

I

On the day when we brought our first child home from the hospital, after I was finished buckling him into his baby capsule, he looked like we were about to launch him to the moon rather than drive him a few miles down the road.

But sometime within the last year or so, we reached a parenting milestone. Now, when our family travels by car, all three of our children can open the door, get themselves into their seats, and buckle themselves. This has reduced the time required to go somewhere by approximately five hours, and Amy and I are no longer required to become human contortionists or to hold advanced degrees in mechanical engineering to properly secure our children in a vehicle.

As a small boy, I can vividly remember standing on the front seat of my dad's pickup truck, with my hands gripping the dash, while we went cruising down the highway.

II

But times change, and we've since learned that properly securing all occupants in a vehicle greatly reduces the potential for harm in the event of a crash, and now every state in the union enforces some form of seat belt law.

But of course, when the automobile was first invented, the seat belt laws that are now on the books in all 50 states did not exist. Nor were there such things as speed limits, or laws

against driving under the influence, nor was there any kind of requirement that a driver be trained and licensed to operate a motor vehicle. The laws that are on the books regarding how every single person operates or rides in a motor vehicle were developed in response to a particular historical event – the invention and widespread adoption of the automobile.

III

And the same thing is true about another, much older set of laws, what have come to be known collectively as The Ten Commandments – they were developed in response to a particular historical event; in this case, not the invention of a new technology, but rather, the liberation of a people.

The book of Exodus tells us that for 400 years, God's people lived as slaves in the land of Egypt. They cried out in their bondage, and God rescued them from the hands of the Egyptians by leading them through the Red Sea.

But in the wilderness, there was no food, and no water. And when God's people cried out in hunger and thirst, God provided for their daily bread.

And only after their safety had been secured, only after their physical needs had been met, did God give them the law. First came deliverance. Then came provision. And then came the law.

God did not say, "Here are my laws, follow them, and if you do, I'll rescue you." God did not say, "Here are my laws, follow them and if you do, I'll

attend to your physical needs.” Grace comes first. It always has, thanks be to God, it always will.

In the Book of Exodus, and in fact, right up to this very present moment, God is on a mission to transform people. First Peter puts it this way: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

The Ten Commandments did not fall out of the sky and land with a thud on the lawn. They do not represent a contract for the services of the Almighty. No, the Ten Commandments are the framework around which God builds this work of transformation. The Ten Commandments are the road map by which God transforms people into a holy nation, a royal priesthood, God’s beloved, chosen people.

Consequently, in Deuteronomy, Moses instructs the people of God to keep the commandments not on the wall or on the lawn, but in their hearts. He says, “Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

For the rest of the summer, we are going to have an in-depth conversation about these ten words that form the framework around which God transforms God’s people. And the first of these ten words is this: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.”

The first words of the law are not “Thou shalt” or “Thou shalt not.” The first words of the law are words of relationship: I am the Lord your God.

IV

I am the Lord *your* God. My sister, God has delivered you and provided for you not because of anything you’ve said or done or not said or done, but simply because the Lord is *your* God. My brother, God has delivered you and provided for you not because of who you are or where you come from, but simply because of who God is: the Lord *your* God.

And so the first thing God says in this framework of the law is about relationship: I am the Lord *your* God; you shall have *no other gods* before me.

The Israelites had lived under Egyptian rule for four centuries. They knew well the pantheon of Egyptian gods. But this commandment is not just a prohibition against the worship of foreign deities. You shall have *no other gods* before me.

So you shall not place any earthly ruler, any king, emperor, or president,

or devotion to any ideology, before the Lord your God.

You shall not place any earthly relationship, no matter how close or intimate, before the Lord your God.

You shall not place any sports team, any hobby, any leisure activity, before the Lord your God.

And here is a simple way to do a self-evaluation. When you get home today, pull out your calendar and pull up your bank statement or whatever it is you use to track your spending. Time and money are two gifts from God that we steward every single day. What does your use of God's gifts of time and money say about your relationship with the Lord your God?

V

The Ten Commandments were not given to us to be a burden. They were given to us as words to live by. They were given as a framework for building a more just and moral society.

There's been lots of noise in recent years about the appropriateness or lack thereof of the Ten Commandments in the courthouse and the statehouse. But perhaps we need to spend less time fussing about what goes on the walls in the courthouse and the capitol buildings, and more on what goes on in the spaces of our own hearts, on what goes on in the spaces our own homes, and on what goes on in this house.

As has been true from the time of Moses, a family is a collection of individuals. A community is a collection of families. And a nation is a collection of communities. And so the place to begin building a more just and moral nation, a more just and moral community, a more just and moral family, is right here, in the space about the size of your fist, right here in your own heart.

As we make our way through the Ten Commandments this summer, we're going to learn a memory device to help us memorize them in order. So here's our first one. Put your index finger in the air.

That one finger pointing up towards the heavens is our reminder. The first commandment is "You shall have no other gods before me."

The 10 commandments are a gift - a framework for transformation. They are a gift from God who loves us so much, who so wants us to be just and moral beings, that God became incarnate for us in Jesus of Nazareth, whom we call the Christ. They are a gift from God who loves us so much, who so wants to be in relationship with us, that he would go to the cross for us, die for us, be raised again for us, and even now, pray for us.

So may we go this day loving the Lord our God with all our hearts, all our minds, all our souls, and all our strength, and may we love our neighbor as we love ourselves, for on these two hang all the law and the prophets.