



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Changing "Shall Not" to "Shall"

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W. Burney Overton

The Ten Commandments

Exodus 20 :1-17

New Revised Standard Version

1. You shall have no other gods before me.
2. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.
3. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet you neighbor’s house, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

It was in a Sunday School class discussing spirituality. As seems to be typical, a portion of the discussion centered in what to do to be spiritual. That, of course, led to a consideration of some passages from the Bible that were interpreted as telling us what to do, and what not to do. That, in turn, led to the observation that so many of the rules in the Bible are expressed in negative form – don’t do this – don’t do that. And a primary example of this are the Ten Commandments, all but two of which are typically translated “You shall not.”

A member of the class raised the question, “Why is this so? Why aren’t they expressed in positive form rather than negative?”

The question intrigued me. As I thought about it, I decided to write a BURNEY’S PAPER and, in it, to suggest some possible answers, to try to express the Commandments in positive form, and, as might be expected, to end the Paper with reference to the

summary of the Commandments, “Love God – and your neighbor as yourself.” (See Matthew 22:37-40)

Why are rules and regulations so typically expressed in negative form? The history of mankind suggests that this is almost universal. Our rules and regulations are set up in terms of what not to do, and in terms of the punishments that follow upon disobedience. Certainly, this is typical of the Old Testament scriptures.

It occurs to me that it seems much simpler to describe what people are not to do, along with the punishment for disobedience, than to describe what people are to do, and the outcome of that appropriate behavior. Maybe the situation is that we human beings don't really want to take on the responsibility for deciding just what appropriate behavior is, and why it is appropriate behavior.

I remember my early life struggles with this issue. I heard and learned a great deal of, “Don't do this. Don't do that. You must not -.” There was some “should” along with “should not,” and “ought” along with “ought not.” Mostly, I felt dread that I would be disobedient, whether I knew it or not, and would be punished. And I felt a lot of confusion about what was appropriate for me to do. It appeared to me that it was up to me to decide what to do, based on instructions about what not to do.

I suppose people believed that it was a whole lot easier to control behavior by prescribing what not to do, and by stating what the punishment would be. Fear of punishment would be a sufficient deterrent to the unacceptable behavior. To a degree, that fear served as a deterrent for me. Of course, if I believed that I would be discovered doing what I wasn't supposed to do, I would often risk doing it.

When it came to God's law, as it was presented to me, I had a strong sense of the fear of God's disapproval and punishment, and, also, a realization that I didn't know for sure what all of God's rules and regulations were. This caused me a good deal of anxiety.

Against that background, I wonder what it would look like, if I took the Ten Commandments in their typical form, and undertook to restate them in the terms of “You shall...?” I wonder what it would look like to try to state the result of doing them according to the positive statement?

1. You shall always have God as your God. God, by God's deciding and doing, is always God. You can count on this.
2. You shall worship God only. To worship other gods is to bring misery and unhappiness into your life, and that of those who are dear to you. To worship God is to follow the course designed to bring happiness and fulfillment into your life and that of those who are dear to you.

3. You shall always speak God’s name with respect and love. It follows that, if you accept God as your God, you will use God’s name only to express your believing and your acceptance.
4. You shall always use the Sabbath – one day in seven – as a special day to replenish yourself – body, mind and spirit.
5. You shall always respect your father and mother, loving them for having given you life.
6. You shall always value life, both yours and that of others. It is a precious gift of God.
7. You shall always be faithful and integrated in your relationships. You shall be in those relationships in ways that affirm that you, and they, are created in the image of God.
8. You shall always value the rights of personal possessions. Since you want to be able both to trust and be trusted, you preserve the rights of personal possessions by keeping only that which is yours.
9. You shall always speak the truth in a loving, caring, valuing way. By so doing, you maintain the basis for trust.
10. You shall always be glad for the good fortune of another person, even as you are grateful for your own good fortune.

“You shall always...” is not a demand, admonition, or obligation. Rather, the phrase sets forth the value of the behavior indicated for living faithfully as a creation in the image of God. It also states what is needed for the community, both to be intact and to nourish all its members, even as it reflects the Kingdom of God. It is a way to state guidelines for living the meaning of being in the image of God.

While virtually all of the rules and regulations in the Bible explicitly or implicitly start with “You shall not...”, I note with considerable interest that the commandments on which, according to Jesus, hang all the Law and the Prophets, are stated in positive form. “You shall love the lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-40)

I wonder why this is the case.

Maybe it is because rules and regulations set up in terms of what not to do aren’t much help in guiding me to love God and my neighbor as myself. Maybe “Love

God...and your neighbor as yourself” isn’t a commandment at all – not as we typically use the word. Maybe it has the connotation of instruction, or statement of a principle. The first statement is to love God, and the second is to love your neighbor as yourself.

Fortunately, much of the writing of the New Testament is in more positive form, and certainly Jesus’ life and teachings have more to do with how to live than how not to live. They point us in the direction of “You shall...”

Even so, I tell myself that I need rules and regulations, however they are set up, to let me know that I am doing the right things and not doing the wrong ones. I need some external authority to keep me straight.

“Love God...and my neighbor as myself” doesn’t do that. They are commandments (instructions) without guidelines, even if they are expressed positively. Most of the rules and regulations say, “Do this.” “Don’t do that.” And usually, they state the penalty for disobedience. They take the burden of responsibility off me.

They also steal my free will from me.

“Love God...and my neighbor as myself” doesn’t steal my free will, nor take away my responsibility for my own decisions and actions. From my point of view, this is good.

There aren’t a bunch of rules and regulations to tell me how to love God...and my neighbor as myself. But I do have the teaching and testimony of a multitude of witnesses to give me guidance. That being the case, I realize that I have virtually limitless resources to open to me the ways to love God...and my neighbor as myself. I am challenged to observe and to study, and grow in my understanding of how to express that love.

Observing, studying, and growing are hard work. I tell myself it is easier if I have quite specific rules – “You shall...” “You shall not...” Maybe even the Biblical writers yielded to the pressure to be specific and definitive.

However, it seems that God is wiser than the creatures in God’s image – wiser than I. God created us to be decision makers, to act on those decisions, and to be responsible for the outcome.

Then God said, “Learn and follow the way of unconditional love and experience the full measure of your life.”

I want to change “You shall not...” to “You shall...”, and I want to commit my life to loving God and my neighbor as myself.