

The Ten Commandments

Erase that picture of Charlton Heston standing on a mountaintop with a stone slab engraved with the



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Ten Commandments held high over his head. Those ten crucial laws for living are so much more than a Hollywood production. They are the foundation defining what it means to be truly human as God intended.

The gospel of grace is the sequel, and our ability to live out that grace is pictured in these essential laws. “The Ten” are divided as follows: verses 3-11 address our relationship with God, and verses 12-17 address our relationship with other humans.

Do not miss the simple fact that of all the people in this world, God chose to reveal himself to Israel to demonstrate his love and to offer redemption to the world through a Jewish Messiah. So the Ten Commandments begin in a context of tragedy and hope with the words: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exodus 20:2).

Keeping these laws could not make them God’s people. They were given these laws because God had already chosen them to be his people. These laws offer a growing relationship with God and a significant example for the world.

An expert on the Mosaic Law asked Jesus which was the greatest commandment. Jesus answered, clearly defining the dual focus: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind” and “love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). Go back to the day Moses delivered the Ten Commandments to Israel on Mt. Sinai and you hear that same sense of immediacy: “The Lord did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, with all those of us alive here today” (Deuteronomy 5:3). No matter the calendar date, we are all called to live out the faith we profess.

The first commandment calls us to a singular loyalty to God, affirmed by his

deliverance from the power and gods of Egypt (the world), (vv. 2-3). The second forbids any attempt to reduce or replace God with any image or idol (vv. 4-6). The third warns against misusing God’s name by taking it lightly or attempting to use it for selfish gain (v. 7). The fourth orders that the seventh day of each week be designated “holy” (vv. 8-11). No work is to be done by human or beast, as we remember all we have is a gift from God and that rest and worship remind us whose we are.

The next six commandments, growing out of the first four, shape our relationship with the human race. The fifth commandment focuses on honoring or parents (v. 12). Often referred to as the building blocks of society, because a family structure is necessary to learning how to live with others and teaching sound values. Generations later the Apostle John wrote: “If anyone claims to honor God, but doesn’t honor his parents he is a liar, because the person who doesn’t honor father or mother, who can be seen, can’t honor God who can’t be seen” (1 John 4:20). The sixth forbids murder, which violates the image of God within another human. Murder presumes one person has the power of life and death over another (v. 13). The seventh forbids adultery, making a mockery of God’s faithful love for Israel. All the commands reflect integrity in a relationship (v. 14).

The eighth forbids stealing. Bound up in this command is much more than property rights. What we possess we earn, not steal, and what we own we may freely choose to share with others (v. 15). The ninth forbids false testimony. Such an act can rob another of their integrity and hope (v. 16). The tenth forbids coveting, which is often the beginning of adultery, stealing and false testimony. Here is the reminder that evil comes from within and not from an exterior force (v. 17).

A healthy relationship requires love, trust and loyalty. The Ten Commandments embody all these qualities. A reading of Israel’s history reveals the people were often negligent of these qualities in their relationship with God and their neighbors. There

Formations

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Scripture: Exodus 20:1-17

is no greater testimony to the mercy and grace of God than his faithfulness to a people who repeatedly broke his heart. Yet the purpose and love of God culminated in the coming of Christ.

The Jews went from ignoring the Ten Commandments to using them as a way to earn God’s favor, then back to rebellion. The commands stand to this day as a measure of moral integrity, a guide to blessings in life and a glimpse of God’s love for us.

When I married I asked the presiding minister to allow me to compose the love vows to my wife. He granted my request, noting that if left anything out he would add it! God’s commands leave nothing out. They reveal our weaknesses and point us to what we can be...with God’s help. Jesus lived out “The Ten.” Instead of dismissing the commandments, he expanded them (Matthew 5-7).

Study the Ten Commandments, comparing them to the gospel accounts of Jesus’ life. Use them as a tool to examine your motivations and actions. Then craft your prayers around the needs you find within yourself. This is what the season called Lent is about, not categorizing your weaknesses but seeking spiritual renewal and strength.

Consider what you can do to actually live out the gospel. Is there a need in your family, your neighborhood, a community ministry where you can share God’s grace, reverse selfishness, offer rest to the weary, become a channel of God’s love? The greatness we claim for our “Christian” nation is often denied by our words, values and lack of action. Our witness as “the church in the world” is too often divisive, judgmental and even selfish. Decide to make a difference, to model grace, to live as God’s people. Don’t just keep the commandments...fulfill them instead!

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.