

Exodus 20 - “The Ten Commandments”

Bernie and Esther were not the most religious couple and in fact they really only went to church once a year. As they were leaving the church, the minister said, "Bernie, it sure would be nice to see you and Esther here more than once a year!"

"I know," replied Bernie, "but at least we keep the Ten Commandments."

"That's great," the minister said. "I'm glad to hear that you keep the Commandments."

"Yep," Bernie said proudly, "Esther keeps six of them and I keep the other four."

“A nation must have a constitution and law to govern it. The only law ever revealed from heaven was received by Israel at Mt. Sinai. The Rabbis counted 613 specific injunctions in this law, 248 positive commands and 365 prohibitions. The Scriptures indicate at least six reasons for the revelation of this law. The Law (1) revealed God’s glory and holiness (Dt 5:22–28); (2) manifested the sinfulness of man (Rom 7:7, 13; 1 Tim 1:9ff.); (3) marked Israel as God’s chosen people (Ps 147:19f.; Eph 2:11ff.); (4) gave Israel a Godly standard by which they might continue to inhabit Canaan (Dt 5:29ff., Judg 2:19–21); (5) prepared Israel for the coming of the Promised Seed (Gal 3:24); and (6) illustrated in various forms and ceremonies the person and work of Christ (Heb 10:1).

In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt they came to the Desert of Sinai. They encamped in front of the mountain to await word from God. The date is given in 19:1 because of the importance of what follows (19:1–2).”¹

20:1-2 - *And God spoke all these words, saying: ² “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.*

Before God lays down the law, He declares who He is and what He’s done for them. This is such an important and needed aspect to understand. God didn’t give the law to Israel while they were in Egypt and declare that He would deliver them if they kept it. No, He delivered them out of Egypt, then gave the law. In other words, the law was not a condition to becoming God’s people – that was already established.

- This is very intentional and important, because the people of Israel (and us) need to recognize that we would be stuck in slavery and sin without God. But God has brought us out of bondage and has given us new life. He alone

¹ Smith, J. E. (1993). *The Pentateuch* (2nd ed., pp. 299–300). College Press Pub. Co.

deserves our allegiance and affection. He has every right to claim legal authority over us and have us live by these commands, because He is our God who has spared us and redeemed us!

- These commandments are not to be viewed as a list of do's and don'ts where you begrudgingly try your best to keep them. They're to be viewed as God's heart for His people to experience His blessed life. And they're to be the desire of God's people to carry out His will in loving devotion to a gracious God who has saved them.

And notice the personal aspect of this prologue to the law. ***I am the Lord your God***... God wants to be in a personal relationship with His people. If a person is not worshipping the One true God, then the law is going to be very heavy and unappealing. But when a person sees the heart of God, and experiences His love and grace, the law suddenly reflects the nature and quality of God. But without a relationship with God, this all becomes empty and dead.

So let's get into these 10 commandments.

First of all, these are often referred to as the *Decalogue*, meaning 'ten words'. It's taken from this first verse that ***God spoke all these words***.

- **Exodus 34:28**, *"So he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And He wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments."*

We also need to recognize that there are more than 10 commandments. These get amplified and applied throughout the Old Testament Law. They got amplified to the tune of 613 commandments. 248 positive injunctions, and 365 negative ones.

But these ten encapsulate and summarize God's rules for our conduct towards Him and others. You can summarize them as "rules of (1) religion, (2) worship, (3) reverence, (4) time, (5) authority, (6) life, (7) purity, (8) property, (9) tongue, and (10) contentment."²

We also see these commandments divided between our relationship to God, and our relationship to others. There is a vertical focus in the commands and a horizontal focus in these commands.

² Hannah, J. D. (1985). Exodus. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, p. 139). Victor Books.

The first four direct Israel's relationship to, and worship of, God.
The next 6 direct Israel in their social relationships with one another.

This is why Jesus when confronted with the question of what was the greatest of the commandments, said in **Matthew 22:37–40**, "Jesus said to him, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the first and great commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.'"

- This summarized and fulfilled the very heart of the law. When you are loving God you will honor Him and be devoted to Him. You will not worship other gods. When you are loving others, you will not do anything to harm them or affect them negatively.

1. First Commandment: Have no other gods before Me – 20:3

20:3 - "You shall have no other gods before Me.

We can tend to reason that this isn't a big issue for us in our society and culture, but in this day it absolutely was.

We've seen how the plagues in Egypt were a direct challenge and hit to the various gods that were worshipped there. Israel has been surrounded by a polytheistic culture, and now they are reminded that following God is a monotheistic religion. And Yahweh is the one true and only God. This is why He uses His covenant name in vs. 2.

The name God is really just a title. It's a title for whatever has your allegiance and devotion. Whatever is that master passion that is governing your life, that's your god.

And Yahweh makes clear that there is to be no other master passion driving your life than Him.

2. Second Commandment: Do not make any idols – 20:4-6

20:4-6 - "You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; ⁵ you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who

hate Me, ⁶ but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

Again, this was a common practice in this day, especially in Egypt. We don't see these things to the same degree in our culture, but we're certainly seeing the practice of worshipping the creation rather than the Creator.

- **Romans 1:22–25**, *“Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. ²⁴ Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.”*
- I mean we see this kind of worship of the planet today with things like climate change. And I know there's a much more sinister plot behind it all, but embedded within in it is this worship of creation. Perhaps if we had held to the laws of God all along, we wouldn't be feeling the panic and fear many have today over these things.

Some people want to make an image of God and justify it that it's of the true God, Yahweh. But any attempt to express the image of a God beyond physical limitations demeans Him and restricts our worship of Him instead of enhancing it.

- Some create an idol of God based on their view of Him that contradicts the Word of God. Some say, my God is all loving and doesn't condemn people. In saying that, you've just created God in your own image of what you want Him to be. You've robbed Him of His sovereignty and put yourself in a position of Creator.

For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God...

“How can it be said that God is ***a jealous God***? “God's jealousy is love in action. He refuses to share the human heart with any rival, not because He is selfish and wants us all for Himself, but because He knows that upon that loyalty to Him depends our very moral life . . . God is not jealous *of* us: He is jealous *for* us.”
(Redpath)

Now there have been some that use verse 5 to claim there are generational curses that get passed down among families. And we blame our sin upon some issue that needs to be broken along the line. Generational curses are not biblical.

What we do see mentioned here is that the sins of the fathers often get repeated by the children in a very natural way because that is what they see exemplified before them. And God will continue to bring correction and punishment for those sins.

But those who love God and obey Him experience the blessed mercy and love of God. Judgment may reach third and fourth generations, but mercy goes to thousands – it doesn't run out!

3. Third Commandment: Don't take the Lord's name in vain – 20:7

20:7 - “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.

A name stood for one's character, it was to embody their essence. So this command is not just about misspeaking the name Yahweh or Lord in vain, it was rather to misrepresent God essentially. Some Christians can say they never speak God's name in vain or as a curse word, but do they uphold the honor and value of God in how they live? Are they representing the Lord in word and deed?

Now in this time, the Lord's name was connected to making a vow or promise. And God commands that this is not to be done in an empty, careless way.

- **Leviticus 19:12**, *"And you shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am the Lord."*

4. Fourth Commandment: Keep the Sabbath – 20:8-11

20:8-11 - “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

The very word Sabbath speaks of 'rest'. It was modeled for us right from creation where God worked for six days then rested on the seventh.

God has intended a day of the week to be a day of resting and recuperating, it's a time to break from your regular labours and allow yourself to be refreshed in the Lord.

The Jews religiously kept the Sabbath (Saturday) as a day for no work. But they began drawing these crazy conclusions over what constituted work. So all these Sabbath restrictions began to be added and it made the Sabbath more of a burden than a blessing. This certainly was not the Lord's intent.

- Illustration: Back in 1992, tenants let three apartments in an Orthodox neighborhood in Israel burn to the ground while they asked a rabbi whether a telephone call to the fire department on the Sabbath would violate Jewish law. Observant Jews are forbidden to use the phone on the Sabbath, because doing so would break an electrical current, which is considered a form of work. In the half-hour it took the rabbi to decide "yes," the fire spread to two neighboring apartments.

Jesus came along and said that the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27-28).

Paul said in **Colossians 2:16–17**, *"So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, ¹⁷ which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ."*

We need to keep in mind that the Sabbath was not for the church, it was a covenant between God and Israel (Exodus 31).

We are no longer required to keep a Sabbath. We are not bound or confined to a Sabbath. *What the Sabbath intended to do was done in Jesus!

Does Sunday become our new Sabbath? No. Sunday is simply the Lords Day that we set aside to gather as a congregation in worship of God.

- "The Sabbath is a reminder of the completion of "the old Creation," while the Lord's Day is a reminder of our Lord's finished work in "the new Creation" (2 Cor. 5:21; Eph. 2:10; 4:24). The Sabbath speaks of rest *after* work and relates to the Law, while the Lord's Day speaks of rest *before* work and relates to grace."³

Praise the Lord we are under God's grace, and not under the law anymore.

Now though we may argue over what a Sabbath looks like, we can't deny the importance of the principle – we need to take time to rest.

- This is important. Take your car for instance. If you're just running it without regular maintenance, it's going to break down.

³ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 190). Victor Books.

- A Sabbath is God’s gift to us, and we benefit by taking time to observe one.

So these first four commandments deal with our relationship to God and worship of God. The next six deal with our relationship to our fellow man.

The vertical relationship must be in order if we’re going to have the horizontal relationships functioning in harmony.

5. Fifth Commandment: Honor your father and mother – 20:12

20:12 - “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you.

Honoring parents promotes a healthy and strong society. Unfortunately what we see today has been the intentional breakdown of the family. We’ve seen children growing up not having a strong authority figure over them to guide and teach them and now we see children with an absolute disrespect towards adult or authority figures.

This is the one commandment that has a direct promise attached to it. When you honor your father and mother, your days will be long.

- The law also began to spell out that any disobedient or rebellious child could be taken to the elders of the city and they shall stone them (Deut 21:18-21).
- Following God’s word literally extended your life here!
- **Ephesians 6:2–3**, “Honor your father and mother,” which is the first commandment with promise: ³ “that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.””

6. Sixth Commandment: Do not murder – 20:13

20:13 - “You shall not murder.

God puts intrinsic value on human life. We are after all made in His image. And so the natural conclusion is that we are to uphold all life and not think that we have the right to bring it to an end. All life is sacred!

- Now God did give allowance for capital punishment. But the word here for murder speaks of “putting to death improperly, for selfish reasons rather than with authorization” (Stuart, *Exodus*, 462). ⁴

⁴ Merida, T. (2014). *Exalting Jesus in Exodus* (Ex 20:13). Holman Reference.

Interestingly Jesus took the sixth and seventh commandments even deeper in the Sermon on the Mount when He said these are things we can violate with just our heart.

- **Matthew 5:21–22**, *“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’²² But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.”*

7. Seventh Commandment: Do not commit adultery – 20:14

20:14 - “You shall not commit adultery.

This is again another breakdown in the family unit. Adultery destroys marriages and homes. There’s nothing good that comes of this.

This is something that begins in the heart.

- **Matthew 5:27–28**, *“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’²⁸ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”*

God desires us to walk in purity and holiness. Sexual immorality has been celebrated in our culture and long before our time. We need to be aware of the vices that the enemy loves to use. God established this command because there is a propensity for this sort of thing and we need to recognize the harm that’s inflicted when we engage in this kind of activity.

- **Proverbs 2:16–19**, *“To deliver you from the immoral woman, From the seductress who flatters with her words,¹⁷ Who forsakes the companion of her youth, And forgets the covenant of her God.¹⁸ For her house leads down to death, And her paths to the dead;¹⁹ None who go to her return, Nor do they regain the paths of life—”*

8. Eighth Commandment: Do not steal – 20:15

20:15 - “You shall not steal.

For there to be a stable society, people need to have a respect for each other’s property. We’re seeing in various places right now the penalty for theft and shoplifting decreasing, so that criminals are feeling licensed to take what they want. This helps no one.

Grandpa was always going on about the good old days, and the lower cost of living, in particular. "When I was a kid, my mom could send me to the store, and I'd get a salami, two pints of milk, 6 oranges, 2 loaves o' bread, a magazine, and some new blue jeans... all for a dollar!!"

Then Grandpa said sadly, "You can't DO that anymore..... they got those video cameras everywhere."

A thief broke into the local police station and stole all the toilets and urinals, leaving no clues.

A spokesperson was quoted as saying, "We have absolutely nothing to go on."

I refused to believe my road worker cousin was stealing from his job, but when I went to his house, all the signs were there.

9. Ninth Commandment: Do not bear false witness – 20:16

20:16 - “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

This one is important (not like the others aren't), but it's important because it closely relates to God. God is a God of truth. There's one thing God can't do – lie (Titus 1:2)! So, He wants His people to be people who uphold truth.

“Speaking the truth and honoring promises is the cement that holds society together. To tell lies in court is to undermine the very law itself, which explains why Moses required the witnesses to be the executioners in capital crimes (Deut. 17:6–13). It's one thing to lie, but quite something else to kill in order to protect your lie. This commandment also prohibits slandering people (Ex. 23:1; Prov. 10:18; 12:17; 19:9; 24:28; Titus 3:1–2; James 4:11; 1 Peter 2:1).”⁵

10. Tenth Commandment: Do not covet – 20:17

20:17 - “You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's.”

This word covet means to desire or literally, pant after. It's having an unhealthy want for something that is not yours.

⁵ Wiersbe, W. W. (1998). *Be delivered* (p. 113). Chariot Victor Pub.

This command is unique in that all the others have an outward display of action to them, whereas this is something that originates in, and is concealed in the heart.

This is the commandment that slaid Paul and caused him to see his sin.

- **Romans 7:7**, *“What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, “You shall not covet.”*

Paul would later liken covetousness to idolatry:

- **Colossians 3:5**, *“Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.”*

* **Luke 12:15**, *“And He said to them, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.””*

11. The Fear of God – 20:18-21

20:18-21 - *Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. ¹⁹ Then they said to Moses, “You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die.” ²⁰ And Moses said to the people, “Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin.” ²¹ So the people stood afar off, but Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was.*

The more the people heard of God and saw of God, the more they had a reverence and holy fear towards Him. That’s a good thing. It’s the kind of attitude we should carry always. He is an awesome God and we should not take Him lightly.

When God spoke the people felt like they would die, when God speaks today we truly should die to ourselves and take in what He says and live out what He says.

Thankfully, the word to us is always, **do not fear**. We need to fear God reverently, but when we do that, we never need to be in fear of God.

This healthy fear of God will help keep us from sin.

Now before we move on, let’s consider the law and it’s purpose.

What's the purpose of the Law?

The law was not intended to show us what standard we must achieve to be seen as righteous before God, but to show us God's perfect standard and how we in our own strength are unable to live up to that standard.

Paul tells us in **Galatians 3:23–25**, *"But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed."*²⁴

*Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.*²⁵ *But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor."*

(The purpose of the law is explained in more detail from Galatians 3:19-25)

Jesus said, *"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill."* (**Matthew 5:17**)

- Jesus was the only One that could live up to the Law. He completely fulfilled it. And so now we are seen as righteous when we come to Jesus in faith and put our lives in Him. Not because of us, but because of Him.

Is the Law valid for today?

The Bible makes it very clear that the believer today is not bound by the law.

Romans 6:14, *"For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace."*

Galatians 5:18, *"But if you are led of the Spirit you are not under the law."*

Because we are not under law doesn't mean that we are now free to do what we please. Instead, we live by a higher law. Yes, we have liberty in Jesus Christ, but we live now by the law of love.

- Jesus Himself summed up the law in these two commands: *"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbour as yourself."* (**Matthew 22:37+39**)

Love fulfills the law: **Romans 13:8–10**, *"Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law."*⁹ *For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*¹⁰ *Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."*

The law in the N.T.:

- (1) No other gods before Me - Acts 14:15
- (2) No idols – Acts 17:29
- (3) Don't take His Name in vain – James 5:12
- (4) Keep the Sabbath – no obligation today
- (5) honor parents – Ephesians 6:1-4
- (6) Do not murder – 1 John 3:15
- (7) Do not commit adultery – Matthew 5:27-28
- (8) Do not steal – Ephesians 4:28
- (9) Do not bear false witness – Colossians 3:9
- (10) Do not covet – Ephesians 5:3

 God gave the Mosaic Law to the Israelites for several purposes:

1. To reveal the holiness of God (1 Peter 1:15)
2. To reveal the sinfulness of man (Gal. 3:19)
3. To reveal the standard of holiness required of those in fellowship with God (Ps. 24:3-5)
4. To supervise physical, mental, and spiritual development of redeemed Israelites until they should come to maturity in Christ (Gal. 3:24; Ps. 119:71-72)
5. To be the unifying principle that made the establishment of the nation possible (Exod. 19:5-8; Deut. 5:27-28)
6. To separate Israel from the nations in order to enable them to become a kingdom of priests (Exod. 19:5-6; 31:13)
7. To make provision for forgiveness of sins and restoration to fellowship (Lev. 1–7)
8. To make provision for a redeemed people to worship by observing and participating in the yearly festivals (Lev. 23)
9. To provide a test that would determine whether one was in the kingdom (theocracy) over which God ruled (Deut. 28)
10. To reveal Jesus Christ (Luke 24:27) (Constable)

 12. The Altar – 20:22-26

20:22-24 - *Then the Lord said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: ‘You have seen that I have talked with you from heaven.’²³ You shall not make anything to be with Me—gods of silver or gods of gold you*

shall not make for yourselves. ²⁴ An altar of earth you shall make for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I record My name I will come to you, and I will bless you.

This is wonderful because after giving the law, we now see an altar! An altar is where sacrifice is made.

- In order for us to be saved (which the law could not do) we needed a sacrifice. We can only approach God through the shed blood of a sacrifice, and that sacrifice is Jesus Christ!
- Jesus became the burnt offering by which He took the fiery judgment of God for your sin and mine. Through His death He brought peace and a right standing now before God (reconciliation).
- **Colossians 1:20**, *"and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross."*

20:25-26 - And if you make Me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stone; for if you use your tool on it, you have profaned it. ²⁶ Nor shall you go up by steps to My altar, that your nakedness may not be exposed on it.'

The altar was not to be fancy or glorious so that it would not detract from the Lord. It was to be simple.

Likewise, no steps were to be used so that flesh would not be exposed. It's a good rule for us – when ministering for the Lord and before the Lord, leave the flesh out and eliminate distractions. Do all for Him and by Him.

~~The need to follow God's law is important. There are consequence when we veer off:~~

~~On July 24, 2013, a train carrying 218 people in eight carriages derailed in northwestern Spain, killing 79 people and hospitalizing another 66. Shortly after the wreck, the driver, Francisco Jose Garzon Amo, told officials, "I can't explain it. I still don't understand how I didn't see I just don't know." He said the journey was "going fine" until the train hit a curve. At that point Garzon said to himself, "Oh my God, the curve, the curve, the curve. I won't make it."~~

~~Despite Garzon's initial confusion and surprise, there is a simple explanation for the crash. Video footage revealed that the train was going as fast as 119 mph~~

before it hit the deadly curve. That's more than twice the speed limit for that section of the track. So it wasn't *just* the speed that caused the accident. It was the combination of the speed and the location of the track. The train was designed to reach speeds of over 130 mph. But Garzon, who was a 30-year employee of Spain's national rail company, simply ignored the boundaries in which those high speeds were to be used.