

The 10 Commandments

Exodus 19:16-20:1

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Steve DeWitt

It is a joy today to begin a new teaching series. Last fall we finished a longer series in the New Testament—1 John—so I thought it would be good to spend some time in the Old Testament.

There is probably no more relevant section of Old Testament Scripture for our modern day than Exodus 20:1-17. You may not know the reference, but I'll bet you know what's in it—the famous Ten Commandments. They are famous or notorious, depending on your perspective. From the contemporary legal perspective, they are definitely notorious as recent years have seen battles over whether the Ten Commandments should be displayed in courthouses or schools. That can be debated but what cannot be debated is that the Ten Commandments are foundational to the whole ethical system upon which many of our laws are based. That and the presence of moral commands means there is a moral command giver to whom we are accountable. That is the real source of angst, and it's why people don't want them in schools, courthouses, or anywhere else for that matter. The commands remind sinners of what we don't want to acknowledge—our sin and accountability to God.

A greater need than getting the Ten Commandments back in the schools, however, is getting the Ten Commandments back in the church.

I'd like to draw your attention to the series graphic below:



You will notice that the "0" and the "s" are obscure. If you squint, you might think the title of our series is *The 1 Commandment*. Are there Ten Commandments or one? As we work through the ten, I want to keep the one central. Which one am I referring to?

"But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" 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. This is the great and first commandment." (Matthew 22:34-38 ESV)

We will spend more time on this as well but it is essential to understand a few things from the start. Jesus says this one command is greater than all the others. In what way is loving God greater than the ten? It is greater in that if you fulfill this one command, then you are

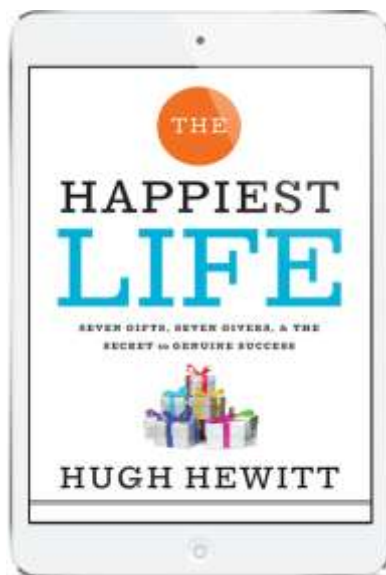
fulfilling all the others as well. In some respect, the Ten Commandments exist because this One Commandment is disobeyed.

If we could simply love God with all our hearts all the time without fail, we wouldn't need commands telling us not to profane his name or kill other humans. So while this series is about the Ten Commandments, the goal is by God's grace and through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit to fulfill the One Great Commandment.

See also that the heart of all the commands is *love*—love from God in giving them and love for God in obeying them. We don't often feel this way about commands. Parents of a teenage son say they want him home by 10:00 on the night before his SATs, and he screams, "You don't love me!" When the mom insists on holding her daughter's hand to cross the street, the daughter screams, "You don't love me! If you loved me, you'd let me be free!" God commands us to enjoy Sabbath rest and not kill each other, and we scream, "God, you don't love me!"

The mom holds her daughter's hand because she loves her. Behind the command is total love. If there is a singular misunderstanding of the Great Commandment or the Ten Commandments it's that God intends by them to limit our happiness or to diminish our joy. God's commands are God's love to us. God's commands are God's grace to us. Who knows better how the human experience of life is maximally enjoyed than the one who created human life in the first place?

One of the commentators I like to follow is Hugh Hewitt, probably because Hewitt and DeWitt are in a Dutch way almost the same. He recently wrote a book that I have not read but hope to entitled, *The Happiest Life* (see the cover below).



I think if we called these commands, *Ten Guides to the Happy Life*, people would understand their purpose better. The reason our courts and our schools and our popular culture are repulsed by them is precisely what lies behind all sin in the first place—the worship of self and the desire for self-freedom. *I don't want God or anyone else telling me what to do.*

And who suffers the consequences? We do. As I will often say in this series, *we don't break the Ten Commandments, they break us.* Breaking them is *A Guide to the Unhappy Life.* As we will see, eight of the commands are in the negative but all of them have a corresponding positive. To not covet is to enjoy contentment. To not steal is to enjoy a life of generosity, and so forth.

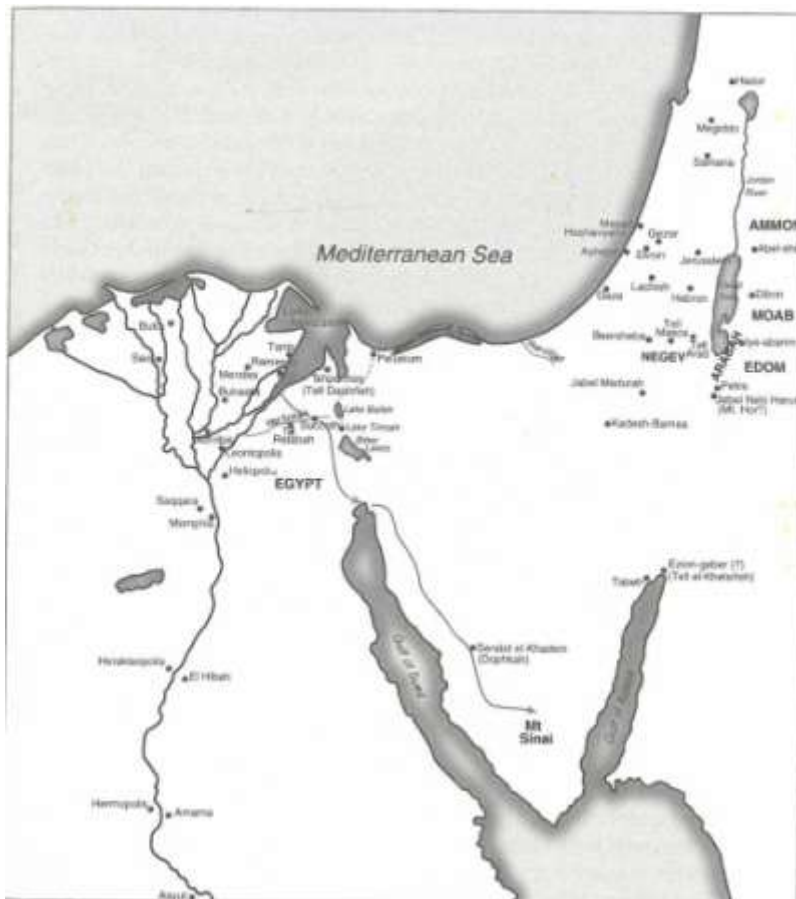
The Ten Commandments in Context

Let's tell the story right up to when God gives the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. We go back to Genesis 1-2 where God created all that is: the universe, the earth, the animals and plants, and human beings uniquely made in the image of God. In Genesis 3, our forefathers Adam and Eve sinned against God, sinning against the only negative command they were given, to not eat of the one tree in the garden God called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Their sin brought God's necessary judgment against the whole human race, a judgment of death. Romans 6:23 would later say, *The wages of sin is death.*

Adam and Eve's sin began a race-wide moral downward spiral. Their son Cain murdered his brother Abel. Soon mankind was so egregiously immoral that God wiped out all of them with a flood except Noah and his family because God had told Noah to build an ark, a picture of God's sovereign grace and saving love toward us.

Man repopulated the earth after the flood and in Genesis 12, God entered into a unilateral covenant with Abraham saying that his descendants would be innumerable and through his descendants, all nations of the earth would be blessed. God covenanted with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Jacob's story is complex but ten of his sons hated one son named Joseph and sold him into slavery in Egypt. Through a pretty incredible story, Jacob and all his sons and daughters join Joseph in Egypt. This was God's plan both to provide for them during severe famine and to bless them and multiply them greatly in Egypt.

Four hundred years passed and they became a nation. A pharaoh came to power who didn't know the greatness of Joseph and who despised the Jews. He enslaved them and oppressed them. Their misery was great. But this was all according to God's plan and purpose. Through incredible events, Moses was born a Jew but raised the son of Pharaoh with incredible privilege. One day he killed an Egyptian who was beating a Jew. He knew his gig in Egypt was up and he escaped into the desert. Forty years passed until on a certain mountain in the wilderness, God spoke to Moses from a burning bush and told him to go back to Egypt and lead Israel out from their oppression in Egypt and back to the Promised Land. Moses did just that. God sent ten plagues on Egypt which finally convinced Pharaoh to let them go. God saved Israel by a miraculous crossing of the Red Sea on dry ground and the drowning of the armies of Egypt behind them.



God led Moses and Israel back to the mountain of the burning bush—the same place God had spoken to Moses—Mount Sinai. There God covenanted himself to Israel. He would be their God. They would be his people. This covenant had certain stipulations which we call the Law and are summarized in the Ten Commandments. As we read this account, understand that this moment is like a marriage. It is the covenantal moment between God and Israel.

"On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. The Lord came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

And the Lord said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the Lord to look and many of them perish. Also let the priests who come near to the Lord consecrate themselves, lest the Lord break out against them." And Moses said to the Lord, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, 'Set limits around the mountain and consecrate it.'" And the Lord said to him, "Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest he break out against them." So Moses went down to the people and told them." (Exodus 19:16-25)

This isn't a burning bush; this is a burning mountain. Think exploding volcano. Think Mount Doom in *The Lord of the Rings*. It is a terrifying scene and it is so on purpose. This is to show Israel the power and grandeur of the God they are in covenantal fidelity to worship.

Moses tells them why they are seeing this incredible display of power, *"Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin."* (Exodus 20:20)

God on the mountain, speaks to his people. What does he say? *"And God spoke all these words, saying, 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 'You shall have no other gods before me.'" (Exodus 20:1-3)*

This whole series may hinge on this truth. Do you see the order God gives? *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt."* For Israel, this was a national salvation. This was God's grace. This was God's doing. Then he gives the first command, *"You shall have no other gods before me."* Salvation came first, then obedience. Imagine if back in Egypt God would have said, "You want out of Egypt? Well, you're going to have to do a few things. In fact, here are ten and if you do them perfectly, then I'll save you." They would never have gotten out. This is the gospel pictured in the Exodus. It is not law then salvation or no one would be saved. It is grace first, then obedience. Grace then command. Salvation then sanctification.

What is the Purpose of the Ten Commandments?

Here is where the casual reader of the Bible will trip up because in the Old Testament, there are large sections of Old Testament laws, like the whole book of Leviticus and then Deuteronomy as a second telling of all the Law. There is a lot of Law in the Old Testament.

But then you get to the New Testament and Paul in particular goes to great lengths to say we are not saved by the Law but by grace. Now the casual reader would say, "*Oh, the Old Testament is law; the New Testament is grace. So now there is no purpose to any of those laws. Jesus has come. They were the shadow, he is the reality. Don't talk to me about the Ten Commandments.*" What is missed is that salvation has always been by grace, including in the Old Testament. After Jesus, we see this with much greater clarity and are privileged to do so. But the confusion in reading Paul is understanding how he is referring to the Law. He never condemns the Law, but he does condemn trying to be saved by it apart from Jesus.

"*We know that the law is good if one uses it properly.*" (1 Timothy 1:8 NIV) The law is good if used properly. How do we use it properly? A great example of using it properly is Jesus' exposition of the law—we call it the Sermon on the Mount—where he goes through several of the Ten Commandments and says not only is the breaking of the command sin but also the attitudes that lead to the breaking of it. So murder is wrong but so is anger toward another. Adultery is sin but so is desiring adultery (lust).

So the consistent call of Scripture to anyone who is trying to use the law to earn their salvation is to realize that you cannot do it. The law doesn't save us because our sinful hearts cannot fulfill its righteous requirements.

Further challenging this is that there are aspects of the Old Testament law, the ceremonial laws and the civic laws, which Christ has fulfilled and annulled. We don't sacrifice bulls and goats. We don't organize governmentally like we are the civic nation Israel of old. Hebrews makes this point.

But the moral commands of the Old Testament are different because they flow from the very unchanging character of God. He is always truth, so lying is never his will. He is always most glorious so profaning his name will forever be sin. Here is where the Ten Commandments are dear and wonderful to us. They guide us into the kind of moral and ethical life that glorifies God. On this side of grace, we don't do it to be saved. We strive to obey because we are saved.

We use the law rightly when we see the law fulfilling three roles: a mirror, a muzzle, and a map. (This illustration comes from Pastor Randall Grossman, quoted by Philip Graham Ryken in *Written in Stone*, p. 27).

Map – Guides our life and conduct

A map shows us where we should go. Before GPS was on our phones, you may have had an occasion when you were lost and you had no idea which direction to head. That is a picture of where we would be without God's moral map. What's right? What's wrong? Or are those even categories? This is the relativistic world we live in today. We are, as Chesterton said, a people with *our feet firmly planted in mid air*. Our art and entertainment reveals the only absolute commandment of our generation, "whatever."

God's law does not begin with us, it begins with God. How gracious of God to provide us with a moral map. How are Christians who want to please God supposed to live? God's law provides the answer, like a map.

Muzzle – Keeps us from doing wrong

A muzzle keeps a dog from barking and biting and otherwise doing things he'd be inclined to do if there was no muzzle. A lawless society is one where everyone bites and barks and does whatever they want. This is anarchy. Think of a mob scene or the downtown area of a city where the officers of the law are absent. What do people do? They loot and pillage until the cops show up. Or here's an easy illustration, what do you instinctively do on the highway when you see a cop? Do you think, *I'll go as fast as I want to go?* No. The law acts as a restraint; a muzzle. Sinners in society and community with one another need muzzles to keep us from the depth of our own depravity.

Mirror – Shows us our sin and need for a Savior

Did that which is good [the law], then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. (Romans 7:13 ESV)

In other words, the moral law of God shows us how massively short we fall to the righteous standard of God. It shows how corrupt our hearts truly are.

Like a mirror, in the law we see ourselves as we truly are in the eyes of God. It isn't pretty. Donald Barnhouse makes the point that mirrors call us to action; they call us to do something about it. Mirrors help us see dirt on our faces but they are totally useless to actually clean our faces. The mirror drives us to the sink and the soap and the water.

When a sinner peers into the perfect law of God, and sees himself for who he is before God's righteous judgment, the conscience cries out and he searches for spiritual relief; he searches for forgiveness; he searches for a Savior.

How beautiful it is when a sinner, crushed under the weight of their sin, hears and believes the words of Jesus, *"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."* (Matthew 11:28) When the crushed conscience is relieved of its burden, not by doing or trying but by receiving grace from God, this is how the law does its finest work—it leads us to Christ.

There we find the only One who ever fulfilled the law's demands. He never loved anyone more than God the Father. He never worshiped a man-made idol. He always honored God's name. He fulfilled the Sabbath as Lord of the Sabbath. He always honored his father and mother. He was never unrighteously angry or violent toward another. He was sexually holy in every respect. He was always truthful. He was always content and trusting in his heavenly father. Jesus fulfilled the law and then he died for all those who haven't fulfilled it.

God's law will be your friend if you allow it to be a map, a muzzle, and a mirror. As we work through each command, I hope each one drives us to greater admiration and love for the God who has loved us so that we might respond by loving and worshiping him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

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