

## **It's the 10 Commandments: Just Say 'Yes'** *by Mike Tighe*

No! Just say it and you'll be safe from drugs and second helpings. And if you're so safe, you don't even need to know the 10 Commandments, right? Ten more big "no's" to add to your long list of things you can't even touch is something you could do without.

The commandments delivered to Moses on two stone tablets at the top of Mt. Sinai have gotten a bad rap. The word's out that these 10 rules include more "do not's" than a couple of overprotective parents letting you take the car alone for the first time. They not only came etched on rocks; they can seem as hard as rocks to keep—and even to understand. Only 35 percent of more than 1000 teenagers surveyed by Gallup could name half the commandments, and only three in 10 knew them all.

The commandments meant something very specific to the Israelites of the Old Testament, but the task today is to explore what they mean now, in this world, to people of all ages. In short, you shouldn't view them as something to be discarded as outdated, but as something to apply to your lives.

"They're not just God on a mountaintop," says Paulist Father Richard Sparks, an assistant professor of Christian Ethics at the College of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. Observing the commandments in their traditional, negative phrasing amounts to a just-get-by approach since the commandments alone state the minimum (like the minimum drinking age almost) and "the call to be a Christian is not to do just the minimum," Father Sparks says.

The commandments are based on a simple, positive foundation of love. The key is looking beyond the negative phrasing to find the positive values they encourage. You'll hear this approach described as going beyond the "letter of the law" to its spirit.

"Follow the commandments," is an O.K. recommendation. But how? Here's a different—and, perhaps, more refreshing—approach of using them as guidelines for leading your lives. Make them more than just a question of what "not to do," but what "to do" instead (with apologies to Shakespeare).

Christ divided the commandments into two groups—love of God and of neighbor. These work just as well today as when he voiced the first shift away from the "do-not" view sometimes associated with the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament.

The first three commandments cover your relationship with God, while the last seven deal with your relationships with one another. (It shouldn't surprise you that the first three often are easier. because God is a lot easier to get along with than families and friends are. God's more available, is a better listener, and is a lot more forgiving than you are with each other.)

Let's take a brisk walk through the 10 Commandments to see where they lead you.

**I. I, the Lord, am your God...You shall not have other Gods besides me.** The flip side of that phrasing is simple: Love God above everything else. But it's easier said than done, especially in this day and age of gods that are so tempting. Money. Power. Designer clothes. Fancy cars. VCR's. Popularity. The list goes on.

Perhaps the Israelites had it easier with this commandment, having to ditch any statues of gods left hanging around the house or the courtyard, instead of evading the tentacles of name brands which clamor for your attention.

The task of avoiding preoccupation with such goods may seem so awesome that you'd have to become a hermit to escape them. But people who can adapt to such a reclusive lifestyle are rare birds indeed—and many holy people stress that the commandment is challenging even for them.

The secret is not to let the commandment inhibit you. Realize that it isn't requiring you to forsake all worldly goods. Rather, it asks you to try to make sure that God is foremost, and to keep other things in perspective.

Simply put, you're asked to base your daily actions on that love of God. And, one of the best ways to prove your love of God is to live the *next nine* commandments positively.

**II. You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain.** Hollering a meek "gosh darnit" instead of a variety of colorful curses—many of which include God's name—is the laziest way possible to live this commandment. Oh, that's the letter of the law, but the spirit asks for more: to use God's name positively. Beyond using the Lord's name in your own prayer the commandment also encourages you to speak well and proudly of your faith, and share it with others.

**III. Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day.** Quite a few years before you were born, stores were closed on Sunday as a nod to this commandment. The fact that stores were closed made it easier to focus on Sunday as a day to concentrate on holy things, rest, reflection and family instead of viewing Mass as something to fill in the time between reading the sale ads in the Sunday paper and waiting for the stores to open.

The underlying idea is to take time for God and to give God a shot at your best moments rather than your leftovers. This doesn't mean "Super-Serious Sundays" but realizing that the weekend's good times are God-times too. Get the message? "Keeping holy" can mean playing tennis, goofing off or catching a movie, but it must mean doing good for yourself so that God is honored by your choices.

That includes Church and knowing what's going on when you're there. Beyond that, it also calls for carrying that thought into our weekdays so that God is part of every day. That makes them all Sundays of a sort, except that you still have to go to school, work or practice besides.

See how easy, but tricky at the same time, these commandments can be? The first three provide a convenient formula for loving God, a necessary requirement for working up any enthusiasm for the next seven commandments about loving others.

**IV. Honor your father and mother.** You *could* set up a little shrine outside your parents' bedroom and genuflect there often, if you wanted to take this at its apparent face value. But that would miss the point *and* cause a traffic jam in the hallway.

This commandment is a toughie for many teenagers as you try to become "your own person," and, in the process, run into multiple roadblocks which it seems your parents establish to frustrate you.

But many who have studied the meaning of the Bible interpret this commandment as being much broader than just honoring parents. It refers to your whole family, and the broader community as well.

Parents must honor their children, treating them with the respect due all people. In turn, those children should love and respect their parents. Both parents and children should cooperate to build that love and respect, and resolve their differences peacefully.

**V. You shall not kill.** Just when you think you've reached a commandment you might be able to skip because you aren't packing a gun, look again. The wording of this commandment obscures a deeper value, and technology has complicated the question.

Obviously, the commandment bans physical killings. Under this fifth commandment are life-and-death issues such as abortion, mercy killing of the terminally ill and nuclear war. Many Church authorities have interpreted this commandment to oppose the necessity of capital punishment, emphasizing that all people—even murderers—have a right to life.

Catholics remain divided on these issues, with some in opposition to abortion, while supporting the nuclear buildup as a defensive or protective measure. Some have tried to adopt what is called a "consistent ethic" hoping to achieve a pro-life attitude in every aspect of personal and world decision making.

This commandment requires us to sort out these issues which center on the value of life. Its message is repeated in Christ's Sermon on the Mount, when he said, "You have heard the commandment... 'You shall not commit murder; every murderer shall be liable to judgment.' What I say to you is: Everyone who grows angry with his brother shall be liable

to judgment...." In that same sermon, Jesus also urged the keeping of this commandment by urging all of us to love our enemies.

Many analysts now interpret this passage to mean that anger alone isn't necessarily bad. "Having a feeling of anger isn't a sin, but it depends on what you do with it—whether you brood [go into a long-term fit], plan harm, count to 10 or pray. Having the feeling merely proves you're alive," Father Sparks says.

In short, you should not allow anger to lead to violence, mental or physical. When you're angry, you should look for a constructive way to work it out. Racism and sexism are also violent attitudes leading to actions that kill the spirits of others through oppressing them.

Exclusive cliques that shun others because they're unpopular or don't dress right also could violate this commandment. Dominating younger brothers or sisters, and making them feel badly about themselves, runs contrary to the value of this commandment.

On the positive side, the commandment calls for encouraging others by pointing out their strengths instead of belittling them—"killing" their spirits—for their weaknesses.

**VI. You shall not commit adultery.** The term *adultery* is misleading, if you think it must apply only to adults. It's also misunderstood if you think it's about biology.

This commandment presents a particularly special challenge to teenagers during the difficult times you can face as you struggle with who you are, and how to develop relationships with others. Basically, it calls for honesty and loyalty in all relationships, whether the same or opposite sex is involved, and regardless of whether having sex is an issue.

**VII. You shall not steal.** You're not home free if you've never shoplifted or swiped a few coins from Mom's purse. Modern biblical scholars have found evidence that this commandment originally might have concerned a specific type of stealing: kidnapping. Obviously, few of you are ever planning such a heist.

But the positive value calls for everyone to give a full day's work (whether it's in school or on the job) for a full day's pay (or education). You must discover your gifts and invest time and effort in them so that you are not stealing from your own potential to excel.

The commandment also asks that you not profit at the expense of the poor. Efforts to stock food shelves and to provide shelter and adequate clothing for the poor are positive ways to live this commandment. Another is not to steal from the future, meaning that you should help to preserve the air, land, water and other natural resources.

**VIII. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.** The apparent simplicity of this commandment is deceiving. It's a good example of the general concept that you should stretch beyond the mere "shall not" order.

The most dramatic instance of false witness came from Peter the apostle. Shortly before the crucifixion, he was asked if he knew Jesus and he answered, "I do not know the man." That you can clearly see was a lie.

Perhaps a good way to look at the eighth commandment is to contradict Peter's statement not only by stating your belief, "I do know Jesus," but also by living a truthful life that reflects that knowledge.

The New Testament calls for discipleship, so instead of just avoiding false witness, you should bear faithful witness as you study, work and have fun.

**IX. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.** This is another commandment that might appear to be for adults only or perhaps for swinging singles. It's actually for anyone whose mind and heart can hold sexual thoughts. It means a lot more than not looking with longing at a suntanned, bikini-clad neighbor though. Some have interpreted it as banning any thoughts of that neighbor and any sexual thoughts at all. A more possible and human reality is that thinking about sexuality and sexual activity is a natural part of growing up.

Thinking about things sexual is not "bad"; rather, allowing yourself to get hung up on such thoughts can and will create problems. A typical problem will be that you find it hard to shake such thoughts, and may even wish to encourage them. And that's where you pass over the line into sin. It works better though in trying to *keep* this commandment to attempt a positive maximum of thinking of others as whole persons, not as sex vending machines.

The commandment is rooted in a time when women were considered to be property, and some versions of the 10 Commandments even lump the ninth with the 10th, concerning not coveting another's property. If we uproot it from those times, and plant the value in the present, it takes on a whole new meaning.

While the equality of women and men has been put into law, attitudes still need to be reshaped, even in people your age. The underlying value this commandment carries for modern days is to work for the equality of everyone—men and women, young and old, of every race.

This also overlaps the 10th Commandment, in expecting you not to envy the talents of others, but to work to develop your own.

**X. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.** People used to think that this commandment meant only that you shouldn't always try to keep up with the Joneses, but be satisfied with what you have. That belief is tied to an emphasis on property.

But actually, the commandment addresses a far broader value than comparisons about whether you wear K-Mart specials while a friend can sleep in Guess jeans, or whether you've got to drive the family car—if and when you can get it—while a friend has his or her own BMW.

Oh, you could get by if you just didn't covet—envy—others' goods. But that's the minimum, and we're talking about trying to live up to the maximum "yes" actions in these commandments. A real "yes" leads to efforts toward social justice, attitudes and actions which assure that all people have what they need—enough to eat, enough to wear and a place to stay.

So that's a quick, basic overview of what the 10 Commandments can mean. They aren't independent rules you can pick and choose from, but a set of overlapping and interdependent directions about how to live without sin and in a positive way.

They aren't, however, *all the directions* that exist. They point to, and blend with, Christ's overall teaching reflected in the Sermon on the Mount, especially in the Beatitudes. (Take a look at Matthew, chapters 5,6,7.) They aren't concerned only with "things," as the wording of some makes them appear to be, but with the values of the individual and our duties to help one other.

Not to do, or to do: That is the question (whatever Shakespeare thought). You shall not just say "no." Rather, just say "yes."