Odds are you may have learned the Ten Commandments many years ago, perhaps when you were in school or faith formation.

On the one hand, they are a great basic reminder of things we need to follow for our benefit; for just as our parents on earth guide is as kids in part with rules, the same is true of our heavenly Father.

The thing of it is though is we are meant to think about these at deeper levels throughout our lives. Faith is something that we grow in; and Lent gives us the time to really look at ourselves and ask “how am I doing?”

Earl Smith, who surrendered himself to God, had to do just that when he looked at his own faith journey after he had discerned God calling him to prison ministry. For while he said “yes” to the call, he also had to do some deeper spiritual growth once he got to the prison.

One Christmas, he was visiting inmates.

He admits he didn’t have much cheer himself that Christmas. He was a brand-new chaplain, with less than five months on the job. The darkness

and despair of more than 5,000 men living behind bars overwhelmed him. How could anyone bring God's light here, he wondered.

In Earl's mind, he had accomplished exactly nothing since starting this job. Prisoners are shrewd and suspicious, slow to open up. His attempts to form pastoral relationships had failed.

December 13, he was handing out packets of Christmas cards to inmates who wanted to send holiday greetings, feeling more inadequate with each delivery. Nothing will do that to you more than a prison, inmate or not, he says, for they are the starkest, toughest places on earth.

It wasn't supposed to feel this way. If ever a minister was called to a job, Earl was called to be a chaplain at San Quentin. When he says called, he means he heard God's voice at maximum volume. He even used the words "San Quentin."

Earl grew up in a racially segregated neighborhood in Stockton, California. His parents made him go to church, but he was more into drugs—using and dealing. By the time he graduated from high school, he was overseeing

a network of suppliers. He was feared on the streets of Stockton. People who crossed him regretted it.

One evening, Michael, one of his dealers, came to his apartment. He owed Earl money, so he figured he was coming to pay. A guy named Steven Moore was with him. They sat down and before Earl knew what was happening, Steven pulled a gun and shot him point-blank six times. He dove under his coffee table. Steven calmly shot him in the back.
“Let’s go,” Michael said. “He’s done.”

A neighbor called police. “You’re going to die,” a doctor told him in the hospital trauma ward. Barely conscious, Earl found himself alone in a room, in searing pain, awaiting surgery.

Suddenly, the pain vanished. Totally. A profound sense of peace came over him. For an instant he thought maybe he was dead. Then a voice spoke, clear as a bell: “You’re not going to die. You have things to do. You’re going to be a chaplain at San Quentin.”

That was all. But it was enough. Earl started going to church again and eventually made his way to college, where he graduated with a degree in religion. Becoming a pastor was a long road. He kept relapsing into his old life, drinking and doing drugs.

He even found himself wondering what it would be like to come face-to-face with Steven Moore and do to him what he had done to Earl. An eye for an eye, right? He thought to himself.

In college, Earl married a faithful, patient woman named Angel. With her support he got serious about his vocation. He put the drinking and drugs behind him and made amends to people he'd hurt. He even convinced himself to forgive Steven Moore. At least he felt he had to say that, but actually doing it would require more work.

Earl was 27 when San Quentin offered him a job as a chaplain. He started on a six-month probationary period. Many candidates don't make it past that period. Like him, they feel overmatched by the prison's impenetrable despair.

That December afternoon, as Earl pushed a cart stacked with Christmas cards down a row of cells, he figured his time at San Quentin was about over. His six-month review was coming up and he had nothing to show for himself. Obviously, he thought, God had called the wrong man to this job.

Earl was in the section called North Block. At cell 66 he extended a packet of cards toward the inmate, who was leaning against the bars of his cell door. All of a sudden his stomach balled up. He broke into a sweat. The man looked at him blankly—a look he got from many inmates who couldn't care less about a visit from the chaplain.

"What's your name?" Earl asked.

His entire expression changed. His eyes widened and he jumped back all the way to the rear of his cell.

"Ace," he said with a croak. But that was a street name. Earl knew his real name. Steven Moore. He hadn't recognized Earl at first, but he knew him on sight. How could he not, for when someone looks you in the eye and shoots you pointblank, you don't forget his face.

It had been eight years. He was a juvenile then, just 17, a budding L.A. gangster visiting family in Stockton. He'd agreed to take Earl out as a favor to Michael, the dealer who owed him money.

Steven knew as well as Earl did what this encounter meant. Though Earl hadn't formed any close relationships at San Quentin, He had met inmates he'd known back on the streets. All it would take was a subtle signal—Earl telling someone Steven had tried to kill him—and he'd be dead before Christmas. A quick twist of a shank in the yard.

The harsh economy of prison runs on debts and obligations. Plenty of inmates would want to do the chaplain a favor.

Earl's heart pounded. All his old street instincts came crashing back. He had Steven Moore right where he wanted him. Hands shaking, Earl laid the stack of Christmas cards on the bars of his cell. He pushed his cart down the corridor.

But Earl didn’t get far before he burst out weeping. He tried handing out more cards but he couldn’t even say “Merry Christmas.”

“What’s wrong, chaplain?” inmates started asking.

At the end of the corridor Earl leaned against the wall, tears streaming down, his whole body shaking now. The only way out of the cell block was back down the corridor. Past Steven’s cell. He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t make his feet move.

Earl stood there, the wall cold and hard against his back. With crystal clarity he saw why his ministry at San Quentin had stalled. His life had changed enormously since that night eight years ago. But the change was on the outside.

Earl says that if he’d truly changed, he would’ve been able to look Steven in the face and greet him in the name of Jesus. But he couldn’t. He hadn’t forgiven him. He hadn’t left his old life behind. No wonder he failed to minister to these men. Inside, he was just like them. Imprisoned behind years of slow-burning hate and anger.

And so Earl pushed his cart back down the corridor, each step agonizing. He passed cell 80. Then 70. His pace slowed. Cell 68, 67. He stopped at cell 66. Earl was all set to say something terrifying to Steven—something so he'd know he was going to get what was coming to him. But a voice inside him gave him different words.

"Hey, I want to thank you for shooting me," Earl said, too softly for the other inmates to hear. "God used you to get to me."

Steven said nothing. He just stared. Earl hurried away, unsure what he might do next. When he finished handing out the cards, he returned to his office, collapsed in his chair and sobbed. A huge weight seemed to lift from him. He felt free. Like his own steel door had flung open, revealing a world of light and air.

He remembered the peace he had experienced the night Steven shot him. Now he knew that was just a glimmer. This was the real thing.

From that day forward, his ministry at San Quentin took off. He says the inmates must have sensed he understood them in a new way. A few guys came to chapel. He started a prison baseball team. He played chess with prisoners.

And he forged deep pastoral relationships. For most inmates, Earl says, it's the inner incarceration that's most damaging. They carry profound pain from their childhoods. They feel worthless because of their crimes. They nurse grudges and hang on to hate.

Earl says he made it his mission to help prisoners understand that even if they serve their term and are released, they'll remain behind bars until they deal with their inner pain.

Steven Moore requested a transfer to another prison. Earl never saw him again or told him he forgave him. That's okay though Earl says. Forgiving him was something he needed to do for himself. It allowed him to put his old life behind him for good. And to accept that God had forgiven him too. That's how he says he brought a little bit of God's light to a place as dark and despairing as San Quentin. He opened up the cell doors of my own heart.

Earl certainly had made a lot of changes and progress when he got off the streets, got married, and got serious about his faith. But as he also says, he was still a prisoner in his heart; he hadn't gone the interior conversion. And that is something that all of us need to do.

Jesus in the Gospel gets angry; it's a righteous anger though, not just Jesus losing His temper. He sees that the people in the Temple who are supposed to be there to pray and worship are just wheeling and dealing and could care less about the temple of their souls. Rather than focusing on the right money to put in the coffers or offering doves for sacrifice, Jesus wants the interior conversion that is authentic, the kind the Earl went through.

A big tool for this is to look at how we are living our our faith regularly, because like Earl we can go on autopilot. We can forget that there are ongoing things that need to change. And the 10 commandments are a great tool for us to sit with to look at how we live out the faith. The reading this week also coincides with our parish penance service tomorrow night. So wether you are coming tomorrow or during Lent here or somewhere

else, or just doing your own examination of conscience, it's worth asking yourself what is it that maybe keeps you from living your faith to the fullest? For Earl it was hate and anger. But each of us has various struggles. And these commandments invite us to really think more deeply about our faith.

The first commandment is I am the Lord your God, and you shall not have other God's before me. We might think well of course I believe in God, so I'll check that off. But look deeper. What do you worship? Is it your money, your pride, your ego? Is all of your time spent at the office, or in youth sports, or just being a busy body? Other people worship the gods of money, sensualism, power, or position. Some worship praise and winning that from others. Other times we ignore moral teachings of the Church we don't like, placing ourselves ahead of God by picking and choosing what commandments of God are right or wrong based on our own opinion.

The second commandment is you shall not take the name of your Lord in vain. It might seem that this is related to profanity; but there's more to it than that. Profanity is typically a venial sin, as it lacks sufficient reflection to commit and sometimes words just slip out. But with this, we should also think about how we talk - or don't talk - about God in our daily life.

Sometimes we can speak about the Faith, the Church, or the sacred with irreverence or defiance. Other times we can become casual in our speech about God, and disrespect Him. We can also violate this commandment when we are demeaning and disrespectful of others as they are created in God's image. The point is we do not manipulate God; we owe our lives to God. You and I are God's servants.

The third is to remember to keep holy the Sabbath day. It goes without saying there are some who to go Mass once or twice a year that are much more holy than some who go every week. Keeping holy the Sabbath is not about just showing up for Mass. Much like a person who wants to become an expert at something has to practice again and again, the same is true with our faith. It is OK to work on a Sunday; many people have to. It's OK to enjoy the day with family, or to play sports. But where we lose sight of this commandment is when we take God off the front burner. When we become lax in our prayer life. When we become dismissive of not coming to Mass on a Sunday because we are too busy, and say "I'll go next week," because this also sets a bad example for others in the family (and I also point out to anyone who is a child they do not violate this commandment as they don't have the ability to drive to Mass). The danger is that God can

become in our lives the same thing as homework, meetings, sports, etc. That's not an option. God is meant to inform all that we do, and when we grow in our knowledge of Him, and welcome Him into our hearts, it will inform everything we do. I'd also say with this, really enter into the Mass. Sometimes our minds wander and that's OK, but remember Mass is Jesus coming to be with us. That's why being here is so important. If you're uncomfortable due to the pandemic there is no obligation in this archdiocese, but eventually that obligation is restored but don't look at it is punching some clock, but a true encounter with the Lord.

The next series of commandments are on the second tablet, as they have to do with our relationships with one another. (The first having to do with our relationship with God; which is why they become first).

Fourth is honor your father and mother. Remember this is a commandment about honor, not feelings - we will get angry and upset at people. And it also goes beyond our mother and father. If we are still at home and under our parents care, have we listened to our parents, even if it's things we don't want to hear? And that also applies to our teachers in school. For parents, it also applies to you - you honor your children by giving them

proper food, clothing, shelter, and caring for their deeper needs by being involved and active in their lives. Parents also live this commandment by passing on the faith to their young, and set a good example for them. As we age, we also honor our parents by praying for them, and trying to be active in their lives and giving them respect, which parents also give to their adult children. But this commandment has also been taught to apply to others in authority too. The honor a student owes to a teacher; a player to coach; a citizen to a judge or a police officer or political leader; and honor we all owe to traditions that gave rise to us. If we have no honor of these things, society collapses. A problem today is lack of this honor; where a person thinks the world revolves around them and no one can tell them what is true or right. Honor is different than worship, but we need to respect authority, parents, and our laws.

Fifth, we are told not to kill. We might think this is one easy to skip over, but not so fast. Certainly, taking an innocent human life is morally reprehensible, but how do we stand up for the unborn as well, and do we stand up against euthanasia? Do we verbally or emotionally abuse others? Do we destroy others reputations through gossip or use of social media? Do we seek revenge? Have you driven recklessly under the influence of

drugs or alcohol, or abused them? Very few people kill in the common understanding of the term, but sometimes we can cause harm to others or ourselves through our decisions or refusal to act.

Sixth, you shall not commit adultery. It's related to the ninth commandment, you shall not covet your neighbor's wife. The tragedy of adultery is that it's a violation of trust between spouses. Couples disagree on finances, child rearing, jobs, but a violation of trust cuts to the heart of marriage. This also of course doesn't just apply to marriage; it refers to all sins of the flesh. When one gives into sensualism, looking at inappropriate images of the body on a computer and willfully entertain thoughts (which are normal to have, but we don't want to engage them through pornography). Our theology of the body is that it is a gift from God; and the marriage act between a husband and wife is also sacred; it's for unity and procreation. Sadly, so often in society the message can be that our bodies and souls are separate, and the body can become objectified, or a young person feels they have to look a certain way to be accepted. This commandment reminds us that we are always body and soul, and we can never separate the two.

The seventh not stealing. We can take things from others, but it also had to do with justice. Justice is to render a person his due; honoring their identity, property, etc. When violated, we commit an injustice. Do we give to others what is their due, or do we take from them what is due to them. Sometimes we can steal goods, but other times a person violates this by taking advantage of someone's generosity. It can mean cheating on taxes, defrauding a company, or reckless spending of our financial resources.

The eighth commandment not to bear false witness against our neighbor. What a timely commandment with social media and cancel culture which tries to destroy someone's life. We should ask ourselves do we try to "cancel" someone through tearing them down through our words or actions or what we put out on social media? Do we gossip about others, which Pope Francis rightfully said is a worse virus in our world than Covid? Saint Thomas Aquinas said that gossip is actually stealing, as it steals the reputation of another and so violates the seventh commandment. But so too does it violate the 8th. This commandment includes lying as well, which causes distrust between people. On the one hand we are entitled to privacy so don't have to answer every question we are asked, but when we lie it causes mistrust and often the truth comes out anyway. When we gossip or

slander, use nasty words and backstabbing observations, it causes separation in the body, so we should ask ourselves always, “would I speak to Jesus in this manner” before we open our mouths.

The 9th and 10th commandments tell us not to covet our neighbor’s wife or goods. Envy can be an overlooked sin. Sometimes we desire something because someone else wants it too. Sure we can notice beauty or want things like possessions, but while desire is OK, we should be aware when envy is causing division, when we are becoming jealous, or letting lust take over with respect to another person.

As someone who hears confessions as a confessor, and someone who like all of us is a sinner who goes to confession myself, I always stress that it’s so important to have balance and a healthy conscience. By that, we are loved by God; Earl realized that when he surrendered to God. And God liberated him. But Earl also had work to do, and that work even after many years as a chaplain, didn’t make him perfect - he still had hate in his heart that he had to let go of. It required a deeper interior conversion. That’s true for us too; the commandments are there to help us reach our potential. Realizing we are forgiven is great, but we also need to frequently get back

to the basics if we truly want to grow in our faith. Don’t be the person who goes to confession after 20 years and says you missed Mass once or twice and used a bad word. And also don’t be the person who feels excessively guilty or as if you’re a bad person God can’t forgive. Rather be the person who knows they are loved, but wants to respond to that love better and better with each passing day. All of us are works in progress, and all of us have such potential for spiritual greatness. Jesus liberates us from our prison of sin, so let us truly then run the race so as to win by sitting with these commandments and remembering what greatness we can achieve when we take them seriously and daily strive to become better people.