

The God Who Commands (Part 2 of 5)

Be Like Him: Ten Commands for Life

Exodus 20:1-21

Mark Vroegop

"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. "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or 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. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. "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. "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. "You shall not murder. "You shall not commit adultery. "You shall not steal. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's." Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin." The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was." (Exodus 20:1–21, ESV)

One of the differences between children and adults is an awareness of cause and effect. Children (and childish adults) do not readily make the connection between their actions, the laws of nature, and what can or will happen. For instance, I was watching some children who were playing baseball. It was a cute game with a brother pitching the ball to his sister, and after she would make contact with the ball, she would run to an imaginary base. No problem, right? Well, they were playing in their front yard, and the young pitcher was standing just to the right of their parents' BMW. Thankfully, nothing happened – this time. But I'm sure that if an adult had said, "Hey, you guys need to move over because you might hit the car," they would have been clueless.

Another example: one of our sons recently purchased a pogo stick at Goodwill, and he has become adept at jumping all over the driveway and even up our exterior cement stairs. When I

cautioned him about being careful, he said, "Don't worry, Dad, nothing's going to happen." And my response was, "Oh yeah, nothing bad has ever happened to you. You've never been injured." My parental sarcasm made the point. "Oh yeah, that's right."

Part of growing up is understanding that there are laws in life – like gravity, Newton's laws of motion, and tensile strength in bones – that are constantly in play. And those laws, when violated or tested, create pain.

A Moral Foundation: "God is not like us"

From a moral perspective, there are laws, principles, or commands which serve as the foundational fabric of life and culture. In other words, somehow and somewhere, it was determined that murder is wrong. Somehow and somewhere, it was established that lying is neither helpful nor right behavior.

Now our post-modern world attempts to tell us that the moral code by which we all live is self-determined, inside of ourselves, and culturally based. What is right for you might not be right for me. Truth is found in what you believe it to be. Morals are determined by what I think to be right and wrong. At a certain level – personal preferences and convictions – there is some degree of truth to this idea that what might be right for me might not be right for you. However, there is a moral floor to this individualized approach. There are laws, commands, and morals beyond ourselves, and our agreement with those rules and laws do not make them any less right any more than my children agreeing that gravity exists makes it more real or applicable.

Last week we walked through Exodus 19, and we observed the context to the giving of the Ten Commandments. It involved a mountain, smoke, fire, lightening, thunder, boundary markers, and clear instructions about nothing touching the mountain. And the point of all of this was to establish a foundational concept as it relates to God, His relationship with human beings, and a morality: **God is not like us**. As I said last week: "He likes us, but He is not like us."

The foundational concept of God as a holy creator – and not like us – has sweeping and very basic implications. It means that God sets the rules; He determines what is right and wrong; something is good because God defines it as good; and disobedience is a challenge to the rule of God in our lives. So getting the supremacy and sovereignty of God right is extremely important. It affects how you view morality, suffering, hardship, and salvation. "All the earth is mine" (Ex. 19:5) is a morally epic statement.

The Role and Limits of the Law

Exodus 20 takes this a step further. After establishing the transcendence of God, the Ten Commandments are given. And before we unpack each of the commands, I want to help you understand some important principles regarding the role and limitations of the Old Testament Law and the Ten Commandments.

1. The word and concept of “Law” can be used in different ways in the Bible

When the Bible talks about “Law,” it can refer to the principle of right and wrong, the Ten Commandments, or the entire Law. For example, Paul talks about Gentiles keeping the law even though they don’t know the law (Rom. 2). Jesus quoted the Ten Commandments when talking about the heart (Matt. 5:21), and He often talked about the “Law and the prophets,” referring to the entire Law (Matt. 5:17).

2. The Ten Commandments were intended to be basic moral principles

Exodus 20:1 does not refer to what follows as commands but as “words.” What follows is not just list of regulations but basic moral principles embedded in ten specific commands. In our Western mindset, we tend to view the concept of “law” through very specific restrictions. We have volumes and volumes of specific laws, and if something isn’t overtly addressed, then one cannot be held accountable. It isn’t a violation if the law doesn’t address it. The Ten Commandments are more like core values than they are like a federal statute. You might even think of them like a constitution which identifies basic principles upon which a culture is based.

3. The specific regulations in the Law are expanded and applied in the Ten Commandments

If you look ahead to chapters 21-23, you will see very specific regulations and instructions. These commands were designed to apply God’s moral code in very specific situations. The commands in Leviticus and Deuteronomy are simply illustrating the scope of how the moral code of God should be applied.

4. The Old Testament Law is typically divided up into moral, civil, and ceremonial commands

The Law was given as the code of life for the people of Israel with applications beyond themselves. The Law included moral commands, defining right and wrong. It included civil commands, defining the governance of the nation. And there were ceremonial commands, defining how Israel should worship. With the coming of Jesus, the advent of the church, and the expansion of the work of God beyond the borders of Israel, the civil and ceremonial laws became irrelevant, while the moral commands were affirmed.

5. Jesus targeted the heart behind the Law

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7), Jesus impressed upon His listeners that obedience to God’s Law was more than just external compliance or actions. Jesus took aim at the heart. While the specific commands in the Old Testament Law expanded the application, Jesus’ focus was on the motivation – the heart. This was not a new concept for the people of Israel; it was the focus of the New Covenant (see Jeremiah 32:31-34). But Jesus made it His main emphasis. He came to fulfill the law (Matt. 5:17) and to get to the heart of true obedience.

6. The Law was never designed to save but to identify the character of God and to lead us to Christ.

The Law is heavy, weighty, and overwhelming. Yet it is still good (Rom. 7:7). The Law makes the character of God clear and plain by making sin clear and plain. This clarity is meant to lead us to Christ so that by the Spirit we can keep the law:

“Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.” (Galatians 3:23–26, ESV) *“For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.””* (Galatians 5:14, ESV) *“But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”* (Galatians 5:18, ESV)

7. True obedience is rooted in the Ten Commandments but is lived out “by the Spirit.”

What is the role of the Ten Commandments now? It is my view that each of the commandments is affirmed by Jesus in the New Testament which makes them both foundational and relevant. But the Ten Commandments are not the sum total of the Christian ethic; they are the beginning and the foundation. The Ten Commandments are the base, and it is by walking by the Spirit and being led by the Spirit (essentially the same thing) that a person finds true obedience (Gal. 5:16-18).

1 Timothy 1:8 tells us that “the law is good if one uses it lawfully.” The Law, including the Ten Commandments, is a powerful revelatory tool. It helps us to know ourselves, the character of God, and our hearts. But it is very important that we understand the role and the limits of the Law. It can be both neglected and abused. Hopefully these seven guidelines help us understand the role and the limits of the Law.

The Ten Commandments

I would imagine that every person hearing this message will be aware of the contents of the Ten Commandments. I suspect that no one will be surprised to learn that God prohibits lying, coveting, murder, etc. So what I want to do is to try and get to the meaning behind the commands. Let’s look at each command and see what we can learn.

1. No other gods

You will notice that verse two restates God’s deliverance of His people from Egypt. This redemption becomes the basis for the moral code that follows. Its format was a common Ancient Near East form of a treaty or covenant delivered to a people who had been rescued. It lays out the terms of their new life.

The first command is not only first in order, but it is also first in essence. All the other commands flow from this first command; it is the ultimate command, and it is directly related to the reality of who God is.

Israel lived in the midst of a polytheistic world where the gods were believed to be capricious, needy, and constantly in competition. Yahweh identifies Himself as the one and only true God and calls for His people to have an exclusive allegiance to Him. God identifies Himself not as the best God among the gods, but as the only God. And in so doing, Yahweh is giving the people of Israel a central focal point for their lives. Since everything in the universe owes its life to "I AM," then to worship anything other than God is not only empty, but it is treason.

Since God is the center of the universe, and since everything exists for His glory, and since nothing is more holy, more glorious, and more worthy than God, then the worship of anything else or the absence of the worship of God is absurd and sinful. The essence of this command is that there is nothing that competes with God for allegiance, loyalty, obedience, and worship.

2. No idols

Verses 4-6 extend the application of God's singular worth by requiring that there was to be no human-made representation of God which would become their object of worship or affection. The prohibition involved *"a carved image, or 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 . . ."* (Ex. 20:4). What's more, there is a very strong warning about consequences in verses 5-6 regarding the long-term effects of God's judgment. It seems clear that God wants Israel to know that creating your own god is a dangerous act.

You might wonder: "What is the big deal with making an idol?" The key is found a phrase in verse four: ". . . you shall not make **for yourself** . . ." Idolatry was, and continues to be, a way for human beings to control their lives apart from dependence on God. It was, and is, a way to live in such a way that I can manage. Humans create idols for pleasure, safety, security, and fulfillment. We create idols when we become convinced that God's revelation of Himself is not sufficient. Idols are created because we long for something more than what God has given.

Idolatry is simply creating something to which you give your affection and attention because God just isn't enough. It is creating something and giving it what only God deserves. Ezekiel 14 helps us understand that the issue of idolatry is not merely an external issue; it begins and can exist in the heart. External idols are merely a reflection of the idols of our hearts.

3. Do not misuse the Name

At a minimum this command applies to swearing, cursing, and blasphemy. The people of God were to hold God's name in reverence, and not treat its use – or Him! – as something less than what He is. Therefore, the command was yet another expression against treating Yahweh, specifically His name, as if He or His name could be treated like everything else.

Yahweh's name was directly connected to His essence. So the flippant abuse of His name or swearing by "the name" in order to validate what a person was saying was to be viewed as a high crime. Therefore, the essence of the command is that talking about God, talking to God, or

invoking the authority of God by virtue of His name was something that should not be abused for self-centered purposes. God's name was not to be used for self-worship.

4. Keep the Sabbath holy

The fourth command is something we find in the beginning chapters of Genesis. God, as creator, creates a rhythm to life that involves regular and intentional rest. Exodus 20:11 even links this command to the principle established in the creation process. What's more, God has designed human beings with limitations on what they can and should do. Human beings are not unlimited in their ability to work. They need physical rest. God commanded that one day per week is to be a Sabbath, a day for intentional, worshipful rest.

In the New Testament, the day of the week and the nomenclature changes. It shifts from the seventh day to the first day and from "Sabbath" to "the Lord's Day." However, the principle remains. What is that principle?

Essentially it is that work is not to be the central focus of your life. The Sabbath was designed to be a day that was different than other days by design. It was to be redemptively different, such that people were able to reflect on God's grace in their lives. And the essential difference is linked to the word "Sabbath," which means to stop or to cease. In other words, God's people are to intentionally stop doing the things from which they would naturally tend to get their value in life in order to be reminded of what their lives are really all about.

Life is not about a constant and heart-consuming production. Life is about a person's relationship with God. And human beings need to regularly and intentionally be reminded about this principle because we tend to define our worth by the things we do.

5. Honor your father and mother

The fifth command relates to the most basic cultural institution – the family. And God established here a connection between the worship of Yahweh and family relationships. An appropriate honoring of God would be reflected in the family.

The word "honor" means to treat with weightiness or reverence. This word is sometimes used in connection with the glory of God (see Ex. 16:10). So to honor one's parents is to recognize the God-designed significance of their role in one's life. It is to see the authority and the glory of God as mediated through them. In other words, a person who is unconcerned about honoring his or her parents has more than a family issue; he or she has a God-issue.

Honoring one's father and mother would involve obedience as children, respect as adults, and care in their old age. It expresses itself verbally, practically, financially, emotionally, relationally, and especially spiritually. There is no greater way to honor your parents than to take your spiritual life to the next level from their generation to yours. You honor your parents by your spiritual progress.

6. No murder

The sixth command prohibits violence toward another human being, but on a broader scale, it relates to the preservation of life. In Genesis 9, God instructed Noah that the life of human beings is sacred to God because of the reflection of the image of God. Life, as a gift from God, is to be preserved.

Now there are instances when the killing of others is not only appropriate but just. That is not what this command is addressing. The sixth commandment prohibits the self-focused, hate-filled, and unauthorized killing of another human being. The image of God in others and ourselves is so sacred to God that killing someone else or ourselves is a violation of the very heart of God, not to mention the source of murder and hatred, that Jesus talked about in Matthew 5:21-26.

7. No adultery

God is the creator of everything, including sexuality, and He defined the boundaries of morality. God establishes here that sexual activity outside of a covenantal marriage relationship is immoral. Why would He do that? God designed marriage between a man and a woman to be a covenantal and all-encompassing relationship. It is often described as a “one-flesh union” – a term that attempts to capture the depth of the interweaving of a man and a woman in every area of life. God’s design for marriage is a relationship based upon mutual trust, mutual promise-keeping, and mutual acceptance. Marriage is meant to be nakedness and a connection to another human being in ways that are deeply spiritual. In fact, it is the closest picture that we have to God’s relationship with His people (see Eph. 5:32). There is something divine about a marriage between a man and a woman – something spiritual, emotional, relational, and physical.

Sexuality expressed in this covenantal relationship of marriage becomes like a sacrament. Sexuality in this context cements the bonds of commitment, and it draws the strings of the heart closer and tighter. And in this way, sexuality affirms and accentuates covenantal love. Sex, rightly understood, is not just physical; it is metaphysical – connecting the “being” of a man to the “being” of a woman.

Central to the beauty and power of sexuality is the soul-connection. And it is only in marriage that the sex-soul-otherness dynamic works. Sexual activity outside of marriage always involves a self-focus; it temporarily offers a person pleasure but at a cost to something deep within his or her soul. Paul said this in 1 Corinthians 6:18: *“Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body”* (1 Corinthians 6:18, ESV). There is something divinely unique about sexuality and sexual sin – something that relates to your soul.

Therefore, all sexuality outside a God-ordained marriage is a violation of God’s heart because it is only in the covenantal relationship that sex will help your soul instead of making you feel like you’ve given a part of your “being” away. Sexual activity outside of marriage is not only wrong; it isn’t safe for your soul.

8. No stealing

The eighth command is designed to protect people from the selfish actions of others. Beyond not taking what isn't yours, the command will be applied to taking away property, destroying property, fair measurements, not moving landmarks, and appropriate interest. Additionally, it will be applied to the protection of widows, orphans, and strangers. Justice is at the heart of this command.

9. No lying

The ninth command prohibits a lack of truth-telling. The immediate application – “bear false witness” – certainly relates to court proceedings. But the implication is far broader. Truthfulness needs to be a part of the social and commercial fabric of a culture, or it will break down and fail. Human relationships do not work in the context of lies.

10. No coveting

The tenth and final command is the more general of the Ten Commandments. “To covet” is to desire or crave something. Now the command is not necessarily against desire per se, because some desires might be right and good. The problem in view here is the desire for what belongs to someone else. Therefore, the text lists the things that you should not covet, but the focus is not on the “wife, servant, ox or donkey,” but rather on the fact that it belongs to “your neighbor.”

God is prohibiting the self-centeredness of looking at what your neighbor has and craving it for yourself at the neglect of your neighbor. It is envisioning your gain at their loss and dreaming about it. God wanted people to be content and not to turn on one another in their sinful desires.

The Ten Commandments reflect the essence of God's character and the foundation of what is right and what is wrong. And that is why the people respond in such fear, saying, “do not let God speak to us lest we die!” (Ex. 20:19) They understood who they were and who God is. We would do well to feel the same heaviness today.

These Commands reinforce that “God is not like us.” And they invite us to 1) be humbled in our inability to keep God's law, 2) run to Christ for atonement from our sin, and 3) renew our commitment to live by the commands given to us from our Creator.

God gave us these Ten Commands. They not only reflect the heart of God; they are the very best way, through Christ, to live.

Life outside of these commands is not only sinful; it is not safe.

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