

Grounded in Covenant

July 12, 2026

Rev. Jennifer Gleichauf

We don't use the word covenant all that often today. I mean, we do — our church is named Covenant — but how often do we use the word in daily life, outside of that name on the sign? Not much. Except, maybe, for marriage. We still sometimes talk about the covenant of marriage. Hold that thought — we'll come back to it.

Our reading today should be fairly familiar. These days it's hard to have not heard of the Ten Commandments, even if you aren't a church-going person. They keep showing up in the news, because people want to post them in courthouses and classrooms. But I think those fights do the commandments a disservice. It boils them down to a set of rules when they are really so much more than that. This list of ten commandments given by God may be thousands of years old and come from a very different culture, but they are far more than just a list of rules. To understand them better, it is helpful to remember that they were first given to a people at a very particular time in history.

By the time we reach Exodus 20, a lot has already happened. God made a covenant with Noah never again to destroy the earth. God made a covenant with Abraham and Sarah to give them descendants as numerous as the stars — to make of them a people. God kept that promise. The descendants of Abraham became the Israelites — and then they were enslaved in Egypt for four hundred years. Exodus tells the story of how God frees them from Pharaoh, and then tracks their long, uncertain journey toward a promised land.

But Exodus is also a story about identity. Picture it for a moment: this is a people with no fixed address, sleeping in tents, eating manna they didn't plant and can't store past a day. They have no capital city, no courts, no elders whose authority everyone already recognizes, no shared memory of how decisions get made when you're not being told what to do by an overseer with a whip. Not one person in the crowd at the base of the mountain has a living grandparent who remembers freedom. Everyone old enough to remember what it was to choose your own day, your own family, your own worship. They know how to survive Pharaoh's rule. They have no idea how to live without it.

They didn't know how to be a people who made decisions for themselves. In chapter 19, just before our passage, God tells them: "You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." A beautiful promise — but how? How do a few hundred thousand former slaves, camped in a desert with no infrastructure and no template, become a nation? What replaces the whip, the taskmaster, the fear that used to organize their whole day?

How do they become something different than just copying what they saw their enslavers do?

God's answer is the Ten Commandments. Look at how the passage begins — not with "thou shalt," but with a reminder of relationship: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Before a single command is given, God establishes who has done what for whom. Everything that follows is spoken from inside that relationship, not before it. These commandments aren't the price of admission into God's favor. They're the shape of a relationship already begun.

Look, too, at what they actually cover, because it's worth naming: no other gods, no idols, God's name not used carelessly, a Sabbath for rest, honoring parents, no murder, no adultery, no stealing, no false witness, no coveting what belongs to your neighbor. Notice the order — commandments about loving God rightly, then commandments about loving neighbor rightly. Two halves of one covenant. This is the framework for a whole community: how to hold God rightly, and how to hold each other.

It is helpful to think about how these commandments would sound to these newly free people trying to figure out who they were. For example:

Take the command to have no other gods. In Egypt, the Israelites lived under a whole household of gods, and Pharaoh himself was considered one of them, or at least his direct representative. The command to have no other gods was a command that no human ruler gets to stand in God's place again. No new Pharaoh.

Or take the command to keep the Sabbath. A day of rest isn't revolutionary to people who have lived our whole lives with the idea of a weekend. But remember who's receiving this command: people who never had a day off in their lives, because a slave doesn't get to decide when to stop working. Their bodies belonged to someone else's productivity, every day, without exception. And now God says: rest. Not just you — your children, your servants, even your animals, even the foreigner living among you. Everyone gets to stop. For people who had spent generations being told their worth was measured in bricks and quotas, being commanded to rest was as radical as being commanded to worship freely. It said, out loud, for the first time: you are not a tool. You are not the sum of your output. You get to just be, one day in seven, because that is what it means to belong to a God who rested on the seventh day too.

Neither of these commands would have felt like restriction to the people receiving them. These were a whole new framework to build a whole new life on. All this has made me think about the wedding I'm officiating in August, for a member of the youth group at my last church. We've been meeting on Zoom for premarital counseling, and they've decided to write their own vows.

Whenever a couple writes their own vows, I offer them the same guidance: vows are not a list of everything you love about your partner. They're not the place to retell how you met, or name your favorite memory. They're not short-term promises about tasks — who takes out the garbage — or lifestyle promises, like a yearly vacation. Vows are the covenant itself: the basic, long-term promises that become the framework everything else gets built around. *In sickness and in health. For richer, for poorer. For better, for worse.* Not everything a marriage will need — but the backbone you return to, again and again, as you move through a lifetime you can't yet see.

The Ten Commandments function the same way for Israel. At the start of this new relationship, this is their vow, their promise, their covenant with God and with each other.

And here's what's easy to miss: these aren't a "behave or else" list, any more than healthy marriage vows are a leash. Movies and jokes love to portray marriage as a cage — marriage means you can't do what you want to do. But a healthy marriage knows the truth is the opposite. The vows are what let two people trust each other enough to be fully known, fully vulnerable, fully free. You promise "in sickness and in health" so that when illness comes, no one is guessing whether they'll be abandoned. You promise "for richer, for poorer" so when someone loses a job or makes a bad financial decision, you know you will get through it together. The promise isn't the cage. The promise is what makes the freedom possible.

(And when a marriage ends in divorce and two people release each other from the vows — that doesn't mean the vows were a bad foundation. It means we're human, and things don't always go the way we hoped or planned.)

The Ten Commandments do the same work: they aren't God restricting Israel for the sake of restriction. They're the architecture that lets a people belong to God and to each other — the road map from "former slaves" to "a community grounded in covenant and trust."

Professor Rolf Jacobson puts this beautifully: he says the purpose of the law isn't "your best life now," but "your neighbor's best life now." The law isn't about you — it's about your neighbor. God loves your neighbor so much that God gives you the law. And God loves you so much that God gives your neighbor that same law, for your sake.

Think about what that means in practice:

- If you're worried someone might kill you, you spend your life managing your safety.
- If you're consumed by jealousy or suspicion, you close yourself off from the very people trying to love you.

- If you think your neighbor is scheming to steal from you or spread lies about you, you spend your energy staying one step ahead of everyone.

- If you believe everyone else has more than you do, your own wants become a prison you can't leave.

But if you know I'm not trying to kill you, and I know you're not trying to break apart my marriage, and we know our neighbors aren't going to steal from us or lie about us, and we're all able to be grateful for what we have — then we're free. Free to stop spending our lives on fear, and start spending them on each other.

That's what these commandments are for. Not *quid pro quo* — "I'll behave if you behave" — but a rooted trust that lets "I won't kill you" grow into "I am actively looking for ways to help you flourish." When the law moves from transaction to trust, we're freed to care for each other not for what we'll get, but because we already belong to each other.

This covenant is God's invitation to put our ultimate concern where it belongs — with the things, and the people, that matter most.

Of course, none of this is as simple lived out as it looks written down. The very next thing Israel does, after receiving this covenant, is build a golden calf. They break the vow right away. So we are not the first, and won't be the last, to hold this covenant with clumsy hands. What seems black-and-white on the page turns out to be full of gray in the living of it, full of moments we'd like to make an exception for ourselves.

Which means we'll need practice at forgiveness — of ourselves, and of each other — because it isn't a question of if we'll break these vows, but when. We will hurt people, even the people we love most.

But here is where this covenant differs from every human one: this was never God's "first" promise to us. Before the commandments, God had already covenanted with Noah, with Abraham, to stay in relationship no matter what. So even when we turn from the law, ignore it, forget it entirely — God is still there, waiting, still inviting us back into the partnership. These commandments remain the foundation we can return to, the framework we can re-ground ourselves in, again and again.

That's the whole of it, really: not a list to check off, but a trust to grow into, one ordinary decision at a time. May we ground ourselves in that covenant — for God's sake, for our neighbor's sake, and for our own. Amen.