

The Ten Commandments

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*live
free*



And God spoke all these words:
“I am the Lord your God, who
brought you out of Egypt, out of
the land of slavery. You shall
have no other gods before me.”
Exodus 20:1-3

Name: _____

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Exodus 20:1-17

¹ And God spoke all these words: ² "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

1 ³ "You shall have no other gods before me.

2 ⁴ "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand *generations* of those who love me and keep my commandments.

3 "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

4 "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labour 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, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

5 "Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

6 "You shall not murder.

7 "You shall not commit adultery.

8 "You shall not steal.

9 "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

10 "You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour."

Introduction

For God's people in Moses' day, they had been set free from slavery in Egypt, and were being brought to new life in the land God was giving them. They had been set free, and so now God spoke and told them to live free. And he chiselled out his words onto stone tablets so that they could be carried wherever his people went, to govern their life of worship: The ten commandments.

We too have been given freedom by Jesus. Now we are to live free, released to be the people God wants us to be. At last, freed from our slavery to sin and the judgement of God, we are free to live by the Spirit and to live for God.

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1)

And so God commands us how to live. And when we hear his commandments, we hear the voice of a Father God who loves his children and now wants to lead them into life.

So this is a series which will remind us of the salvation we have in Jesus, and the relationship with God which we enjoy. And it will then lead us to live in light of the freedom we have, growing in holiness as we love God and love others.

The context of the ten commandments

Historical Context

The context in which God gave his people the ten commandments is very important. God's law is an outworking of God's saving grace. So as with all scripture, the ten commandments teach us the gospel!

God's promise to Abraham is to establish his descendants as a nation, in the land he would give them, to enjoy his blessing and be a source of blessing to the nations. Yet as the book of Exodus begins, the Israelites have been subject to cruel slavery in Egypt for over four centuries.

But God hears the cry of his people, and acts to redeem them from slavery. Moses is raised up and tasked by God to lead his people out of slavery.

When Pharaoh refuses, a series of plagues are sent as a warning and judgement. Finally, the death of the firstborn and the Passover bring the permission for the Israelites to leave. When Pharaoh again hardens his heart, the Egyptian army pursue them, but God opens a path through the Red Sea to bring his people to safety, and to defeat their Egyptian enemies once and for all.

From the shores of the Red Sea, Moses leads the people to Mount Sinai – the place where he first received his commission from God, and where God promised that his people would come and worship him.

So it is that the Israelites gather at the foot of the mountain. They are the people whom God has set free. And now they hear his voice – literally and audibly God speaks from the mountain in a way never repeated. And he gives them these commandments.

God has set them free – not he tells them how to “live free”. The ten commandments are not a guide about how to *gain* a place in God’s people. They are instead how to *live* as God’s people once we have benefitted from his redeeming love.

Law Context

The ten commandments are part of the Mosaic Law, sometimes also referred to as the Old (Sinai) Covenant. The Law continues from Exodus 20 onwards to the end of Leviticus.

After the 40 years of wandering in the desert which follow Israel’s reluctance to trust God and enter the land, Moses brings them once again to the border of Canaan, and in the book of Deuteronomy he reminds them of their history and of the covenant (“Deuteronomy” literally means “second law”) – thus we see the 10 commandments repeated in Deuteronomy 5. Occasionally the wording is slightly different, so on some weeks we’ll take a look at Deuteronomy as well.

The Purpose of the Law

Many of us will have had conversations with non-Christian friends in which we try to explain that Christianity is not about obeying *rules*, but instead is about a *relationship* with God.

That's true. But then what do we do when we turn to the parts of the Bible (especially the ten commandments and Law of Moses) which are filled with rules and laws? What is purpose of the Law?

The law expresses God's character

In Romans 8:4 Paul speaks of the "righteous requirements of the law". The law expresses what is right and holy, in line with God's character. In Lev 11:44 God says "be holy, because I am holy".

So (for instance), as the author of life, God condemns murder. As the Lord of truth he forbids lying. As the loving husband to his church he hates adultery.

The law exposes our sin

The law also serves to highlight how far short of God's standard of holiness we fall. Rather than make us think "Great! When I do all these things God will definitely accept me." The law instead drives us to think "Help! I can't meet God's standards - I am a sinner."

Indeed, in Romans 7 Paul goes a step further in describing this function of the law. He says the law is a "keep off the grass" sign that makes you suddenly want to walk all over it even though it hadn't occurred to you before you read the sign. When our sinful hearts hear the law, it can often make things worse: "For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet.' But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire." (Rom 7:7-8)

The law drives us to our Saviour

As a result of the above, the main purpose of the law is to make us look to Jesus for forgiveness, and his righteousness, knowing that we can't do it ourselves.

Galatians likens the law to the role of a guardian, placed in authority over a child to help them grow into adulthood. So too the law was the guardian of God's people, to lead them to hope for and trust in Christ: "Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith." (Gal 3:23-24)

The law encourages a life of holiness

In Jeremiah 31:33, God promised that when Jesus came, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts." As Christians who have the Holy Spirit working within us, God gives us understanding of his will, and the desire and strength to obey it. Does that mean that we don't need the law at all anymore?

Not quite. Yes, we are no longer "in the flesh" but "in the Spirit" (Romans 8). And yet "we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit" are still those who "groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for the adoption of sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:23) Every Christian knows the battle that rages between our new spiritual nature, and our ongoing sinful nature.

And when that battle is at its fiercest, the law comes as a concerned friend, to remind us of what pleases the Lord.

Perhaps an illustration will help. When we moved to Sheffield six years ago we bought an A-Z. We used it all the time. Today, we rarely need it – our 'mental map' of Sheffield is sufficient to get us where we need to go. And yet it still lives in the glove box, ready to come out whenever we get lost, or forget our way. So too God's law remains as a guide and companion to the Christian, even as the Spirit writes the law on our hearts.

Understanding the Law

The previous section shows that the purpose of the law is to point us to Jesus. However, we must also recognise that different parts of the Law point to Jesus in different ways (and therefore are differently affected by his coming.)

A common way to describe these differences is to speak about three types of laws: moral law, civil law, and ceremonial law.

Moral law refers to those commandments which express unchanging ethical demands of God, since they spring from the character of God, who does not change. Just as murder was wrong long before Sinai (think of God's reaction to Cain after he kills Abel in Genesis 4), so it remains wrong today, even though we no longer live under the Old Covenant.

Civil law refers to commandments which were put in place to set Israel apart as a nation special to God. These were almost arbitrary – for instance the requirement to abstain from certain foods, or mixed fibres in clothing. Just as a football team's shirt colours are 'arbitrary', and yet very important once decided (to fans at least), so the civil laws became a key part of Israel's identity. (Understanding this helps us to see why Peter was so shocked at the idea of eating 'unclean' food when he brings the gospel to Cornelius's house in Acts 10:10-15). Also within this category come the 'case law' examples of how judges in Israel should deal with punishment and compensation for different events.

Ceremonial law refers to the sacrificial system, temple and priesthood. Laws which were largely put in place to deal with the reality of sin that the rest of the law exposed.

In broad terms this threefold distinction of the law can be helpful. But it is not as though the Old Testament laws come colour-coded, or in three sections labelled 'moral', 'civil' and 'ceremonial'. Sometimes different types of laws are intermingled in the same chapter (Lev 19 for instance), and many laws fit into more than one category. Indeed, when we come to the fourth commandment on the Sabbath, part of the complexity (and controversy) stems from the fact that it has moral, civil and ceremonial aspects all bound up in one.

Nevertheless, the strength of seeing the law in these three categories is that it helps explain our relation to the law as Christians. In particular, we can say that the moral law stands (because it is reiterated and expanded in Jesus' teaching), the civil law is annulled (as God's people no longer form a distinct nation), and the ceremonial law is replaced (by Jesus' atoning work of the cross and resurrection).

Jesus and the Law

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them." (Matt 5:17) What does this fulfilment look like?

Jesus keeps the law's demands

An obvious answer is that Jesus keeps the law! He alone lived a life of perfect obedience to the Father, and though tempted in every way just as we are, yet was without sin (Heb 4:15). As a result, Jesus is able to give us his righteousness through faith in him (Rom 1:17).

Jesus is the reality to which the Law points

Where the law describes a sacrificial system for sin, Jesus is *the* sacrifice for sin. Where the law gives details on the construction of a temple, Jesus is *the* temple, in whom God comes to dwell with man – the Word become flesh. In these and many other ways, the OT law presents shadows of what was to come – the reality is in Christ. Hebrews 9-10 in particular draw the connections between Jesus and the law.

Jesus teaches the full extent of the law

Jesus' teaching showed how obedience to the law was much more than external behaviour, but also spoke to our heart attitudes. In the repeated formula in the Sermon on the Mount "you have heard it said... but I tell you that..." Jesus takes many of the commands of the law, and shows how far-reaching they are.

Jesus gives his Spirit so that we grow in godliness

Finally, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to live and work in his people, leading us in his ways. Though we still retain our sinful nature, we also have a new spiritual nature which we are encouraged to keep in step with (Gal 5).

We also know that when Jesus returns we will be made perfect (the Holy Spirit's work in us now complete and unchallenged). So the ten commandments are in part a promise that God makes to his people. This is what we *will* be like!

The Ten Commandments as a whole

We will be spending one week on each of the commandments (after the introduction in week 1). But it is also helpful to think about the commandments as a whole.

The summary of the law

When asked about the greatest commandments, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 “Love the Lord you God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

Thinking of this summary of the law, it is easy to see how it corresponds to the ten commandments. The first four focus on loving God, while the following six focus on loving others.

The ten commandments as ways of describing all sin

It is also helpful to see how the ten commandments do not just identify separate, distinct sins, but rather are different ways of describing all sin.

For instance, all sin involves disloyalty to God, and allowing something else to compete for our love of God. Thus all sin violates the first commandment.

Similarly, the sixth commandment “do not murder” is shown by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount to include all unrighteous anger and disrespect for life. And yet all sin is an expression of disrespect for life and for God’s image and so violates this command.

The ten commandments applied to our worship of Jesus

We could also see how each of the commandments are related to how we worship Christ as Lord. Perhaps here it is worth mentioning all ten:

1. We are to worship Jesus as the one and only Lord, Saviour and mediator.
2. Jesus is the one perfect image of God, and we worship God only through him.
3. Jesus is the name of God, before whom every knee must bow.

4. Jesus is our Sabbath rest, and Lord of the Sabbath.
5. Jesus opens the way for us to be adopted as God's children, and to know him as Father.
6. Jesus is our life, the Lord of life, and the one who gave his life that we might live.
7. Jesus is our bridegroom and perfect husband who gave himself to cleanse us and make us his pure, spotless bride. We love him as no other.
8. Jesus is the source of our inheritance, and the one who provides everything we need.
9. Jesus is God's truth.
10. Jesus is our complete sufficiency, and in him we can be content with what we have, thankful for his present and future gifts.

A Prayer for the Series

Heavenly Father, thank you that you love us, and have given us forgiveness and new life in Christ. Thank you that you are at work in us by your Holy Spirit to grow us in godliness. As we consider your commandments, may they be a hammer to break through our hard-heartedness, exposing our sinful desires and actions. May they be a magnet to draw us to Jesus as our Saviour, and the only one who can make us right before you. May they be our guide as we seek to live in the light of the gospel, following Jesus. And may they be our hope, as we look forward to the day when Christ shall return and we will be like him. Amen.

Series Overview

The following table shows the passages that we are going to look at each week during our series, along with some brief comments.

Apart from the first week (an introduction to the series as a whole), these comments have three parts:

- Stating the command (both positively and negatively)
- Linking it to Jesus
- Initial thoughts on areas of application

<p>Sun 2 Feb Ex 20:1-2 (Eph 2:1-10)</p>	<p>“Live free” An introduction in which we’ll explore the 10 commandments as a whole, in particular looking at the context of who the Lord is (the one who is, who speaks and who acts for this people), and what he has done (that grace comes before law – freedom from Egypt before the Sinai covenant). What are the implications of this for us today?</p>
<p>Sun 9 Feb Ex 20:3 (Psalm 145)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No other gods / There is only one God and we should love him • Jesus shows us who God truly is, especially in his death and resurrection. • Loving God above everything else, not allowing ‘good things’ to take precedence over God. Not looking to other things for what only God can give us. Trusting and following Jesus.
<p>Sun 16 Feb Ex 20:4-6 (Col 1:15-20)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No idols / worship God God’s way • Jesus alone is the image of the invisible God, and he alone brings us close to God, there is no other name by which we may be saved. • Not thinking that created things (people, places, activities) can act as mediators bringing us closer to God; not worshipping created things.
<p>Sun 23 Feb Ex 20:7 (Phil 2:5-11)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t take Lord’s name in vain / Honour God for who he truly is • Jesus has the name above every name, because he is our risen, victorious Lord and Saviour. • Not making God small in our thinking; not speaking ill of God; not using God-talk as a way of masking sinful lives; accurately proclaiming Christ to the world, not misrepresenting him.
<p>Sun 2 Mar Ex 20:8-11 (Matt 11:28-30)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remember the Sabbath / Enjoy your life with God • Christ is Lord of the Sabbath. He makes peace between us and God and invites his people to come to him and he will give us rest. • Not forgetting what God has done; seeking rest elsewhere than in Jesus; being indifferent to our responsibility to others.

<p>Sun 9 Mar Ex 20:12 (Eph 6:1-4)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honour your father and mother / keep in God's ways • Jesus is fully obedient to the Father, and so brings many sons to glory as we are adopted as God's children. • Honouring all those in authority over us; structuring family life so that families grow in the faith;
<p>Sun 16 Mar Ex 20:13 (Matt 5:21-26)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not murder / be life-giving • Jesus is the Lord of life, who gives his own life to secure eternal life for us. • Trusting Jesus and bringing people to him as the source of life; not seeking revenge, or harbouring bitterness or resentment; not displaying anger or violence; opposing abortion and euthanasia.
<p>Sun 23 Mar Ex 20:14 (Prov 5)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not commit adultery / be faithful • Jesus is the one who faithfully keeps all of God's promises, and he is the sacrificially loving husband to his bride, the church, • Being faithful to our word, our family and church family. Protecting and nurturing marriages. Not having lustful thoughts. Keeping sex within marriage, as a way as expressing and cementing the relationship.
<p>Sun 30 Mar Ex 20:15 (Rom 13:7-10)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not steal / be generous • Jesus gives up everything for us, and gives us everything we need. • Being content, being generous. Rejoicing in the spiritual blessings we have in Jesus. Being honest with other people's property. Not taking things, time, or credit that isn't ours.
<p>Sun 6 Apr Ex 20:16 (Eph 4:11-15)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not bear false witness / live by the truth • Jesus is the truth. He shows us God, ourselves and the world truly. • Speak truthfully, and relate to people on the basis on what Jesus has done. Don't exaggerate / lie either to give people a bad impression about someone else, or a good impression of ourselves. Not gossiping or talking about others in a bad way.
<p>Sun 13 Apr Ex 20:17 (1 Tim 6:6-11)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not covet / be content in Christ • In his death and resurrection, Jesus has provided full salvation, and gives us everything we need. • Being content; celebrating and not envying the blessings that others enjoy; having godly ambitions.