

Turns out that God gave the Israelites just such a reminder, one that wasn't easy to ignore given the fact that they had to carry the message - written on stone tablets and kept in a golden box - everywhere they went. The Ten Commandments were God's "nagware" for the Israelites. The Commandments kept them updated about God's will. The Commandments made them stop and think before committing some seriously stupid sin. Granted, sometimes the Israelites still clicked the wrong box, just like we do, but the commandments provided a base line operating system to which they could reboot or perform a system restoration.

When we download software, there is usually a lengthy user agreement to which we must "agree" before we can proceed. Show of hands, please! Who reads those contracts? We don't read them because they are too lengthy and too boring, and they read like they were written by a Shakespeare-wannabee ("Whereas the aforementioned entity of the first part, known as proprietor, and the entity of the second part, known as the User..."). When we click "Agree," we're saying that we're willing to abide by the covenant contained therein, which includes getting all those pop-up nagware reminders. The software company wants to make sure we're using their product correctly while getting the compensation they deserve.

With the Ten Commandments, God is doing the same thing with the Israelites and, by extension, with us, too. Remember that God entered a covenant with Abraham: God said that a great nation would come from Abraham's family and that nation would be the means through which God would bless all the nations of the world (Genesis 12). By the time of the Exodus, that promise had become a reality. God liberated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, bringing them out of bondage on the way to the Promised Land. Now, at Mount Sinai, God gives Israel the formal "user agreement," and these commandments serve as constant pop-up reminders to keep the covenant, and to use God's gift of freedom wisely, and for God's own purposes. When we commit these commandments to our mental hard drive, they help steer us toward keeping the covenant to love God and love others, and help prevent epic system errors in our lives.

Pop-up #1: Take the first command: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me" (v. 2). This pop-up is the most important of the commandments because it drives the agenda of the rest. All sin is the result of idolatry: putting someone or something ahead

of God. The very first human sin wasn't eating the forbidden fruit but believing that humankind could be like God (Gen. 3:1-7). This command is so essential that God told the Israelites to recite it daily in the form of the *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:4-5). In other words, there isn't any part of human life that is excluded from giving our full love and worship to God. Ignore that pop-up and we're headed for a system crash.

Pop-up #2: The second command about not creating idols makes the first even more explicit (vv. 4-6). While we might be tempted to ignore this commandment because we're not actually bowing down to wooden idols, we need to constantly update our spiritual software to exclude the other idols to which we give homage: money, sex or power. Most human sin comes down to one of those three things and the effects can reach down through generations.

Pop-up #3: Making "wrongful use" of God's name, the third pop-up, warns us against co-opting God's name for our own purposes. In the ancient world, you invoked the name of a god to get what you wanted. In our own time, we might want to use God's name to support our own selfish agenda, falsely believing that God blesses whatever it is we feel like doing. Notice that this command is the only one that comes with a curse: God will "not acquit" anyone guilty to disrespecting God's name. Like clicking on a bad link in a suspicious email, using God's name wrongly can introduce malware into our ability to truly love and obey God.

Pop-up #4: The command to observe the Sabbath is a lot like a weekly reminder to update and backup our spiritual, physical and mental hard drive (vv. 8-11). On the seventh day of creation, God's presence "rested" in creation, much like God's later glory "rested" in Israel's tabernacle and the temple. The Sabbath is an opportunity to stop producing more output and, instead, receive input from God in the form of worship, prayer and listening to God. A day set aside each week to reboot and recalibrate our lives to God's will and rhythm is essential for a healthy, godly life. Ignoring that update leads to system overload and renders us slow and ineffective for God's kingdom. We need to rest and be reminded that God is the One who ultimately runs the universe.

Pop-up #5: Honoring our parents, the fifth commandment, ensures that God's covenant will be constantly updated with every successive generation (v. 12). If parental instruction in the covenant isn't followed or their authority is rejected, the whole covenant is in jeopardy. Notice that this commandment is connected to living "long in the land" that God was giving to the Israelites. Covenant obedience was the condition for Israelites living in the Promised Land and failure to do so would result in their expulsion. If we fail to receive and pass on the faith from generation to generation, then we risk our Christian community becoming as obsolete as 10-year old software.

Pop-ups #6, 7, 8, 9: Murder and adultery, commandments six and seven, are both forms of malicious malware amid the covenant community (vv. 13-16). These acts are so heinous that Jesus updated the commandments to include an even more secure firewall against them. Don't murder? Start by not insulting and cursing people, even those who have wronged you (Matthew 5:21-26). Don't commit adultery? Start by not allowing your eyes to wander lustfully (Matthew 25:27-30). These two, along with the eighth and ninth commandments against stealing and "bearing false witness" against another person, are designed to protect the covenant community and its integrity.

Pop-up #10: Finally, the prohibition against "coveting," the 10th commandment, reminds us that we do not have permission to want someone else's spouse or property enough to take them for ourselves (v. 17). In fact, it's often the very act of coveting that leads to the active violation of the other commandments. Like any virtuous computer operator, it's important that we maintain our content filters to keep us from gazing at and wanting things we don't have permission to have.

The Ten Commandments are pop-ups that we should never turn off, especially since they tend to pop up whenever we are facing temptation. God put these commandments in place for our benefit and the benefit of the community of faith. We need to heed them, and update our consciences with them, every day. It's the best kind of "nagware" available!

Prayer: Reminding God, thank You for Your guidance. Forgive me for getting ahead of Your plans. Help me know when to stop and listen for Your direction. Your ways are perfect, Lord. Thank You for offering gentle grace. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

God's Nagware

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Exodus 20:1-17

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Every time I boot up my computer, there is inevitably a flurry of messages that pop up on my screen. Most are reminding me that I have been negligent and failed to take care of my PC properly in some way. Some of the messages are practical, like those reminding you to update your software. Others are more ethical, telling you to purchase the license for that free trial software you downloaded 30 days ago. There's a window that reminds you to back up your computer, and the one that pops up whenever you attempt to perform a keystroke that is out of bounds (SYSTEM ERROR!). Not to mention the hundreds of advertisements that pop up like bad weeds on your feed over the course of a week.

Tech savvy people call these pop-up messages "nagware" because they constantly "nag" us to act, to respond. The more we ignore them, the more abundant - and irritating - they become. Although these constant reminders are annoying, they do serve a purpose. Updating software keeps your computer running smoothly and prevents infection from the myriad of viruses that seem to hit cyberspace every day.

Purchasing the license for that free trial software is just the right thing to do since someone has invested time, energy, money and intellectual property to create it. And those pop-ups that warn you that you're about to do something catastrophically stupid can keep you from crashing your computer altogether. Sometimes we need to be asked: "Are you sure you want to perform this operation? Click Yes or No." It makes us think for a second before we click.

In fact, it might be helpful if we had similar pop-ups in the non-digital part of our daily lives. Wouldn't it be great, for example, if you had a mental pop-up each morning reminding you to update your physical and spiritual health? To start your day with prayer? To make time to read a devotional?

It might be helpful to have a reminder each day to do the right thing when confronted with an ethical choice, or to keep you from making a bad one ("Are you sure you want to send that self-righteous rant of an email to your boss? Click Yes or No.").