

## THE DECALOGUE (THE TEN COMMANDMENTS)

"Understanding the Law of Moses"

(Exodus 20:1-17)

### INTRODUCTION

The Decalogue is the term given to the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. It is also known as the Moral laws of God. The second type of God's law is the Civil or Legal laws (Exodus 21-23), which is based upon the Moral Laws. The last and third type is the Ceremonial or Levitical laws found in the Book of Leviticus.

- I. TEN COMMANDMENTS ARE ONLY FOR OT TIMES?** -- Some Dispensationalists have interpreted Hebrews 7:18 to mean that ALL the laws of God have been abrogated. **Hebrews 7:18** reads, "*For there is verily a disannulling of the commandment going before for the weakness and unprofitableness thereof.*" The word "disannulling" means "to put away or set aside." This means that the commandment has been set aside because of its own weakness and unprofitableness. The question is: which "commandment" is this verse referring to? Is it a reference to ALL the laws of God or just the moral law or the civil or the ceremonial? The immediate context of Hebrews 7 will give us the key.

**Hebrews 7:11-19**, "*If therefore perfection were by the Levitical priesthood, (for under it the people received the law,) what further need was there that another priest should rise after the order of Melchisedec, and not be called after the order of Aaron? For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law. For he of whom these things are spoken pertaineth to another tribe, of which no man gave attendance at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Juda; of which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning priesthood. And it is yet far more evident: for that after the similitude of Melchisedec there ariseth another priest, Who is made, not after the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life. For he testifieth, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec. For there is verily a disannulling of the commandment going before for the weakness and unprofitableness thereof. For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God.*"

The context is to contrast the legitimacy of Christ's High-priesthood against the Levitical priesthood. Since Christ came from the tribe of Judah, how could He at the same time be called a priest since the priestly line belonged only to the tribe of Levi? The example from the Old Testament which testifies to Christ's dual office is Melchizedek who was both king and priest. Hence, the order and legitimacy of Christ's High-priesthood came not from the tribe of Levi but the order of Melchizedek. Therefore, the commandment which was considered weak and unprofitable was not the law in its entirety but only the Levitical law. This means that only the Levitical law has been disannulled or set aside and not the Moral laws of God, namely the Decalogue. There is no biblical basis for the dispensationalist's view of setting aside the Ten Commandments.

If the dispensationalists are right, then the Christian world would be bereft of the greatest lamp to their feet and light to guide their holy pathway on this side of eternity. Man would be void of God's absolute laws to guide all humanity and reveal to them what is fundamentally right and wrong. The Decalogue reminds mankind that there is a God who has set an absolute for him to meet, which he has failed to do so miserably.

Everything would be relative and what is wrong in one country may be right in another. When man sets the rules and establishes his own standards, the standards he sets is a true reflection of man's sinful nature and his glaring total depravity.

But God's laws are immutable and forever relevant. They describe the attributes or character of God. They teach the conduct that every Christian needs to have in his daily practical life. The entrance of God's Word gives light. Psalm 119:130, "The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple." This is how we shall approach the study of the Ten Commandments.

**II. UNDERSTANDING THE LAWS** – It is important to understand all the laws in the Bible. A wrong understanding will result in wrong application. Basically, there are three kinds of laws in the Bible. They are all found in the Old Testament. The three laws are: MORAL; CIVIL; and RELIGIOUS.

**1. The Foundation of all Biblical Laws** – The first law given by God to Israel was the Decalogue (cf. Exodus 20). This is the standard of holiness given to man by God. Without this absolute standard there is no right or wrong on the earth.

The Decalogue was given for the purpose of showing sinful men how great sinners they are. **Romans 5:19-20** (KJV), *"For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous. 20 Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound."* Verse 19 reveals that all are conceived and born in sin because of the first Adam. When Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, all mankind entered into sin with him. The evidence that this is true is that all men die. Death is the clear evidence that all human beings born of human fathers and mothers are sinners. There is no exception, not even babies inside the womb. Do they die inside their mothers' wombs? The answer is yes. Therefore, they are already sinners before they are born. For those who do not die in their mothers' wombs before birth, it is because of God's mercy. It is not because they are not sinners.

Verse 20 reveals that the Law was given to man so that he may know before he dies that he is a terrible depraved sinner. Before the giving of the law, man did not know that he was a great and terrible sinner. For example he did not know that to covet was a sin against God. He also did not know that to steal from man was also a sin against God. He only found that out after death. By then, it was too late because there was nothing he could do to get himself out of Hell. With the giving of the Ten Commandments, all mankind can know that they are great sinners and do something about their terrible state of sin by turning to Christ.

The Decalogue is absolute and there is no justification for breaking any of them. It reflects the character of God and since God is immutable, it is still applicable today. The Decalogue reveals the standard that God expects of all mankind in order to stand before God accepted. Man has to be able to keep all the Ten Commandments perfectly all the days of his life. However, man is conceived in sin and therefore already disqualified even before leaving the womb. **DO NOT THINK THAT THE TEN COMMANDMENTS WERE GIVEN AS A WAY OF SALVATION.** This view of the Decalogue is not biblical. God knows that we are already sinners the moment we are conceived. The Decalogue was given to

magnify sin in the sinner's life. It is not an alternate way of salvation by works as opposed to grace only.

2. **The Regulatory Law** –The Civil Laws are found in Exodus 21, 22 and 23. They were given immediately after the Ten Commandments and were based upon them. The Ten Commandments are also known as the apodictic (absolute) laws whereas the Civil laws are also known as the casuistic (case-by-case) laws.

Based upon man's relationship with God (in terms of the Ten Commandments), God used the same Ten Commandments and applied them to regulate man's relationship with one another. This meant that when a man sinned against another, he sinned against God at the same time. Man's transgression of the Civil laws, which were all based upon the Moral laws, meant that he broke both these laws at the same time. This meant that he had to seek forgiveness from the man he sinned against as well as from God. For example, if he stole from a man, he would be punished for stealing. But the punishment would vary as it depended on what he had stolen. If he stole a sheep and killed it and then sold it, he had to pay four sheep to the owner. If he stole an ox, then he had to repay five oxen. If he stole a person, i.e. kidnapped a person, then it was the death penalty. After he made these payments, his relationship with society was restored in full and he could go back and live a normal life. But his relationship with God was not restored yet. He transgressed against God as well and there was no payment he could make to redeem him; he needed to be punished for what he has done wrong! God had to intervene and help man.

In countries whose civil laws are not based upon God's laws, man would be charged with breaking God's laws too when he sins against his fellow man. The reason is that man is made in the image of God and when he sins against man, he sins against God. That is the basis for capital punishment that God imposed upon all mankind even before the Ten Commandments were given. **Genesis 9:5-6** (KJV), *"And surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it, and at the hand of man; at the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man. 6 Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man."* The revelation that all mankind are sinners from conception because of the first Adam, who is mankind's representative, stands and applies to everyone without exception. This is how God regards man and this is how every man, if he is true to his own soul, should also admit. Regardless of what man might do or believe or chooses not to believe, it does not change the fact that he is a born sinner! He might deny it but it is still true. He has as much chance of denying the existence of God as a man has in putting out the sun with a cup of water.

3. **The Reparation Law** – In the case of sinning against another man, he could find the man and ask him to forgive and make whatever restitution in order for his wrongdoing to be rendered forgiven and not be held against him anymore; then he could return to society. In the case of his sin against God, there was nothing he could give to God that would be good enough to appease God's anger against him. This is where the Levitical laws come in.

The religious laws are the Levitical laws given by the LORD to Israel to repair their relationship with God after they sinned. When an Israelite sinned against man or

God, his relationship with the LORD was drastically affected. If he was born again, his relationship was not broken, i.e. he was still a child of God but the LORD would not hear his prayers (cf. Psalm 66:18) and neither would He receive the sinner's offerings unless the offerings were based upon his repentance for sin committed. This is just like the LORD not hearing the prayers of an unbeliever except his prayer for salvation in the course of becoming a believer. The sinner could not just repent in words. He had to demonstrate his repentance by obeying what God has prescribed under the OT Levitical system as revealed in the Book of Leviticus. There were clean animals that God prescribed for man to use for the many types of offerings that he had to bring before his sins could be forgiven by God. Other animals not on the clean list would not be accepted by God. For those who could not afford to sacrifice clean animals like sheep, goats or oxen which are rather expensive, clean birds like turtle doves and pigeons were allowed to be used. Nobody was exempted from offering these animals or birds in order to atone for their sins. Animals are not made in the image of God and cannot actually take away man's sin at all, not even for a brief moment. The reason for the acceptance of the many different kinds of animal offerings is that the crucifixion of Christ had not taken place yet. Until the day of Christ's first coming to live and die for man's sins, these clean animals and birds were used as stand-ins which the Bible calls "types of Christ". God accepted them because God knew that Christ would surely go to the cross at Calvary. The efficacy of these animal sacrifices was not in the animals themselves but in what Christ would do in the future. They were to be offered in faith.

### III. APPLICATION OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS – Romans 1:18-32

1. **In Terms of Judgement** – When God wants to condemn the Gentiles, He will use general Revelation, i.e. creation (Romans 1). The reason God uses creation to condemn all Gentiles, especially Gentiles who have not been given the Word of God in any form including the Ten Commandments, is because creation speaks in a language that all can understand. Another factor is that creation is found everywhere and the voice spoken through creation is understood by all, without excuse. It is like the language of music where the notes on the bar can be understood by all musicians regardless of what nationality or language they speak. The voice of creation is uttered day and night without end since the beginning of creation. This is true even after the fall and creation has been marred by man's sins. This truth is affirmed in **Psalm 19:1-6 (KJV)**, *"To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David. The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. 2 Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. 3 There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. 4 Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun, 5 Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race. 6 His going forth is from the end of the heaven, and his circuit unto the ends of it: and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof."* There is no one on the earth who is excluded here in this Psalm. It does not matter what nationality or language he speaks, or what education he has. Creation speaks to him.

The language of creation conveys two doctrines of God: God exists and He is a powerful God. The creation of God that is visible to our naked eyes reveals the invisible God and one of His attributes. This is affirmed in **Romans 1:18-20**

(KJV), *"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; 19 Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. 20 For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse."* [Emphasis added] The message of God is clear and man has rejected it. Therefore, the wrath of God is against man because man holds on to the truth of God in unrighteousness. They live as if there is no God. They make Him into their own idols. They sin over and over again and these manifold sins are elaborated for us in Romans 1:21-32.

Sinful man can know that God, who is invisible, is visible to them through His creation. He is the Creator behind all creation that surrounds mankind throughout the ages. But man chooses to ignore and reject and deny there is a Creator. They try to eradicate God's existence by ascribing God's creation to an accident and calling this new god "chance." The other invisible attribute of God visible to all mankind through God's creation is that He is a very powerful God. This power of God is eternal. The gigantic nature of the universe and the power of the stars and Sun, the greatness of the mountains, the unique design in everything from the smallest to the greatest all points to a Creator who is awesome and very powerful. But man refuses to accept these truths into his heart as evidenced by His sin throughout the ages in every corner of the world. God's conclusion against these gentiles is that they are all without excuse when they are judged by God in this manner. Man might hold his fists up at God today but God will judge man and put puny man in his proper place as one of God's many creatures.

God does not use the Ten Commandments to condemn the Gentiles; for then the Gentiles would argue that God did not give them the Ten Commandments and that God is therefore unrighteous to condemn them. Man would then have an excuse. But when God uses general revelation to condemn man, man has no excuse. Therefore, the Ten Commandments are not for Gentiles. [NOTE – the Ten Commandments were given to condemn and not to save.]

2. **In Terms of Salvation** – Just because God does not need to use the Ten Commandments to condemn those who died without having heard of the Ten Commandments does not mean that the Ten Commandments are useless to the Gentiles. When the gospel is preached, the Ten Commandments must be used to show sinful man how great sinners they are. This is the purpose of the Ten Commandments given by God. Without the Ten Commandments there is no absolute right or wrong. With the Ten Commandments man is cut in the heart that he is a sinner. If he were to die in his sin he will end up in Hell. There is no way out unless God shows the way. Did He show man a way out of sin, death and Hell? Thank God He did.

The Ten Commandments are very good in condemning us. With this condemnation, man now realizes how great a sinner he is. Then when the Gospel of Christ is shared with him, he will be directed to find the Saviour Jesus Christ who died for him so that he will not need to die and go to Hell. The Ten Commandments are for all to kick-start their journey of salvation by revealing their sinfulness.

**CONCLUSION** – The Ten Commandments were given to Israel only in OT times. They were not given to the Gentile nations and therefore they were not expected to obey them. However, if Gentiles were to come and live inside Israel, then the Ten Commandments were meant for the Gentiles in the land of Israel. This is also true of our national laws today. What is good for Singaporeans in Singapore must also apply to non-Singaporeans as far the laws that regulate our society are concerned. The difference is that in the case of Israel all the laws were given by God whereas Gentiles nations made up their own laws. Therefore, the LORD's judgements upon Israel will be based on the Laws of God given to Israel. When God judges Gentile nations from the time of the Moses, God uses creation. This is affirmed in Romans 1. In this sense, the Ten Commandments are not for Gentiles.

Are the Ten Commandments for all today? The answer is the same in both OT and NT times. The Ten Commandments are for the church only and not for those who have not been given the Ten Commandments. However, the Ten Commandments can be used to share the gospel. In this sense of sharing the gospel, the Ten Commandments are for all.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Can we say that the Ten Commandments are written in the hearts of all men as if they are found in their conscience? Support your answer from Scripture, if possible, whether your answer is yes or no.
2. How were people saved in Old Testament times? Can someone be saved on earth without believing in Christ?
3. Romans 5:13: *"For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law."* One pastor has taught that based upon this verse, his church will not teach the Ten Commandments because when there is no law there is no sin. What do you say to this phrase: *"for by the law is the knowledge of sin"* (cf. Rom 3:20)? Since there is no knowledge of the law, then there is no sin! Do you agree with this reasoning?
4. Do you love the Ten Commandments? Do the Ten Commandments condemn or kill you? Are you afraid of them or are they your delight?
5. If you placed a tablet of the Ten Commandments on the wall in your parents' home and they asked you to take it down, what would your response be? Answer the question based upon the scenarios that they are unbelievers or believers (Charismatic church or dispensationalists).