

Unit 1 Introduction

The Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments constitute one of the most popular and well-known sections of the Old Testament. Most believers, and many non-believers alike, have at least a general acquaintance with them. Even in the broader culture, the Ten Commandments have historically occupied an important place in American society. The Ten Commandments have been prominently displayed in courts of law and Cecille D DeMille's movie, *The Ten Commandments*, has been viewed by millions for over the past sixty years. Unfortunately, the Ten Commandments are often taken as a list of "dos" and "don'ts" that one must follow in order to be considered a good person. Further examination of the list itself, however, demonstrates that they served a much greater purpose in the life of ancient Israel's community. The principles set forth within them, moreover, continue to inform the community of faith today and provide the basis for a moral and just society.

The title, Ten Commandments, actually derives from the Hebrew term "the ten words" (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13; 10:4) or the Decalogue from the Greek. As a body of divine legislation, they contain two positive commands and eight negative prohibitions. Two versions of the Decalogue appear in the Old Testament (Exodus 20:1-18; Deuteronomy 5:6-21), with the first account given by Moses to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai, and the second account delivered by Moses in the plains of Moab before the Israelites entered the Promise Land. As an essential component of God's covenant with the Israelites, they provide the rationale for God's relationship to Israel as well as establish the moral, ethical, and religious principles upon which the laws in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy are grounded.

The Ten Commandments are predicated on two simple, yet profound concepts: loving God and loving neighbor. These basic principles constitute the essence of all the Law/Torah. As such, the detailed laws we encounter throughout Exodus-Deuteronomy are simply illustrations of what it means to love God and neighbor in real life. Even Jesus acknowledged this when He stated, "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:40). The structure of the list bears witness to this as commands one through four focus on Israel's relationship to God and commands five through 10 focus on relationships within the community.

The commands begin with a prologue which includes a note of self-identification intended to emphasize God's gracious activity on behalf of God's people: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). The notice is positive in its outlook in that it emphasizes God's benevolent action in liberating the people from slavery. This statement indicates that

the basis of the covenant relationship is predicated on God's grace and there was nothing Israel could do to merit God's favor (Deuteronomy 7:7-8). In addition, Israel's love and faithfulness to God is portrayed as the grateful response to what God did on their behalf. The first command embodies this notion with the words: "(Therefore) you shall not have other gods before (i.e. in front of) me..." (Exodus 20:3). Israel, out of love and thanksgiving, was called to honor God by not elevating other deities above God and worshiping them. For Israel, Yahweh was pre-eminent and should not have to contend for the devotion of the people He graciously delivered from bondage.

The second prohibition is similar in that it warns against idolatry. Israel was forbidden from making idols in the form of anything in the heavens or on the earth, nor was Israel to bow down and worship objects created by human hands (Exodus 20:4). The rationale for this proscription revolves around the very nature of God's being; that is, God's presence is so awesome, holy, and wonderful that it cannot be contained in a material, earthen object. This instruction not only distinguished Israel from her neighbors, but it also prevented the possibility of individuals trying to manipulate God and exercise control over Him through an object fashioned by human hands. In essence, God could not be placed in an inferior or subordinate position to human beings or be subject to the whims and desires of mortals. This prohibition not only preserved the holiness of God's character, but it helped to identify and set the parameters for the proper posture between God and the people.

The third command centers on the name of God, which prohibited the Israelites from misusing or abusing it (Exodus 20:7). Although most modern translators read this as preventing one from taking God's name "in vain," the Hebrew suggests that it should read as "emptily" or for "no good purpose." Since the context for such a prohibition appears to be a court setting, the implication is that one would not testify or make a false statement while invoking God's name. Such misuse of God's name would not only subvert the justice system in Israel's community, but the notion that one would try to promote injustice in the name of God (which represented God's character) was unconscionable to the biblical writers.

The fourth command focuses upon the Sabbath day (Exodus 20:8-11). Honoring the Sabbath parallels God's action of sanctifying or hallowing the Sabbath at time of creation (Genesis 2:3). In Jewish thought and belief, the distinctiveness of the seventh day was established at creation and woven into the very fabric of the universe. The Israelites, therefore, were required to sanctify this day

by setting it aside from the other days of the week and worshipping/honoring God, the one who brought the universe into being. Resting from work not only mirrored God's "resting" on the Sabbath, but it also ensured that the daily and secular obligations of life would not interfere with its holiness.

Commands five through 10 have a different focus in that they are concerned about maintaining right relationships within society. The first of these is framed in a positive manner, "honor your father and mother" (Exodus 20:12). It is significant that the second part of the list starts out by speaking to the most universal/fundamental relationship we experience in life; that between parent and child. This injunction is often understood to address children or young people who are required to treat parents with dignity and respect. Most likely, the commandment is addressing adults or grown children who were responsible for the care and well-being of elderly parents. One "honored" one's parents by taking care of their basic needs and providing for their overall welfare in old age. The command contains a measure of reciprocity; just as parents took care of their children when they were young, children were to look out for their parents as they grew old.

The next command centers on life itself: "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13). Often times, this prohibition is understood to include all manner of killing, even in the case of defending oneself from danger (i.e. turn the other cheek) or fighting in a just war. The verb utilized in this text, *ratsach*, is not one of the more general words for killing in Hebrew, however. This specific term carries with it the idea of pre-meditated or cold-blooded killing. The writers envision the intentional, senseless taking of human life (i.e. homicide). In Jewish thought, God authored human life, therefore, human beings did not have the right to recklessly shed the blood of another human being who was created in the image of God (see Genesis 9:6).

The seventh command safeguards the most fundamental, yet important relationship in society by prohibiting adultery ("You shall not commit adultery," Exodus 20:14). As the essential building block of Israel's community, marriage represented the highest and most intimate form of relationship and therefore was honored as a sacred trust between two people. The injunction against committing adultery not only expressed the highest forms of loving one's neighbor, but it also protected the marriage relationship and ensured that the

bond between husband and wife was maintained and the children from this union actually belonged to the couple.

The eighth command signals a shift from the previous commands. While commandments five through seven address personal relationships of various types, this injunction protects the property of an individual: "You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:15). Although some scholars have contended this command originally applied to the kidnapping of a free Israelite person who could then be sold into slavery (i.e. Genesis 40:15), most would agree that as the command stands, it refers to material possessions and the forbidding of robbery. Thus, the concern for one's neighbor is inherent in protecting the belongings of others.

The ninth command is related to one's speech: "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). Such a command is understood within the context of Israel's judicial system. Like any society, the courts were a place where disagreements/arguments and other issues pertaining to the law were adjudicated. In order to ensure that Israel embodied a just society, protection against false witness in a lawsuit was forbidden. Providing a false testimony could be a means of harming one's neighbor, as the story of Ahab's theft and false accusations against Naboth indicate (1 Kings 21:1-16). The fact that an individual who provides such testimony is called a "malicious witness" (Exodus 23:1; Deuteronomy 19:16), indicates the potential for injustice and violence which such action could produce.

The last command is inherently different from those in numbers five through nine. This injunction does not refer to an outward act but addresses an inward motivation: "You shall not covet" (Exodus 20:17). The ability to control or limit covetousness prevented the likelihood of an individual from committing acts of murder, adultery, theft, or injustice. As such, this prohibition serves a fitting closure to the Decalogue, because it addresses the source of disobedience, the desires originating from the human mind/heart. When one's desires were aligned with God's expectation for how the Israelites were to live in community, then they could actualize God's desire for them and reflect the nature of the God they worshiped to the nations around them.

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