

SEPTEMBER 14, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Tough Question: *Has anyone ever been able to completely follow the ten commandments?*

This is an interesting question. We are told that the problem with the Law is that no one can follow it entirely. What gets confused at times is the ten commandments with the entirety of the Law of Moses. They are not the same thing. The ten commandments are part of the Law, but not the entirety of it.

Even so, can anyone follow all ten commandments, excluding the full Law of Moses? That's a great question and we'll take a look. To do so, we have to break down the commandments one by one. What do they say as they are written? What did Jesus do to them in the Sermon on the Mount? How have we changed the meaning through the ages and to day in our interpretation?

All of this matters. Take a look and think for yourself as we unpack the ten commandments as laid out in Exodus 20!!!!

2 "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

This is the "why". They know this is "their" God because God delivered them from slavery. As such the owe loyalty to God.

Command 1:

3 "You shall have no other gods before[a] me.

This is the first command. In our time we understand it to encompass anything that might take priority over God. As such we make "god" a relative term that can include anything whatsoever. It can be a job, person, hobby, money, anything that takes the place of God as the top priority in our lives.

To the ones hearing this it would have rang differently. This would have likely been taken quite literally. In their beliefs there were many gods attributed to many nations. In fact, nations would often be identified in conjunction with their God. This is why there is comparison in the Old Testament between Israel's God and the gods of other nations. Israel's God would lose respect in light of defeat. That would mean another nation's god was stronger.

The story in 1 Samuel where the ark is brought into the temple of Dagon and the statue of Dagon is fallen, broken, and pieces appear to be clamoring for the threshold of the door. They belief was that there was a literal fight between two gods with one being the clear victor. What made it all the more impressive was that Israel's God, Who should have been powerless or at least very diminished was still able to best the god of the nation in which the ark was setting.

To them this command was based in what they believed to be literal, actual beings at play.

I would argue that in our modern interpretation where "god" can mean anything then no, no one has ever been able to completely follow this command. All of us at some point or another have elevated someone or something above God.

In their understanding of elevating an actual named god, then yes many have been able to do that. Those raised Christian who have never dared bow to a god of any other tradition have followed this command. To the point that many Christians don't even agree in the god that other Christians worship because of their own rules and regulations.

Command 2:

4 "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

This is similar to the first commandment. It follows similar strictures. This command is referring to literal, actual made images that become objects of worship. I would suggest that many through the ages can say they haven't done this in the specific way this command is issued.

But again, this is up for interpretation. There are implements that take our attention such as computers, phones, televisions, and more. They become more significant than things that grow our relationship with God. If we stretch the definition of an idol to this then likely no, none have been able to follow it.

Icons are another point of contention here. This has led to some very staunch traditions refusing to have even a cross in the sanctuary. The fear is that pictures of saints, statues of martyrs, images of scripture, crosses, anything that is crafted runs the risk of falling into violating this command. To those who subscribe to this interpretation, we would be considered in violation through the presence of the cross, stained glass, and flags in our

sanctuary.

Command 3:

7 “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

In my opinion, no one has been able to keep this command. The reason is that it is so much deeper than what people today have made it out to be. In fact everyone who has made it superficial also violates this command in likely much more hurtful ways. This is not just about the “JC” or “GD” uttered in anger, frustration, pain, etc. Using God’s name in vain is attributing anything to God that isn’t God. To the truly devout at that time, and even today, it is forbidden to pronounce God’s name YHWH for this explicit purpose. It is too sacred to utter for any reason lest it be used inappropriately.

This is an incredibly literal understanding of this command and under this perhaps some might have achieved it. However all of us need language to refer to God whether in belief or disbelief. Does it matter by what name we call God if we are referring to the same being? I don’t believe so.

Many if not most people of faith invoke God’s name to support a morality, a value, a decision, a habit, and more. Many are comfortable telling others what they need to believe, think, and live because “God says so.” Anytime that advice is wrong, that is taking the name of God in vain. Some might even go so far as to say that attributing something to God that isn’t God crosses the line to blasphemy.

Even those with the best intention misquote and misattribute God. We’re human and limited so it’s bound to happen.

Command 4:

8 “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. 11 For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Books have been written on the subject of Sabbath. Why is it important? What does it mean? What is work? What is rest? How much effort is too much effort?

People of faith have the entire gamut of this, and in all of it we might be breaking it in some form. Even the most diligent. The big question is what “work” looks like. There are those who refuse to tear toilet paper, or use an elevator because pushing the button causes a spark(creates fire) that engages the lift. But they still walk places. They do things that don’t fall in their perspective of “work” or “labor”. Are they missing something? Does this go so far as that the diligence it takes to adhere to not working becomes work in and of itself? I can’t say.

There are others who regard no day as set apart. Every day is hard work or hard play. Every day adds to the exhaustion and fatigue. There is no “off” button even at play. Clearly this misses the point of the command. There is not time to actually rest or recreate oneself.

Of course there is everything in between. Jesus gives a bit of an “out”. He cites intervening in matters of necessity and emergence as being acceptable. He says “Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath.” In other words the day is set apart to serve the needs of the person’s spiritual and physical health.

Does this mean that Sabbath looks different for everyone? Perhaps.

We have instituted worship as a part of Sabbath. Year after year this seems less a necessity for more and more people of faith. Does consistently missing worship, coming into the presence of God, each and every week constitute a violation of Sabbath?

Like so many other values and beliefs in Christianity, everyone violates someone else’s understanding of Sabbath at some point.

Command 5:

12 “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. This command was written as an explicit expectation rather than the broad one often prescribed today. Today parents like to use this to enforce obedience and respect from their children. I can understand this sense of interpretation, however it isn’t the initial reasoning.

This was about caring for parents in old age. When they got too old to provide for themselves the expectation was that the children would adopt them into their home and care for them. Just as the parent cared for them in their childhood. Another way of stating this might be “care for your aging parents so your kids will see the role modeling and you too will live long because you’ll get the same treatment.”

Times have obviously changed. Sometimes people take their aging parents into their home. Sometimes they care by providing aids and assistance to respect the parents’ desire to remain in their own home. Still others

honor their parents by helping them into assisted living or nursing care because that's the place they will receive the treatment that they need. All of this in my estimation honors this command even if it looks different.

Certainly there are those who disregard their parents completely in their older years.

I would suggest that if we are interpreting this with the modern idea of obedience and respect then no, no one has met this. All of us have disobeyed and disrespected in some shape or form. In the original spirit however, sure, many have honored their parents by caring for them in their later years. How that will translate to their kids remains to be seen!

Command 6:

13 "You shall not murder.

This one is easy. It is clearly referring to taking a life intentionally with malice. Jesus in Matthew 5 highlights this as referring to our thought life as well, and in that sense every one has become angry at someone without a good reason. As it is written here, however most people go through their lives not murdering someone.

Command 7:

14 "You shall not commit adultery.

Once again, we get to interpretation. Jesus takes this to an extreme as well just as with murder. "If you so much as look at a woman with lust you've committed adultery." Even this taken literally excludes women, but if we take it at its spirit it becomes a bit more encompassing. I don't know that we can get inside the mind and heart of every human who has ever lived without projecting our own senses, but perhaps there are people who have lived a lifetime without having lustful thoughts in their hearts. So even here it might be possible though I think most at one point have had the experience.

In the sense that it is about cheating on a spouse sexually, again there are many who have never physically done this. In the sense that some interpret this to not only mean cheating on a spouse but also any sexual activity outside marriage, there are many through history who have been able to accomplish this as well.

None of these, however, capture the fullness or intent of this command. It is given in the context of a very different culture of sexual economy and gender roles/expectations.

Women were property as much as if not more than people. The expectation was that a woman would be a virgin until married. A loophole for this was that if a man had sex with a woman, that was as much a marriage ceremony as needed. He would still have to pay a bride price to the father however for her. It's also why there is the somewhat insensitive and crass rule that a rapist was bound to pay a bride price to the father and "take her as a wife".

It is widely understood that this is part of what happened on the threshing floor with Ruth and Boaz. It explains why he was so rushed in the morning to marry her. He'd already been to bed with her, now he needed to make it right. After all, she might be pregnant!

There was emphasis on the "purity" of the woman and to have a woman engage sexually with a man not her husband essentially was to create "damaged goods". The likelihood that she would be able to find a husband after was slim and none. In the story of Tamar and Amnon, this is why she is so adamant about the shame on their family and that she would live the rest of her life in lonely misery if he forced himself on her.

That this is about women as property also is explained by the existence of concubines. Wealth and powerful men had more than one wife, and then at a status lesser than wife but still sexually available was the concubine. None of this was considered adultery. For the man this was just more possibilities to advance his bloodline.

In other words the woman was an object purchased for a price from the father for the purpose of sexual availability and child bearing. The levirate marriage is evidence of the emphasis on child bearing. When a woman married if the husband died before they had kids she was automatically married to the next related male to the husband to bear children in the husband's name.

For a married woman to have a sexual encounter apart from the husband this created another issue of property. The child is the property of the husband...or father...what if they aren't the same person? Now we have a contest of legal possession. This throws social order into all kinds of chaos.

Adultery in this context is about the property of a father being damaged and not worth a bride price. It is the property of a husband potentially bearing property that would be legally contestable.

For us this is about fidelity, love, and commitment in marriage. This was very different then.

Also worth noting is that the penalties for adultery were most often born by the woman, not the man. A man could visit a prostitute, have a concubine, etc. with immunity. It was the woman who would incur punishment for sexual engagement with someone other than her husband.

All of this to say that adultery in this regard, at least in our culture, isn't really a thing. Many people, even those who commit infidelity, aren't doing it under this legal, property expectation. Culture has shifted in a way that this command as it was written at the beginning in many ways is obsolete. Though Jesus' expansion on it does

give it further meaning and teeth.

Command 8:

15 “You shall not steal.

Have there been individuals throughout history who have managed to live their entire life without taking the physical property of another? Probably.

Once again...interpretation. I would say that in its original form this is about respecting the property of another. “Don’t take what isn’t yours.” In this there are lots who can say they have never done it. Remember, the rich young ruler said he’d obeyed the commands perfectly from his youth and Jesus didn’t challenge him.

How about today? Does it count to steal someone’s idea? Is it stealing to represent someone else’s thoughts, discoveries, opinions as our own? If I charge interest, am I stealing? (keep in mind this was called usury and forbidden from on Jew and then later on Christian to another). If I overcharge for goods or services am I stealing? If I get something under false pretenses or trickery, am I stealing?

All of this is up for discussion. Everyone comes to their own conclusion. Often those conclusions are convenient to the person’s experiences. What is the intent of the command? Literal or figurative? And how far does the boundary of it stretch?

I would suggest at the very least if I feel like I’ve cheated someone I’ve probably violated the command. Most of us have at some point gotten something with a shady move. Keep in mind here too, it doesn’t have to be huge in scale to violate a command. It just has to break the rule, even minimally.

Command 9:

16 “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

This is a tricky one. Jesus I think adjusts it in the Sermon on the Mount, but here it is straightforward. In the Sermon Jesus says “let your yes be your yes and your no be your no”. It’s in the context of making oaths, but certainly applies to honesty. In other words be people of our word.

Here it doesn’t say “don’t lie”. This might be one of the more misquoted commands. It might be because we don’t want to encourage people to be dishonest and deceitful. It’s much easier to get someone to not lie if we tell them “God said it in the ten commandments.” Even if the commandment doesn’t say that at all.

I recently heard someone make the claim that if no one ever lied society couldn’t take the strain. This might not be altogether wrong. Sometimes lies, we call them “white lies”, are told to spare someone’s feelings. Or we tell a lie out of protection. The Nazi asks if there are Jews in the attic. “Of course not.”

This command is very much about preserving order. Don’t lie about someone else. Specifically this has a legal sense to it as in trials and such. Tell the truth about one another, particularly in a court proceeding.

This is the only way justice is done. In a broader sense outside of legal proceedings this is how communities stick and stand together. Relationships are broken on rumors and lies. Communities are torn apart when lies are afoot. The one you can trust you don’t think you can. The one who told you that you can’t trust that individual is actually the liar...and gets trusted...if that makes sense.

I don’t know that anyone has been able to make it a lifetime without a lie. I don’t even know any of us has been able to make a lifetime without lying about someone else.

I do believe that many have gone a lifetime without every lying about someone in a court proceeding. Most people have. Even ones who have lied through their teeth about others outside of court.

As with everything, it is all about how far you want to interpret the command and how hard a loophole is sought.

Command 10:

17 “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

First I want to say that I think this can be associated with the adultery command. If women were viewed as property, and this is about property (even the neighbor’s wife is mentioned) they are linked. Don’t defile another man’s property. Where does it start thought? Desire, envy.

David envied Uriah’s wife Bathsheba. Then the adultery and murder ensued. It began with a look, a leer, then envy, then action.

Perhaps a more positive way of saying this would be “be satisfied with what you have.”

This command seems to condemn jealousy. How deep does it go? Once again we get into interpretation and perspective. Is it wrong to just think “wow, nice new car!”? Or does it have to cross over to “I’ll do anything, lie, cheat, or steal to get a car like that!”? Or does it have to get to the place where in my heart I’m plotting? “If I take out my neighbor I may be able to swipe that car and no one will notice.” “I know Joe has a gambling problem, I bet I can swindle him out of it.”

I don’t know that anyone can say entirely where that line is that crosses from admiration and appreciation for what someone else has to sinful envy.

It does speak to the modern day notion of “keeping up with the Joneses.” When life becomes more about making sure we have as much or more than the people around us we’ve crossed into dangerous territory. At that point life isn’t about God, it’s about things.

What about resentment? Is this the line? There is a difference between appreciating what someone else has and being bitter at them because I don’t. This is a toxic envy that erodes relationships. It might not lead to anything physically shady. It very well leads to damage in a relationship. It forgets that people are more important than property.

Appreciation is one thing. Inspired to be more ambitious to grow and achieve is another thing, and not necessarily bad. Relationship eroding jealousy, theft, and hurtful means to attain what another has are entirely different.

Has anyone ever made it through life without admiring or wishing they had something someone else possesses? I sincerely doubt it. Has anyone made it through life without allowing that feeling to grow to the point of bad acting, theft, inflicting harm, or destroying the fabric of a relationship? Absolutely. Probably more than we think.

SO...CAN WE DO IT?

In case you haven’t figured it out, that’s a very loaded question. It all depends on a couple things. First, how do you interpret the commandments? Second, how hard are you looking for a loophole? Mind you, I’d suggest that if I’m looking hard for a loophole in a particular commandment I’ve probably broken it to some extent.

At the end of the day these commandments are there to help us have God in God’s rightful place in our lives, and live with one another in a way that is harmonious, peaceful, and builds community. Jesus summed them up (as well as the rest of the Law AND the prophets) with “love God and love your neighbor.”

Are we doing these two things? Are we looking for loopholes for the world “love”? Are we finding reasons to not love our neighbor? If so we’re probably breaking the ten commandments in some form or another. On the other hand, if we are truly doing our level best to love God and working hard against our own biases to love one another without condition, agenda, or excuse, we’re probably doing pretty well following them.

How about you? The most important person to wonder about is ourselves. How does the one in the mirror do with love of God and love of neighbor?

Mark is the first of the gospels that was written. It was likely around 70 AD. There is disagreement as to exactly who “Mark” was. What does seem evident is that he had access to material that was either eyewitness or something very akin to it. Mark himself wasn’t necessarily present in the stories that he communicates, which isn’t all that different from the other gospel writers. They were writing at a time when the church had been formed for many decades, firsthand witnesses had largely died off, and the story of Jesus needed preserved. So they did collecting the best information that they could to put together their works. Mark being the first was used by Matthew and Luke as a source, explaining why some stories and accounts appear in all three while John doesn’t have it.

Also important to keep in mind is that the writers are telling theology just as much as history. The differences in the gospels can be accounted for in many instances by recognizing this. A story is told, and told in such a way as to reflect a theology already known and needing to be passed along. This doesn’t constitute an inaccuracy in the storytelling. It is the storyteller merging theology into the narrative for the larger point of having the reader know who Jesus is, and recognize things to come. Hindsight is a powerful tool.

For Mark birth stories aren’t necessary. Enough people would have still been around who knew the stories from more direct contact that there wasn’t a need to answer the question “where did He come from?” Mark gets right into it, but like the birth stories, establishes something special about Jesus.

John is foretold in Isaiah. He is prophesied as the one who will introduce or by the “forerunner” of the Messiah. John in turn in his ministry of repentance preaches the coming Lord. One who is far greater than he is. Prophecy is the credibility factor here.

Notice also that baptism isn’t a uniquely Christian ritual. John nor Jesus were Christians. They were observant Jews. The baptism was a purifying ritual in their own tradition that they were using as a sign for people who were turning towards God in an intentional way. Later we would use it for those turning to Christ. But in this opening chapter it is evident that baptism is borrowed, not uniquely created.

Also interesting is that the Holy Spirit is referenced here. That’s curious. The Holy Spirit didn’t descend until Pentecost. The idea of the Trinity wouldn’t be fully formed until hundreds of years later, though the seeds of it would come sooner. The point being that John wouldn’t have had that language. Here is the helpfulness of recognizing theology also being a priority. Mark knows that Jesus would bring the Holy Spirit. John’s comment is a device to let the reader know that the subject of the story, Jesus, brings power unheard of before.

Then comes Jesus' baptism. It's not largely discussed here. It is a simple note of incident. The illustration of the dove, the Spirit, and the voice lets us know that John has found his man. The Messiah has come. With the many John baptized how would he have known who was the One he was waiting for? It comes by divine revelation. Jesus' identity is confirmed and now His ministry begins.

Again, Mark is straight to the punch. Jesus is tempted by Satan and survives. The message? Jesus has come. Jesus is affirmed. Jesus immediately breaks the power of Satan. Now we know this and the story can move forward.

Unlike the other gospels where John's plight is more lengthy and Jesus' taking the ministry of repentance, Mark is once again succinct. John is arrested. Jesus takes over the message of repentance and preaching the good news. What is the news? The Kingdom of God is near!

Why isn't Mark more thorough in this? He doesn't need to be to make the point. The point is that the One greater than John has come and taken the place of prominence. That's all we need to know and it proves itself out quickly in the story.

The calling of the disciples comes next. This is an area that is wildly different from the gospel of John. Here Jesus calls and they leave without question. For many this is disturbing. For many this kind of blind response to a charismatic figure has led to destruction in cult recruitment. It also leaves questions of abandoning families and dependents without reason or word. None of this resonates with our Jesus.

John's story is different. John the Baptist actually has to point out Jesus to a couple of his own disciples and tells them that Jesus is the promised one. They should check Him out. They spend the day with Him and are convinced, recruiting their brothers later. This seems much more likely. It is a process, not reckless abandon. So why does Mark put it this way? Because he is making a point theologically. That point isn't to be reckless and abandon our families.

The point is that when we know God is calling we answer. Period. Simple and true point couched in a very summary tale of Jesus recruiting His first disciples.

We then over the following verses seen stories of healing and casting out demons. A few things happen that we'll cover. He silences the demons' knowledge of Himself. He tries to hide from the crowds. He bounces from town to town.

Something to consider in Jesus' day was that to be elevated above Caesar, seen as a divine king, was equivalent to treason. Punishable by death. For Him to be "outed" so soon would eliminate the rest of His ministry. So He shuts them up.

Also, if we didn't pick up His power to break Satan with the wilderness temptation, we can't miss it now. The demons have no choice but to obey and He casts them out. The Kingdom of God is being made one exorcism and one healing at a time. If you want to know where the Kingdom is, look at Jesus.

In His healing, there is a very real danger of people missing His identity if they focus on the miracle. These works would equate Him with a magician. But He is no magician. He is Messiah. You can go to a magician, get your miracle and move on. Not the Messiah. He has something much more important to offer.

We see this in verse 38. As He begins bouncing from town to town because the crowds are getting too much He makes His ultimate purpose known. He is really there to preach His message. Repentance. The Kingdom of God. The miracles are just a sign of who He is. The real meat is His message. That is what He wants to be the focus.

Unfortunately things then and now aren't all that different. There were many who got their miracle and left. They weren't interested in the message. The message would force them to ask "what can I do for others?" when all they were concerned about was "what's in it for me?" We still see this in church today. Flipping that focus from self to others, from the me to the we is what Jesus was all about.

The problem with crowds and why Jesus led His close disciples to "lonely places" is that crowds were a threat. Yes, even adoring crowds were a threat. They attracted attention. They looked stirred up. The Jews were a notoriously rebellious group. Seeing them gather en masse with a "leader" was a threat. Threats were squashed starting with the leader. That would be Jesus. He wasn't looking for that. He had a message to preach. He had a movement to start.

The chapter ends with healing a man with leprosy. Some translations describe Jesus' reaction as "compassion", some "pity", and some "indignant". Indignant seems harsh. So what gives?

The actual term translated is indicating ferocious emotion. Something hit Jesus deep. Something was frustrating yet compelling. Compassion we like better because it's softer and makes sense of the healing. There might be a little more to it though.

The leper begs because that's the only way anyone will come near him. He is an outcast. He is disgusting to the people. Especially the priests. He is unclean without the possibility of being made clean.

Is Jesus moved with compassion? Yes. Is He also likely frustrated at the religious figures who dismiss the man's value simply because he is sick? Yes. This man is more than a disease. He is man. A person. A child of God. So of course He will heal.

Sending the man to the priests and instructing him to follow the Law to the letter to show for certain he is cleansed does a couple things. It thumbs His nose at those who would dismiss because He sees the man's value. It also shows the priests that what they see as refuse has great value. In fact the man following the custom to the letter shows a devoutness that should impress them. Jesus is elevating the oppressed so that in revealing their quality it might put the shame the ones who had dismissed him.

It is a peak that Jesus isn't here to support that system that's missed the point of God. He's here to make it right.

One more note perhaps just as a comfort. Jesus, for all the reasons we've mentioned asks him to keep quiet about how he was healed. He says "don't tell anyone". The guy tells EVERYONE. So Jesus continues to have to remove to avoid crowds.

How often have we asked someone to keep something in confidence because even if the news is good there will be other consequences that are a problem? With the best of intentions they break confidence and then we have to clean up the consequence. There's a reason people ask us to keep things private. If we want that for ourselves we have to grant it to others.

Oddly today we have a reverse problem. Jesus tells the leper to NOT tell anyone and he tells everyone. Now Jesus asks us to share our faith, story, and redemption with everyone and it's hard to get people to share it with anyone...