

## THE TEN COMMANDMENTS (Part 1)

Exodus 20:1-17  
Key Verse: 20:3

*"You shall have no other gods before me."*

Over the next several weeks, we are going to learn about and memorize three fundamental documents that every Christian should know and understand. They are the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed. The Ten Commandments were given during the Old Testament era. They became the constitution of the nation of Israel, and they concisely summarize all the Old Testament law. As Christians, we revere the Old Testament and accept it as God's word to us. But our understanding of the law is different from that of people in Old Testament times, because the coming of Jesus ushered in a new covenant, a new relationship between God and his people who are now covered by the blood of Jesus and anointed with the Holy Spirit.

Are we bound to obey these Ten Commandments as they were written? Not exactly. For example, the fourth commandment says, *"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy"* (8). The Sabbath day is Saturday, but we worship God together on Sunday. Are we doing something wrong? No, we are not. Very early in the history of the Church, Christians changed their day of worship from to Sunday, the first day of the week, the day of resurrection, to honor the risen Christ and to show that we are now living a completely new life in Christ. Christians are not following the letter of any written law. We are following a living person, our risen Lord and Savior Christ, who is the fulfillment of the law. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus said, *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."* Jesus lived a perfect life. He was tempted to sin in every way, just as we are, but he obeyed all of God's laws perfectly, not simply out of duty, but because he truly wanted to, because he was perfectly united with his Father. Jesus loved what his Father loves and hated what his Father hates.

After Jesus died, rose and ascended into heaven, he sat down at the right hand of the Father and gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus who lives and reigns in the Church which is now the literal Body of Christ on earth until Jesus returns in power and glory. Christians should obey God's law, but in a different and more powerful way than was understood in Old Testament times. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:3, *"You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."* The Holy Spirit wants to come and write his law on

our hearts, so that we love what God loves and hate what God hates. The Holy Spirit is not aggressive or pushy. He respects our freedom, our individual choice, and will never impose his will upon us. The Spirit's goal is not to simply make us do things, but to radically transform us into God's children, into brothers and sisters of Christ and happy members of God's family. Before going any farther, let's stop and pray together and invite the Spirit to come, to open our minds to God's word, to give him our permission to incarnate his law into us. *Spirit of God, come to us now. Write your living Word on our minds and hearts. Purify us of sin. Teach us to love what you love and to hate what you hate. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.*

All of these commandments, except for the fourth and fifth ones, are written in a negative form: *You shall not*. God drew a line in the sand and said, "Do not ever cross this line." Sinful human beings need clear boundaries. Especially today, in our postmodern world, we instinctively challenge every rule and push against every boundary. Postmodern people will make the lines as fuzzy as possible, playing games with words to justify whatever they want to do. On January 26, 1998, President Bill Clinton addressed the nation from the White House. He looked straight at the television camera, waved his index finger emphatically four times, and said with great confidence, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman Ms. Lewinsky." But when the evidence came to light, he was caught in a trap of his own lies. He and his political supporters and lawyers continued to play word games, arguing about the meaning of *sexual relations* and even about the word *is*. That way of thinking has rubbed off on an entire generation of young people, even within the Church, so that now they feel free to engage in all kinds of sexual activity while deceiving themselves and claiming they are not having sex. By playing these crooked games, they suppress God's truth and damage their lives.

Language and culture continually change. Our standard for what is right and wrong is not determined by language or culture but by the life, teachings and person of Jesus Christ. As we study the Ten Commandments and put them into practice, the key question for us is today, "What would Jesus have us do?" For example, the seventh commandment says, "*You shall not commit adultery*" (14). Jesus taught in Matthew 5:27-28, "*You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*" Today our senses are under assault by a constant barrage of sexualized images. Pornography is a serious problem, a symptom of deep spiritual sickness in our society. If Jesus were alive today, would he have his finger on a mouse clicking on pornographic websites? Well, I can tell you that Jesus is alive today, and he is definitely not doing such things. Jesus is kneeling before the throne of his Father, pleading and interceding for Christians, saying, "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*" (Lk 23:34). To help us think about the Ten Commandments from a New Testament gospel perspective, I am going to turn the negative commandments around and try to rephrase them in a positive way. I am not claiming that my phrasing is better than that of Moses. I

am not claiming that my way is better than the way that any other pastor or Bible teacher would explain them. I am doing this only to help us think about the word of God, so that as you memorize and meditate on the Ten Commandments you may come to your own personal understanding and together we may grow in spiritual maturity. The Ten Commandments are a lot to swallow in one sitting. To avoid getting spiritual indigestion, we will focus on commandments 1-4 this week, and next week we will cover commandments 5-10.

**First commandment: maintain your exclusive relationship with God.** Look at verses 1-3: *“And God spoke all these words: ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.’”* Although this passage has always been called the Ten Commandments, the text does not have any numbers to tell us which commandments are which. In the traditional Protestant understanding, the first commandment is verse 3: *“You shall have no other gods before me,”* and verse 2 is an introduction or preamble. In the traditional Jewish understanding, however, verse 2 is treated as the first commandment and verse 3 is treated as the second commandment. Verses 2 and 3 are closely linked, because together they tell us who God is and who we are; they summarize our relationship to God quite beautifully. To whom are these commandments written? Are they written for godless heathens to teach them what is right so that they can make themselves better and come to God? Absolutely not. As it says in verse 2, the Ten Commandments are given to God’s redeemed people. These commandments are for people who have been saved from death and marked with the blood of the Passover lamb, our Lord Jesus Christ. These commandments are for people who have been brought out of slavery and are now on a journey into the promised land of God’s eternal kingdom. We do not obey these commandments to make ourselves holy. We obey them to praise and glorify God who has already made us a holy nation. The Apostle Peter wrote in 1 Peter 2:9-12:

*9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 11 Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. 12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*

The first commandment is telling us to identify ourselves as people of God. In Old Testament times, to be counted among God’s people was to put aside the gods of other nations and to worship Yahweh, the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,

the Creator of the heavens and the earth. This membership among God's people was sealed by the covenant of circumcision in which male every newborn male baby was to be circumcised on the eighth day (Ge 17). Since the coming of Jesus Christ, we have a richer understanding of God. We now understand that though God is one, he is also a Trinity. To be counted among God's people today, Jesus instituted a new sign, the sign of baptism, in Matthew 28:19: *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."* Baptism is a ceremony that Jesus gave to his apostles to welcome people into this family.

In the first century Roman Empire, people worshipped many different gods, and a person could belong to as many religions as h wanted. If Christians had presented Jesus as just another god to be worshipped alongside every other, no one would have minded their new teaching. But Christians believed the exclusivity of Jesus Christ, saying that he was the Way and the Truth and the Life, and that no one could come to the Father except through him (Jn 14:6). As a result, Christians were regarded as subversive and dangerous; they were put into prison, thrown to the lions, and burned at the stake because they would not renounce their exclusive devotion to Jesus. The times in which we live today are similar to those of the Roman Empire. Our world is globalized, multicultural and pluralistic. Our daily lives put us into close contact with people of many nations, religions and value systems. Generosity, tolerance and open-mindedness are highly valued. People feel free to pick and choose whatever teachings and values they want from the vast marketplace of ideas, and most people will not mind if you claim to be a Jewish Buddhist Mormon. But Jesus still calls us to acknowledge him as the one and only Way. The continued exclusivity of the Christian faith is the most offensive aspect of the gospel today. As Christians, we absolutely must be kind and gentle. It is not Christlike to offend others by displaying a proud, overconfident, your-face attitude. In Christlike humility, we may respect individuals of all religions, people of no religion, and people who oppose religion. At the same time, we recognize that it is Jesus Christ, and him alone, that holds the exclusive claim on our souls. Christian baptism is our identification with Christ and our rejection of everything in opposition to Christ. Christian people who obey the first commandment do not hide their relationship to Jesus. They identify themselves as his followers, making their allegiance to him absolutely clear.

The plurality of religious beliefs in today's world is deceiving, because in the spiritual realm there are only two kingdoms. Jesus knew that his first-century world had many different religions, but in the four gospels he doesn't ever seem to mention this. In Jesus' world view, there is a kingdom of light and a kingdom of darkness, the rule of God and the rule of Satan. To become a Christian is not to denounce every other religion of the world as being evil, stupid or irrelevant. Indeed, people of other religions do know a lot of good things and understand many spiritual truths as well as or better than we do. Converting to Christ is not leaving one social group to join another social group. True conversion is leaving the realm of Satan, dying to sin and being reborn into a new life with

Christ. This is why, in a traditional Christian baptism, the one who is being baptized is usually asked to renounce sin and Satan. “Do you renounce Satan and all his works?” Christians cannot play around with Satan any more. We decide to renounce him and continue to renounce him each and every day, doing our best to walk in the light of Jesus.

**Second commandment: worship God and only God.** Look at verses 4-6:

*4 You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

We were made to glorify God and to worship him for all eternity. Every human being must worship by nature. If we do not worship God, our hearts quickly turn to idols. What exactly is an idol? An idol is an image of a created thing. Created things were made by God, and thus they are good and useful and beautiful. The beauty of these created things should fill us with love for the Creator, causing us to thank and praise him for his goodness. But as Paul wrote in Romans 1:21-23:

*21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.*

When Christians do not worship God, what happens? At first, not much. God does not demand our worship, and if we take no interest in worshiping him, it does not harm him at all. But it does begin to harm us. As Paul explained, God gives us over to the sinful desires of our hearts to worship and serve created things (Ro 1:23). Perhaps the most beautiful created thing is sex. Sexuality is a powerful force, a vital part of our human identity. In its proper place glorifies God and sanctifies us, helping us to become real men and real women in the holy image of God. Apart from God, however, sex becomes a potent idol that leads us first into impurity, then into destructive out-of-control behavior. It is no coincidence that the most popular idol worshiped by all humankind throughout history has been Ashtoreth, the goddess of fertility and sex. The next most popular idol of all time is Baal, the god of material wealth and success. Worship of Baal is very much alive today in our consumerist, success-oriented American culture. The idealized vision of an American home today, a huge house filled with a fancy array of high-priced consumer goods, is little more than a shrine to Baal.

Getting rid of our idols seems virtually impossible, because no matter where we go, no matter where we live, the national idols soon become an intrinsic part of who we are. People who try to uproot these idols are often just replacing them with another set of idols. Suppose we throw away – no, recycle – all our consumer goods, vow to ride only bicycles, and eat only local produce with a minimal carbon footprint. If we do this, it is likely that we have merely exchanged the idol of consumerism for the idol of environmentalism. There are so many man-made belief systems: socialism, libertarianism, constitutionalism and so on. In each of these –isms, you can find some good principles. But none of them are God, and none of them is going to redeem us. The teachings of any particular denomination or church can also become idols, if Christians devote themselves to those ideas more fervently than to Jesus himself. Given our proclivity to continually fall into idol worship, what are we to do? We worship God in spirit and truth, loving him with all our heart and soul and strength. As we worship him, we invite him to cleanse us of our idols, and our love for God burns hotter and hotter.

**Third commandment: hallowed be your name.** Look at verse 7: *"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name."* As a child, I memorized the King James version, which says, *"Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain."* I remember being confused about this, because no one told me exactly it meant to take God's name in vain. Some people said that it was swearing, saying, "Oh my God" or calling out the name of Jesus Christ as a curse word. To the ancient Hebrews and among Jewish people today, God's name, *Yahweh*, is so holy that it must never be uttered. As Scriptures were read out loud in a synagogue, every occurrence of this holy name would be replaced by *adonai*, which is translated as "Lord." When scribes copied manuscripts by hand, every time they came to this name, they would take a brand new pen, write the name and throw the pen away. I do not believe it is God's intention to bind us with these practices. But he does want us to recover a deep sense of his holiness. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Father, hallowed be your name." As Christians, we long to honor his holy name, and we pray that his name will be honored by all people over all the earth. When we hear the name of the Lord being profaned, it should break our hearts. When we ourselves are criticized by others, we do not need to be defensive at all, because we and Christians everywhere are full of faults. But to see and hear Jesus Christ being blasphemed, it should cause us to fall to our knees and cry out, "Lord have mercy." May God's holy names be hallowed on earth as they are in heaven.

**Fourth commandment: Work hard, enjoy life and be happy normal people.** Look at verses 8-11:

*8 "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter,*

*nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. 11 For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

Why did God command his people to rest on the Sabbath? According to this passage, it is because he himself rested on the seventh day. When he finished creating the world, he didn't go to sleep, because God doesn't get tired as we do. I believe that he stopped and marveled at his beautiful creation, especially the people whom he made. He came down into the world and took walks in the Garden with Adam and Eve. As Christians, we are not called to renounce the world, because this world was made to be our home. Even though it is a fallen world, the magnificent beauty of God's creation is still here, and we are meant to enjoy it and take care of it. People who are truly holy are also supposed to be happy. They work hard as they carry out their mission, and they also take time to rest and enjoy life in the presence of God and other people.

Some of the worst offenders of the fourth commandment are well-meaning pastors. They work hard all week and even harder on the weekend, getting stressed out and burned out. Human beings are not machines. The ideal Christian is not a cyborg, a "Terminator 2" who never stops fighting. Jesus Christ did not do that. Jesus was fully dedicated to his Father's mission, and he was not afraid to take times of rest within God's will. In fact, Jesus often seemed to be resting and enjoying his life even as he was working and struggling. Although his disciples were often stressed out, he himself found plenty of time to engage in conversations and enjoy deep friendships with all kinds of people which brought refreshment to his soul. Some of us are afraid to take a rest and enjoy God's world for fear that we may be seen as compromised, lazy, worldly or pleasure-seeking. But God had a divine purpose in setting up the cycle of six days of work followed by a day of rest. As we try to take a rest, it sometimes becomes impossible, because we find we are too stressed out and full of worry about all the things we must do tomorrow. Jesus commanded us not to worry about tomorrow, because each day has enough trouble of its own (Mt 6:34). The spiritually mature person knows how to live in the moment, as Jesus did, not obsessing over the past or the future but loving and serving God here and now.

May God help us to grow in spiritual maturity as we learn to love what he loves and hate what he hates. May the Holy Spirit continue to write his law upon our hearts so that we obey his laws not out of duty but with real love and real joy.