

## “Then God Spoke All These Words...”

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20 • Psalm 19 • Philippians 3:4b-14 • Matthew 21:33-46

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Our readings from the book of Exodus over the past few weeks have led us from the Red Sea to the top of Mount Sinai. Three weeks ago the escaped Israelite slaves were being pursued by the Egyptian army, and God miraculously brought them to a place of safety. Two weeks ago the Israelites were hungry in the wilderness, and God fed them with manna and quail. Last week the Israelites were thirsty, and God made water flow from a rock. Now the Israelites have encamped at the base of the mountain where Moses had once encountered God in a bush that burned yet was not consumed. God is appearing at this mountain a second time, this time with thunder and lightning and smoke and a cloud and a loud trumpet blast and a violent trembling. “Then God spoke all these words: ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery....’” So begin some of the most famous words in both Judaism and Christianity: the Ten Commandments. In the Bible they are called the “Ten Words” – the ten most important utterances of God between creation and Jesus. These Ten Words were inscribed on two tablets of stone, “written with the finger of God.”

There are 613 commandments in the Torah, the Law of Moses, the first five books of the Bible. These Ten are part of those 613 — a *small* portion, but arguably the most important portion. Only these Ten were inscribed on those tablets. Those two tablets were placed in the Ark of the Covenant, the most sacred religious object in Israelite worship. That Ark was placed in the Holy of Holies, the most sacred chamber in the temple. It was believed that the very presence of God resided in that chamber. These Ten Words stand head-and-shoulders above all the other laws of the Jewish people.

Or ... do they? When Jesus was asked which commandment in the Law was the greatest, he gave two answers. The first: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” The second: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus says: “There is no other commandment greater than these.” Both of those commandments are indeed from the Torah, the Law of Moses; they are among the 613; yet neither of those two commandments are among the Ten Words.

And yet: those two commandments that Jesus quotes provide a very nice *summary* of the Ten Words. The first several of the Ten Words have to do with *loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength*, and the remainder have to do with *loving your neighbor as yourself*. So what we have are two *Great* Commandments, which effectively summarize the *Ten* Commandments, and many biblical interpreters would say that all the rest of the 613 commandments in the Torah just give further elaboration about specific details that could all be categorized under the rubrics of the Ten.

What I’m trying to say is that these Ten Commandments are a big deal. A *really* big deal.

They begin with a very important prologue: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” The fundamental basis for the Ten Commandments is *God’s deliverance*. *First*, God saved the people of Israel. *Then*, God told them how to live. That order is important. God’s Law is rooted in God’s *love* for the people, a love so deep that God went to great effort to *save* them, to *deliver* them from bondage. That was true for the Israelites – their salvation occurred at the Red Sea – and it is true for us Christians as well. Our salvation occurred at Calvary, on the cross where Jesus was executed. Our obedience to God comes about *in gratitude* for the great things God has done for us. That is critically important. God does not command blind obedience like an uncaring taskmaster – no, God asks for *faithful living*, in response to God’s great *love* for us. It’s important to remember that order, especially when we are trying to engage with the world; too often, we try to tell people how to live their lives *before* they have an appreciation for *who God is* and *what God has done for them*. That doesn’t work very well, and it inverts the proper order of things. *First*, people need to know how great God is, and how great God’s *love* is for them. *Then*, they can begin to contemplate what that means for how they are living their lives. God’s *love* precedes God’s *law*.

The first several commandments all have to do with the proper place God should have in our lives. “You shall have no other gods before me.” *Nothing* is more important than God. Not your job, not money, not your favorite sports team, not your favorite hobby or pastime, not even the beloved members of your family. The most important priority in your life needs to your *Lord*. No one else can ever love you as much as God does. No one else can ever *save* you as much as God can. You owe your very existence to God, and your eternity rests in God’s hands. There is *nothing* you can do to change that! What do you do, each day, to *give thanks* to God for all your blessings? What do you do, each day, to *appreciate* God’s deliverance? What do you do, each day, to *listen to God’s Word* for your life?

“You shall not make for yourself an idol.” Making an idol is taking something – tangible or intangible – and setting it up in your life *as if it were God*. Giving it the *authority* and *centrality* and *priority* in your life that God should have. It’s perfectly fine to have interests, hobbies, things we love to do. But it’s *not* fine to allow those to become the *primary* object of our attention and devotion.

“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.” When we take the name of God or Jesus frivolously, when we turn them into slang, or a curse, or something we say when something happens we don’t like, we dishonor the Name above all names that most deserves respect.

“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work.” This commandment invites us to set apart one day of the week for a different *purpose* than all the rest. It’s a day to *rest*, a day to *relax*, a day to *unwind*, a day to *rejuvenate*, a day to *enjoy and appreciate God’s magnificent creation*, and, of course, a day to *worship God*. One whole day of the week should feel *qualitatively different* than all the others. It should feel more *holy*, more *sacred*, than all the others.

“Honor your father and mother.” It needs to be said that the Ten Commandments were originally given to *adults*, not to *children*. The intent of this commandment has a lot more to do with *how we treat our parents as they age* than it does with getting young children to be obedient. Honor and obedience are not the same thing. Honor has to do with how we *treat* our parents through the whole course of their lives, regardless of their mental or physical health, and regardless of how they might treat you when they are not in their right mind. Honoring your father and mother sometimes involves making really hard decisions for their own well-being, as lovingly as you possibly can.

“You shall not murder.” Or, perhaps, “You shall not kill.” There has been debate for many centuries about which meaning is intended. On one level, the commandment is clear – yet many

questions remain. Does this commandment say anything about the killing of *animals*? Is it ever okay to kill in self-defense? Is *war* ever justified? Are some weapons of warfare more ethical than others?

“You shall not commit adultery.” You and I both know families that have been torn apart by infidelity or unfaithfulness. It is the greatest and most heartbreaking violation of a sacred marital vow.

“You shall not steal.” Obviously, this refers to taking things that belong to other people, but let’s not forget other forms of stealing: plagiarism, violation of copyright laws, fraud, identity theft, price gouging. And what about corporations where those at the top take home mega bucks while the laborers who do the grunt work don’t bring enough home to pay their bills? Is that a form of stealing?

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” In a strict sense, this refers to false testimony in court; in a broader sense, it refers to any attempt to deceive other people for personal gain. America would be so much less fractured today if more people in politics took this one seriously, and if certain media outlets would care more about truth and honesty than about ratings and money.

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house,” etc. This one, the last, has to do with unhealthy desires to have things that aren’t yours. In some ways this is a precursor to stealing, but in a broader sense, it’s about thinking that *your* life will be happier by trying to copy or imitate someone *else’s*. God has made us all different; we all have different skills and interests and abilities and tastes. True life is found not in keeping up with the Joneses, but in discovering the things that bring *you* true joy.

Those, in brief, are the Ten. I’ve given you a quick summary. Thousands of books have been written on the Ten Commandments; you could spend your whole life studying the finer points. Now these were, and remain, *Jewish* laws. So, to what extent should *Christians* follow them? There were 613 commandments in the Torah. We don’t observe the other ones. The New Testament stresses that Gentile Christians do not have to follow the Jewish Law. So why should we observe these Ten?

That’s a good question, one that theologians have wrestled with over the centuries. The Ten Commandments have been called the “moral law,” as distinguished from the “ceremonial law” – the rules that had to do with ancient Jewish religious practices – and the “judicial law” – the rules that pertained to daily life in ancient Israel. The Ten Commandments are remarkable in that they can transcend cultural and historical boundaries in ways that the other laws can not. Furthermore, several passages in the New Testament seem to imply that the laws contained in the Ten Commandments are still important for Christians to observe, even if we are not obliged to follow the entire Jewish Law. Martin Luther and John Calvin both argued that the moral law contained in the Ten Commandments serves three different purposes: first, to inform people of their sin and point them to Christ; second, to motivate people to refrain from sin out of fear of punishment; and third, to encourage believers to do good. It is that third use of the law that is the most important, and is why most Christian traditions continue to teach the Ten Commandments today. They are an *excellent guide to faithful living*. Jesus’s instructions to “love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength” and to “love our neighbor” are foundational, and superior, but they lack specificity. The Ten Commandments give us a *structure*. They provide us a solid, reliable *framework* for how to live our life and to know, in broad strokes, what is right and wrong in the eyes of God. They do not, by any stretch of the imagination, provide answers to every single ethical question in life, but they do give us a strong moral compass. It’s a code that we can *voluntarily* observe, in seeking to be *faithful* to Christ. Imagine how much better the world would be if more people felt motivated to a strong moral code, like these Ten Commandments....

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