

The Ten Commandments: Living in God's promise of freedom

Opening Prayer

Holy God, through Your Son You have called us to live faithfully and act courageously. Keep us steadfast in Your covenant of grace, and teach us the wisdom that comes only through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

The Story so far...

- The Israelites have been set free from slavery in Egypt by God.
- They have passed through the waters of the Red Sea and been fed in the wilderness.
- God has made another promise to His people: "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: ⁴You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. ⁵Now therefore, if you obey My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is Mine, ⁶but you shall be for Me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." Exodus 19:3b-6a
- The Israelites are camped at Mt. Sinai – sometimes called Mt. Horeb (most scholars think these are the same place) – when God calls Moses to the mountain and gives him the commandments.

The Commandments as a whole

- The Ten Commandments are recorded twice in the Old Testament – in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5.
 - The major difference is the motive for keeping the Sabbath
 - In Exodus – motive is based on God's blessing and will for creation: "*For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it*" (Exodus 20:11).
 - In Deuteronomy – motive is based on Israel's experience of rescue from slavery: "*Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day*" (Deuteronomy 5:15).
 - Exodus emphasizes the Sabbath as blessing, Deuteronomy emphasizes Sabbath as an institution of justice – "the first fair labor law." Rolf Jacobson
- These commands intend to shape and order the world according to the radical and distinctive vision of the God of the exodus: that non-exploitative modes of social relationship can be sustained in the world.
- The law is a gracious gift of God for the sake of the life, health and well-being of individuals in the community. The law is fundamentally a gift.
- The commands have an essentially personal and inter-relational character. Obedience is seen to be a response within a relationship, not a response to the law as law.
- The commandments are part of the covenant between God and the people – a specific covenant *within* the already existing covenant with Abraham.
 - The commandments do not establish the relationship between God and the people – they have been God's people for a long time already.
- The commands are generally divided into two "tables" – the first concerning relationship with God and the second concerning relationship with one another.

- There are three different ways of dividing and numbering the commandments:

Numbering the Ten Commandments (Chart courtesy of WorkingPreacher.org.)

Jewish	Catholic, Lutheran, Orthodox	Reformed, Anglican, other Protestants
1. I am the Lord your God		
2. No other Gods (and no graven images)	1. No other Gods (and no graven images)	1. No other Gods 2. No graven images
3. Do not misuse God’s name	2. Do not misuse God’s name	3. Do not misuse God’s name
4. Keep the Sabbath	3. Keep the Sabbath	4. Keep the Sabbath
5. Honor father & mother	4. Honor father & mother	5. Honor father & mother
6. Do not murder	5. Do not murder	6. Do not murder
7. Do not commit adultery	6. Do not commit adultery	7. Do not commit adultery
8. Do not steal	7. Do not steal	8. Do not steal
9. Do not bear false witness against a neighbor	8. Do not bear false witness against a neighbor	9. Do not bear false witness against a neighbor
10. Do not covet your neighbor’s spouse or house	9. Do not covet your neighbor’s spouse 10. Do not covet your neighbor’s house	10. Do not covet your neighbor’s spouse or house

Important and sometimes overlooked

Nineteen comes before Twenty – Dr. David Lose

- The relationship God establishes with the chosen people *comes first* – literally. (See Exodus 19:3b-6a above)
- The law, with its ethical demands on our behavior, *comes second* – literally. See **Exodus 20:1-17**
 - Exodus 20:1-2 underlines that same point: “I am the LORD your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”
- God first establishes the relationship with His people. Only then does He make a claim on our behavior.

Three crucial points about the law

1. God does not give the law as a means to salvation. This can be seen from the text: God rescues (saves) the people *before* giving them the law.
2. The law isn’t about “us,” per se. God does not give us the law in order to perfect us or even to make us a better “you” or “me” The law is about our neighbors. God gives the law, not so that we can be more spiritual or have our best life now, but so that our neighbor can have their best life now.
 - a. We see this in how often God uses “neighbor” in the commands.

- b. Paul makes this point in Galatians: “The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love you neighbor as yourself.’” The bottom line is this: The entire law is about loving your neighbor.
- 3. The Ten Commandments are for *free people, for people whom God has freed*: “I am the LORD your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”
 - a. The commandments are not meant to limit our freedom by telling us what we can’t do. Rather, the commandments are what the lives of people freed by God look like.
 - i. For Christians, we must remember that through Christ’s death and resurrection we have been freed from the power of sin. And now that we are free, the law shows us what that free life looks like.

The First Table – Tuned into God (Rolf Jacobson)

These commands govern our relationship with God. They show us that the goal of the life of faith is to be attuned to God, and to do that we need to turn away from things that we would seek instead of God.

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt... You shall have no other gods before Me.

- 1. God is making a claim on Israel. They are His and He is theirs.
- 2. The command requires Israel to organize its entire life, in every aspect, around the singular loyalty to God.
- 3. It does not insist there *are* no other gods, only that any other gods not receive any of Israel’s loyalty.
- 4. This is the ultimate commandment – do not put anything else in our lives ahead of God.
 - a. As both Moses (**Deut. 6:5**) and Jesus (**Matt. 22:34-40**) say, this means to love God with all our heart, and all our soul, and all our might (or mind).

You shall not make for yourself an idol...

- 1. Creation of an idol – or even an image of God – was a means to control God. To limit where God was or how God could act.
- 2. Luther wrote in the *Large Catechism*: “A god means that from which we are to expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress. ... That now, I say, upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god.”

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God.

- 1. This is not simply about cursing or using obscenities.
- 2. The “name” of Yahweh bespeaks God’s powerful presence and purpose. Saying the name is the mobilization of the presence and power of God.
 - a. We do this today when we pray, “in the name of Jesus.”
- 3. To make wrongful use, then, is to invoke the presence and purpose of God for things that are not in line with God’s own person or purpose. To seek to use God for our own purposes.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.

- 1. Interestingly, this commandment doesn’t say anything about worshipping God on the sabbath, only that there be no work.
- 2. This is not a prohibition as much as a blessing. There is an acknowledgement that there are appropriate times for work, then a command to rest.
 - a. The command is for everyone – all people and animals equally.

3. The command is for the well-being of creation. The world is not, this command says, a place of endless productivity, ambition, or anxiety.
4. The Church has long understood the “keep it holy” part as a command to worship.
5. Rolf Jacobson – Keeping the Sabbath is about lives that are captured by a God Who keeps faith with us and Who keeps intruding graciously into our lives.
 - a. You used to serve Pharaoh (Deut.) who never gave days off and responded to complaints with more and more difficult work. To serve Me means that once every seven days every person and animal gets a day off.
 - b. This is actually more than once a week.
 - i. Every seven years the land is given a rest.
 - ii. Every seven years all debts are forgiven – for the sake of charity and stewardship
 - iii. Every seven years all slaves were set free – God’s intrusion to free those in chains
 - iv. Every seven times seven years (49) all land was returned to its original family – God’s intrusion to ensure that the means of life were not monopolized by the few
 - c. Keeping Sabbath is more than one day a week. It is about an entire way of life.

The Second Table: Turned Toward the Neighbor

Honor your father and your mother

1. The Hebrew term for ‘honor’ includes the meaning “be heavy,” suggesting the sense of “give weight to.” The command does not advocate obeying or being subordinate, but treating parents with appropriate seriousness.

You shall not murder

1. Human life belongs to God and must be respected.
2. While there are many discussions about under what circumstances this command is to be followed, going all the way back to Genesis suggest that there is an uncompromising line against the taking of another life, period.

You shall not commit adultery

1. This command concerns distorted sexual, or more generally human, relations.
2. Understood narrowly, “adultery” consists in the violation of the wife of another man.
3. Understood more broadly, the command points to the recognition that sexuality is enormously wondrous and enormously dangerous.
 - a. The wonder is available in a community only if it is practiced respectfully and with discipline.
 - b. The danger is that it is capable of evoking desires that are destructive of persons and communal relations.
4. In its fullest interpretation, this command envisions covenantal relations of mutuality that are genuinely life-giving, nurturing, enhancing, and respectful.

You shall not steal

1. This command is clearly about property, and the not taking of it from others.
2. A fuller reading of the command, in context of the whole of Scripture, would seem to include not taking advantage of another – financially or otherwise. Not stealing someone’s future, or their dignity, or their sense of self.
3. While anyone can steal property from another, this command is also a warning to the powerful not to take advantage of the weak.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor

1. This command is technically about courtroom practice. The courtroom must be a place where the truth is told.
2. Viable human community depends on truth telling. This command is concerned with the public portrayal of reality that is not excessively skewed by self-interest, manipulation or ideology.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, etc.

1. This is not about simply envy or desire, but a kind of acquisitiveness that destabilizes the property and/or life of another. The reaching for something not one's own that destroys community.
2. This is the only commandment repeated twice, which underlies its importance.
3. Coveting – the intense, single-minded desire for something, leads inevitably to breaking most, if not all, of the other commandments.
 - a. Example 1 – King David (2 Samuel 11-12). He sees Bathsheba, wants her, takes her and ends up having her husband, and probably all of the military company he commanded, killed. Starts with just a little coveting.
 - b. Example 2 – King Ahab & Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 21). They want a vineyard that is close to the palace for their own. When the owner, Naboth, refused to sell, they arrange for false charges to be brought against him in court and he ends up dead, his vineyard royal property. Started with just a little coveting.

The Commandments are what divinely bestowed freedom looks like

- Freedom is not when the powerful take whatever they want.
 - Freedom is when we respect the property of others and help them maintain and keep it.
- Freedom is not when the strong dominate the weak.
 - Freedom is when the bodies and lives of all are protected and their rights respected.
- Freedom is not the endless satisfaction of every sexual impulse.
 - Sexual freedom is found within the bounds of a loving and committed marriage.

Remember the purpose of the law

- The purpose of the law is not “your best life now,” but “your neighbor’s best life now.” God loves your neighbor so much that God gives you the law.
- Because we are sinful people who “cannot free ourselves,” and because we will be until Jesus comes and brings with Him the new creation, God says, “This is how you need to live: love your neighbor.” How do we do that?
 - Make sure everyone gets one day off each week, take care of the elderly, don’t kill, don’t steal, don’t have sex with someone else’s spouse, don’t hurt your neighbor with your words, don’t desire your neighbor’s stuff. That’s how you love your neighbor.

The law isn’t about you, it’s about your neighbor. And God loves you so much that God gives your neighbor the exact same law.

Remember Romans: “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift. ... For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works”(Romans 3:23-28).

Thanks be to God!