

I've broken all ten

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October 2, 2014

When teaching classes in churches, I occasionally tested students on the [Ten Commandments](#).

Write 'em down. Right now. Start.

No sneaking a peek at the 20th chapter of Exodus. No furtive glances at your neighbor's efforts. No searching the Internet. No asking leading questions of me, the guy giving the pop quiz.

The Ten Commandments are easy to remember. There's only ten, and so you never exceed the need for the readily available opposable thumbs (two) and flexible fingers (eight). Furthermore, even the most verbose of the commandments can be crash-dieted to a reasonable handful of words.

The post-quiz review was enlightening: Which one(s) did you forget?

What order did you put them in?

Did you add a "new" commandment? (In my experience, youth and adults often substituted a variation of the golden rule—treat your neighbor as yourself—for one of the traditional Godly edicts in Exodus.

Isn't #3 all about not using four-letter curses with God's name at the beginning, middle, or end? (Nope, not at all . . . unless you disagree with me! What do you believe #3 means?)

Is killing acceptable during a declared war? Or, to use, Augustine's and Aquinas's theological reasoning, in "a just war?" What's the difference between murder and killing? What if I didn't mean to kill someone? What about killing to save another's life? Is killing a mosquito (or Bambi, the innocent deer) the same as a killing a human?

Why isn't there something about honoring children? (Such a childish question!)

On and on the questions and wonderings and opinions and confusions would go. The Ten Commandments, as ancient as the dirt on Mount Horeb, are remarkably simple to understand. They are also portable, memorable, comprehensive, compatible with diverse faith traditions, as culturally neutral as they are specific to new or different cultures, and a list that is faithfully relevant for each person right here and now.

How many have you broken?

Me? I've broken all ten. I've also kept all ten. I am a sinner. God is a forgiver. I strive for perfection. Perfection is impossible.

Were the Ten Commandments immutable rules? Were they a flexible or an inflexible boundary for relationships? Did they represent holy or holey ordinances? Were all ten divine longings, an almighty dream of the distant future between Creator and creation?

In 2003's *The Pirates of the Caribbean*, the pirate Barbossa [explained](#) to Elizabeth,

*First, your return to shore was not part of our negotiations nor our agreement so I must do nothing. And secondly, you must be a pirate for the pirate's code to apply and you're not. And thirdly, the code is more what you'd call "guidelines" than actual rules.*

That's it. Godly guidelines. Try these commandments, and they'll help you through the day. Take a commandment with a swig of water and aspirin, get some rest, and soon you'll feel better.

What continues to amaze me is how unavoidable each rule is. And I do use the present tense "is" over the past tense "was." I don't believe the commandments are mere guidelines, but they do guide every decision I have ever made. There is nothing that you or I do, regardless of faith tradition—or lack of faith tradition—that isn't encompassed by these ten. Even if you are a card-carrying atheist and X-out out the first four (the ones directly about God), those final six will confront you with what is the best way to live, whether it's a thousand years ago, or in today's Beijing, Baghdad, or Boston.

It is fun to give a pop quiz on the top ten. We forget one or more, we add one or more, we substitute a *this* for a *that*, we precisely order them as printed in Exodus or list them randomly to reveal our own disorder. It's fun and revealing to lobby for an

eleventh commandment: what should be added? It's intriguing to see how people shrink the sentences down to one or two words. (*Do not testify falsely against your neighbor* becomes the blunt *No lies!*)

We can play all day with these familiar commandments. And yet they are the most serious and important part of each day.

I have broken them all because I am but a human. And I try to follow them today, here and now, because I long to be fully human.

Originally posted at [Patten's blog](#)