

Exod. 20:1–17

Ps. 19

1 Cor. 1:18–25

John 2:13–22

God's Commandments

**Goal for
the Session**

Children will learn about God's laws known as the Ten Commandments and make them their own.

■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

Focus on Exodus 20:1–17

WHAT is important to know?

— From "Exegetical Perspective," W. Sibley Towner

The Decalogue comes to us almost as a kind of legal credo, fundamental to what individual Israelites understood was expected of them as people of God. *The first table of the law (vv. 1–11)*. The pericope begins with four commandments aimed at establishing a right relationship between God and the elect people. Like all the commandments, these are addressed to an individual Israelite in the second person singular, though of course they are intended to regulate community life. *The second table of the law (vv. 12–20)*. The remaining verses of the Decalogue offer categorical imperatives that regulate relationships within the elect people of God.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From "Theological Perspective," George W. Stroup

It is important to remember that the Ten Commandments presuppose Israel's history and its understanding of covenantal life before God, because, especially in Christian circles, the Ten Commandments have all too often been reduced to moral principles. Although Christians differ on precisely how the Ten Commandments are numbered, all agree that the commandments are in the form of two tables, of which one has to do with how people are to live before God and the second with how they are to live with one another. That the commandments are given in two tables has great significance for Jewish and Christian life. The two tables differ, but they are also inseparable. Hence it would be a profound mistake to emphasize one and ignore the other, to reduce the commandments to either ethics or theology. Because the two tables should not be understood apart from one another, so too theology and ethics are inseparable.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From "Pastoral Perspective," Craig Kocher

As the Ten Commandments were given to the people of Israel as a gift to shape their love of God and one another, the journey of Lent comes as a gift to mold the witness of the church. It is an opportunity to confess the ways we have squandered God's gifts, to renew the vibrancy and faithfulness of our worship, and to increase our love of neighbors near and far. Like the Commandments, Lent is not about religious moralism. Rather, Lent is a journey of deepening holiness shaping lives in the image of Christ to praise God and live in friendship with one another.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From "Homiletical Perspective," Barbara Brown Taylor

If nothing else, stories and traditions like these remind Christian interpreters of the Ten Teachings that these teachings have been around a long time. They are never our possession, any more than the God who uttered them is. Instead, we stand among a people counted as God's peculiar possession, set apart by holy speech and practice for the mending of God's holy world.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Exodus 20:1–17

Focus on Your Teaching

The attitude toward rules may vary widely in a group of children from ages five to twelve. Younger children may struggle with them, but rarely question them. Older children often ask why a rule is necessary. At the same time, children seem to be able to adapt their behavior to the rules wherever they are. The rules at home may differ from the rules at school, which are not the same as the rules at church. However, as they explore the Ten Commandments they may find there a basis for all the rules they encounter.

YOU WILL NEED

- newsprint marker
- purple cloth
- Christ candle
- matches
- Bible, bookmark
- offering basket
- Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021; CD player
- decks of cards
- game spinners
- Resource Sheets 1, 2
- scissors
- Color Pack 3, 4

For Responding

- option 1:
paper, markers,
commandment cards
from Resource Sheet 2
- option 2: newsprint,
marker, yellow and
red construction
paper, scissors, black
markers
- option 3: Resource
Sheet 2, ten .5
liter plastic bottles,
permanent markers,
small ball
- option 4: *Singing the
Feast*, 2020–2021;
CD player

God of love, bring me to a love for your rules, a love that I can impart to the children. In Jesus' name. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, place a bookmark at Exodus in the worship table Bible. Print the Gathering litany, which will be used throughout Lent, on newsprint. Follow the directions on Resource Sheet 2 (Ten Commandments) to prepare the commandment cards for Exploring. For option 2 in Responding, draw some common traffic sign shapes on newsprint.

As the children arrive, ask them to set up the worship table with the purple cloth, Christ candle, offering basket, and Bible. When everything is ready, play “Kum Ba Yah” (track 15 on *Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021). Invite the children to hum along with the music. Light the Christ candle and lead the children in this litany:

Leader: *Jesus Christ is the Light of the World.*

All: *Whoever follows Jesus has the light of life.*

Leader: *God, we are happy to be here to learn more about Jesus.*

All: *Amen.*

Receive the offering. Point to the purple cloth and explain that it lets us know that it is the season of Lent, the weeks that lead to Palm Sunday and Easter. Extinguish the candle.

Without explanation, form groups of four and give each group a deck of cards and a game spinner. If there are six or fewer in the group, keep them together. Tell them to play a game as you go about preparing something for later in the session. If they have questions, tell them to work it out among themselves. After a few minutes, stop the game and ask them how they enjoyed it. If they did manage to put a game together, ask:

✿ What did you have to agree on before you could play?

If they were not able to play a game, ask:

✿ What did you need to do to be able to play a game together?

Explain that today's Bible story is about rules for playing and living together as God's people.

Kum Ba Yah

Kum ba yah, my Lord, kum
ba yah!
Kum ba yah, my Lord, kum
ba yah!
Kum ba yah, my Lord, kum
ba yah!
O Lord, kum ba yah!

Come by here, my Lord,
come by here!
Come by here, my Lord,
come by here!
Come by here, my Lord,
come by here!
O Lord, come by here!

Jesus went about doing
good;
Jesus went about doing
good.
He told everyone God is
love;
God cares for you.

Providing information
about the Bible helps
children understand
how it is put together
and the idea of many
books within one
volume.

God Is So Good

God is so good,
God is so good,
God is so good,
God's so good to me.

God answers prayers,
God answers prayers,
God answers prayers,
God's so good to me.

God cares for me,
God cares for me,
God cares for me,
God's so good to me.

EXPLORING

Invite a child to get the Bible from the worship table, open it to the bookmark, and read the name of the book. Recall that the story from the previous session was in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Today's story is from Exodus, the second book of the Bible.

Tell the story on Resource Sheet 1 (Rules for the People). Ask:

✠ Why did the people need God's rules?

Read the definition of *commandment* on Color Pack 4, and display it to continue the classroom dictionary.

Show the group the cards of the Ten Commandments made from Resource Sheet 2 (Ten Commandments). Read each card and talk together about what it means. Turn the cards facedown on a flat surface. Invite the children to select one card each. (If there are more than ten in the group, do this another time to include the rest or ask some children to work in pairs.) One at a time, they read their cards aloud and name something they would do to follow that commandment. Encourage the group to help children who are unable to think of something on the spot. If a child selects the card about being faithful to a spouse, suggest that she or he think about being faithful to their family. Make this activity more about exploring each commandment than giving "right" answers.

Look at Color Pack 3 together. Ask:

✠ What title would you give this picture?

✠ What might Moses be ready to say?

Sing "God Is So Good" (track 6 on *Singing the Feast, 2020–2021*), adding a stanza with "God gives us rules." To move to Responding, suggest that God's rules or commandments are so important that people try to memorize or remember them by heart.

RESPONDING

If possible, provide two options so children have a choice. Select one that is more challenging for children who are able to work on their own.

1. Art Display Children will interpret the commandments for life today through illustration. Invite the children to select a commandment and draw a picture of how to follow it today. Suggest that they write the commandment at the top or bottom of the paper first, copying it from the commandment cards used in Exploring. As they finish, create a display with the illustrations. Group illustrations for the same commandment together. Look at the display together, inviting each child to tell about his or her interpretation of the commandment.

**EASY
PREP**

For a complete list of traffic and road signs go to https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Road_signs_in_the_United_States for signs.

- 2. Rules for Life Journey** Children will interpret the commandments as rules for today using traffic signs. Show the traffic sign shapes drawn on newsprint. Talk together about what each shape means. Form pairs and have each pair create at least two signs based on two different commandments. For example, a triangle yield sign might be changed to “yield to God” as an interpretation of “Worship no other gods.” Provide yellow and red construction paper, scissors, and black markers. When all the pairs have completed their signs, invite each pair to show its signs to the others. Perhaps they can display the signs around the church.
- 3. Ten Commandment Ten Pins** Games are a fun way to learn the Ten Commandments. Here the children play ten pins to review the Commandments. Have the children number the plastic bottles from one to ten and decorate them with markers. Set up the bottles in a triangle shape. Have the children take turns rolling a small ball to knock down the ten bottles. After each turn, the child selects one bottle that was knocked down to tell how to follow that commandment or rule today. Keep Resource Sheet 2 (Ten Commandments) handy to find the number of the commandment. If the same bottles are consistently knocked down or chosen, rearrange them.
- 4. Music** Music and rhythm provide a framework for recalling the Ten Commandments. Have the children sit on the floor in a circle. Select one child to be “It.” Play “God Is So Good” (track 6 on *Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021) as It walks around the outside of the circle, tapping each child lightly on the head in time with the music. When the music stops, It says to the last child tapped, “Tell me a commandment.” The child must say one of the Ten Commandments. That child then becomes It.

To make the game more difficult after a few rounds, make new rules, such as “A commandment cannot be repeated until all ten have been named” or “Say the commandment while hopping on one foot.”

Behold, I Am with You

Behold, I am with you,
(Behold, I am with you)
And will keep you wherever
you go, (And will keep
you wherever you go)
And will keep you wherever
you go. (And will keep
you wherever you go)

Behold, I am with you,
(Behold, I am with you)
And will keep you wherever
you go, (And will keep
you wherever you go)
And will keep you wherever
you go. (And will keep
you wherever you go)

CLOSING

Play “Behold, I Am with You” (track 2 on *Singing the Feast*, 2020–2021) as children gather at the worship table. Light the Christ candle.

Sing “Behold, I Am with You” several times to prepare for the closing prayer.

Pray the following prayer, pausing after each line for the group to repeat it:

*Be with us, God, through Lenten days.
Be with us, God, in school and play.
Be with us, God, each day and night.
Be with us, God, 'til Easter light. Amen.*

Thank the children for coming and encourage them to return next week. To each child, say: “(Name), remember God’s commandments this week.”

Rules for the People based on Exodus 20:1-17

Many, many years went by after Abraham and Sarah had a baby boy. Many more years passed by the time God's people had become a great number. Then God called Moses to be a leader of God's people, who were now called the Israelites.

They were in trouble. They moved to Egypt when they had no food. Life was good at first, but then Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt, made them slaves. He forced them to make bricks to build his buildings. God heard the cries of the people in slavery. So God and Moses led the people out of slavery in Egypt. They began a long, long journey to a new home.

When they were slaves in Egypt, the people could only do what Pharaoh told them they could do. They never decided anything for themselves. They were told when to work and where to work, when to eat and when to sleep. Everything was done by Pharaoh's rules.

Now the people were on their own. No more Pharaoh's rules! That was really good, but they didn't know how to live together and work together without those rules. They didn't remember how to be God's people. God saw that life was confusing for the people, and God decided to help them. They needed rules for living together. They needed reminders about being God's people.

God asked Moses to bring his brother Aaron to the top of the mountain, Mount Sinai. God met with them there. When Moses and Aaron came down from the mountain, they had two stone slabs with rules from God for the people. The rules were:

1. Worship no other gods.
2. Don't make anything to look like God.
3. Use God's name carefully.
4. Keep the Sabbath day holy.
5. Treat your mother and father well.
6. Don't kill.
7. Be faithful to your husband or wife.
8. Don't steal.
9. Don't lie or tell lies about others.
10. Don't want what belongs to someone else.



God's people try hard to follow these same rules today. We call them the Ten Commandments.

Ten Commandments

Look at Exodus 20:1–17 in your Bible. The heading is probably The Ten Commandments. However, the commandments are not numbered or organized by single verses. Look at verses 2–6. Is that one commandment or two? This uncertainty has created a difference in the way churches number the Ten Commandments. Check with your pastor or educator to get the numbering used by your church and denomination.

Adjust the commandment cards below and use the cards that match your numbering.



The Ten Commandments	Worship no other gods.	Don't make anything to look like God.	Use God's name carefully.
Keep the Sabbath day holy.	Treat your mother and father well.	Don't kill.	Be faithful to your husband or wife.
Don't steal.	Don't lie or tell lies about others.	Don't want what belongs to someone else.	Don't do anything to encourage someone to be unfaithful to their family.

**Conversations on
Exodus 20:1–17**

Discuss this passage in light of the commentary below.

Idea! Watch “What If There Were No Tomorrow?” (bit.ly/GroundhogDayNoTomorrow) from *Groundhog Day* (1993; PG). Discuss the common messages confirmed by the study of the Ten Commandments and the film clip.

WHAT is important to know?

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- ✠ How would you explain the two parts of the commandments to a teenager?
- ✠ Why are laws important for the Israelites in their relationship with God and one another?

WHERE is God in these words?

It is important to remember that the Ten Commandments presuppose Israel’s history and its understanding of covenantal life before God, because, especially in Christian circles, the Ten Commandments have all too often been reduced to moral principles. Although Christians differ on precisely how the Ten Commandments are numbered, all agree that the commandments are in the form of two tables, of which one has to do with how people are to live before God and the second with how they are to live with one another. That the commandments are given in two tables has great significance for Jewish and Christian life. The two tables differ, but they are also inseparable. Hence it would be a profound mistake to emphasize one and ignore the other, to reduce the commandments to either ethics or theology. Because the two tables should not be understood apart from one another, so too theology and ethics are inseparable. (*George W. Stroup*)

- ✠ How are the Ten Commandments a gift from God?
- ✠ What does Sabbath teach us about God?

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

As the Ten Commandments were given to the people of Israel as a gift to shape their love of God and one another, the journey of Lent comes as a gift to mold the witness of the church. It is an opportunity to confess the ways we have squandered God’s gifts, to renew the vibrancy and faithfulness of our worship, and to increase our love of neighbors near and far. Like the Commandments, Lent is not about religious moralism. Rather, Lent is a journey of deepening holiness shaping lives in the image of Christ to praise God and live in friendship with one another. (*Craig Kocher*)

- ✠ How do you think the commandments give healthy boundaries to a person’s life? A community’s life?
- ✠ From what do the commandments set us free? What do they set us free to do?
- ✠ How does your understanding of loving God and loving neighbor inform your commitment to “deepening holiness”?

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

If nothing else, stories and traditions like these remind Christian interpreters of the Ten Teachings that these teachings have been around a long time. They are never our possession, any more than the God who uttered them is. Instead, we stand among a people counted as God’s peculiar possession, set apart by holy speech and practice for the mending of God’s holy world. (*Barbara Brown Taylor*)

- ✠ What are ways you can deepen your relationship with God and other people through attention to the commandments this Lenten season?
- ✠ In what ways is Exodus 20:1–17 a prophetic call to the church as it responds to the realities of human needs?

God, help us love you and our neighbors by living in your commandments. Amen.

Exod. 20:1–17

Ps. 19

1 Cor. 1:18–25

John 2:13–22

The Gift of the Ten Laws

Goal for the Session

Heeding God's gift of the Ten Commandments, adults will practice ways to live in right relationship with God and with one another.

■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

Focus on Exodus 20:1–17

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FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Exodus 20:1–17

Focus on Your Teaching

Our lives are circumscribed by laws, rules, and regulations. Most adults understand the necessity of laws that benefit the safety of the community, such as observing speed limits, though we may still occasionally break those laws. We may grudgingly acquiesce to other laws that we know benefit the community, such as paying our income taxes. When it comes to laws that define our lives together as a Christian community, we may be less clear about their function. This session is an opportunity for adults to consider the practical implication of the Ten Commandments.

YOU WILL NEED

- six candles
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for March 14, 2021

For Responding

- option 1: ten prepared newspaper sheets, Resource Sheet 2, markers, tape
- option 2: paper, pens
- option 3: for each mobile: one 4" x 18" poster board strip; two 3" x 6" strips, two large tablet shapes, yarn or string, scissors, one or more hole punches, markers

The Ten Commandments are sometimes referred to as the Ten Words, because they are the foundational words for life as God's people. The word *Decalogue* comes from a Latin word meaning ten words.

Holy God, guide my planning and my teaching, that I may open doors to understanding. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, arrange six candles on a table in the shape of a cross. For option 1 in Responding, prepare separate sheets of newspaper, each with one commandment. For option 3, prepare materials for mobiles. For the closing, post the following on a piece of newspaper: "Lord, have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law."

Welcome participants and introduce any newcomers.

Ask participants to line up along a continuum, with one side of the room representing strong agreement with the statement, "I am in favor of displaying the Ten Commandments in public places," and the other representing strong disagreement. Invite volunteers to explain their position. Ask:

✠ What is the value in posting the commandments on the courthouse lawn or in the statehouse? What might be an alternative?

Explain that the debate over posting the commandments causes many to overlook the deeper ways these commandments should function. Today's session will focus on the purpose and function of these rules in our faith tradition.

Light all six candles representing the weeks of Lent, a time of reflection and repentance in preparation for Easter. Remind participants that you are lighting all six candles representing the six weeks of Lent, and then extinguishing an additional candle every week until all six are dark. Today is the third Sunday in Lent.

Sit in silence for a few moments, then extinguish three candles. Read Psalm 19:7–8, part of today's lectionary psalm.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

O God, open our minds to new insights as we explore your Word. Guide our reflections as we move further into Lent. Amen.

EXPLORING

Invite participants to close their eyes and listen for any new insights that emerge as you read the focus scripture aloud. After reading each commandment, pause for a few moments so that adults can reflect silently. Afterward, invite participants to respond to the following:

- ✪ Something that surprised me . . .
- ✪ Something new that I had never thought of before . . .
- ✪ I have questions about . . .

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Exodus 20:1–17). Invite adults to read silently the “What?” and the “Where” excerpts. Ask them to name some salient points from the excerpts. Discuss:

- ✪ The “Where?” excerpt notes that the two tables are inseparable, that it is a mistake to reduce the commandments to either ethics or theology. What does this mean?
- ✪ What are the implications for how the Ten Words guide and shape our lives as Christians?

If you choose more than one activity in a session that calls for forming pairs or small groups, mix it up so that adults are not always working with the same persons.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (The Two Tables of the Ten Words). Form two groups. Assign to one group the commentary about the first table, and to the second the commentary about the second table. Ask them to read the commentary and then to rewrite each commandment using language that clarifies its meaning. Have groups present their commandments, explaining what they learned about the meaning of each.

To transition to Responding, invite someone to read aloud the “So What?” excerpt. Ask the whole group to reflect on how the gift of the Ten Commandments molds the witness of the church.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session.

- 1. Choose a Practice** By exploring the deeper implications of the Ten Commandments, adults can identify specific practices to guide them in living in right relationship with God and with one another. Invite adults to review Resource Sheet 2. Form small groups or pairs and assign one commandment to each group. Ask groups to create a list of possible practices to deepen their commitment to the commandment’s intent. Post the lists around your space, and invite adults to move around, reading, making additions, and recording questions. Ask adults to commit to doing at least one of the suggested practices.

**EASY
PREP**

2. **Create New Analogies** Thinking of analogies for how the commandments function provides adults with new ways to understand them and live them more fully. Tell the group that one analogy for how the commandments work is that they are like boundary lines on a football field, outlining basic expectations for how people should act and serving to protect the community from running out of bounds and falling into ways of living that will destroy it. Distribute paper and pens and challenge adults to come up with other analogies to describe how the commandments function, and discuss these together. Ask adults to reflect on where in their own lives there is work to be done in order to live more fully in relationship with God and neighbor. Encourage them to refer to this analogy as they engage in daily times of devotion and reflection.
3. **Create a Mobile** Creating a mobile in which attention must be focused on balancing the parts provides a visual reminder of how the two tables of the commandments—and the practices of loving God and neighbor—are integrally related. Provide adults with the prepared poster board pieces and other materials. Have them print “The Ten Commandments” on the mobile header. On the two shorter pieces, they should print “Love God” and “Love Neighbor.” On each of the two tablets, they should print the appropriate commandments of the two tables. Assemble the mobiles, balancing them so they hang straight. Display where congregants can see them.

CLOSING

As is the practice in some congregations during Lent, invite adults to stand as you read the commandments from the Bible. After each one, the group repeats the posted response.

Pray the following:

Holy God, we give thanks for the gift of the Ten Words. Open us to new understandings of what it means to love you and our neighbor. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for March 14, 2021, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

Focus on Exodus 20:1–17

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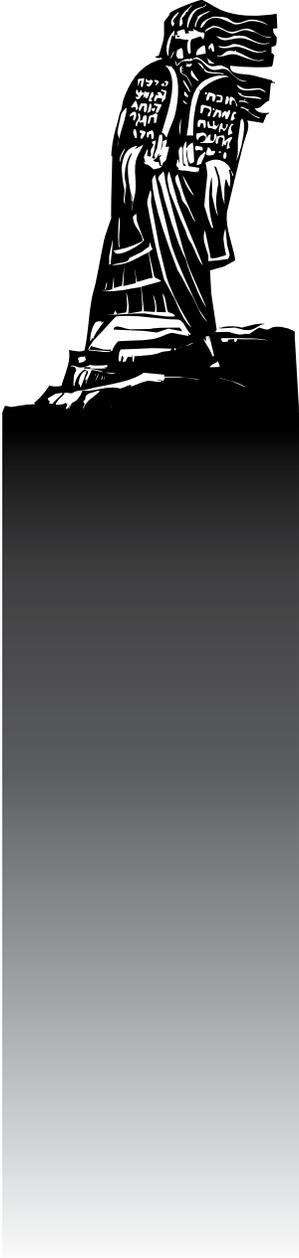
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The Two Tables of the Ten Words



The First Table

The first four commandments are aimed at establishing a right relationship between God and the people.

The First Commandment does not deny the reality of the gods worshiped by others. From the people of YHWH, though, it demands total allegiance.

The Second Commandment condemns the making of idols. God is a “jealous God,” hostile to efforts to get God “in a box,” that is, localized, concretized, easy to manipulate.

The Third Commandment moves to forestall manipulation of God by magical or other vain use of the divine name.

The Fourth Commandment presents Sabbath not as a day of worship, but rather as a day of cessation blessed by God.

The Second Table

The remaining verses of the Decalogue regulate relationships among the people of God.

The Fifth Commandment to honor father and mother is the only one of the ten to which is attached a promise. This law not only elevates the status of women (by placing the mother on the same level as the father), but also promotes the uninterrupted flow of tradition between generations.

The Sixth Commandment is aimed at that form of killing deemed socially unacceptable, homicide. Warfare, capital punishment, or revenge killing were not included here, so long as restraining rules were followed. Jesus later radicalized this commandment by stressing the intentionality of an individual.

At stake in the **Seventh Commandment** are family integrity and the legitimacy of children. Some forms of sexual activity outside of marriage were not understood to be forbidden by this commandment (polygamous relationships with concubines and slaves). Jesus’ radicalization of this commandment rightly stresses intentionality and sees lust as the root cause of adultery.

The Eighth Commandment protects private property. This law was not understood to preclude social safety net provisions, such as the right of the poor to glean in the corners of fields.

The Ninth Commandment is a bulwark not only against trivial lying but especially against perjury in court.

The Tenth Commandment addresses the private and inner moral condition that also threatens community interest. The verb “to covet” includes an element of enactment. To look upon a neighbor’s house or spouse with deep desire is to move into rehearsal and to take steps for action. Inordinate desire or lust are what are prohibited, not mere ambition or fantasy.

—Adapted from W. Sibley Towner, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 74, 77, 79.