

Ten Commandments

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No Other Gods

Scripture

Exodus 20:1–3 The Ten Commandments open with a reminder of what God did for God's people in the past. Based on God's salvation, God then demands that we give God complete devotion.

Prayer

O God, you are our hope and our salvation. You formed us as your people and made possible all we are and all we have. Help us now to turn our hearts fully to you so that we may see the way that leads to life. In the name of Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

Introduction

The Ten Commandments appear in Exodus 20:1–7 and are repeated in Deuteronomy 5:1–21 when Moses gives his final speeches before his death. Exodus 20 introduces them simply as God's "words" (Exodus 20:1) and the identification of "ten words" comes later in Exodus 34:28. This language reminds us that the Ten Commandments are not laws in the strict sense of the word. Therefore, we should not read them as the antithesis of grace as many Christians have done. Jewish tradition maintains in fact that the "laws" contained here are "the foremost expression of grace."¹ Indeed, the commandments begin with God's self-identity as the one who brought the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt. The injunctions that follow therefore present the proper response to God's grace, not a way to earn or maintain right relationship with God.

The commandments appear in two tables, corresponding to the two tablets Moses brought down from Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:1). The first table contains the prologue (Exodus 20:1–2) and four commandments that focus on relationship to God (Exodus 20:3–11). Commandments 2 and 4 have particularly long explanations that tie these injunctions closely to the prologue. The second table contains

1. Göran Larsson, *Bound for Freedom: The Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 138.

the final six commandments, which direct behavior toward other people (Exodus 20:12–17).

Jewish and Christian tradition hold fast to the count of ten commands in Exodus 20:1–17. There are different understandings, however, of how those ten commands should be divided to get to that number. For example, Jews read Exodus 20:1–2 as the first commandment whereas Christians understand these verses as an introduction or prologue (Jews then combine commandments 2 [no other gods] and 3 [no idols]). Roman Catholics and Lutherans read the command against worshipping other gods and the prohibition against idols together as the first commandment and then divide Exodus 20:17 (on not coveting) into two commands. In this study, we will follow Presbyterians and other groups from the Reformed tradition in reading Exodus 20:3 (no other gods) and 20:4–6 (no idols) as separate commandments.

The God Who Commands Is the God Who Saves

The Ten Commandments begin with a statement by God about God that sets the tone and gives the context for the commands themselves: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Exodus 20:2). This introduction to the commandments is important for at least three reasons.

First, it sets the imperatives that follow in the context of a relationship between God and God’s people. The commandments are guidelines for living in relationship to God, who first saved and then commanded. So though we do not read the prologue as the first command as Jews do, there is much to learn from the Jewish counting of the commandments. The first statement is about God’s identity and action as savior, and the commandments cannot be properly understood without that understanding.

Second, the relationship begins with God’s action, and therefore obedience to the commandments is a response of gratitude for what God has done. This underscores the nonlegalistic nature of commandments. It also highlights the fact that God’s initiative brings

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salvation and occurs before the human response. In other words, the commandments do not present a way to gain God’s favor—God

granted love and care without any human act—but offer instead a way to respond to God’s act of salvation. The identity of God and what God has done for God’s people will not allow us to reduce the commandments to a set of moral guidelines or to a source or morality that has inspired Western law. Though the commandments have served those purposes admirably, the Decalogue must always remind people of faith that God has delivered them from bondage. They have been freed from oppression and death.

Finally, while the commandments begin with God’s grace, they present this God of liberation as one who saves Israel from slavery in Egypt in order to worship and serve the Lord who provided that salvation. As Patrick Miller says, the Ten Commandments invite us to draw a distinction between being *free* and being *freed*.² Freedom is sometimes taken in the abstract to mean an existence with no regulations, limits, or boundaries. Such a vision of freedom, however, is an illusion. The commandments know nothing of that type of being free. Rather, they embrace the truth Bob Dylan proclaimed when he said that no matter who you are or how powerful you are “you’re gonna have to serve somebody.”³ The question is, Who or what will you serve? The commandments declare God has freed us from the forces of evil in order to *serve* God, who is the source of life.⁴ They show us the shape of service to God that comes as a result of being freed from Pharaoh. The apostle Paul echoes this notion of service when he calls himself a “servant of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:1). The commandments urge us to be servants of the Master who leads us to goodness and life.

No Other Gods

The First Commandment gives the most basic and most demanding requirement of relationship with God: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7). The form of the sentence in Hebrew is very simple. It consists of a negative particle and an imperfect verb. Two features of the sentence, however, pose questions for us.

First, what does it mean to “have a god?” Essentially, it means to have someone or something that is the object of your worship and ultimate devotion. In the Old Testament world, it

2. See Patrick Miller, *The Ten Commandments*. Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

3. Bob Dylan, “You Gotta Serve Somebody,” from the album *Slow Train Coming* (New York: Columbia Records, 1979).

4. Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 16.

meant expressing and pledging loyalty to one of the other deities that occupied attention. Baal is a good example of another god frequently mentioned in the Old Testament that posed temptations for the Israelites. Recognizing only one deity might seem to remove us from the prohibition against having other gods, but on closer consideration, we have as much of a problem with this issue as our forebears in faith. “Gods,” now or in the past, are not abstract beings. Rather, they represent certain values and concerns that vie for our attention. Baal was the god of fertility, so he represented wealth and abundance. Worshipers of Baal thought he made them prosperous. When we realize Baal’s identity, therefore, we also realize he is still with us. He is the god of markets and riches.

The second feature of the First Commandment that makes it complex is the end of the sentence: “before me.” *Before* is an ambiguous English word that reflects an equally ambiguous Hebrew preposition. Other possible translations are “beside me” or “other than me.” Some scholars believe this expression refers to having an image or representation of another deity in a shrine devoted to Yahweh. The question of whether the commandments assume the reality of other gods is interesting, but it is really beside the point of the First Commandment. The fact is, Israel frequently turned to other gods (just as we do), and the First Commandment is written in light of that fact. The real point of the commandment is that God expects absolute devotion. Deuteronomy 6:5 tells us essentially what the First Commandment means: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

By identifying the commandments as the demands of a God to whom the people owe their very lives, the prologue makes clear that the commandments themselves are prime illustrations of how to demonstrate allegiance to that God. As noted above, the First Commandment (“You shall have no other gods before me”) is the logical consequence of the prologue’s declaration. God, and no other, rescued you from bondage; therefore, you must declare ultimate allegiance only to this God. This is the First Commandment, and it is the constant challenge for people who realize they owe their very lives to

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God but are drawn to other gods who promise alternative sources of life and fulfillment.

The Political Nature of the First Commandment

In recent decades, the Ten Commandments have been at the center of political controversy. Particularly interesting have been the debates about where the commandments may be displayed. Is it appropriate, for example, to display them on the walls of a courthouse? Should they appear on the walls of public school classrooms? In 2005, the question about displaying the Ten Commandments on a monument on the grounds of the Texas state capital arose. It appeared along with sixteen other monuments that reflect the history and culture of the state. The argument was made that the commandments were part of the state's religious heritage, part of Texans' identity as people who are guided by the words of the Ten Commandments.

Each of the examples cited has been controversial because of the question of whether a country that promotes no single religion should permit a text from Jewish and Christian Scripture to appear on government property. But perhaps Jews and Christians should voice another concern: Does the display of the Ten Commandments on government property remove them from their true context—in Scripture and in the life of the people of faith—so that their meaning is irreparably altered? Does the characterization of the commandments as an expression of Western culture and morality reduce them to much less than they are?

There are no definitive answers to these questions. It is essential, however, to consider the inherent political demands of the First Commandment. Politics in the most general sense have to do with influencing people toward certain convictions that order and govern their lives. It is telling that many public displays of the Ten Commandments do not include the prologue, or at least not the full statement of the prologue. By removing the commandments from the prologue, however, the most essential and most important political dimension is erased, namely, the call to be in relationship with the God who rescued from slavery and oppression. Public displays of

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the commandments such as the ones described here do not have to remove the reader from his or her obligations to God. It seems clear, however, that when they are placed within government institutions, they are placed there primarily to enhance an understanding of and to support the reputation of that institution, not, directly at least, to call those who see the commandments to submit to the authority of the One who said, “You shall have no other gods.”

A few years ago, I visited Westminster Abbey in London. I was struck by the fact that English artists—poets, novelists, and musicians—along with famous political figures are immortalized there. On my return from the trip, I told a colleague who grew up in Great Britain about my visit to Westminster Abbey. He scoffed, “Civil religion!” I realized that as a Christian from Great Britain, he was put off by the fact that Christian faith and worship had been co-opted by the state for its own purposes. The state in democratic societies is willing to share some of its devotion with religion because the state embraces religious traditions to support its goals and ideals. But God demands absolute devotion.

Spiritual Practice

Imagine how your life would be different if you were truly devoted to God with your entire heart, soul, and might. How would you spend your time and money differently? Would anything change in the way you treat other people? Commit one week to praying every day for these changes to take place in your life.

Questions for Reflection

What “gods” are most tempting to Christians in North America today? How do they entice us to commit ourselves to them?

How do we alter or reduce our commitment to God because of the temptations of these other gods?

How could the church better proclaim the demand of God for complete devotion? What practices could the church foster to help its members better respond to that demand?