

# BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Deut 4:1-2, 6-8; Ps 15 (14); James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

## This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me

Mark 7:1 Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, 2 they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. 3 (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 4 and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) 5 So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” 6 He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

8 You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

9 *Then he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! 10 For Moses said, ‘Honour your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ 11 But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God) — 12 then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, 13 thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.”*

14 Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 15 there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

17 *When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. 18 He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, 19 since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) 20 And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles.*

21 For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, 22 adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

With this Gospel reading we are back on the Markan readings and the change may come as something of a shock, with its directness and even earthiness. In italics, the verses omitted by the lectionary are restored, as they help towards a fuller understanding of the passage as a whole.

As we read the passage, it may be good to recall that all religions have “traditions” which can be at variance with the core vision of the faith. It is true of Islam, Judaism and, within Christianity, of Catholicism. The passage is an invitation not to past accusation but to present self-examination.

### OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The food laws were, and are, a vital part of Jewish identity. In general, scholars

### Thought for the day

As disciples, we all need a kind of personal “rule of life” and we are supported by the community of faith and its practices. But the externals of religions—the very supports we need—risk becoming merely cultural, an empty shell, if our heart is not in it. All three readings this Sunday underline the point: *Pure, unspoilt religion is this: coming to the help of orphans and widows when they need it.*

### Prayer

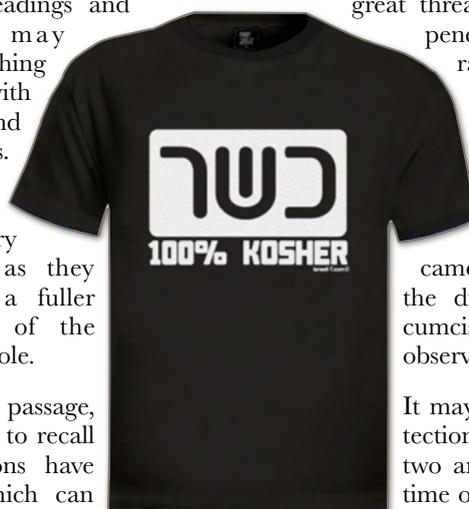
Heavenly Father, you know the human heart, that most devious thing of all (Sir 42:18; Jer 17:9). Help us to know ourselves. Help us to grow in integrity, rooted in purity of heart. Help to serve our neighbour in need with undivided hearts that we may come before you in heartfelt praise and thanksgiving.

would reckon that the dietary laws came in at a time when assimilation was a great threat. This could have happened at many times in Israelite history, but perhaps the great danger of assimilation / annihilation was the Exile in Babylon (587-539 bc). It is probable that the identity markers of Judaism came into being then, that is, the dietary (kosher) laws, circumcision at birth and Sabbath observance.

It may be added that such protection has shown its value over two and half millennia. At the time of Jesus, there was in some quarters a tendency to casuistry, to nit-picking regulations to test the practical application in everyday life.

### KIND OF WRITING

The text is a series of arguments, offering a thesis and proofs in a sequence. The chart overleaf traces the sequence, which is structured according to the principles of “anecdote” (*chreia*) rhetoric



Argument	Mark
Scene setting	<b>vv. 1-2</b>
Explanatory note	<b>vv. 3-4</b>
Opening question	<b>v. 5</b>
First <i>Argument</i> (from Scripture)	<b>vv. 6-7</b>
First Practical <i>Conclusion</i>	<b>v. 8</b>
Second <i>Argument</i> (from Tradition)	<i>vv. 9-12</i>
Second Practical <i>Conclusion</i>	<i>v. 13</i>
Third General <i>Conclusion</i>	<b>v. 14-15</b>
Third <i>Argument</i> (from the human person)	<i>vv. 17-20</i>
Fourth General <i>Conclusion</i>	<b>vv. 21-23</b>

(persuasion).

**NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND**

The extent to which the early Christian movement ought to have held onto earlier traditions was a problem from the start, arising first of all in Paul’s letters. His understanding of the cross led him to think that God now included all humanity in his plan of salvation and that to remain distinct by outward signs (the identity marks of Judaism) no longer served the kingdom of God.

**ST PAUL**

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil.

For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God.

Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God.

Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve. But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. (Rom 14:13-23)

**BRIEF COMMENTARY**

**Verse 1** Pharisees, especially, were concerned with the details of the Law. In some way, their approach was liberal and “lay”, taking the sacredness of the Temple and making it a reality in daily life.

**Verse 2** Ritual washing was essential before eating.

**Verse 3** The explanatory note here tells us that Mark is writing for an audience with little or no direct experience of Judaism, hence the note.

**Verse 5** The tradition of the elders meant rules not found in the Bible but developed over time by the community. The Pharisees, in particular, laid great store by this oral tradition.

**Verse 6** Argument from Scripture would have been very powerful for the Pharisees. The prophets regularly condemn the religion of mere outward observance. Cf. *Spare me the din of your chanting, let me hear none of your strumming on lyres, let justice flow like water, and uprightness like a never-failing stream!* (Amos 5:23-24, NJB) Notice the bodily imagery here—to be developed later.

**Verse 7** Always a risk in all religions and not unknown in our own.

**Verse 8** A very stark first conclusion, not lacking in clarity. The verses which follow illustrate this with the example of Corban, which allowed people, apparently, to get around their filial duty to their parents.

**Verse 14** This is a formal address, calling for special attention.

**Verse 15** This is the principle behind the example and teaching which follow. In the omitted vv.17-20 a fairly graphic illustration is made, which rather undermines the concern with food laws. It is not all that clear that *Jesus himself* would have been so absolute—other-

wise, why was there so much trouble with the issue in early Christianity?

**Verse 21** This teaching is, of course, consistent with Jesus’ move to the heart as expressed in the Sermon on the Mount, especially in the Antitheses (Matthew 5:21-48).

**Verse 23** Jesus is therefore not denying that there can be defilement—it’s just that it comes from within, not from without.

**POINTERS FOR PRAYER**

1. Certain sections of the Jewish people put great store on the importance of rules and conventions as a measure of the goodness of a person. Jesus challenges this view. How have you found that getting appearances right did not necessarily make you a good person?

2. Even fidelity in religious practice is not enough. “This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me”. How have you experienced the importance of carrying your faith beyond attendance at Mass on Sundays? When have you seen that in others? What brought this home to you?

3. What Jesus seeks are followers whose faith is whole-hearted and warm, people whose religion is not primarily in dutiful observance but in their enthusiasm for life and their care for one another. It is good to be with them. Think of the contrast between a dinner party at which everything is just right but very formal, and another party which is rather haphazard and casual but full of great warmth.

4. “It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.” It is also from within that good intentions come. We have choices. When have you been faced with the choice between good and evil? When did you realise the importance of accepting responsibility for your own life and choices? How has this helped your growth as a person?

**PRAYER**

Father of light, giver of every good and perfect gift, bring to fruition the word of truth sown in our hearts by your Son, that we may rightly understand your commandments, live your law of love, and so offer you worship that is pure and undefiled. Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

## Every perfect gift is from above, from the Father of lights

Jas 1:17 Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. 18 In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

Jas 1:21 Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

Jas 1:22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

Jas 1:27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

In the lectionary Year B, James is read continuously from Sunday 22B to Sunday 26B. Accordingly, a more ample introduction will be provided today, without the need to repeat it on subsequent Sundays. The document was effectively dismissed by Luther as “a right strawy epistle” on account of the perceived contrast /contradiction with Pauline teaching on faith and works. However, it contains sparkling gems of Christian wisdom and offers penetrating insight into discipleship then and now. Nevertheless, the letter did not enter the canon until at least after 200 AD.

### CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The letter is addressed to the Diaspora. This allegorical use must point to Jewish followers of Jesus dispersed throughout the known world. One may always ask *which* James and *when*. Of the five James in the NT, only two are real candidates. James *the brother of John* was executed by Herod Agrippa I in 44 AD. James *the brother of Jesus* was killed by stoning in 62 AD according to Josephus. This latter James was a highly significant figure in the Jerusalem church, as reflected in Acts 15 and Galatians 2-3. A case could be made for saying that the text represents in some measure the legacy of James of Jerusalem, although the

present text is a later product directed to the Diaspora. There are difficulties in tracing the document directly to a contemporary of Jesus: the good grammar and rhetoric, the very reduced reference to Jesus, the actual absence of Jesus in the list of good people to follow and, finally, the absence of conflict over the kosher regulations.

James in Greek is *Iakōbos* and the echo of the great patriarch is intentional. In terms of date, sometime between 80 and 90 AD is possible; a much later date is also possible, up to Hadrian’s suppression of the second revolt in 135 AD.

### KIND OF WRITING

The whole document as such is quite different from the familiar Pauline letters. However, letters could take many forms in antiquity. Beyond that, the variety of proposals re the *genre* is impressive: ethical teaching, catechism for Baptism, Jewish manual adapted for Christian use, Christian wisdom literature. At least, the reigning uncertainty does help name characteristics of the document!

Attention to the words used helps to mark the document as something special: the letter employs sixty-three words not found elsewhere in the NT and, of these, ten make their first appearance in this letter. This means the letter represents a strand of early Christianity not widely represented in our present NT. The letter has a strong relationship with the Jesus’ tradition, especially as represented in Matthew; it has roots in Jewish proverbial wisdom; it fits into the style of contemporary Greek moralists. The current division into chapters and verses does not always help a sequential reading.

### RELATED PASSAGES

And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. (Matthew 7:26)

### BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 17** The key phrases are in synonymous parallelism. Cf. James 1:5. Behind the conviction stands the goodness of creation in Genesis and the goodness of God in the Psalms. The echo of Genesis is confirmed by the expression “Father of lights” (= Gen 1:3, 14-19; Psalm

136:7). Consistent with that, variation and shadow are words taken from astrology. V. 17 is a very noble sentiment and has found a permanent place in the Orthodox liturgy (see the prayer below).

**Verse 18** The metaphor of birth is agreeably mixed. It is feminine (*he bore us*) and masculine (by the word of truth). God’s purpose in creation is the new creation. As first fruits, we participate already in the final harvest.

**Verse 21** A series of imperatives starts in v. 19, on the good use of the tongue. Good action requires great purity of heart and hearing *and doing* are inseparable. The only real faith is a lived faith. The “begetting word,” familiar from Stoic teaching, has power to save.

**Verse 22** Paul and James agree here. See Rom 2:13. Cf. Mt 7:26 above. In James’ view, self-deception is culpable.

**Verse 27** This positive statement is in contrast to the negative one in v. 26. Pure etc. may be found elsewhere in Heb 7:26; 13:4; 1 Pet 1:4. In this view, the world contaminates. Orphans and widows are a constant theme: Is 1:17; Jer 5:28; Ezek 22:7; Zech 7:10. Strangers are *not* explicitly included in this care.

### POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Take time to reflect on v. 17, such an uplifting and encouraging sentiment.
2. The indwelling, begetting word grounds our life in God and stands the heart of both contemplation and action.
3. “Spirituality is whatever I do to make the Gospel come alive in my life.” (Nivard Kinsella).

### PRAYER

Lord, bless those who praise You and sanctify those who trust in You. Save Your people and bless Your inheritance. Protect the whole body of Your Church. Sanctify those who love the beauty of Your house. Glorify them in return by Your divine power, and do not forsake us who hope in You. Grant peace to Your world, to Your churches, to the clergy, to those in public service, to the armed forces, and to all Your people. For every good and perfect gift is from above, coming from You, the Father of lights. To You we give glory, thanksgiving, and worship, to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages.

*(Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom)*

# Keep the commandments

Deut 4:1 So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. 2 You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the LORD your God with which I am charging you.

3 *You have seen for yourselves what the LORD did with regard to the Baal of Peor—how the LORD your God destroyed from among you everyone who followed the Baal of Peor, 4 while those of you who held fast to the LORD your God are all alive today.*

Deut 4:5 *See, just as the LORD my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy.*

6 You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!” 7 For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? 8 And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?

## INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The reading (slightly expanded above to provide the context) presents the case for the Law (the Torah), independently of the casuistry which arose afterwards.

## ORIGIN OF THE READING

Deuteronomy has a fairly straightforward structure, as follows:

Preamble: 1:1–4:43  
 Law-giving in Moab: 4:44–28:68  
 The covenant in Moab: 29:1–32:47  
 Testamentary benedictions: 33:1–29

## KIND OF WRITING

Preamble Deut 1:1–4:43

1:1-5	Preface (place, time)
1:6-3:29	Moses’s own story
4:1-40	Peroration

The conclusion (or peroration) is especially rich in a kind of homiletic theology. This is the background to our unit, 4:1-2, 6-8, given today as a lead-in to the Gospel reading.

## OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

i) Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4–9)

(ii) While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. Thus Israel yoked itself to the Baal of Peor, and the Lord’s anger was kindled against Israel. The Lord said to Moses, “Take all the chiefs of the people, and impale them in the sun before the Lord, in order that the fierce anger of the Lord may turn away from Israel.” And Moses said to the judges of Israel, “Each of you shall kill any of your people who have yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor.”

Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman into his family, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation of the Israelites, while they were weeping at the entrance of the tent of meeting. When Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he got up and left the congregation. Taking a spear in his hand, he went after the Israelite man into the tent, and pierced the two of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. So the plague was stopped among the people of Israel. Nevertheless those that died by the plague were twenty-four thousand. (Numbers 25:1–9)

(iii) All the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you. The Lord will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your womb, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your ground in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give you. The Lord will open for you his rich storehouse, the heavens, to give the rain of your land in its season and to bless all

your undertakings. You will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow. The Lord will make you the head, and not the tail; you shall be only at the top, and not at the bottom—if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I am commanding you today, by diligently observing them, (Deuteronomy 28:10–13)

## BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 1** This the start of the exhortation, which invites full commitment to the Torah. Cf. Deut 6:4-9 above. Entry into and residence in the land are *always* conditional.

**Verse 2** The command not to alter the Torah reflects the political covenants of the time and also wisdom literature. Cf. Prov 30:6.

**Verse 3** This verse reflects what happened in Ba’al Peor. Although not part of the reading, it forms the essential background (see above). The message couldn’t be clearer: keeping the Law leads to life; breaking the Law brings death.

**Verse 4** Once more, holding fast leads to life.

**Verses 5-6** For them, the Torah was the summation of practical wisdom. Notice the wisdom vocabulary in the passage.

**Verses 7-8** Israel is special because of its God and the gift of the Law. Cf. Dt 5:25, 28:10-13 (given above).

## POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. “The glory of God is the living person” (Irenaeus of Lyons) How can we learn to live life to the full? The Torah and later the Sermon on the Mounts are our paths to a life fully lived in God’s presence.

2. A real sense of the gift of faith does have to lead to complacency: it can also lead to heartfelt gratitude and sense of graced privilege.

3. Wisdom, especially of the practical kind, is a very attractive characteristic in someone. What are your sources for living wisely?

## PRAYER

God, our guide and the giver of wisdom, help us to receive your word so that we may have life in the Word made flesh, Jesus, your Son and our saviour, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.

# THE LITURGY

**Deut 4:1-2, 6-8; Ps 15 (14); James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

## READINGS 1 AND 3

The Law was, of course, good and a gift from God. Cf. *So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.* (Romans 7:12) The abuse of the Law is another question altogether. Christians have to be careful not to slip into a simplistic superiority or even supersessionism vis-à-vis God's first chosen people. Excessive traditionalism is not unknown among us!

## THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 14 is one of many psalms which meditate on the Law and makes for a perfect response to the reading.

## SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

### First Reading

*Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8*

Did you ever feel gratitude for guidance given or for a presence in your life? That's exactly how the Jews felt and still feel today about the gift of God's word and God's presence.

### Second Reading

*James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27*

The letter of James is marked by its direct simplicity, being close to experience. But it can also touch a nerve. After all, what is "pure religion"? Do I live it?

### Gospel

*Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23*

Our reading reflects issues of religious law at the time of Jesus. Exaggerated traditionalism was sapping the life out of religion. Of course, this has not "gone away" at all and the critique of Jesus speaks directly to church today.

## WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

### Monday 31 August *St Aidan*

*1 Thessalonians 4:13-18*

St Paul is answering a question of the Thessalonians: when our Lord comes again will those already dead be at a disadvantage? The response uses two kinds of language: apocalyptic and relational. It is likely that the second, relational language will speak more directly

to us today.

*Luke 4:16-30*

Luke expands a simple, historical incident into a great tableau, thus furnishing a key to the whole Gospel, from the proclamation to Jesus through the inclusion outsiders to his death and resurrection in the Holy City.

### Tuesday 1 September

*1 Thessalonians 5:1-6, 9-11*

The Thessalonians also had a second question: when will the end be? Paul is cautious and uses a series of metaphors: (i) a thief in the night: the second coming is unpredictable; (ii) giving birth: the Lord's coming is inevitable; (iii) helmet and breastplate: how will we prepare. (This verse is omitted in the lectionary should be restored—this is always allowed.)

*Luke 4:31-37*

Following yesterday's *tableau*, Luke shows us Jesus a prophet, powerful in word and deed.



### Wednesday 2 September

*Colossians 1:1-8*

In this opening thanksgiving, we hear something of the life of the church in Colossae, in modern-day Turkey. We learn that Paul was not the teacher of the Colossians, but a certain Epaphras.

*Luke 4:38-44*

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is help up mainly as a prophet. But his original in God is not forgotten. It falls to the demons—whose know their catechism—to remind us of the deep identity of Jesus.

### Thursday 3 September

*St Gregory the Great, pope and doctor*

*Colossians 1:9-14*

How will the Colossians feel as they hear this passage? It is always a pleasure to know that someone is praying for you.

*Luke 5:1-11*

The call stories in Mark and Matthew are stripped of all human interest and even psychological probability, leaving the sovereign call of Jesus to stand out. However, in this great story, Luke furnishes us with a *reason* for the "yes" of Peter and the others. Luke also does not want us to leave the miracle in the past; instead he wants to us ask, what experience of Jesus drew me in the first place and what experience of Jesus today keeps me "in" right now?

### Friday 4 September

*Colossians 1:15-20*

Today we hear the most famous passage in the letter to the Colossians. It is just amazing that such profound claims are made about a Galilean peasant preacher, executed by the Romans as a criminal, only a short time before.

*Luke 5:33-39*

The Jesus revolution was also a revolution of received ideas and practices. The great "novelty" of the Gospel—God's untrammelled compassion and eager love—calls for novelty in how we "practice" the faith, even today. Yes, the old is good, but even more so is the new.

### Saturday 5 September

*Colossians 1:21-23*

In this reading, "foreigners and enemies" means really non-Jews or Gentiles. Now that all the Gentiles—including us today—have been included in salvation, a certain way of life is expected of us.

*Luke 6:1-5*

We could be bold here and ask what were the Pharisees themselves doing in a cornfield anyway on the *Sabbath day*? That would be to miss the point: Jesus has authority, even over the Sabbath—a mighty claim, given that the Sabbath was traced to creation itself and to the Ten Commandments.