

A Sunday School teacher was trying to teach the Ten Commandments to her young students, and she thought it would be most helpful if she used examples that her students could relate to that show how the Ten Commandments might apply to everyday life. So, she said to the class,

“Early one Saturday morning Johnny’s parents had to run an errand and they asked Johnny to wash the dishes while they were gone. When they returned, Johnny was playing video games and the dishes were still unwashed.” The teacher asked, “which Commandment applies here” and in one accord the class responded, “Honor your father and mother!” “Good,” said the teacher and she gave another example.

“Annie went shopping with her mother and when no one was looking, she slipped a candy bar into her pocket without planning to pay for it.” Again, the class was quick: “You shall not steal!” “Great,” said the teacher, then she gave one more example.

“George was having a bad day and he lost his temper. He got angry with his little sister and grabbing her pet kitten, he threatened to pull its tail off.” Now this was a much tougher example, and everyone in the class was quiet for a moment but then one little fellow brightened up and shouted, “What God has joined together, let no one separate.”

This morning we are beginning a sermon series through the Ten Commandments – and with those words, I can imagine that some of you already have a picture in your mind of Charlton Heston portraying Moses carrying two stone tablets down the mountain. Well, there’s a little more to the Ten Commandments than that, and for the next ten Sundays, beginning now, we are going to explore each Commandment, one at a time, but before we begin this enormous and intimidating undertaking, I need to first give you some background information and then explain what the Ten Commandments are all about in general terms.

A little over 2000 years before Christ was born, God established a covenant – a contract with a man named Abram. Abram trusted God, and he was graciously counted as righteous by God because of his faith in God, and God gave him the new name of Abraham for he would be the father of many. In this covenant, God promised Abraham that through his children, looking far ahead to Christ, all the people of the earth who live by faith would be blessed.

The covenant continued to Abraham's son Isaac and to his son Jacob whom God renamed Israel. Jacob or Israel, if you will, had twelve sons who became the twelve tribes of Israel.

One of Jacob's sons, Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt by his jealous brothers, but by God's divine plan, He used Joseph to preserve the people of Israel during a very long and severe famine. The people of Israel moved into Egypt where food was plentiful, and they continued to reside in Egypt; but unfortunately, there was a change in leadership in Egypt, things took a turn for the worst, and the Israelites became enslaved by the Egyptians for some 400 years.

God knew this, He saw their suffering, He heard their cries, and when the time was right, God tasked Moses with liberating His people from their slavery and bondage in Egypt, and the great Exodus towards the Promised Land began. Now, it's important to keep in mind that at this point, God's people knew nothing but slavery. They didn't know what it was like to live in freedom, but here they are free and on the move.

If you recall, in **Exodus 14**, they had the Red Sea experience where God parted the water allowing them to cross safely to the other side, and once safely across, they were full of praise for God, but they were also in the wilderness where several difficult trials awaited them that required God's help.

Three months after they departed Egypt, the Israelites made it to Mount Sinai – the mountain of God, where they remained for almost a year. It was at Mount Sinai where God would enter into a covenant with His people. Moses went up the mountain, and God explained to Moses that the Israelites would be His people, His treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation if they accepted and obeyed the covenant. Then Moses went down the mountain and informed the elders of Israel about God's covenant and His plan to make them a unique people, and all the people were excited about it.

The people prepared themselves, and three days later, God descended from heaven onto Mount Sinai in an awesome display of power and majesty. The mountain violently quaked, there was flashes of lightning and booming thunder, fire and smoke, and there was the sound of a very loud and long trumpet blast. Witnessing this, the Israelites trembled in fear for they were amazed beyond measure. God then called Moses back to the top of the mountain and he climbed back up. With the exception of Aaron, God told Moses to warn all the priests and all the people

not to come up the mountain in curiosity for they would perish. Once again, Moses goes back down the mountain and gave this warning to the people – they could only stand at the foot of the mountain, and that brings us to **Exodus 20**. So, if you have your Bible, turn to **Exodus 20** and we will begin with **verses 1-2**. We are told,

¹Then 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.”

This is a passage that is often overlooked when thinking about the Ten Commandments, but it's really important. We are told in **verse 1** that **God spoke all these words**. Now, let's stop there for a moment because I want to point something out. When God gave the Ten Commandments, He spoke to all of the Israelites as they were assembled with Moses before the mountain. This might be portrayed differently in some movies you may have watched. Before the Commandments were written in stone, they were first given to all the people by the voice of God. This had an impact on the people – in fact, it terrified them so much so, that later in **verses 18-19**, after God had spoken, the people went to Moses and said “*no more of that, we can't handle that*” and they asked that God not speak with them directly again – instead Moses could be their messenger.

In **verse 2**, God introduces Himself to His people, and He says to them, “**I am your God.**” In the ancient world, including Egypt where they had just left, people worshipped many false gods, but here the LORD sets Himself apart from any of the other supposed deities. “*I am your God, not an imposter, not a false god, not simply a higher power, not some impersonal force, but your God,*” and then He tells the people why He has the right to tell His people what to do. Before God gives His commands to the people, He reminds them what He has done for them – something they could not do for themselves. God reminds them that He rescued them, He freed them from slavery in the land of Egypt, which would include everything God had done in bringing them out – the plagues against Egypt, the Red Sea experience, turning bitter water into drinkable water, proving manna from heaven, and so on. The point is: because of who God is and what God has done, He has the right to tell His people what to do – and His people have the obligation to do what He tells them to do.

Now before we look at the first commandment, we need to talk about the nature of the Commandments in general. The Ten Commandments are God-based rules for moral conduct which serve as the foundation for the Law. We could say these

rules are the framework for their constitution as a nation under God, which will make up Israel's religious, and civil, and ceremonial laws.

Remember, as I said before, God's people had been in bondage, under the thumb of the Egyptians – that's all they knew, but now they are free and need to function as a nation with rules. These rules were specifically given to the Israelites at a certain time and in a certain place, and they were given by God, not by Moses, and in the process of giving these rules – and this is important, the rules revealed something about the rule-maker. They are a reflection of God's divine nature and character declaring from His point of view – in simple terms, what is right and what is wrong.

These are God's moral standards, His moral law, and it's important to point out that what occurred on Mount Sinai in giving the Ten Commandments was not the invention of God's moral standards – for people were given a conscience by God. All cultures have said that murder is wrong, and kindness is good. All agree that we have particular obligations to our family. All say that honesty is good and stealing is wrong. People instinctively know what is right and what is wrong – it's implanted in their hearts and minds, so here on Mount Sinai, we don't have the invention of God's moral standards, rather we have the formal declaration of them in the form of the Ten Commandments.

Now, as we work our way through the Ten Commandments during the next several weeks, you will notice they are broken down into two parts. The first four Commandments focus on the relationship between a person and God, whereas the second six Commandments focus on person-to-person relationships, and if you recall, Jesus made the same distinction when He explained and summed it all up in just two Commandments. Let's look at what He said in **Matthew 22:34-40**. We read,

³⁴ But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. ³⁵ One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" 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 foremost commandment. ³⁹ The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

Jesus said, the Law, actually the entire Old Testament because He said the Law and the Prophets, hangs on loving God and loving one another, so if you think

about it, these God-based rules are motivated by love, and simply put – we are commanded to do whatever love requires us to do. That’s what it boils down to – and it seems simple enough, but unfortunately, we can’t even keep these two Commandments from Jesus, much less the ten given on Mount Sinai.

So, the question usually comes up, and I’m speaking to Christians here – since we live under grace and not under the Law, are the Ten Commandments still important to us – are they still relevant?

That’s a question that has been debated and is still being debated by many people, but I believe the answer is “yes” and let me explain.

When looking at the entire Bible, the Ten Commandments, which serve as the foundation of the Law, was not given so that the Israelites, or anyone else for that matter, could attain righteousness. A righteous standing before God has always been by faith in God – just like Abraham was graciously counted as righteous because he trusted God long before the Ten Commandments were ever given. No one is declared righteous, no one goes to heaven by keeping the Law because no one, except for Jesus, could. The Law was given to reveal sin, it exposed our wickedness, it formally made sin a legal violation, and it imposed a death penalty. Under the Law, humanity was on death row so to speak, and it created in us a desperate need for mercy and grace, forgiveness and salvation that is only found in Jesus Christ.

So, it is absolutely true, that as followers of Christ, saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone, we are no longer under the control of the Law – we no longer condemned by it. We are delivered from the judgment of the Law, free from the death penalty it had imposed upon us because Christ took the penalty for us. In Christ, we have entered into a new covenant – the old has passed away; however, it is Scripture, and therefore it must be important and relevant to us still. The Apostle Paul tells us in **2 Timothy 3:16-17**,

¹⁶ All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

All Scripture would also include the Ten Commandments as well, so how could they be profitable to us?

First, we might say that the Ten Commandments serve as road signs to keep us on God's moral path. As I said earlier, the Ten Commandments will not save anybody, but they may help to keep us safe.

Have you ever traveled to the gorge on Highway 14? It's a beautiful drive, it's a scenic drive, but it can also be a dangerous drive if you don't pay attention to the road signs. There are some curves on that highway where the road signs tell you to slow down, and if you don't, especially in bad weather, you could experience the gorge up close and personal as you flip over a guardrail. There are many truckers, who were apparently in a hurry, that ignored these road signs and paid for it dearly.

The Ten Commandments are like road signs. They are God's way of lovingly saying, "Watch Out! Don't do it! Don't go there!" It's like a parent telling a child, "Don't touch that hot burner because you will regret it." The Ten Commandments cannot save us, but they may keep us safe, and we should not ignore them – even as Christians.

Secondly, the Ten Commandments serve as a standard, God's standard, showing us the heart and the desire of God for His people. It is true that we are no longer under the custody of the Law, we are no longer condemned by it, we are no longer controlled by it for the Holy Spirit leads us, but I think we should still respect it because it gives God's standard for what is right and what is wrong, and I should point out here, that as believers, they are only a starting point, for we operate under a higher standard where God looks beyond our external behavior and looks at the heart. For example, Jesus took it up a notch when He said in **Matthew 5:21-22**,

²¹ "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not commit murder' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.

So, the Ten Commandments serve as standard for godly living and it's our starting point for what God says is right and what is wrong. The Ten Commandments lay the foundation for God's moral standards, especially in a time where people are making up their own standards.

In their book "The Day America Told the Truth", James Patterson and Peter Kim laid down the law for postmodern times. They observed that today there is

“absolutely no moral consensus at all. Everyone is making up their own personal moral codes—their own Ten Commandments.” Patterson and Kim proceed to list what they call the “ten real commandments,” the rules that according to their surveys people actually live by. These rules included some of the following:

*—I will steal from those who won’t really miss it;
—I will lie when it suits me, so long as it doesn’t cause any real damage;
—I will cheat on my spouse—after all, given the chance, he or she will do the same.*

People change standards to suit themselves and to justify their own behavior, claiming what’s true and right for them may not be true and right for you, but that’s okay. Well let me tell you – it’s not okay, for ultimately, it will be God’s standards by which mankind will be judged. Not yours or mine – His.

Lastly, and maybe most importantly, the Ten Commandments are important and relevant to us because they reflect God’s nature and character, God poured Himself into them, and it honors God and pleases Him when we take Him at His word, and when we obey Him.

Okay, we have finally made it to the first Commandment found in **Exodus 20:3**, where God tells His people,

“You shall have no other gods before Me.”

I don’t think we need to spend a lot of time on this first commandment because it naturally and logically flows from our understanding of who God is and what He has done for His people. Because of that, God says, **“You shall have no other gods before Me.”** When God says **“You”** – and this is important, that is singular – that’s personal – in other words, this command is not directed to the nation, it’s directed to each individual – it is spoken to each person as if God has singled them out by name.

He says, *“You, yes I’m talking to you, you shall have no other gods before Me.”* Those words **“before Me,”** literally mean *“to My face.”* You shall have no other gods in My face – none before Me, none beside Me, none after Me, and none except for Me. In other words, God alone is God and there is absolutely no other God.

This was a critical commandment for the Israelites who came out of Egypt where many false gods were worshipped, plus we know the Israelites will be prone to seeking and worshipping false gods, trusting in their idols, and forsaking the One and Only True God.

If you recall, just days later, they made a golden calf while Moses was up on Mount Sinai getting the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments of all things. They forgot who God is. They forgot the God who delivered them. They forgot they were God's people.

Here's the bottom line: For every one of us, God must be first in our life. That's where the Ten Commandments begin, and it speaks more about a relationship with Him than a rule imposed by Him.

The story is told about an old farm couple who were driving along in their pickup when the wife said, "We never sit all snuggled up in the truck like we used to." The husband looked at her and said, "I haven't moved."

God doesn't move away from us – we routinely move away from Him, hence the command, **"You shall have no other gods before Me."** God will not take second place in your life, and He's not just someone you add to your life. God doesn't want to be added to your life – He wants your life – all of it.

Does God have it, or are you putting another gods in His face by loving and trusting someone or something more than Him? Only you can answer that.

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