

The Ten Commandments

Exodus 20

Exodus 20 – *“And God spoke all these words, saying: ² ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. ³ ‘You shall have no other gods before Me. ⁴ ‘You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; ⁵ you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, ⁶ but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.*

⁷ ‘You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain. ⁸ ‘Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

¹² ‘Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you.

¹³ ‘You shall not murder. ¹⁴ ‘You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵ ‘You shall not steal. ¹⁶ ‘You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷ ‘You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s.”

¹⁸ Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. ¹⁹ Then they said to Moses, “You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die.” ²⁰ And Moses said to the people, “Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin.” ²¹ So the people stood afar off, but Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was. ²² Then the Lord said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: ‘You have seen that I have talked with you from heaven. ²³ You shall not make anything to be with Me—gods of silver or gods of gold you shall not make for yourselves. ²⁴ An altar of earth you shall make for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I record My name I will come to you, and I will bless you. ²⁵ And if you make Me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stone; for if you use your tool on it, you have profaned it. ²⁶ Nor shall you go up by steps to My altar, that your nakedness may not be exposed on it.”

Background notes

In Exodus 19, the children of Israel arrived at Mt. Sinai and camped at the base of the mountain. There was thunder and lightning, fire and smoke, earthquake activity, and the sound of a loud trumpet as the Lord descended upon Mt. Sinai to talk with Moses. The voice of God was heard speaking to the people from heaven in the midst of these awesome conditions.

Can you imagine hearing the Ten Commandments directly from the voice of God? An awesome experience, right? No wonder the people said in verse 19, *“Moses, you speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die.”* In verse 20 Moses assured them that they did not need to be afraid, but certainly the awesome conditions were a test to see if the people would listen and hear the Lord. In addition, this awesome display of God’s power and holiness should have been a strong motivation for the people to lead more holy lives and not sin. Verse 20 once again: *“Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.”*

I think this awesome display of God’s power and God’s presence would have motivated me to obey and follow the Lord’s commandments! How about you? I believe the main reason why God displayed His presence and power was so that the people would fear the Lord and would be motivated not to sin.

Doctrinal Points

1. The Ten Commandments give us God’s moral standards.

The Ten Commandments were not given as a way of salvation, because no one can keep them. In addition, the Ten Commandments, or the Law, were not given as a rule of life for Christians because we are not under the Law, but under grace. *“You are not under the law but under grace” (Romans 6:14).* Our aim and goal as believers is to love and serve the Lord Jesus Christ. And as Romans 8:4 says, *“that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.”*

So why was the Law given? We find the answer in Galatians 3:19: “What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions...” In other words, the Law was given to show, in no uncertain terms, what was a transgression of God’s moral standards. Knowing God’s moral standards and knowing that in our own moral strength we could not keep those standards, we are led to faith in Christ. As Galatians 3:24 says: *“Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.”* So the Ten Commandments were given to show us God’s righteous requirements.

Il love that billboard that says: *“What part of Thou Shalt Not don’t you understand?” -God.* The Ten Commandments give us God’s moral standards.

2. The Ten Commandments show us our duties to God and man.

The Ten Commandments not only give us God's moral standards, because that was the primary reason the Law was given, but the Ten Commandments also show us our duties towards God and man. If our aim as believers is to love the Lord and serve Him, these duties will automatically become an essential part of our lifestyle. It has often been pointed out that the first half of the Decalogue (that's another name for the Ten Commandments) cover our love and duties towards God, and the second half of the Decalogue cover our love and duties toward our neighbors and people in general. Some Christians divide the Commandments into "4 and 6": the first four commandments are God-ward and the last six commandments are man-ward. Some Christians make the division as 5 and 5 – these people include the fifth commandment about honoring your father and mother as a duty towards God, because that is part of God's structure of authority. In either case, the Ten Commandments definitely show us our duties towards God and man. Remember, this is the way our Lord summarized the whole law in Matthew 22:35-40: *An expert in the Law tested Him with this question: 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' Jesus replied, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'*" Notice that the Lord made a two-fold division of the Law: the God-ward side and the man-ward side, or the God-ward division and the man-ward division.

The first commandment, "You shall love no other gods before me." is against polytheism and the worship of anything other than the one true God of the Bible.

The prohibition in the second commandment is against carved images or likenesses to anything in heaven or on earth. This commandment is against making anything or painting anything as an object of worship. That is idolatry. It is not a prohibition against works of art, such as sculpting or painting. This is idolatry.

The third commandment, of not taking God's name in vain, includes not only profanity but also taking an oath. or swearing an oath falsely in God's name.

Keeping the Sabbath, the fourth commandment, is the only non-moral commandment of the "Big Ten." All of the Ten Commandments are moral commandments except keeping the Sabbath, and all the other nine are repeated in the New Testament under the law of Christ. Christians are not told to keep the Sabbath in the New Testament.

The promise of long life under the fifth commandment about obedience to parents should be understood in the context in which it is given. It was given to Israel, as Israel was being given the Promised Land, land of Canaan. Look again at verse 12: *Honor your father and mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.*" The people of Israel, of course, did not keep this commandment and were removed from the land.

The sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” is **not** a commandment against capital punishment. Capital punishment has a Biblical basis in the Noahic Covenant. This commandment is against murder. “Thou shalt not murder” is the best translation of the Hebrew here, as many translations indicate.

The next three commandments are pretty straightforward: number seven, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” number eight, “Thou shalt not steal,” number nine, “Thou shalt not lie, or bear false witness.” Damaging a person’s reputation and character by false statements is certainly included in this ninth commandment.

Notice that the tenth commandment moves to the thought life: “Thou shalt not covet.” Some people think that if you don’t actually commit the act, then you can covet and lust all you want with your mind, as long as no one gets hurt. Not according to Scripture! To covet what others have and not be satisfied with what God has given us is sin. In Romans 7, the apostle Paul said that it was this tenth commandment that showed him he was a sinner, because he could not keep from coveting! The Ten Commandments show us our duties to God and man.

Practical Application

Let’s not take away from the pure worship of God.

Verses 23-26: *“Do not make any gods alongside Me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver and gods of gold. Make an altar of earth for Me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your fellowship offerings, your sheep and goats and your cattle... If you make an altar of stones for Me, do not build it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you use a tool on it. And do not go up to My altar on steps, lest your nakedness be exposed on it.”*

In these verses the Lord elaborated on the first and second commandments, and gave specific instructions for the construction of an altar for sacrifice by which Israel would worship the Lord. Notice it is not altars (plural), but one altar. When the instructions for the Tabernacle were given later, the one altar would be in the court of The Tabernacle, and still later, it would be in the court of the Temple in Jerusalem. But notice the altar for worship here in Exodus 20 is to be of earth or uncut stones without manmade steps, like the pagan altars. This would differentiate the Lord’s altar from pagan altars, and would prevent any kind of indecent exposure.

There’s a spiritual lesson and application here: Worship to the Lord should be without manmade tools and without manmade steps of approach. We don’t need elaborate manmade buildings and manmade rituals to worship the Lord. The Lord Jesus said in John 4:24, *“God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth.”* Let’s not take away from the pure worship of God.