through our own achievements or striving. As Archbishop Stephen Cottrell has put it "the Christian Way offers something strange and beautiful and different about belonging to each other... it is about inhabiting the earth in community with others.'

Whether for us as disciples or us as a church community, five point plans, three word slogans, 18 step strategies are only of any use if they help to build up the body of Christ. The test of any of these things is are we now more loving, welcoming, caring, generous, forgiving, prayerful. As we become more of those things we will find that we are more fulfilled and we and the church may even be more fun.