

The Ten Commandments

Deuteronomy 5

The original giving of the Ten Commandments is recorded in Exodus 20. Almost forty years later, as the people are preparing to enter the Promised Land, Moses recites the Ten Commandments in the hearing of all the people, urging them to “observe them carefully.” If you are able, please stand and hear the Word of God as found in Deuteronomy 5:1–21.

1 Then Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: “Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the ordinances which I am speaking today in your hearing, that you may learn them and observe them carefully. 2 “The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. 3 “The Lord did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, with all those of us alive here today. 4 “The Lord spoke to you face to face at the mountain from the midst of the fire, 5 while I was standing between the Lord and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the Lord; for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain. He said,

6 ‘I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

7 ‘You shall have no other gods before Me.

8 ‘You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. 9 ‘You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, 10 but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

11 ‘You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.

12 ‘Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 13 ‘Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 14 but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. 15 ‘You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day.

16 ‘Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, that your days may be prolonged and that it may go well with you on the land which the Lord your God gives you.

17 'You shall not murder.

18 'You shall not commit adultery.

19 'You shall not steal.

20 'You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

21 'You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, and you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field or his male servant or his female servant, his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.'

Before we look at each of the Ten Commandments, I'd like to make three points of context. **First, the Ten Commandments are the core of the old covenant that God made with Israel.** This list of commandments is sometimes used as shorthand for the entire old covenant. In Exodus 34:28 we read, "And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments." (See also Deut. 4:13, 10:4, etc.) A covenant defines the relationship between two parties. The Ten Commandments establish what God expected of His people.

Second, obeying the Ten Commandments was essential for their mission (their influence among the nations). In Deuteronomy 4:6-8 Moses speaks of the evangelistic impact of their obedience.

6 "So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' 7 "For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the Lord our God whenever we call on Him? 8 "Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today?"

As Israel obeyed the Ten Commandments, the surrounding peoples would observe a wisdom like no other. These commandments weren't arbitrary rules; they were an expression of God's wisdom and kindness. As Moses mentions in verses 7 and 8, Israel's greatness was wrapped up in the fact that 1) her God was near and heard her prayers (unlike the nations whose gods were deaf to their cries) and 2) her God had laid out in the law a type of righteousness that was unparalleled among the nations. As we'll see, the Ten Commandments set forth a way of living that was compassionate and just for "the least of these" in their midst. This was unique among the nations.

Third, **the Ten Commandments speak of loving God and loving others.** The first three commands talk about various aspects of loving God (and only God), the fourth command speaks about loving God AND people on the Sabbath, and the last six talk about how the people should treat each other. There is a vertical dimension (related to God) and horizontal dimension (related to your children, your servants, foreigners [a.k.a. immigrants], your parents, and your neighbors). As we'll see, these commandments are rooted in their life in the Promised Land.

This morning we will give a brief explanation of each of the Ten Commandments. You'll probably leave thinking, "What about x, y, and z?" I know I'm leaving many issues unaddressed this morning. But hopefully this overview of the Ten Commandments will give us a fresh vision for our own lives. As we'll see from Romans 8, those of us living in the age of fulfillment have the capacity to give fullest expression of the true intent of these commands.

The Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 5:6-21) Before giving the Ten Commandments, God reminds the people of His track record:

6 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

God is speaking as the One who had rescued them. Before laying out these commands, God wanted them to remember that He was **with** them and **for** them. The **first commandment** speaks of exclusive devotion to God.

7 'You shall have no other gods before Me.

They had come out of Egypt with its many gods; they were going into Canaan with its many gods. YHWH would not merely be one God among many others. One commentator translated this verse, "You shall have no other gods as rivals to me" (Wright, p. 69). We will sing a song later in the service that expresses this commitment: "You have no rival, You have no equal." We will see again next week in chapter 6 that God wanted exclusive devotion: they should worship Him and only Him.

The **second commandment** is most likely the prohibition against making of idols to represent YHWH. The first commandment already prohibited worshiping **other** gods; the second commandment prohibits making an idol/image representing the one, true God.

8 'You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.

There were (and are) challenges of worshiping an invisible God, but the solution isn't to create a likeness that you end up worshiping. Even though God is invisible, He is real. He wants to relate directly to His people.

The **third commandment** addresses how they needed to avoid giving God a "bad name."

11 'You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.

The term translated "vain" is sometimes translated false, worthless, or deceptive. This third commandment would certainly prohibit using profanity that incorporates the name

of God (or Jesus) in a blasphemous way. But in addition this command prohibits using God's name in any way that is incompatible with His character. In Isaiah 48 the prophet confronted the people with the fact that they "swear by the name of the Lord and invoke the God of Israel, but not in truth nor in righteousness." When they prayed, they were "using" God. By contrast, when David confronted Goliath, he honored the name of the Lord when he said, "You come to me with a sword, a spear, and a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of Hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have taunted."

The **fourth commandment** spoke about observing the sabbath day (sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday).

12 'Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you.
13 'Six days you shall labor and do all your work,

The Sabbath was a day set apart as holy; it was not like the other six days. Every member of society got this gift of a day of rest. They couldn't force anybody to work: not their children, not their servants, and not the sojourners (who were basically immigrants - foreigners living in their midst). Harold Macmillan, the British Prime Minister in the '50s and '60s described the Sabbath as "the first and greatest worker-protection act in history" (Wright, p. 76).

Interestingly, in Exodus 20 the creation week is given as the paradigm for resting on the seventh day: the nation of Israel imitated God by working six days and resting on the seventh. Here in Deuteronomy 5, we have an additional rationale for the Sabbath:

15 'You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day.

In Egypt it's unlikely that they got a day off every week. And so the Sabbath was a gift. It's not as if they really, really wanted to work seven days a week and God was forcing them to take a day off. Rather, they had been delivered from slavery so they shouldn't live as slaves. The Sabbath was part of their weekly rhythm.

Imagine 3 or 4 generations of Jews standing on the Plains of Moab (across from the Promised Land) listening to the **fifth commandment**:

16 'Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, that your days may be prolonged and that it may go well with you on the land which the Lord your God gives you.

Since the family was the basic building block of their society, everyone (whether ten years old or 50 years old) needed to honor their father and mother. The vision for families in Deuteronomy is that of parents intentionally teaching the faith to their children and grandchildren so that the generations were rightly related to each other and to God.

The promise of long life in the Land is found throughout Deuteronomy in conjunction with obedience.

The **sixth commandment** prohibits murder (killing of another person).

17 'You shall not murder.

This isn't simply a command not to kill. There were certain circumstances when they were commanded to kill (e.g., in battle, for certain types of disobedience). The verb used here is appropriately translated "murder" - taking someone's life unlawfully. The fundamental reason murder is wrong is because human beings are created in the image of God (see Genesis 9:6). For this reason we affirm the value human life - whether it's the unborn child in the womb or the elderly, whether it's our own flesh and blood or people we see on the news that we've never met.

There is a stereotype of the Old and New Testaments: the OT dealt mainly with external actions and the NT with the condition of our hearts. In reality, the OT also addressed the heart attitudes that might lead to murder. Leviticus 19, for example, speaks about not hating fellow countrymen and not holding grudges; rather, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Something similar is true about the **seventh commandment**:

18 'You shall not commit adultery.

The term adultery refers to sexual relations by a married person with someone other than his/her spouse. Adultery was/is obviously a violation of the marriage covenant in which two people commit to being exclusively committed to each other until they are parted by death. The only sexual relations that the Bible advocates are between a man and a woman in a loving marriage. The Bible's teaching on sexuality reflects God's design for humanity and for human flourishing. Nobody can seriously argue that committing adultery promotes the well-being of families and society.

As we'll see in a few minutes, the Law wasn't only concerned with illicit sexual acts; the tenth commandment prohibits coveting your neighbor's wife. In the book of Proverbs the father warns his son about sexual temptation. In Job 31 Job speaks about making "a covenant with his eyes" to avoid lust. When Jesus taught in the SoM that lust is adultery of the heart, He was articulating a theme that's found throughout the OT.

The **eighth commandment** prohibits stealing:

19 'You shall not steal.

Stealing could either be taking something that is not yours or withholding something that belongs to someone else. The Law had a rather detailed set of instructions about the consequences of stealing (see Ex. 22:1-14). The person caught stealing had to pay back double or 4x what was taken, depending on the circumstances. Stealing also

included withholding your workers' wages (Lev. 19:13) or even withholding a tithe from God (see Malachi 3:8).

The **ninth commandment** prohibits lying against your neighbor.

20 'You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

This command presupposes a legal setting in which you are called to testify against your neighbor. This is reflected in our day in the oaths taken before testifying in court. In the US, the traditional question asked is, "Do you solemnly swear that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" If you take that oath and bear false witness, you have not only broken the 9th command, you have also broken the 3rd command (because you have sworn in God's name to tell the truth - "so help you God").

Notice how the **tenth commandments** prohibits "coveting" what your neighbor has. Living in the "digital age" we have infinite opportunity to covet what others have, but in ancient Israel the temptation to covet was first and foremost wanting what was next door (what your neighbor had). God commanded them:

21 'You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, and you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field or his male servant or his female servant, his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.'

As we've seen in the other commands, the Law didn't merely deal with externals. It also dealt with internal matters of the heart. To covet something is to want internally what someone else has. Of course, coveting fuels other sins like stealing, adultery, and murder. In Romans 7:7 Paul mentions the tenth commandment, saying that the command, "You shall not covet" awakened in him a sinful desire to covet. The opposite of being covetous is being thankful and content.

Even though we went through the Ten Commandments quickly, I hope you can see the beauty of living out those commands. Obeying the ten commandments promotes human flourishing in the family and in society. Israel, of course, miserably failed to live out these commandments, ultimately resulting in the Exile.

How should we "hear" the Ten Commandments (and the Law in general)?

The Spirit empowers us to give fullest expression to the true intent of the Law.
(Romans 8:1-4)

1 Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 3 For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, 4 so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Verse 4 echoes Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:17 when He said, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but fulfill." He came to fulfill the Law - to bring it to its fullest expression. Here in Romans 8 Paul boldly writes that this requirement of the Law is brought to fullest expression "in us," namely those "who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." This means that:

The Spirit empowers us to give fullest expression to the true intent of the Law (love God and love our neighbors).

People should be able to point to us and say, "Now I get it. . . now I understand what it means to be in a covenant relationship with the one true living God!" This would be an arrogant claim if we made it up. But we find this claim made over and over in the New Testament. For example, we are told that we are "the body of Christ" - the physical representation of Jesus Himself on this earth.

Just as Israel's obedience was vital for their mission, so too is ours. As we give fullest expression to the true intent of the Law, others come to understand the beauty and power of Jesus.

They should see in us people who not only don't take God's name in vain, but who positively enhance His reputation. We should be those who not only don't murder people; we don't even hate people. We not only don't steal from people; we are eager to be generous, sharing what God has given us. The Ten Commandments can give us this vision for our lives.

In his book *Disappointment with God* Philip Yancey wrestles with questions about how people can believe in God when there is so much evil and when He seems so absent in this world. Toward the end of the book he reflects on the reality that the Holy Spirit indwells those who believe in Jesus and that we are therefore called the body of Christ. He writes (pp. 142-143), "My friend Richard had asked, 'Where is God? Show me. I want to see him.' Surely at least part of the answer to his question is this: *If you want to see God, then look at the people who belong to him - they are his 'bodies.' They are the body of Christ.*"