

An Examination of the Ten Commandments

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEN WORDS

“The Bible is not first of all a book of moral truth. I would call it instead a book of truth about the way life is. Those strange old scriptures present life as having been ordered in a certain way, with certain laws as inextricably built into it as the law of gravity is built into the physical universe. When Jesus says that whoever would save his life will lose it and whoever loses his life will save it, surely he is not making a statement about how, morally speaking, life ought to be. Rather, he is making a statement about how life is.”

— Frederick Buechner

God has revealed Himself to us. The Bible is His self-disclosure. In it He reveals not only who He is but also who He has created us to be. The law of God is likewise both an expression of His character and His revealed will for our lives. One of our difficulties with God’s laws (besides our inability to keep them) is the sheer complexity of them scattered as they are throughout the Scriptures. It can be helpful to categorize all of these diverse commands into three groups: moral, ceremonial, and civil. As we will see, all three of these kinds of law show us something of God’s nature: His perfect holiness in revealing Himself to His people, His righteous priesthood for us, and His perfect justice in governing His chosen ones. They also point us forward to the fulfillment of the whole of His law: the Word become flesh perfectly obeying His Father, the spotless Lamb offering Himself for the sins of His people, the King of Kings ruling the perfect government in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Three Categories of God’s Law

- 1. Moral**
- 2. Ceremonial**
- 3. Civil**

RELATIONAL CONTEXT—SUZERAIN TREATIES

God gives us these laws in a specific context. For the Ten Commandments the immediate context is Exodus and then Deuteronomy. The first upon their initial deliverance from Egypt and the second after they have wandered because of their disobedience and as they are preparing to enter the Promised Land. Both times He uses a convention common to the people to whom he spoke—the Suzerain Treaty. When a king conquered a city or kingdom, he would often appoint a vassal or governor in that place to rule in his place with very specific guidelines spelled out in the treaty. Most often these treaties would contain the following:

- 1. Introduction** by name—I AM, Yahweh.
- 2. Historical Prologue**—Who brought you out of Egypt, the land of slavery.
- 3. Prime Stipulation**—No other gods before Me.
- 4. Other Stipulations**—No images, not misuse the name, remember Sabbath, honor father & mother, no murder, no adultery, no stealing, no false witness, no coveting.
- 5. Oath of Obedience**—Ex. 24:3-7; Deut 5:27
- 6. Record on File**—Ex. 25:16; Deut 5:22

A FEAR THAT MAKES US UNAFRAID

In Exodus 20:20 we read, “Moses said to the people, ‘*Do not be afraid.* God has come to test you, so that *the fear of God* will be with you to keep you from sinning.” What is this fear that drives out all other fears? It is finding rest in a faithful sovereign who is completely loyal to us and who frees us more and more to be utterly faithful to Him. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, but it is not an abject fear, it is an expression of faith and repentance before this Holy God who has revealed Himself to us and allowed us to live in His presence. As we understand that we will be fearless indeed in how we live righteously before this world.

CONFESSIONAL EXPOSITION OF THE LAW (WESTMINSTER STANDARDS)

What is required in the first commandment? (WSC #46)

The first commandment requires us to know and acknowledge God to be the only true God, and our God; and to worship and glorify him accordingly.

What are the **duties** required in the first commandment? (W^{Larger}C # 104)

The duties required in the first commandment are, the knowing and acknowledging of God to be the only true God, and our God; (1 Chron. 28:9, Deut. 26:7, Isa. 43:10, Jer. 14:22) and to worship and glorify him accordingly, (Ps. 95:6–7, Matt. 4:10, Ps. 29:2) by thinking, (Mal. 3:16) mediating, (Ps. 63:6) remembering, (Eccl. 12:1) highly esteeming, (Ps. 71:19) honouring, (Mal. 1:6) adoring, (Isa. 45:23) choosing, (Josh. 24:15,22) loving, (Deut. 6:5) desiring, (Ps. 73:25) fearing of him; (Isa. 8:13) believing him; (Exod. 14:31) trusting (Isa. 26:4) hoping, (Ps. 130:7) delighting, (Ps. 37:4) rejoicing in him; (Ps. 32:11) being zealous for him; (Rom. 12:11, Num. 25:11) calling upon him, giving all praise and thanks, (Phil. 4:6) and yielding all obedience and submission to him with the whole man; (Jer. 7:23, James 4:7) being careful in all things to please him, (1 John 3:22) and sorrowful when in any thing he is offended; (Jer. 31:18, Ps. 119:136) and walking humbly with him. (Micah 6:8)

What is forbidden in the first commandment? (WSC #47)

The first commandment forbids the denying, or not worshipping and glorifying, the true God as God, and our God; and the giving of that worship and glory to any other, which is due to him alone.

What are the **sins** forbidden in the first commandment? (WLC #105)

The sins forbidden in the first commandment are, Atheism, in denying or not having a God; (Ps. 14:1, Eph. 2:12) Idolatry, in having or worshipping more gods than one, or any with or instead of the true God; (Jer. 2:27–28, 1 Thess. 1:9) the not having and avouching him for God, and our God; (Ps. 81:11) the omission or neglect of any thing due to him, required in this commandment; (Isa. 43:22–24) ignorance, (Jer. 4:22, Hos. 4:1,6) forgetfulness, (Jer. 2:32) misapprehensions, (Acts 17:23,29) false opinions, (Isa. 40:18) unworthy and wicked thoughts of him; (Ps. 50:21) bold and curious searching into his secrets; (Deut. 29:29) all profaneness, (Tit. 1:16, Heb. 12:16) hatred of God; (Rom. 1:30) self-love, (2 Tim. 3:2) self-seeking, (Phil. 2:21) and all other inordinate and im-moderate setting of our mind, will, or affections upon other things, and taking them off from him in whole or in part; (1 John 2:15–16, 1 Sam. 2:29, Col. 3:2,5) vain credulity, (1 John 4:1) unbelief, (Heb. 3:12) heresy, (Gal. 5:20, Tit. 3:10) misbelief, (Acts 26:9) distrust, (Ps. 78:22) despair, (Gen. 4:13) incorrigibleness, (Jer. 5:3) and insensibleness under judgments, (Isa. 42:25) hardness of heart, (Rom. 2:5) pride, (Jer. 13:15) presumption, (Ps. 19:13) carnal security, (Zeph. 1:12) tempting of God; (Matt. 4:7) using unlawful means, (Rom. 3:8) and trusting in lawful means; (Jer. 17:5) carnal delights and joys; (2 Tim. 3:4) corrupt, blind, and indiscreet zeal; (Gal. 4:17, John 16:2, Rom. 10:2, Luke 9:54–55) lukewarmness, (Rev. 3:16) and deadness in the things of God; (Rev. 2:1) estranging ourselves, and apostatizing from God; (Ezek. 14:5, Isa. 1:4–5) praying, or giving any religious worship, to saints, angels, or any other creatures; (Rom. 10:13–14, Hosea 4:12, Acts 10:25–26, Rev. 19:10, Matt. 4:10, Col. 2:18, Rom. 1:25) all compacts and consulting with the devil, (Lev. 20:6, 1 Sam. 28:7,11, 1 Chron. 10:13–14) and hearkening to his suggestions; (Acts 5:3) making men the lords of our faith and conscience; (2 Cor. 1:24, Matt. 23:9) slighting and despising God and his commands; (Deut. 32:15, 2 Sam. 12:9, Prov. 13:13) resisting and grieving of his Spirit, (Acts 7:51, Eph. 4:30) discontent and impatience at his dispensations, charging him foolishly for the evils he inflicts on us; (Ps. 73:2–3,13–15,22, Job 1:22) and ascribing the praise of any good we either are, have or can do, to fortune, (1 Sam. 6:7–9) idols, (Dan. 5:23) ourselves, (Deut. 8:17, Dan. 4:30) or any other creature (Hab. 1:16).

SUMMARY OF THE LAW (# 39–41)

39. What is the duty which God requires of man?

The duty which God requires of man is obedience to His revealed will.

40. What did God at first reveal to man for the rule of His obedience?

The rule which God at first revealed to man for his obedience was the moral law.

41. Where is the moral law summarized?

The moral law is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments.

An Examination of the Ten Commandments

WE DELIGHT IN THE LAW THAT REVEALS OUR SAVIOR

“O Lord, Your law is my delight!”¹ We are most joyous when we are most obedient. Why then is it so difficult for us to obey God’s law? Why do we resist His commands so strenuously? The law actually provokes us as we find in Romans, “For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.”²

Calvin’s Three Uses of the Law

1. Shows us our guilt
2. Restrains evil in society
3. Instructs us in daily living

Once we come to Christ we have a new spirit and are made alive to Christ, yet we still struggle with the old ways of our flesh. Paul expresses it thus, “For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.”³ We are now caught in this in-between time when we are no longer under the Law as a slave, but still need it to instruct us as a schoolmaster.

This freedom is possible because Christ has fulfilled the Law. He has kept it perfectly in our place. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”⁴ Our

“God’s laws bite back. If you break them, they break you.”

— Timothy J. Keller

relationship to the law has irreversibly changed. What once condemned us and goaded us on to greater sin can now be a blessing. The Law shows us the majesty of the Father who is the Creator of the Law. It reveals the righteousness of Christ as the keeper of the Law. It manifests the holiness of the

Spirit as the liberator from the Law. We strive to keep the Law because we delight in the Lawgiver and we want to be like Him.

TWO VIEWS OF THE TWO TABLES OF THE LAW

Some have referred to the two tables of the law as the natural divide between laws 1-4 and 5-10. The first table dealing with our relationship to God and the latter to our relationship with others. This is helpful in helping us understand the scope and inter-relationships between the overlapping commandments. Jesus seems to be using this same framework in His answers about the law when he summarizes the law by saying that we are to love God and our neighbor. The problem with this division is also something that Jesus addressed, namely that they cannot be divided but hang together. “How can you say you love God whom you cannot see when you do not love your neighbor whom you can see?”⁵

The other way of speaking about the law in two tables has to do with the copy of them that was given to the people for storage in the Most Holy Place. It was there in the Ark of the Covenant where the people’s copy of the treaty bore witness their promises to God and His promises to them. This is akin to each party in a contract having copies of the agreement.

¹ Psalm 119 is a beautiful tribute to God’s law culminating in this praise in verse 174.

² Romans 7:5

³ Romans 7:22-23.

⁴ Romans 8:1

⁵ First John

HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND THE TEN COMMANDMENTS?

What rules are to be observed for the right understanding of the Ten Commandments? (WLC #99)

For the right understanding of the Ten Commandments, these rules are to be observed:

1. That the law is perfect, and binds every one to full conformity in the whole man unto the righteousness thereof, and unto entire obedience for ever; so as to require the utmost perfection of every duty, and to forbid the least degree of every sin. (Ps. 19:7, James 2:10, Matt. 5:21–22)
2. That it is spiritual, and so reaches the understanding, will, affections, and all other powers of the soul; as well as words, works, and gestures. (Rom. 7:14, Deut. 6:5, Matt. 22:37–39, Matt. 5:21–22, 27–28, 33–34, 37–39, 43–44)
3. That one and the same thing, in diverse respects, is required or forbidden in several commandments. (Col. 3:5, Amos 8:5, Prov. 1:19, 1 Tim. 6:10)
4. That as, where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden; (Isa. 58:13, Deut. 6:13, Matt. 4:9–10, Matt. 15:4–6) and, where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded: (Matt. 5:21–25, Eph. 4:28) so, where a promise is annexed, the contrary threatening is included; (Exod. 20:12, Prov. 30:17) and, where a threatening is annexed, the contrary promise is included. (Jer. 18:7–8, Exod. 20:7, Ps. 15:1, 4–5, Ps. 24:4–5)
5. That what God forbids, is at no time to be done; (Job 13:7–8, Rom. 3:8, Job 36:21, Heb. 11:25) what he commands, is always our duty; (Deut. 4:8–9) and yet every particular duty is not to be done at all times. (Matt. 12:7)
6. That under one sin or duty, all of the same kind are forbidden or commanded; together with all the causes, means occasions, and appearances thereof, and provocations thereunto. (Matt. 5:21–22, 27–28, Matt. 15:4–6, Heb. 10:24–25, 1 Thess. 5:22, Jude 23, Gal. 5:26, Col. 3:21)
7. That what is forbidden or commanded to ourselves, we are bound, according to our places to endeavour that it may be avoided or performed by others, according to the duty of their places. (Exod. 20:10, Lev. 19:17, Gen. 18:19, Josh. 24:15, Deut. 6:6–7)
8. That in what is commanded to others, we are bound, according to our places and callings, to be helpful to them; (2 Cor. 1:24) and to take heed of partaking with others in what is forbidden them. (1 Tim. 5:22, Eph. 5:11)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does the Law reveal about God?
2. What does it reveal about us?
3. Can anyone obey the Law of God?
4. What purpose does the Law serve for Christians? For those not in Christ?

APPLICATION

How do we keep the Law? What does it mean for us to be free from the Law and yet to delight in it? How do we continue to revere the Law as God's directions for our life without being legalists? Our relationship to the Law is one of our most difficult on-going struggles as Christians. How can we help one another understand the right balance and then do it?

An Examination of the Ten Commandments

THE FIRST LAW: LOYALTY ABOVE ALL

“And God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.”

— Exodus 20:1-3

Relationship is the context in which we receive God’s law. It starts with the foundational need for loyalty to maintain intimacy. The King requires it. The people need it. The husband and wife can only experience the oneness they were made for with it. Without this essential fidelity we need not go any farther; nor can we. There can be no relationship.

Law # 1
No Other Gods
Before God

Notice the way in which the commandments are framed. It is God who is revealing Himself to His own people. They are the covenant people of God through God’s promise, but He goes further than that. He has acted upon that promise, showing Himself faithful by bringing them out of Egypt and delivering them from bondage. His command for our fidelity is based upon His own faithfulness in saving His people.

THE HEART OF THIS COMMAND—

God’s relationship with His people is designed to be an exclusive one. Everything else flows out of that intimacy. Our behavior has always been meant to flow out of a heart captivated by God alone. There can be room for no other. We will only understand the rules as we understand the relationship that these rules are intended to govern. Otherwise we will inevitably stray into either legalism or lawlessness. God’s people are His people and must not give themselves to any other. God Himself is equally committed to this devotion and has amply demonstrated the extent of His love for us.

FLESHING IT OUT—POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF THE LAW

What is **required** in the first commandment? (WSC #46)

The first commandment requires us to know and acknowledge God to be the only true God, and our God; and to worship and glorify him accordingly.

What is **forbidden** in the first commandment? (WSC #47)

The first commandment forbids the denying, or not worshiping and glorifying, the true God as God, and our God; and the giving of that worship and glory to any other, which is due to him alone. (See fuller answer in WLC #105)

HOW DID CHRIST FULFILL THIS LAW?

Jesus fulfilled this law in two primary ways. First, as the exact representation of God's being,⁶ He revealed the truth of God's character expressed in this law in a way humanity had never before seen. This word of the law that says you are to have no other gods before me was but a pale reflection of the Word who came demonstrating His Father's absolute fidelity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are shown to be perfectly of one accord in their passion for God's glory being revealed through the salvation of His people.

“Worship is seeing the worth of God and giving God what He is worth.”

— Timothy J. Keller

Second, Christ fulfilled this law by obeying it in our place. He perfectly kept this law in all the positive and negative aspects we have discussed. Another way to look at this is to see that Jesus not only revealed divine character as the Law Giver, but he also revealed perfect human character as recipient of both the relationship and the rules intended to govern that relationship. In this role then, Jesus kept no other gods before the true God. He was completely loyal and faithful in this covenant relationship. He is uniquely the mediator between God and man.

We see these in Scripture again in both the positive and negative. He rightly receives the worship of His disciples⁷ and refuses to bow down to Satan in His temptation.⁸ Jesus is the law made flesh revealing the truth of His character more brilliantly than anything else ever could. He also reveals what redeemed humanity is to be as conformed to the image of Christ. However we seek to understand this law it must do justice to the purity of devotion Jesus demonstrates towards the Father.

“God and God alone, is man's highest good.”

— Herman Bavinck

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What gods are we tempted to place before God?
2. How does this law reveal God's character?
3. How has Christ fulfilled this law?
4. What do you need to do as a result of hearing this word from God?

APPLICATION

How do we live with faithfulness to the Lord? What does it mean for us to be monogamous with Him? How do we repent from our faithlessness in this area? What is the legalistic response to this? What is the antinomian response? Which are you more prone to fall into? How can this body of believers come alongside you and help you to love God faithfully? What aspects of the gospel are you not appropriating in obeying this law?

⁶ Hebrews 1:3.

⁷ Matthew 28:9.

⁸ Matthew 4:8-10.