

The Ten Commandments (Part 1)

Exodus 20:1-11

Introduction

Review: God brought the Israelites out of slavery, through the waters of the Red Sea. He gave them water and food in the desert and rescued them from enemy attacks. Now they have arrived at the Mountain of God where God himself appeared as thunder, lightning, and fire. If any person or animal touched the mountain they would die. And God called Moses up the mountain and today's message explains *what God said to him*.

Ten Commandments: The words recorded in this chapter are popularly known the “**Ten Commandments**.” Outside of a few other passages, they might be the most famous in the Bible. They have been central to modern civilization (included in the laws enacted by Charlamagne and Alfred the Great to name just two). In fact, there have been dozens of cases in previous decades about displaying the 10 commandments on public property (just to highlight their ongoing significance). Many Jewish teachers believe the core of the commandments of the Torah (613 *mitzvot*) are summarized in the Ten Commandments (a sort of Jewish “Bill of Rights,” cf. U.S. Constitution).

- There are terms for rules, statues, commands, and regulations but these are simply called the “**ten words**” (Ex 34:28, Deut 4:13, 10:4), i.e., Decalogue (LXX).
- These words have stood the test of time and crossed over a multitude of cultures.
- Interestingly they are not numbered we just know there are 10 of them: Is the prologue part of 1? 1-2 combined and coveting separated (Lutheran, Augustine, Catholic, etc.). We will use the traditional numbering.
 - No other gods.
 - No idols.
 - No taking the Lord's name in vain.
 - Remember the Sabbath.
 - Honor your parents.
 - Do not murder.
 - Do not commit adultery.
 - Do not steal.
 - Do not bear false witness (lie).
 - Do not covet.

Two Tables of the Law: First table (**horizontal**) and second table (**vertical**). Loving God and loving others. ³⁷ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt 22:37-40; cf. Deut 6:4-5, Lev 19:18).

- Today we'll look at the **first table** (horizontal). This is not normal or natural for humans. Most people look inward, then maybe horizontal, then lastly vertical (not intuitive). But we know that we'll know ourselves best when we see God most clearly because he created

us and knows us best (he knows what we'll become and what we *should* become). He knows our future selves (we don't even know that).

Rules: 8 of these 10 rules are “negative” (i.e., “you shall not”). And most of us have a real problem with rules. **We don't want to be told what to do.**

- So most of us come to these commands with a negative view (e.g., Raiders of the Lost Ark, “face melting”). #nofun
- Every relationship you have is governed by rules, written or unwritten. And if that relationship is one of love, those rules are for your good and not your harm (e.g., kids; touch the stove, go to bed, eat healthy, etc.). Rules and boundaries from God are meant to maximize your joy, not stop it. They are meant to protect you, rather than harm you (e.g., walls to the pool; tracks to the rollercoaster). True freedom requires clear boundaries and they enable us to fully enjoy the privilege of being the people of God.
- Cf. Deuteronomy (“second law”; e.g., DVD commentary on the law)
 - ²⁴ And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day (Deut 6:24).
 - ⁴⁷ For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess” (Deut 32:47).
- The commands of God “keep us out of slavery, not lead us into it” (Greear). They reveal the character of God so we can “be holy as he is holy” (1 Pet 1:15). They are not meant to give us salvation but guide us to the Savior.

¹ 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 slavery. ³ “You shall have no other gods before me. ⁴ “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or 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 or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of 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 a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Prologue (vv. 1-2) ¹ 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 slavery.

God Spoke: Before we get to the first “thou shalt not” we have an introduction of sorts, a reminder of **who** is giving these instructions (cf. “we the people” of the US Constitution).

- The God who spoke all of creation into existence (Gen 1) is speaking now. God is unique in that his words are not just informative but also performative. When he speaks, his words have the empower to bring about what they declare. God's promises, commands and declarations are not empty statements but actions in themselves, actively shaping our reality.
- These are the very words of God (God spoke all these words, saying)! He is showing his right, his jurisdiction, over his people. Of course he has jurisdiction over all creation as creator, but the context of these commands is the **treasured relationship** he has with his people (e.g., rules of a parent).

Who is This God?: The trust that the Israelites owe God is not some distant historical artifact but a recent memory. **The God who is telling them how to live is the God who rescued their lives.** These are not abstract rules from a distant God but loving commands to a people he just rescued and is trying to guide to the Promised Land.

- Grace always precedes the law. We have rightfully been taught to fear legalism, not to become Pharisees (the Pharisees didn't love the law, they loved themselves). In our anti-legalistic paranoia, we have failed to see that the law is good and beautiful.
- Lawlessness is anti-gospel (1 Jn 3:4). God is not calling the Israelites to earn righteousness but calling them to walk in his ways. The laws of the Bible are about discipleship more than salvation.

It is their response to his salvation that motivates their obedience to his commands. **You'll never keep the rules if you don't treasure the rule-giver.**

1. Worshipping Him Alone (v. 3) ³ "You shall have no other gods before me.

Polytheistic Context: The first word is a declaration of the supremacy and centrality of God. This would have been world shattering in the polytheistic culture of the ANE.

- And before we proverbially throw stones at ancient polytheism, many of us are functionally polytheistic.
- As Jesus reminded us, **"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money"** (Matt 6:24). Money is just one false god we worship.
- There is only one true God in actuality, but there are many functional false gods we worship in practicality.
- We violate this command when we pretend that there are many ways to paradise, rather than just one, or that you can believe what you want because it all ends up the same in the end.
- We violate this command when we worship the gods of our age like money, power, comfort.

Rightful King: YHWH is the creator, sustainer, and ruler of all things. It would be wrong to worship anyone or anything else. Whenever we turn away even slightly from God, we degrade him from his rightful place.

- **What are the false gods in your life that you look to for what only God can give you?**

2. Reflecting His Image (vv. 4-6) ⁴ “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or 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 or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

- If the first commandment tells us not to worship anyone or anything other than God, the second tells us not to worship anything less than God.

Make for Yourself: You shall not make for yourself

- An idol is an invention, a creation of human beings, an invention of the human imagination. It is idolatry when we take something created and worship it as the creator (Rom 1).
- **Why do we make idols?** Idols are under our control. They are manageable, approachable, palatable. It's a lot less scary to disobey a knobby-kneed, shiny calf than a God of thunder and fire.

Misrepresent God: There is also a long Christian tradition of not portraying images not only of false gods but of the true God. Whether or not we should portray Jesus in art is beyond the scope of this conversation (if you want to discuss religious iconography afterward, I'd love to). It's permissibility says nothing of its danger. Even a physical form limits God (God is everywhere all the time; not like a gas stretched but in all places equally at all times).

- We live in a Photoshop world. Instagram crafted pics. It's not new (FDR wheelchair).
- The danger is we tend to portray him the way we want him to be rather than the way he is (e.g., White Jesus, Black Jesus, South Asian, East Asian, etc.).
- Talladega Nights: “Dear baby eight pound, six ounce, baby Jesus in your golden fleece diapers.” “He grew up, he had a beard.” “I like to picture Jesus in a Tuxedo T-shirt with giant eagle wings singing lead vocals for Lynyrd Skynyrd with an angel band.”
- E.g., Quest for the Historical Jesus made him look suspiciously like a nineteenth century, white, European liberal academic. **When we create a Jesus to worship we always seem to create a Jesus that looks suspiciously like us!**
- In some ways we break this commandment whenever we define God in our heart as we want Him to be rather than believing what He reveals Himself to be.
- It is important to fill our minds with God's vision and God's words of himself.
 - It's easy to limit our vision of God to only what we want him to be (Mercy? Love? Wrath? Holiness? Cross? Resurrection? Victory? Suffering?).

Idols Worshipers: You shall not bow down to them or serve them

- **We are all worshippers.** The biggest worship service in the city occurred today at 1pm at Lincoln Financial Field.
- You will either worship the divine or you will worship the mundane.
 - “A man may have enough of the world to sink him but he can never have enough to satisfy him” (Thomas Brooks).

- When you worship something other than God it leads to despair, loneliness, and anxiety because the idol cannot give you what you want it to give.
 - What are the idols in your life?
- Our idols end up being destroying us (which is why God must destroy them first).
 - Our obedience and disobedience have far reaching implications (there is no such thing as a victimless crime).
 - Visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Jealous: I the LORD your God am a jealous God, Oprah famously remarked that she couldn't believe the God of the Bible because it says that God is jealous. But God is not jealous like we're jealous because he is not sinful like we're sinful. He is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good, so his jealousy can't be poisoned by the insecurity, suspicion, and selfishness that contaminates ours.

- God's jealousy and vengeance come from the same place as his love. He is not jealous like a baseball fan is when he sees someone wearing a rival team's jersey (e.g., jealous like an oncologist whose patient eschews treatment for coffee enema's and crystals).
- We don't want a father in heaven, we want a grandfather (C. S. Lewis). #grandparents
- Jealousy is an act of love (like a spouse to their unfaithful partner). "Love forgives the most but condones the least... Love gives only the happiness there is, not the happiness there is not" (Lewis).
- God loves us with perfect love and he wants what's best for us. And what's best for us is him.

Become Like Them: Those who make idols become like them (Ps 115:8). We become like what we worship. We will either be conformed to the image of God or the image of our idols. And God, in his kindness, shows us exactly what he is like when he takes on flesh. Jesus is the perfect image of the invisible God.

- Describing the difference between human love and God's love, a pastor said this: human love when pushed to jealousy kills, godly love when pushed dies (Keller).
- "Bad news: we become like what we worship. Good news: we become like what we worship. Best news: the one you worship has become like you" (Wilson).
- If anything, this rule is a reminder that the one who we are called to worship has taken on flesh to save us from our sins and pave the way to follow him to our eternal home.

3. Bearing His Name (v. 7) 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.

Swearing?: Just about swearing? (put a dollar in the swear jar). It's not *not* about swearing, it's about so much more.

- God isn't just concerned about random sounds you put together? (English only? Ancient Hebrew? Koine Greek?). E.g., Judaism, *Ha Shem, Adonai*.

- This is about how we think of God, how we view him, and how we reflect him to the world.

Vanity: Emptiness, futility, nothingness. **We take the Lord's name in vain when we use it...**

- **Blasphemously** (disrespectfully, profanely, describing something immoral or ungodly).
 - This is where “cursing” is involved. We should be much more offended by the blasphemous use of God's name than even the vulgar or sexual immoral curse words that are also so common.
 - You're not fooling anyone with swear substitutions (heck, darnitt, etc.). Intent matters more. He knows your heart.
- **Trivially** (carelessly or flippantly using it).
 - “In Jesus name” can be as blasphemous as a four letter word (e.g., Potluck Blasphemy, “bless this food to our bodies”).
 - The hollow use of God's name belies our shallow affection for him (I grew up in a “yes m'am, yes sir” house. I didn't call my youth pastor by their first name. You call the president “Mr. President.” In court recently, you say “your honor”). We treat human leaders with more respect than we treat God!
- **Falsely** (lying)
 - A prophet speaking for the Lord must speak the truth because he or she represents the Lord.
 - Be careful when you say “the Lord told me” because, if you're wrong, you're implicating God.

Carrying the Name of YHWH: If you belong to the family of God, then you carry his name into the world. When the world looks at you they should see him (e.g., Christian = little Christ).

- If you call yourself a Christian, you better act like it. ^{19b} “Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity” (2 Tim 2:19b).
- Israel is the visible representative of YHWH amid the nations. Their worship, speech, conduct, attitude, and faith must reflect and represent accurately the sum total of God's loving character.
- Toward the end of the 10 commandments we will learn that we shouldn't bear false witness against our neighbor (Ex 20:16), but how many of us bear false witness of God to a watching world? How many of us lie about God by calling ourselves Christians yet living like unbelievers?

4. Enjoying His Rest (vv. 8-11) 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 a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Positive: This is the first command stated positively (though all could be stated positively; e.g., worship God first, worship God correctly, carry his name well, etc.). This positive verbiage underscores that all of these commands and this one in particular are for our good.

- Sabbath, shabbat, “rest” (lit. to cease)
- Do (vs. do not) yet the thing you’re doing is “not doing.”
 - *FYI, Sabbath ≠ Lord’s Day/Sunday

Train Our Hearts: Why is this weekly pattern so significant?

- “To rest in the midst of a great work communicates, to others as well as to my own soul, a consciousness that I am not the engine of the great work... To think of myself as essential and necessary is to idolize my own power. The practice of rest helps to rescue me from that idolatry, freeing me to humbly and thankfully find my place in the great work [of God]” (McRoberts).
- “The Sabbath was a weekly tutorial for anxious people” (Ed Welch).
- God is sovereign over our time and schedule. We depend on him. We trust him. When we rest we are saying, “I’m not God, God is God.” What a gloriously freeing truth.

For Our Good: The Sabbath is not a rule to make you holy but a command to bring you joy.

- Jewish saying during Babylonian Exile: “More than Israel kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath kept Israel.” It was a weekly reminder of who was really on the throne.
- “What you cannot rest from you are a slave to.”
- Being *set free* and learning to *live free* are different things. Liberation isn’t only getting out of slavery but getting the slavery out of you.
- “If you don’t take a break, eventually you just break.”
- “I’d rather burn out than rust out” is something only someone who has never burned out would say.
 - *Sabbath is not laziness. You **labor** for six days. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work. You toil, work, struggle for six days, then you rest.

Worship: We are called to work hard and rest well. Rest is actually worship.

- It reflects the character of God. ¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. God created for six days and rested on the seventh. Our rest mirrors God’s rest. When we rest, we reconnect with the garden paradise that God intended us to live in. God *designed* us this way.
 - 1: “Pastor told me he never takes a day off because Satan never takes a day off.”
 - 2: “Seems to me that Pastor needs to pick a better role model.”
- But our rest is meant to be “holy” rest. It’s meant to be worship. All rest isn’t Sabbath rest. Sabbath rest is holy rest. It should *necessarily* include worship.
 - We are called to cease activity for a purpose (the worship and enjoyment of God).
 - **Sabbath is not a vacation.** If your rest keeps you from worship then it is not sabbath rest, it’s just a nap

For All: Notice that this command applies to everyone. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the

sojourner who is within your gates. The ANE would have expected a break for the nobility, but God gives a break for everyone (rich and poor, Israelite and non-Israelite, adult and child, human and animal).

- If my Sabbath prevents someone else from rest then I might be relaxing (of a kind) but not Sabbath.
- If my rest prevents someone else from Sabbath, then it is a rest of privilege, not Sabbath.
- How to apply this in a modern age is complicated in a pluralistic society.
 - We were designed for weekly, worshipful rest and we must be careful that our rest is not based on the vision of worldly comfort but biblical reconnection with and dependence on God.

Christ and Sabbath: There are godly Christians who I love who believe some form of Sabbatarianism is in effect. But remember what these laws point to, they point to Christ. Jesus fulfills the law. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls (Matt 11:29).

- The Sabbath is Scripture to be applied but not a rule to be legally adhered to (let me explain).
 - “Fear to omit the Sabbath shows that you fear the Law is still in force; and if the Law is needful, it is so as a whole, not in part, nor in one commandment only; and if as a whole, the righteousness which is by faith is little by little shut out” (Chrysostom)
- The Sabbath points to our ultimate rest in Christ. Christ secures a true Sabbath rest. There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God (Heb 4:9). The Israelite practice of Sabbatarianism and even our modern weekly patterns of rest are not ultimate or salvific, they point to our savior who is our rest. The Sabbath is a shadow that points to Christ. Therefore [we don't] pass judgment on [others] with regard [the] Sabbath (Col 2:16).
 - We need rest, we would be wise to have weekly rest, but not as legal obedience but as an admission of dependence on God.

Conclusion

Law-Keeper: This gets us to the purpose of the law. As Jesus makes clear in the Sermon on the Mount, the law can't save us. In fact, we can't even obey the law (e.g., anger = murder, lust = adultery). Jesus came to fulfill the law. Only he has obediently kept the commands of God.

- Without Jesus, the law stands over us, condemning us for our sins. “Before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed (Gal 3:23). But now we are not under the law but led by the Spirit. God's law is not written on tablets of stone but on hearts of flesh. The law of God no longer stands above us to condemn us but is a path under us that we might walk in the way of God. So we learn to love God's ways as life-giving.
 - #1 Are you condemned? Place your faith in God.
 - #2 Love the commands of God and walk in them.