

READING FOR THE NEXT SESSION

Mark Twain has to be one of the premier students of human nature. In *Huckleberry Finn*, his protagonist Huck Finn says, "Bein' good is a whole lot of trouble, but bein' bad ain't no trouble at all." The default mode of human existence seems to be self-interest, while altruism—regard for and service to others—requires a special program.

It is a preoccupation of today's media moguls to remind us how horrible we are. Hardly a day goes by without reports of a tragic shooting in high school, at the post office, or in the streets; spousal abuse; pornography at every turn; the broken American family; terrorist activities worldwide; the Balkans; Africa; the Middle East—the litany goes on. Neighbor helps neighbor simply isn't news.

Robert Bellah, in his 1985 *Habits of the Heart*, pointed to a breakdown in moral responsibility—so necessary for a free society. Robert Putnam in his "Bowling Alone" thesis pointed out that Americans increasingly withdraw from civil society. Most recently the Institute for American Values cried an alarm in its "Call to Civil Society—Why Democracy Needs Moral Truths."

"Everything nailed down is coming loose," said the Angel Gabriel, looking down on humanity's moral confusion in Marc Connelly's 1930 play *The Green Pastures*. This charming American play translates biblical drama into very earthy terms. Gabriel's sad words are as accurate now as they were in 1930.

We live in an age of moral deconstructionism. We fearlessly critique and criticize, dissect and dismantle our culture's conventional wisdom. For example, one of the great running jokes about Unitarian Universalists is that we believe, not in the Ten Commandments, but the Ten Suggestions. Or, it has been asked, "Is it really true we accept the Ten Commandments provided they can be amended at the next annual meeting?" In a cartoon Moses says to God, "Maybe I'd better deliver just the first ten now and see how it goes down."

In a February 27, 1999, edition of the cartoon "Non Sequitur" by Wiley from the Inter-

net, Moses is standing before the children of Israel with two stone tablets in hand. The caption reads "The Dawn of Middle Management." Moses tells the people, "OK, if it'll help you follow them any better, you can refer to them as the ten mission statements."

In another cartoon, Moses brings down the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai for two people who are waiting anxiously and says, "It's just a first draft, but it seems that no one is going to get away with anything!" Another caricature shows a man and a woman standing outside a church looking at its bulletin board that says, "Special this week: Observe any eight of the ten commandments." The man says to the woman, "There must be a limit to permissiveness." But my favorite is two ancient berobed wise men looking at the stone tablet bearing the Decalogue, one saying to the other, "'Comandments' is misspelled." On it goes.

Why do we today have such fun parodying this ancient ethical code? We do it partly because we find the Ten Commandments hard to live by. It is uncompromising. First, we have the so-called "spiritual commandments" dealing with humanity's relationship to God: have no other gods, do not use the Lord's name in vain, do not worship idols, keep the Sabbath holy. Then we have a transition, a positive commandment for a change: honor your father and your mother. Finally, we have five no-nonsense prohibitions: thou shalt not commit adultery; thou shalt not steal; thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor; and thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's possessions, including thy neighbor's wife (evidently the commandments were primarily for men, not women).

The Tennessee state senate passed a resolution that prods local schools, homes, and businesses to post copies of the Ten Commandments in prominent places. Unfortunately, it seems that most people in one poll could name no more than two of the ten, and many weren't too happy when told about the others.

Are the Ten Commandments out of date? If so, how can we nail down some ethical con-

victions when, morally, “everything nailed down is coming loose”?

The Decalogue appears twice in the Hebrew Scriptures—Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5—the products of two different schools of thought. Ancient editors finessed this redundancy by having Moses break the first set of tablets in a fit of anger at the Israelites who were worshipping the golden calf. He had to go back for a second set. The Ten Commandments were a kind of constitutional law for a wandering people. Biblical scholars believe there were ten to correspond to the ten fingers, thus making them easier to memorize for public worship. They stand as a major ethical step forward in their time, some 3,000 years ago.

To what extent are the Ten Commandments still instructive? Most of us would reject a jealous god who equates blasphemy with murder. This Jehovah is not a user-friendly god, but often a vain and vengeful one who promises retribution for every violation of the commandments. This god is the Great Ethical Enforcer.

Nonetheless, the Decalogue stands as a monument in ethical history. In words the Unitarian poet James Russell Lowell used for the motto of the American Copyright League, “In vain we call old notions fudge, and bend our conscience to our dealing; the Ten Commandments will not budge, and stealing will continue stealing.”

It is easy to caricature attempts to modernize the Ten Commandments: “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy, unless something comes up”; “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor—at least not on a regular basis”; “Honor thy father and thy mother, usually”; “Thou shalt not get caught”; “Thou shalt not get involved.” And then, in our free society, some would argue for voluntary compliance, any other restriction on freedom being unseemly.

The moral of the story of the Ten Commandments is to understand it as an historical benchmark, setting forth fundamental, if sometimes abstract, rules for human conduct. The Decalogue, however, does not help us in getting from abstractions to the often ambiguous problems of every day.

While many long for the security of absolutes, others look more to inner values than external constraints to guide behavior. Character is what we are when no one is looking. Character is when we act, though it will not do us any particular good. Character is when we meet what Rushworth Kidder calls our “unenforceable obligations” to our neighbors.

I recall one summer evening many years ago when a Roman Catholic visitor, learning I was a minister, asked about my religion. When he heard that I neither feared hell nor sought heaven, but believed in “the importance of being good for nothing,” he was incredulous. He said that if he didn’t fear eternal punishment or seek eternal reward there would be no telling what he would do. He was bound to the Great Enforcer, not the moral power of unenforceable obligations.

Why do we honor our marriage covenant even when we are at times unhappy? Why do we sacrifice to raise children when that seems hopelessly frustrating? Why do we keep promises even when we could get away with breaking them? Why do we obey the law even when there is little danger of being caught? The evangelist Dwight Moody defined character as “what you are in the dark.”

Why do we involve ourselves in community service and social action when no one seems to notice and we often fail? And why have people done these things for centuries? No external power is forcing us to meet these obligations; we are truly on our own, not coerced by the “cudgel but an inward music: the irresistible power of unarmed truth, the powerful attraction of its example,” in Boris Pasternak’s words.

Ethicist Carol Gilligan, a student of the late Harvard psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, suggested that women and men understand ethics differently. For men, laws and rules are paramount. Ethics consists in obeying them. For women, she argues, it is the relationship between people that is crucial. Do we hurt or help one another is the ruling principle. Gilligan is closer to what I would call ethics as unenforceable obligations—our covenant to relate lovingly and compassionately to one another.

I speak of ethics in terms of “the importance of being good for nothing.” Our motivations

for behavior depend neither on fear of hell nor promise of heaven, but on our inner convictions. Ethics are unenforceable obligations. If “laws are the wise restraints that make us free,” James Conant says, then ethics are those inner imperatives that prompt us to care when we need not, to act when it may be controversial, to serve when we would rather indulge ourselves. The true test of character is to act when so doing will not do us any personal good.

Hosea Ballou, that nineteenth-century Universalist preacher of universal salvation, was riding the circuit in the New Hampshire hills with a Baptist minister one afternoon. They argued theology as they traveled. At one point, the Baptist looked over and said, “Brother Ballou, if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle, and ride away, and I’d still go to heaven.” Hosea Ballou looked over at him and said, “If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you.”

One of our moral critics, educator Robert Coles of Harvard, writes, “Something is wrong with a society whose members are endlessly preoccupied with feeling better, rather than obsessed with making the world better.” In his cross-cultural studies of children he finds the self-portraits of rich American children fill up the whole page, while in those of Hopi Indian children of the American southwest they are merely a dot in a rich landscape.

With that understanding then, here are ten considered convictions, or should we say habits, to be learned by highly ethical people. How do they stack up against the biblical commandments?

1. The cosmos does not make junk. Creation is fundamentally good. Walk gently upon the earth as you would be a good guest in a neighbor’s house.
2. People are precious. Be gentle with your neighbor—none of us knows what it is like to be another. Walk a mile in their moccasins.

3. Our being here is both privilege and right. Be gentle with yourself—aspire to be more than you are—but accept your finitude and your contingency.
4. Love people, use things. Treat people as ends, not means. People must not be used for our ulterior purposes.
5. Doing good is not about keeping score. Affirm the importance of being good for nothing. Do good for its own sake.
6. Let the inner and the outer person be the same. Be honest with yourself.
7. Deeds are more important than creeds. So act that your behavior speaks louder than your words.
8. This world is a neighborhood. All people are our neighbors. We are here to share with our neighbors so that everyone has enough, no one has too much, and we share with maximum freedom and minimum coercion.
9. And to show a little more humor than the Ten Commandments: Always be a little kinder than necessary.
10. Finally, “Do unto others 20 percent better than you would have them do unto you—20 percent to correct for subjective error.”

The Golden Ladder of Giving According to Maimonides

1. To give reluctantly, the gift of the hand, but not of the heart.
2. To give cheerfully, but not in proportion to need.
3. To give cheerfully and proportionately, but not until solicited.

4. To give cheerfully, proportionately, and unsolicited, but to put the gift into the poor [person's] hand, thus creating shame.
5. To give in such a way that the distressed may know their benefactor, without being known to him/her.
6. To know the objects of our bounty, but remain unknown to them.
7. To give so that the benefactor may not know those whom he/she has relieved, and they shall not know him/her.
8. To prevent poverty by teaching a trade, setting a man/woman up in business, or in some way preventing the need of charity. Giving is most blessed and most acceptable when the donor remains completely anonymous.

—*Quotations of Courage and Vision*,
edited by Carl Hermann

Background Reading

Gilligan, Carol. "Woman's Place in Man's Life Cycle," *In a Different Voice, Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. reprint ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Kohlberg, Lawrence. "Continuities in Childhood and Adult Moral Development Revisited," *Moralization, the Cognitive Developmental Approach*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1973.