



Title	⇒ Can Being Good Save Me? (10 Commandments Interlude)
Scripture	Ephesians 2: 1-10
Minister	The Reverend Matthew Ruttan
Place	Westminster Presbyterian Church, Barrie, ON
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Calendar	Pentecost 19
Note	This text is an approximate rendering

Minister: Peace be with you
Congregation: And also with you



At the start of October when we began our voyage through the 10 Commandments I told you the true story about Larry Walters, the man who had a great passion for flying. Those of you who were here will recall the story because, quite frankly, it is hard to forget. For those of you who missed it, here's a quick retelling.

Walters was a truck driver who had a lifelong dream to fly. He joined the Air Force but poor eyesight disqualified him. But he had an idea: Just because he couldn't fly a plane didn't mean he couldn't fly. If you recall, he went down to the local army and navy surplus store and bought a tank of helium and forty-five weather balloons. Back in his yard, he used straps to attach the balloons to his lawn chair. He anchored the chair to the bumper of his jeep and inflated the balloons with helium. Then he packed some sandwiches and drinks and loaded a BB gun, figuring he could shoot a few balloons at a time to come back down gradually to earth.

Of course, you remember what happened, don't you? His plan was to sit back, and lazily ascend into the sky. But no. As soon as he cut the cord, he shot up as if fired from a canon to 11,000 feet. So high that he certainly couldn't risk shooting any of the balloons! So there he stayed for fourteen hours, totally at a loss. I told you about how he drifted over the approach corridor for Los Angeles International Airport, and how a Pan Am pilot radioed the tower about passing a guy in a lawn chair at eleven thousand feet with a gun in his lap! And how he drifted out over the sea and how a Navy helicopter finally lowered a rope down to rescue him.

Back on the ground Mr. Walters was arrested. As he was being led away in handcuffs, a television reporter called out, "Mr. Walters, why'd you do it?" Larry, stopped, eyed the man, then replied nonchalantly, "A man can't just sit around. You have to have a vision for life."¹

In one respect, it is ridiculous, and even dangerous. But Larry does have a point, in the wider sense of things. You can't just sit around. You have to have a vision for life. This is the prospect of this series on the 10 Commandments: *Moral vision*, without which we are floating around almost aimlessly, and dangerously.



Having delved into the first four of the commandments—to have no other gods besides the Lord; to not make any idols; to not make wrongful use of the Lord's name; and to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy—we arrive at a kind of mid-point. A shift in the commandments happens at this exact juncture. They are roughly divided in two halves. The first four—the ones I just mentioned—are specifically about how we are to be loyal to this liberating and rescuing God who has freed us out of the *Shawshank Redemption* prison of sin,

and how we are to behave toward him under the brilliant radiance of his heat and light. The next six, deal primarily with our relationships to each other.

So there is a natural break right here in the middle, as if watching a play in two acts, we are now at intermission thinking a little bit about what we have seen so far and what we expect in the second half. And so it is an opportunity to think again about the bigger picture of moral vision. And part of the reason why I think this is just as critical as airline technicians checking out your plane on a layover in the middle of our flight, is because if we don't keep some key things finely tuned on our journey, the plane might not fly straight on the second leg of the trip. A tune up is needed on our layover for us to keep our vision clear for the second half.

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Some of you know the story of Martin Luther, the great German reformer. He began by going into law because that's what his father wanted him to do. But one day on the way back from school he found himself in the midst of a terrible storm. And amidst petrifying and ear-cracking lighting bolts, as Luther ran for cover, one struck the ground very near him. In fear of his life while he fell to the ground, he cried out to St. Anne for help. Feeling that his life was spared because of his desperate plea, he became a monk as a part of his thanksgiving to the Lord.

But something happened to Luther. The more he studied Scripture, the more he felt the oppressive judgment of a God of justice. Here's how he says it in his own words: "I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, "the justice of God," because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him."

Luther became increasingly hard on himself. No matter how much he tried he could not perfectly follow all of God's commandments; and he felt guilty and angry and resentful. He would punish himself physically in a vain attempt to make himself more holy or more disciplined or more acceptable. He went to the confessional booth almost non-stop in an attempt to lay out his sins so frequently that the priests who listened to him started to get tired of hearing him. And this wouldn't have been the case if they were serious offences Luther was confessing. The reason they were getting upset at him was that they didn't think his sins were all that bad. Go out and do some real sinning, they said, and then come back and talk to us! Stop being so worried about all these piddly little things, they urged him. But Luther knew, long before Sigmund Freud, that our sins go much deeper than what we can remember on the surface of our consciences.

But then the moment came. The revelation. Luther realized—as if seeing a sunrise for the very first time—that it simply could not be done. By our actions alone, we cannot perfectly please a God of perfect justice. Theologian John Leith summarizes Luther's experience like this: "The great, decisive experience in the life of Martin Luther was the new awareness that God's favor cannot be earned, cannot be bought, cannot be achieved by any human effort. God's favor is freely given. It is all grace."² At some level, through and through, we all have moments of contrary thoughts, doubt, unforgiveness, envy, lust, pride, whatever. Luther was learning the lesson of what would later be written in the Westminster catechism, an influential document on some of the main tenants of the faith and which gave incredible shape to the Reformed version of Christianity:

Question 82: Is any man able perfectly to keep the commandments of God?

Answer: No mere man, since the fall, is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed.

It's the realization of Luther. You can't do it!

And part of the reason why we pause on this very crucial fact in the midst of our series on the 10 Commandments, is because the commandments have often—and wrongly—been considered rules to earn you the favour of God. “If I just keep the commandments I’ll be a good person and God will accept me.” “If I keep the commandments—if I’m “good”—then God will let me into heaven.” “If I’m good, then God will have no choice, but to reward me—in this life and beyond.”

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One of the deep blessings of ministry is that I get the chance to sit and talk with people who are at the end of their lives—they and also their families. And if you have ever been at that place, and have, by the grace of God, somehow returned, you will probably know that the questions at that point have to do with a whole number of things; the questions people have are unpredictable—they concern reflections back upon their lives or what their legacy might be or being worried about their family or friends after they are gone. But a part of the conversation is always about God and what lies beyond when a fragile heart stops beating and when the beeping line on the hospital machine goes flat. And it is at those moments when I understand with greatest clarity the dangerous power of our primitive instincts that suggest to us that receiving God’s favour must surely be connected to how good we’ve been. The question it boils down to is this: *Can being good save me?*

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From Luther, let me invite you into a life that is a little closer to our own. Fiona works as a mid-level executive at TD Bank in a growing suburb of Toronto. She is married and has two kids. And by all outward appearances Fiona has it all together. She has a great relationship with her parents. She graduated in the top 2% of her class at McGill University in Montreal. And despite having a huge diamond ring on her finger beside her wedding ring, men continually pursue her, such is the prettiness of her face and the mysteriously magnetic charm of her character.

At home Fiona loves to play with her kids. They do the family things that not many others in their age bracket (and income bracket) find time to do: eating meals together (at the table), and going to soccer practice and gymnastics. Every month one of their parents comes over to be with the kids while they go out on a date, just to keep things fresh. They go to their favourite restaurant, and always reserve the good booth that has some privacy, and indulge in a bottle of red wine that is a little too expensive—but they do it anyway.

They have a rich life. Not only is it decorated with the things that our society at large covets—things like upward mobility, success, time with family—but they are active members of their church, called “Grace on the Hill Community Church.” He does some maintenance on the weekends; they both sponsor some of the local mission projects; she coordinates Sunday School and organizes speakers to come in every other month on topics of interest for modern Christians, things like life-style evangelism and mental well-being. They tithe 10%. Fiona seems to have it all together.

But in Fiona’s conscience things are not as neat. From a young age she has been fed the main messages of our culture: work hard, look good, and be good and you can go anywhere and do anything. It’s the message of self-empowerment. Some of it has worked well for her—at work, in her home, and in her church. People like to be around other people who get things done, and do so with seemingly little perspiration and with seemingly inexhaustible enthusiasm. But no matter her successes she feels guilty. And even if Fiona wouldn’t use the word guilt, it’s a feeling within that something isn’t adding up.

Her dad, she has been recently told, had a mild stroke. She didn’t find out until three weeks after the fact because her parents were concerned she was too busy and “didn’t need the stress of worrying about father.” Was she physically and emotionally unavailable to those closest to her? At work she loved her boss’ gentle eyes, and would sometimes go to him for advice about something for which she needed no advice—just to sit with him a while and talk. She never outwardly did anything about any of this, but in her heart, she knew she was doing something that was creeping towards a line.

At home, her children were her world. And despite the fatigue she felt at the end of the day, she would do her best to enter into their world to relate to them. But she wondered about how she was preparing them for the life ahead. At night when they prayed, they brainstormed what to pray for and ended up with a grocery list of things like food and clothes and good opportunities. Had she not exposed her kids enough to the needs of others, to those hurting? At church, she used her influence—in subtle ways, and even in ways of which she was not fully aware—to get certain things done. Decisions that weren't necessarily what Christ would want, but that were better in her own eyes. She had been so busy that she hadn't been praying or reading Scripture. She felt a distance from God. Not all the time, but sometimes. Was it her fault?

Despite having it all on the outside, the perfect package with the perfect bow, all wrapped up—on the inside, a fog of uncertainty clouded the black and whites of life and making them grey. How good is good enough? How good is good enough for a *perfect* God?

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There is something strikingly similar with Martin Luther and Fiona... and us. It is that despite the primitive instincts within us that we are our own masters, that we are the ones who with hard work and being good can control our destiny, *we are not gods*. Remember the first commandment? “You shall have no other gods before me.” Sometimes I think he means *us!*

Luther's breakthrough, which was really just seeing more clearly the breakthrough of Christ, was what is said so simply and so ground-breakingly in the Biblical letter to the Ephesians:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith,
and this is not your own doing;
it is the gift of God”

Let me say that again: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

Can being good save us? The answer, as by now I'm sure you've guessed, is a resounding ‘No.’ Then why do we have the commandments? Why do we go about trying to be good? The commandments are not about *earning* salvation. They are a guide to holy living because we are *thankful* for our salvation. Salvation from Egypt, from sin, and from ourselves.

Just this week I was speaking with a friend in a nursing home who put it in a perfect way: “Grace,” she said, “is God's riches, paid for at Christ's expense.” And the flood gates open—for Luther, for Fiona and for you. Luther's devotion could not earn it for him. Fiona's sparkling life could not earn it for her. 10 Commandments lived will not give us reward miles with God. Yes, they will make him smile. But they will not make him love us any more.

Can we do it ourselves? No.
Can God do it? Yes.
And the good news of the Gospel is that he did.

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¹ This story was recalled by the Rev. Dale Woods while delivering a message titled “Stewards of Vision” at a *Stewards by Design* conference held in Niagara Falls, ON, in May, 2010. Here I have abbreviated his telling.

² John Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 179.