

TUTORIAL
1.30

God gave the Ten Commandments

See Tutorial 1.6 notes for overall instructions.

The portions of Scripture referred to in this tutorial are: **Exodus 20:1-17**.

Last time

God led the Israelites into the wilderness to the foot of Mount Sinai. He proposed a covenant in which He would bless them as a people if they'd obey His commandments. They readily agreed to this. They were told to prepare themselves for what was coming. A boundary was placed around the foot of the mountain, and anyone going beyond this was to die.

On the third day Moses had the people gather at the base of the mountain, and then walked up the slopes that were trembling with earthquakes, into the billowing smoke and lightning flashes above.

Ten overarching commandments

Moses eventually comes back down and presents to the Israelite tribes God's law that would govern their lives now as a community. In a great deal of detail, the law paints a picture of how they are to behave, and many specific things that are prohibited. But in a preface to the main body of the law, God gives 10 overarching commandments, which provide the premise or paradigm by which the long list of regulations and instructions can be understood. (Exodus 20:1-17) Before beginning the list of 10 God reminds them first that He is Yahweh, the Sovereign One, who rescued them out of slavery in Egypt. His right to be their Law Maker is based on being the Creator, but also their personal Rescuer and Provider.

The 1st commandment is also the most fundamental. Under the covenant He is to be their God... exclusively. They are to have no other god, but Him. So as a community and as individuals, nothing, no person, no object, no desire, no ambition or idea is to take His rightful place in their lives. He is their Story Writer and Teller. There can be no other voices that are louder than His, no forces that shape their individual character or their corporate culture that are not orchestrated by Him. There's to be no reliance on anything or anyone in His place as provider, no turning for help elsewhere first in a crisis. And,

critically, at no point are they to function as though they, themselves, are the centre of their universe...in effect, their own god.

For things to be any other way, whether intentionally or not, even for a moment, is to have broken this first law, and therefore the whole covenant.

The 2nd commandment makes further application of the first. They are not to make idols – manufactured things that are then revered as having divine qualities. This is the universal practice of the cultures around them. God knew it would be a great temptation, a stumbling block to the Israelites...as the Narrative will show. He tells them that He is a jealous God. He won't tolerate His place being given to another, even the figment of their imaginations. On a deeper and broader level, this addresses the universal tendency of fallen humans to focus on and be enamoured by the material, tangible world. To assume that what can be perceived with the senses is the most important...and particularly those things that humans have made. To worship what's created, even to fail in any way to constantly observe and acknowledge the Creator God's role, is to break this and all commandments.

The 3rd commandment says they are not to misuse His name. The Egyptians who the Israelites had lived next to for so many generations, and the communities they will soon have contact with, used the names of their divinities in chants and incantations to entreat or invoke against harm. This commandment very clearly condemns blasphemy and profanity. But mindless repetitions of His name in religious ritual or treating it as a lucky charm are also misuses of His name. God is painting a picture in which, unlike the relationship of the people groups around them to their false gods, the Israelites would always show Him complete respect and honour as a real Person...yes, as sovereign King, but also as their merciful, gracious Rescuer, Provider, Guide and Father. The way they spoke to and about Him must always fully reflect a perfect reverence for His position and appreciation of the relationship He desired.

The 4th commandment tells them that they were to keep one day in the week holy...set aside for Him. The Sabbath (*Sabat* in Hebrew – rest). God refers to Himself "resting" after the 6 days of creation. Stopping for a day from the normal work activities, would be an acknowledgment of His place in Creation and in their lives...also recognition of God's rights over the earth in the face of Satan's false claim on it. God knows that their human tendency will be to go about their lives and forget about Him. But He wanted to be central in their lives as individuals, as families and as a community, bound to Him by the covenant. So the commandment is about one day in the week, but in its essence it would be broken if even for a moment they forgot about God, didn't recognise His hand in creation or even once relied on themselves rather than on Him.

The 5th commandment is the first of the laws that refers to their relationships as a community. It says that they are to honour their father and mother. The family unit is a vital part of the picture God is presenting to them of the perfect covenant community with Him at its Head. Parents, as will be stressed in the ongoing Narrative, are to teach their children about God. His intention is for each generation to equip the next with truth. If there is no honour and respect for parents then this breaks down...and ultimately there will be no honour and respect for God in the community. Any personal or communal failure in this area of filial respect and recognition of God's intention for the family would be a violation of His covenant law.

The 6th commandment prohibits the taking of human life. God places enormous value on the life He has given to His image-bearers, even corrupted by the Fall. His Law embodies the expectation that the Israelite – and, by extension all humans and their societies – will hold with the same high regard, the lives of others as they do their own...to see them as God's gift. Later parts of God's Narrative demonstrate that the underlying essence of this law goes far beyond physical murder. It also covers actions that put another person's life at risk through carelessness or neglect of duty. But even beyond this, to the very attitudes of heart. To despise someone as worthless, to hold bitterness in one's heart toward them or to hate them, in God's perfect economy is to be guilty of their murder; and is to have violated God's righteous standards that are codified in His Law.

The 7th commandment again focuses on the high value God places on marriage and the family unit. It prohibits adultery – and by extension all sex outside of marriage. Marriage, with its companionship, mutual support and its intimacy was a gift given to humans at the very beginning of God's Story. Adultery – in fact, *any* sexual intimacy outside of marriage - violates this gift and steals from God the glory that He should get as a result. It also harms the entire community by eroding values and creating tensions and divisions. Later, God's Word clarifies that this law is not only violated by physical acts, but also by entertaining desires and lustful thoughts.

The 8th commandment says that they are not to steal. On the surface, this might seem a straightforward injunction against taking someone's possessions or money, and that is certainly the case. But in its essence this law reaches much further. It covers any situation in which someone puts their own needs, desires, comfort and fulfillment above someone else's. It is the ever-present default of humans to assume a place at the centre of their world. Viewed in this light, stealing includes a million subtle things like inappropriately taking someone's time, energy and attention...or dominating a conversation, or taking credit for something we don't deserve. And it also includes taking for ourselves glory that is rightfully God's.

The 9th commandment forbids speaking falsely about others. But the wider paradigmatic concerns have to do with honesty in general. As the Storyteller, Communicator and Revealer of all that's true and real, God detests falsehood and deception. Right from the beginning Satan has utilised half-truths and straight out lies to create a web of deceit with which to trap human beings. God knows the devastating results that deceit, innuendo, false accusations etc., would have on the Israelite community and He wants them to avoid this. But in the bigger picture of his Law, He wants them and all humans to realise they can never function consistently and fully in Truth like He does.

The 10th commandment deals with another area that God knew would be problematic for the Israelites and for all humans – wanting what they don't have. The underlying principle here has elements that would violate their relationship with God, with other individuals and the community as a whole. To covet what is someone else's is to be ungrateful and dissatisfied with what God has given us. It is to assume that we are more important than someone else and that our needs and desires should be given a higher priority than theirs. Often envy is not just directed at material things, but also intangibles: relationships, status, popularity, influence, appearance and many others. Like the other nine, to fail in this one area even in what might seem to us the mildest way, is to violate it completely and therefore to break His perfect Law in its entirety.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. Comment on any differences you see between the way that most people view the law and the judicial system of our country, and the way we should view God's law. Do you think the well-documented corruption and obvious weaknesses of the whole legal system would be a factor in how someone would also view God's law? How would you try to introduce the subject of God's law to someone from our culture? What would be the misconceptions you'd try to avoid?
2. Describe the pluralism and relativism that is so common in our society (do some research if necessary) and comment on how these concepts conflict with the exclusivist nature of

the commandments (e.g. “You must not have any other god but me.”). Do you sense any danger of evangelical Christianity adopting pluralistic attitudes at odds with God’s (Yahweh’s) exclusivist claims?

3. The third commandment (Exodus 20:7) is usually related to blasphemy. This is certainly true, but dig deeper into the essence of what God is saying here. What is contained in the concept of God’s name? How might a person treat this idly, or with disrespect? Describe how, even if someone never uses God’s name “in vain”, they constantly fall short of obeying this command.
4. On the surface, the seventh commandment (Exodus 20:14) is strictly about faithfulness within a marriage. But consider the wider paradigmatic application (the “spirit”) of this command and all of God’s law. In light of that, reflect on how it is appropriate to say that everyone (whether they have never married or are “faithfully married”) has failed to live up to this command? Give concrete examples of how God’s righteous, holy standard for marriage is impossible for humans to attain to.



ACTIVITIES

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1. Then find three people you know - a mixture of believers and unbelievers if possible, and ask them the questions - “What are the Ten Commandments?” and “How do you think they are relevant today?”