

The Ten Commandments

Back when Jay Lenno was the host of the Tonight Show, he frequently did “man-on-the-street” interviews. One night, he asked people he encountered, “Can you name one of the Ten Commandments?” He spoke with two college age women first: “Can you name one of the Ten Commandments?” One of the women replied, “Uhhhh... Freedom of Speech?”

The Ten Commandments. What are they? Are they important for our lives today? To answer these questions, we need to look at 3 things: the origin of the Ten Commandments, the meaning of the Ten Commandments, and the keeping of the Ten Commandments.

First of all, the origin of the Ten Commandments. Where did the Ten Commandments come from? Think back 3500 years to the time of Moses. God had spoken to Moses from the burning bush and sent him to Egypt with a mission to accomplish. The mission was to lead the Hebrew people, God’s people, to escape from slavery in Egypt, and guide them to freedom, all the way to their future homeland, the promised land of Israel. As they escaped, the Pharaoh and the powerful armies of Egypt pursued them. They came to the Red Sea, and the situation of the Israelites seemed hopeless, with no way out. But God parted the Sea, so they could walk through on dry land. Then, God caused the waters to return, drowning the pursuing Egyptian army. The people were safe on the other shore—all 600,000 men, along with the women & the children. God had delivered them. Now, they began their trek through the wilderness. After about 2½ months, they came to Mt. Sinai, the holy mountain where Moses had first heard God’s voice. Moses climbed the mountain, and God spoke to him. God promised that he would make a sacred covenant with the people. If they would obey God’s commandments, God would take

them as his own nation. The people agreed. And now, Moses tells the people to get ready, because God was going to appear before them on Mt. Sinai in 3 days. Sure enough, 3 days later the people stood at the foot of the mountain, and Lord descended like fire, the mountain was covered with thick smoke, and the ground shook, and there was thunder & lightning and the sound of trumpets, and God spoke—the first time he spoke directly to the people. God’s words are recorded in Exodus 20: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage...” And then, God continued by giving the Ten Commandments. God’s very first words to the people—the Ten Commandments!

These are holy words—words of power and at the same time, words of love. With power & love, God has saved the people from their old life of slavery in Egypt. With power & love, God has saved the people for a new life, a life of meaning, a life in community, a life of freedom to live the way God intended human life to be. However, for this new life to be possible, the people must follow God’s rules for living—rules summed up in the Ten Commandments.

So, that’s the origin of the Ten Commandments. But what is their meaning for us as Christians? I’d like to look briefly at each one. But before we do, we need to turn to the New Testament, to Jesus’ teaching, because Jesus expanded the meaning of the Commandments. What is Jesus’ attitude toward the Ten Commandments? In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, we find these words in Matthew 5, beginning with verse 17. Jesus says: “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them.” In other words, Jesus teaches that the commandments are essential, and that their complete meaning is found in him. He goes on to show what he means, by taking specific

commandments, and showing how their meaning needs to be expanded to cover not just the letter of the law but also the spirit of the law. He begins with the 6th Commandment: “You shall not kill.” Jesus teaches: “You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5: 21-24). We see here how Jesus expanded the meaning of the Ten Commandments.

So, as we consider each of the commandments, we look for both the letter & the spirit of the law. Often it helps deepen our understanding if we try to express the commandment in a positive affirmation, rather than a negative prohibition.

Commandment 1: “You shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20: 3) We are to give our full allegiance, our complete loyalty to God alone.

Commandment 2: You shall not make for yourself a graven image. (Exodus 20: 4-6) No worshipping idols. Think of all the things that people worship in our society: money, status symbols, material possessions, famous athletes & musicians & movie stars... Our trust is in God.

Commandment 3: You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. (Exodus 20: 7) We are to treat God's name with reverence. When we talk about God, we are to speak of him in a way that honors him, in a way that brings people closer to him.

Commandment 4: Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. (Exodus 20: 8-11) Just as God rested on the 7th day, the Sabbath is a holy day for us to rest from work and worship God.

You recall that God wrote the commandments on two stone tablets. These first 4 commandments make up the first tablet—all about a meaningful relationship with God.

Now, we turn to the 2nd tablet—and these commandments are all about a meaningful relationship with others.

Commandment 5: Honor your father and your mother. (Exodus 20: 12) God's commandment is about showing respect to our parents, caring for our parents—and more broadly, it's about respect between the generations.

Commandment 6: You shall not kill. (Exodus 20: 13) Remember? This is the commandment which Jesus taught included a prohibition against anger & insults. As God's people we are to work for all that is life-giving.

Commandment 7: You shall not commit adultery. (Exodus 20: 14) The covenant of marriage is to be honored. We have the responsibility to do all in our power to support and uphold others in their marriage.

Commandment 8: You shall not steal. (Exodus 20: 15). That's clear & concise.

Commandment 9: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. (Exodus 20: 16)
Think about the many layers here—false testimony in court is prohibited, but so is lying, and then, in a positive light, we need to make sure our speech is helpful, encouraging, uplifting.

Commandment 10: You shall not covet. (Exodus 20:17) Our desire is to live for God, instead of desiring our neighbor's possessions.

Here we have a quick overview of the meaning of the Ten Commandments.

There's one more important issue to consider: the keeping of the Ten Commandments. What can help us keep God's commandments? Prayer is essential.

Almost 500 years ago, Martin Luther suggested a helpful approach to praying the 10 Commandments. In his book, "A Simple Way to Pray" (1535), Martin Luther writes:

I divide each commandment into four parts, thereby fashioning a garland of four strands. That is, I think of each commandment as, first, instruction, which is really what it is intended to be, and consider what the Lord God demands of me so earnestly. Second, I turn it into a thanksgiving; third, a confession; and fourth, a prayer.

[Luther demonstrates his approach for the first commandment, "I am the Lord your God. ... You shall have no other gods before me." First—instruction.] Here I earnestly consider that God expects and teaches me to trust him sincerely in all things and that it is his most earnest purpose to be my God. I must think of him in this way at the risk of losing eternal salvation. My heart must not build upon anything else or trust in any other thing, be it wealth, prestige, wisdom, might, piety, or anything else.

Second [Thanksgiving], I give thanks for his infinite compassion by which he has come to me in such a fatherly way and, unasked, unbidden, and unmerited, has offered to be my God, to care for me, and to be my comfort, guardian, help, and strength in every time of need. We poor mortals have sought so many gods and would have to seek them still if he did not enable us to hear him openly tell us in our own language that he intends to be our God. How could we ever—in all eternity—thank him enough!

Third [Confession], I confess and acknowledge my great sin and ingratitude for having so shamefully despised such sublime teachings and such a precious gift throughout my whole life, and for having fearfully provoked his wrath by countless acts of idolatry. I repent of these and ask for his grace.

Fourth [Prayer], I pray and say, "O my God and Lord, help me by thy grace to learn and understand thy commandments more fully every day and to live by them in sincere confidence. Preserve my heart so that I shall never again become forgetful and ungrateful, that I may never seek after other gods or other consolation on earth or in any creature, but cling truly and solely to thee, my only God. Amen, dear Lord and Father. Amen."

Martin Luther concludes: "These are the Ten Commandments in their fourfold aspect, namely, as a school text, song book, penitential book, and prayer book."

For us, this approach could strengthen us in keeping the Ten Commandments. Each day, in our time of prayer, focusing on a different commandment as instruction, thanksgiving, confession, and prayer.

The Ten Commandments—God’s words, spoken directly to His people 3500 years ago. Let us take them with us into our daily lives, following them carefully, for they are still God’s gift for us today, pointing the way to life in community that is meaningful and blessed.