

# The Ten Commandments

WORD & WAY FORMATIONS COMMENTARY

February 10, 2019 Scripture: Deuteronomy 5:6-21



**Michael K. Olmsted**

Learning the value or purpose of a rule is not always easy. I grew up in a family where it was a rule that you ate what was on your plate. Rules can vex a strong-willed child, but I understood that a rule was firm until the day we had liver for lunch. At the first bite I gagged. We were at my grandparents in Chicago and though my mother was determined, it became clearly evident that liver would come back up no matter how insistent my mother was! So the rule was not absolute after all! (I still cannot swallow liver.)

There are rules and laws of behavior that embrace a deeper meaning than social behavior and cultural ideas. The Ten Commandments that come out of Israel's pilgrimage of identity and foundation of faith in God are remarkable for the time of their appearing. They are distinctive in what they reveal about God and the fact they are built upon God's love and our relationship with him. So, it comes as no surprise that a scribe, an expert in the Law, would ask Jesus, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered clearly: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40).

"The Ten" are all about life shaped by the love and grace of God. The Ten Commandments, found in both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, have been known for 3,000 years and continue to define a life based on love for God and others. There are additional laws in the Old Testament that offer dietary, behavioral and religious regulations, but the Ten Commandments are the bedrock essentials for those who profess to believe in God.

Israel has been wandering in the wilderness of their own choosing. Few of the original exiles are still alive. Moses is about to lay aside his mantle of leadership and a new era shaped by the

struggle to claim the "promised land" is beginning. The text begins with "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (v. 6). The God who is totally "other" has chosen to be the God who is with these vagabonds, the God who acts and so has proven his intent and integrity. Jehovah is not like any god the world has invented. Those who claim to be his people must likewise be different and these core commandments define that difference. The commandments begin with the most basic truth of life: "You shall have no other gods before me" (v. 7).

Egypt had a multiplicity of gods with exotic names, represented by statues and various areas of influence. The modern world does not know Baal, but our gods are at the core of society: entertainment, power, money, sex, sports, social standing. God is a "jealous God," meaning he loves you more than you can measure ... he loves you exclusively and fully.

The commandment says, "You shall not make for yourself an idol" (v. 8). Can you imagine packing a figure of God with your toiletries as you get ready for a trip? A frequent temptation is to reduce God to a manageable size so he will fit your specific wishes. The God who delivered Israel and sent his Son to love the world can never be confined to an impressive building or man-made organization. Faith resides in the soul, not in the manipulations of this world.

The commandment says: "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God ... for the Lord will not accept anyone who misuses his name" (v. 11). This is more than using the name of God in cursing. To misuse God's name is to bring shame on God when we live in open opposition to his teachings and will, when we treat others as unworthy of his love or when we act as a people of privilege instead of as a people who are forgiven. Our words and actions reveal if we misuse God's name.

The commandment says I will honor God by "observing the Sabbath day and keeping it holy" (v. 12). Sabbath's earliest mention is in Exodus 16:23: "Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord." Sabbath does involve rest and worship, but also a day to step away from the routines and obligations to

focus on God and his generous gifts, to celebrate his love and to bless others. We need a regular time to focus on God and the joy of being his people. That idea is about as foreign today as it was when God gave his law.

The remaining commandments focus on how we express God's love to others. The commandment says "honor your father and mother, as the Lord commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (v. 16). This is the first command coupled with a promise. Elderly people in those days often had no security or support. God's kind of love is marked by generosity and security. In the heart of God there are no forgotten or unnecessary people in his family.

Then follow several moral statements, commandments that include: forbidding murder (v. 17); marital fidelity (v. 18); prohibition against stealing (v. 19); integrity in legal or business dealings (v. 20); and a warning against envy (v. 21). The commandments demand that our profession of love for God must shape how we relate to and treat others. In Matthew 7 Jesus applies the Ten Commandments to the challenges of everyday life, teaching that to live without God's teachings and standards is as foolish as building your house on a foundation of sand. Such a life will collapse and be lost (Matt. 7:26-27).

We believe firmly in God's grace and often express concerns about legalistic religion. The law of God is not a point-earning system in a game of religion. Israel was standing on the edge of a whole new identity and world. They would never have gotten to that point without God and they had no future without God. This faith was to be much more than a political support system: it was necessarily a way of life. So God gave them carefully composed guidelines, a checklist to help them stay on target. But without faith in the God of grace, those laws could become institutional rules – burdensome and easily violated. So God began with love and continues with love.

The Ten Commandments remind us that we are God's children by his choice and our acceptance, as we show the world the difference only God can make.

*Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.*