

“Rules”

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Exodus 20: 1 – 17

*Then God spoke all these words:*

<sup>2</sup>*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;* <sup>3</sup>*you shall have no other gods before me.*

<sup>4</sup>*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.* <sup>5</sup>*You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, <sup>6</sup>but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

<sup>7</sup>*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.*

<sup>8</sup>*Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.* <sup>9</sup>*For six days you shall labor and do all your work.* <sup>10</sup>*But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work — you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.* <sup>11</sup>*For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.*

<sup>12</sup>*Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.*

<sup>13</sup>*You shall not murder.*

<sup>14</sup>*You shall not commit adultery.*

<sup>15</sup>*You shall not steal.*

<sup>16</sup>*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

<sup>17</sup>*You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*

<sup>18</sup>*When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, <sup>19</sup>and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.”* <sup>20</sup>*Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.”* <sup>21</sup>*Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.*

When Sarah Allan was a little bit younger, one of our favorite board games was, “Ticket to Ride.”

In playing you create train routes across the country. accumulating points for both segments and trips completed as you roll, draw, and strategize your way across the board.

When we played it for the first time, how did we start?

We started with the pamphlet of rules.

It’s a fairly complicated game when you’re getting started,  
and so not only did we all read the rules,

we kept them beside us, and throughout our first few rounds...  
 to figure out what we were supposed to do with the white blocks...  
 how many players do you need to use the double routes....

The rules introduced the game to us, took us by the hand, and led us through it, step by step.

The Ten Commandments are not like that game.

Not like those rules.

It would be easier if they were,

were a list that defined everything,  
 helped us make our decisions.

Like a navigation system,

dictating each and every turn in the road helping us to reach our destination.

Instead, they are an outline.

A fence on the outer limit of the terrain on which we live.

Guardrails on the side of the road to keep us where we can make the best progress on our journey.

To start, the more literal translation of the words which describe the commandments is

מַסְדֵּרֵי תַעֲשֶׂר

asereth ha-devarim, the ten words, or the ten utterances.

Not the final word, but a beginning word.

Mostly written (but not intended to be understood) as a negative,

in a legal linguistic style of the day that would have been known to those hearing it, who would have heard them as an invitation.

Why is this important?

Because.... what happens when we are given a negative in this day?

We feel compelled to find our way around it.

As Ferrol Sams wrote that his mother said about him in the autobiographical novel,

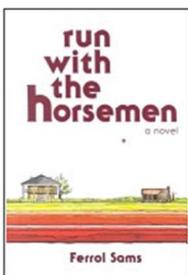
*Run with the Horsemen*,

“He's a good boy, he takes instruction well;

I just can't think of enough things to tell him not to do.”<sup>1</sup>

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## Run with the Horsemen



Ferrol Sams

Peachtree Publishers, 1982 - Comics & Graphic Novels - 422 pages

★★★★★

88 Reviews

g+1 0

**A boy's account of growing up through the rituals of life on an ancestral farm in middle Georgia between the big wars**

A boy's account of growing up through the rituals of life on an ancestral farm in middle Georgia between the big wars. It is a rueful, humorous story of the people in one rural county, but the telling cuts so deep it breaks through to the universal. Reminiscent of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Tom Sawyer*, and *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Run With the Horsemen* is the powerfully moving and delightfully endearing story of Porter Osborne Jr.'s journey to adulthood.

Or, in the movie “Despicable Me” when the mastermind criminal Mr. Gru welcomes his newly adopted daughters Margo, Edith and Agnes<sup>2</sup> into his very creepy home:

“Rule # 1, You will not touch anything!”

Their response?

“Can we touch the floor?”

“Can we touch the air?”

These commandments, utterances, are not presented in order for us to haggle over exact implications of those outer boundaries.

The overall composition and language choice of these words, their placement in this section of text tells that God has in mind something much bigger. Much bolder.

Terence Fretheim writes:

while the address is individual, the concern is not some private welfare. The focus is on protecting *the health of the community*, to which end the individual plays such an important role. That eight commandments are negatively formulated is pertinent at this point. As such, they open up life rather than close it down; that is, they focus on the outer limits of conduct rather than specific behaviors.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>2</sup> <http://www.minionsmovie.com/despicableme.html>

<sup>3</sup> Terence E. Fretheim *Interpretation* 221. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991. pg 221.

He also writes:

That eight commandments are negatively formulated is pertinent at this point. As such, they open up life rather than close it down; that is, they focus on the outer limits of conduct rather than specific behaviors (though chaps. 21-23 draw out such specific implications). At the same time, the negative formulation indicates that the primary concern is not to create the human community but to *protect* it from the behaviors that have the potential of destroying it. Yet the commands implicitly commend their positive side (cf. 20:3 and Deuteronomy 6:5). The two positive commands suggest the appropriateness of this for all ten words. For example, not bearing false witness invites speaking well of one’s neighbor, not killing suggests efforts to preserve life, and not wrongfully using the name of God commends the praise of God. It is not enough for a community’s life and health simply to avoid crimes.

Hence it is of considerable importance that these commandments not be understood as eternally limited in scope of as ethical principles more important than any others that might be formulated. The various canonical expansions of some commandments witness to an ongoing effort by Israel to address changing life situations. This *gives the people of God in every age an inner biblical warrant to expand on them.*

Terence Fretheim and others have even suggested that the way in which the commandments were written allows and encourages those living with the commandments to adjust and adapt them as the times change, to reflect our evolving understanding of God's presence in the world.

Patrick Miller has written: <sup>4</sup>

the commandment not to steal unfolds an ethic of neighbor love that has to do not only with making sure that one does not illegally and stealthily take what belongs to one's neighbor but also with protecting the goods of one's neighbor, being available for safekeeping of the property of another, and avoiding legal acts that endanger the economic well-being of the neighbor.

A former classmate, Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb writes:

The *Assert Hadibrot* have worked well for 3,000 years. They've remained fresh and relevant as their meanings evolve: Consider *Lo Tachmod*, "don't covet," which in scarce times meant, "it's OK to lack things," but amid today's abundance might mean "acquire less, for your sake and the Earth's."<sup>5</sup>

What does this mean?

It means that unless this is old news for you, and maybe it is,  
it means that it's time that we looked at these words with new eyes.

When we are told to keep the Sabbath,  
it doesn't mean we should make a list of the things we don't get to do,  
it means we are invited to consider the gift of this day.

This is a day when we get to worship God.

We can say no to the other distractions.

No to obligations we might need to say yes to on others days of the week.

We don't have to be defined by our productivity or our relevance.

What we do, what we make, how much we got done.

We are beloved children of God, and that is enough.

In the words of Brene Brown from a Washington Post article:<sup>6</sup>

One of the things... [I have found is] the importance of rest and play, and the willingness to let go of exhaustion as a status symbol and productivity as self-worth.....What's really meaningful for us? What do we want to be doing? That happens not just in work culture, I see it even with teenagers who now have four and five hours of homework and go to bed at one in the morning. We don't know who we are without productivity as a metric of our worth.

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<sup>4</sup> Patrick Miller, "Preaching the Ten Commandments," in *Journal for Preaching*, Lent, 2002. pgs 5 – 6.

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb, *Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation, Bethesda, MD*

[http://ftp.momentmag.com/Exclusive/2011/02/ask\\_the\\_rabbis.html](http://ftp.momentmag.com/Exclusive/2011/02/ask_the_rabbis.html)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/exhaustion-is-not-a-status-symbol/2012/10/02/19d27aa8-0cba-11e2-bb5e-492c0d30bff6\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/exhaustion-is-not-a-status-symbol/2012/10/02/19d27aa8-0cba-11e2-bb5e-492c0d30bff6_story.html)

YOU are ENOUGH.

When we are told not to bear false witness, that actually means that we are invited to see our neighbors as God sees them, honestly, with grace and hope, as beloved.

And that's the same for our neighbors we'd love to get together with very soon and those we do our best to avoid.

When we are told not to take the Lord's name in vain, it means that we are given the opportunity to praise God.

God who created the cycle of day and night, time and seasons, turtles and toadstools.

For the grace of Jesus Christ found through tears shed in grief

-a symbol of the depth of the love that has been shared....

Praising God for the gift of fingerpaints

The ability to laughing so hard at a joke that milk comes out of your nose.

Gratitude for the image of God shining in those men and women of faith

who were willing to walk across a bridge despite violent opposition

And while I hate to disappoint the parents of younger children, honoring your father and mother isn't about children minding their parents, it's about grown children still taking care of their parents even when those parents can no longer produce anything or bring in an income or toil in the fields.

These are the building blocks of community.

Hospitality shared.

Witness given.

God vision cultivated.

Miss Reenie McKnight. My first grade Sunday School teacher. About the age of my grandmother, she was afflicted with MS, she showed up every Sunday, in her wheelchair to teach my Sunday School class. To teach us about Nicodemus. Zaccheus. Moses and Miriam.

She was wonderful, and I adored her.

And at some point in November or early December of that year I happened to be at a check-out line in a Bible bookstore with my mom and I saw it. A ten commandments charm bracelet. Gold. Or should I say, **golden**. Jingly. Bible verses. It caught my eye.

And I knew. In that moment. That it was exactly what Miss Reenie wanted and it was exactly the gift I would get for her.

I was in the first grade. It would be eleven more years before I would go to college and move away.



That's a lot of years. That's a lot of Sundays.

But on each and every Sunday, I would see Miss Reenie and would peek a look at her wrist.

At first I was proud to have given her such a wonderful present. As I grew up that emotion shifted to surprise that she still wore it. And as I grew older still that emotion shifted to a tender gratitude, because I knew why she wore it.

She wore it not because there was a rule telling her to wear it,  
but because she understood what **wasn't** on that list of ten commandments,  
the greater love, beloved community, they encouraged.

It's a glimpse of what Pope Francis suggested in the first teaching document he wrote as Pope, including these words: <sup>7</sup>

I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.... More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: "Give them something to eat" (*Mk 6:37*).

Accepting the Ten Commandments,  
the Ten Utterances  
is about so much more than the words on the page,  
it's about the faith in the room.  
The strength of community.  
The vision of what can be.  
The hope of an outstretched hand when you are hanging on by your fingernails.

It's about what's not on the list.

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> [http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium\\_en.pdf](http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.pdf) pgs 41-42.