
One is Plenty

Exodus 20

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 2 2005 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

Do you think you have enough? 'Enough what?' You may say. Enough anything? Do you think you have enough money, for example? Or do you always look longingly through catalogues of expensive goods, and always drive a hard bargain when the sales assistant suggests there may be a little flexibility? Do you think you have enough time, or do you complain that life's too short? Are you always attracted to goods that do things quicker, do you lose your temper at the stop sign when the car in front won't drive ahead when it's their turn and you can't move until they do? Do you think you get enough love, or do you look jealously at couples who seem wrapped up in each other, meticulously count your birthday cards and despair at how few there are, and wonder why small furry animals prefer sitting in other people's laps to purring in yours?

If there's one anxiety most people can share, it's an anxiety about not having enough. It's just as well, because the economy depends on people thinking they need just a little bit more. If the secret got out that men could meet beautiful women without driving sleek new cars, or that families could be civil to one another without a tasty new breakfast cereal, or that it's possible to have sophisticated personal engagements without a highly sophisticated gadget on which to note one's personal engagements, then not only the advertising profession but half of manufacturing industry would go under.

The Ten Commandments dismantle this nagging assumption that there is not enough. Look at the 8th commandment, you shall not steal. Think for a moment about the psychology of stealing. I'm not talking about the people running nursing homes in New Orleans who broke into supermarkets when they ran out of food for their ailing residents. I'm not talking about desperation. I'm talking about the state of mind that says it doesn't matter that I fiddle my personal expenses because Duke's a big institution and it can wear it and anyway it makes up a bit for what they don't pay me. The state of mind that says I have to publish that data, even though it's someone else's research not mine, because I need to get tenure. That's stealing. Stealing is saying there isn't enough in the world and if I'm going to have what I need then someone else is bound to suffer. But God said 'You shall not steal'.

Look at the 4th commandment, remember the Sabbath day. Think about the psychology of working every day. It has to be done, only I can do it, everybody is depending on me, there's not enough time, it's a competitive world out there, if I don't get this contract someone else will, if I put a bit more time in this proposal will be perfect, I'm not clever enough, I can only make up for it with hard work, my parents aren't paying for my education so I can sit around all weekend. Breaking the command to rest is saying there's only one savior in this universe and it's me. There isn't enough time but I might just pull it off. I have to save my career, I have to save the world. I can't stop. But God said 'You shall rest'.

Look at the 7th commandment, you shall not commit adultery. We all know that adultery is more often a symptom than a cause. But the mindset of adultery is simply that one is not enough. By contrast marriage is the great proclamation of that one is plenty. All is focused on a single other – another mind, another imagination, another myriad of experiences and energies and enthusiasms and enjoyments. Could one ever exhaust that person? One other person is always more than enough, when you believe that that person will listen to you until you run out of things to say, when you trust that that person will wait for as long as it takes for you to understand why you are the way you are, when you realise that that person will always impute the best of motives to your actions however clumsy you feel inside. You don't need to grab the biggest piece of cake any more, because you are one body, and her eating it is as good as you eating it. You don't have to have all the witty punch-lines yourself any more, because it's not a competition for attention that only one of you can win. You shall not commit adultery. One person is enough.

Look at the 3rd commandment, you shall not make wrong use of the name of God. Think about what is in our minds when we do so. It's when the language at our disposal doesn't seem to convey the strength or depth of

feeling in our hearts. We hear a ripping sound when we put on a treasured item of clothing. Our favourite sports team is losing and the weakest player on the team misses a golden opportunity. We hang on the telephone for 20 minutes and a voice says 'we value you as a customer and will be with you shortly'. Somehow language seems inadequate to express the depth of our distress on these occasions. So we invoke the name of God. We make the holy into the trivial, and thus impoverish the language. Whenever we exaggerate we do the same thing. We say the truth is somehow not enough. Don't invoke the name of God against call center operators, and don't invoke God's name to make your life sound that little bit more eventful and interesting. You shall not make wrong use of the name of God.

And then there's the 2nd commandment, you shall not make yourself an idol. Surely the psychology of this is that God is not enough – not big enough, or at least not near enough. So I shall make a god I can relate to, a god my size – a car perhaps, a career maybe, even the scales that tell me how much I weigh. And now we're getting nearer the heart of the problem. There's an abiding anxiety that we don't have enough – not enough property, not enough time, not enough love, not enough language. But the heart of the matter is that we feel we don't have enough God. For all our hymns and services and prayers and moments of truth, God is not enough.

And that's why the moment in which God speaks these words is so significant. Israel has come out of Egypt, but is already beginning to wonder if it wouldn't have been better off staying. This is the moment when God says, 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. I have met your deepest yearning, and have exceeded it by giving you the promise of a land to settle in. I have been with you in the darkness, listened to you in your despair, led you out of death, dispersed your enemies, guided you by my own hand. *I have set you free.* I am the Lord your God. The problem is not that I am not enough for you – it is that I am *too much for you.* Your imaginations are simply too small to comprehend me. And what you don't know is that this is just the beginning. I am the creator of heaven and earth. I have set you free. But I will also be faithful to you through unimaginable betrayal. And I will come among you myself in the form of my only-begotten son. I love every creature I have made, but I treasure each one of you as if you were the only one. I forgive you even when you have let me down seventy times seven times. Can you *imagine?*

'No, you can't, can you. I can see you can't. You still fall into thinking I'm not enough. You get anxious, and when you get anxious you start wanting more gods, more money, more things. I gave you manna in the desert, far more food than you needed. You still collected on the Sabbath because you feared there wouldn't be enough. I gave you water in the desert. But still your thoughts were straying back to Egypt. If only you could let your imaginations go and enter the land I am promising you, and let me set you free.

'But in the meantime, here are some rules to remind you of what matters most, that I am more than enough, that my abundance is always greater than your scarcity. Have no other gods: more of them means less of me. Have no idols: they will never be remotely enough, and will lead you to forget that I am plenty. Keep the Sabbath: I will give you all the time you need. Look after your aging parents and don't steal – I will give you everything you need. Don't kill people – they are part of the everything I am giving you. Don't misuse language – yes and no will be enough for you.'

Really it comes down to the first commandment and the last. Here are you, anxious, covetous, looking at all the fun they seem to have next door, the great parties, the great sex, the amazing children, the plentiful friends, the healthy bodies, the gorgeous golden retriever, and all the time feeling more and more impoverished, more and more deprived, more and more sorry for yourself, more and more trapped in your stunted imagination, more and more a slave. And here, says God, am I, meticulously creating you in all your intricacy and beauty, setting you free from the darkest of prisons, forgiving you time and again even when your greatest hatred is for yourself, and coming among you to be your companion in Jesus.

Just you, and just God. Face to face. And that's the moment when God stretches out two hands and gives you the Ten Commandments, just like you were Moses. God says, 'I have set you free. You may forget that. You may fall back into thinking or feeling that I am not enough. A lot of people do. So here are some gifts. They will help you remember your freedom. They will challenge your imagination to realise that I am a God of abundance, who gives you more than enough, far more than you could ever want or need, who created galaxies no one may

ever see, who has depths of forgiveness no sinner may ever require, who gives you in Jesus more love than you could ever realise.'

And we take the gift from God's hands, and we look into God's face, and we say, 'May these commandments be to me always a gift and never a burden. May they always remind me that you are the one true God who has set me free. Write these words on my heart so I never forget that you are always more than enough. For now I realise that, with you, one is plenty.'