

The Ten Commandments

Exodus 20:1-21

Key Verse: 20:2

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."

After God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, he led them to Mount Sinai. There he made a covenant with them. God chose them to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. God wanted to use them as a source of blessing to the world. However, their spiritual condition at that time was not so great. They were sick with sin, and full of spiritual and emotional wounds, after a long 400 years in slavery. Their thought world and lifestyle were vulgar. They were ruled by their flesh desires and were very weak to face any kind of challenge. Yet, God had great hope in them. God gave them the Ten Commandments. It was not because they had to earn salvation. It was to help them grow in the holiness of God and to be a people who could carry out the priestly duty. In a similar way, we Christians have been saved by the grace of Jesus Christ alone. Now, we need to grow. The Ten Commandments help us by exposing our sinfulness and revealing God's holiness.

The Ten Commandments are not man-made, but God-made. Among God's laws, they are especially important. They were kept inside the Ark of the Covenant, which was at the very center of the Most Holy Place. Other laws, such as those regarding sacrifices, feasts, and purification rites were not meant to be everlasting. When Christ came, he fulfilled these laws and rendered them obsolete. However, the Ten Commandments are timeless and universal. They apply to all generations and all cultures. They apply to all people regardless of social, economic, or educational status. Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Mt 5:21). Then Jesus interpreted the Ten Commandments even more broadly, convicting all people. Through studying the Ten Commandments we can recognize sin as sin, come to Jesus, and receive his grace more deeply. This is the real meaning of Easter. May the Ten Commandments lead us to Christ and his cross in this Easter season.

I. God's covenant relationship with his people based on grace (1-2)

Verse 1 says, "And God spoke all these words." This verse teaches us that the author of the Ten Commandments is God. God's command is holy, righteous and good; it is absolute. Let's read verse 2. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." Before giving the Ten Commandments, God reminded his people of his grace of salvation. His people should understand that the Ten Commandments are based on God's grace. When we know this, we can obey his commandments willingly, out of love for him, and not mechanically, like robots. This is why God reminded the Israelites of who they were, and how they were saved. They had been miserable slaves in Egypt. They were oppressed, mistreated and abused. They had a slave mentality: They worked when their masters were watching, but did nothing when no one supervised them. What is worse, they lived according to their sinful desires. They indulged in sexual immorality. They easily complained, became angry and emotional, and fought with each other. To cover their wicked and lazy behavior, they often lied. There was no order or justice in their community. Recently, I met a young man who had been part of a street gang. While in prison for his crimes, he met Christ by grace, and wanted to live a new life. After release from prison, he tried to resign from his former gang. In response, they attempted to murder him. He ran for his life and ended up in our church. We prayed together for his protection and I assisted him on his way. His life as a gang member is a depiction of the Israelites when they lived in Egypt as slaves. When the Israelites were utterly helpless and miserable, God had mercy on them. God brought them out of Egypt by his mighty power and set them free. This grace of deliverance was the basis of his relationship with them. The phrase, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt," is repeated 11 times in the Pentateuch and once in the Psalms (Ex 6:7; 20:2; Lev 11:45; 19:36; 22:33; 25:38, 55; 26:13; Num 15:41; Dt 13:5; Ps 81:10). God wanted his people to remember his grace. Then they could be thankful, and willing to live a holy life in obedience to God's commands.

In the same way, we Christians need to remember the grace of Jesus Christ. We were dead in our transgressions and sins. We gratified the cravings of our sinful nature and followed our evil desires and thoughts. We were by nature deserving of wrath. We had no hope. However, God saved us through Jesus Christ. Christ paid the full price of our

sin and bought us with his blood. He made us children of God. Now we can know God and his love. In turn, we can love and serve God freely. God's purpose in saving us is not for us to remain in sin, but to live according to his word, grow in his image, and serve him in righteousness. To do so, we must remember God's grace.

II. The Ten Commandments (3-21)

The Ten Commandments can be divided into two parts. The first four commands regard our relationship with God (3-11). The last six commands regard our relationship with others (12-21). Let's consider them one by one.

First, "you shall have no other gods before me" (3). The first commandment forbids having other gods, for God our Savior is unique; he alone is God, there is no other. In our time of religious pluralism, people worship many things: nature, other creatures, heavenly host. In India there are millions of gods, equivalent to the number of cows. Americans hearing this may feel smug. However, many Americans have made a god in their own imagination, taking bits and pieces from various religions. So we can say that there are millions of gods in America, too. Pastor Tim Keller has exposed American idolatry in his book, "Counterfeit Gods." He summarizes them as gods of money, sex and power. These idols are man-made. They are not living. They cannot help us in a time of need. Instead, they mislead us and eventually destroy us. Why, then, do people worship useless idols? Romans 1:21 tells us that when men do not thank or glorify the one true God, their thinking becomes futile and their foolish hearts are darkened. They exchange the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal human beings, birds, animals and reptiles. Simply speaking, when people do not acknowledge the one true God, they make idols instead. God, who created us and redeems us, is alone worthy of our worship. When we worship God alone we find true joy and real freedom. This is what caused Apostle Paul to suddenly cry out at the end of his first letter to Timothy, "...God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen" (1 Ti 6:15b-16).

Second, "you shall not make for yourself an image" (4-6). This command governs how to worship God. If man makes an image, it limits God to a form. The result is a small view of God. This leads people to think that they can manage God. They lose reverence for him. We should know that God cannot be contained in man-made images. God is great. Even the glorious Jerusalem temple was unworthy as his dwelling place. Stephen testified before the Sanhedrin, "...the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says: 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?'" God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. God rules the whole universe in all its vastness. Scientists estimate that the Milky Way galaxy contains 100 billion stars, and further that there are 500 billion galaxies in the universe. God made all these. Can we contain this great God in some man-made image? Isaiah 6:3 says, "...the whole earth is full of his glory." How can we worship God? Jesus taught that God is Spirit and that we must worship God in spirit and truth (Jn 4:24).

What happens when we worship man-made images and other gods? It provokes God to jealousy. Jealousy arises when a loved one does not return that love, and instead loves something else. God loved us so much that he gave his one and only Son for us. He wants us to receive his love and to love him wholeheartedly and uniquely. If our hearts are stolen by something else, God becomes jealous. Then he punishes not only the offending party, but their children to the third and fourth generation. On the other hand, God shows love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. God's anger lasts for a season, but his love endures forever.

Third, "you shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God" (7). This commandment regards God's honor. God is worthy to receive honor, glory and praise from all creation. So God's name, which represents his glorious character, should be held in high honor. We should not misuse God's name, even in jest, or theological argument. 1 Samuel 2:30b, says, "Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained." God's people bear his name among the peoples of the earth. If we live hypocritical lives, God is dishonored and his name is blasphemed among unbelievers (Ro 2:24). Jesus taught us to pray, "Father, hallowed be your name." We should honor God in our practical lives, both in word and in deed.

Fourth, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (8-11). God created the heavens and the earth in six days. Then he blessed the seventh day and made it holy. This means the Sabbath day is set apart from other days as a day

to worship God. We must work hard for six days. On the seventh day we must cease our labor, come to God, and worship him. Fellowship with God refreshes our souls. Keeping the Sabbath is not just sleeping late and doing nothing. It is coming to God to find true rest in him. To Pharisees, who had become legalistic and lost the true meaning of the Sabbath, Jesus declared, "...the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath...the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mk 12:27). God made the Sabbath for the happiness of human beings. Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus is at the center of the Sabbath. Jesus, who died for our sins, rose again on the third day, which was Sunday. Jesus established the day of his resurrection as the day for worship in Christian community. This is why we worship on Sunday, not on Saturday. We call it "the Lord's day" (Ac 20:7). The Lord's day is a day to have fellowship with Christ and with others, and to help the needy. Those who do so will be blessed by God to live victorious lives.

Fifth, "honor your father and your mother" (12). To honor one's parents is the first commandment among those governing human relationships. It is the basis of human ethics. Confucianism emphasizes honoring one's parents as an important virtue. In America, parents' rights are often ignored. Then children become increasingly rebellious. This causes so many problems. We need to remember God's word: "honor your father and your mother." Paul exhorted children: "...obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother--which is the first commandment with a promise--so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth" (Eph 6:1-3). Those who honor their parents will be blessed by God.

Sixth, "you shall not murder" (13). This commandment teaches us the sanctity of human life. Human life is valuable, for it is made in the image of God. Murder is motivated by hatred, anger, jealousy, and even immorality. Abortion is murder. This convicts our nation, as more than 40 million babies have been aborted since 1972. St. Augustine said suicide was murder. Jesus extended this command to include anger and holding grudges (Mt 5:22). Grudges lead to insults, which destroy someone's personality. Murder is to destroy--the character of Satan (Jn 8:44). God gives life. We should not murder, hold grudges or insult others, but respect and protect life.

Seventh, "you shall not commit adultery" (14). This commandment prohibits sexual activity outside of marriage. Sexual immorality may bring temporary pleasure. But it leaves deep wounds and lasting guilt. It destroys families and society. Jesus extended this command to include lust in one's heart (Mt 5:28). This is a most pervasive sin-sickness in our time. How can we deal with it? The Psalmist asked, "How can a young person stay on the path of purity?" Then he answered, "By living according to God's word" (Ps 119:9). Colossians 3:5-6 says, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming."

Eighth, "you shall not steal" (15). The only exception to this command is in baseball, in which stealing bases is a virtue. This commandment protects property. Borrowing property from the office or church without returning it is also stealing. Stealing is often motivated by laziness. The Bible says that those who are not willing to work should not eat (2 Th 3:10). Paul exhorted the Ephesians, "Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need" (Eph 4:28).

Ninth, "you shall not give false testimony against your neighbor" (16). Giving false testimony includes slander, gossip, and character defamation, as well as perjuries in court. In brief, we should not dishonor others' reputations. We should not speak ill of them behind the scenes. If we do so, trust disappears and chaos ensues. We should say encouraging words that build up others.

Tenth, "you shall not covet" (17). There is a basic difference between this commandment and all others. Coveting is an inner desire rather than an outer action. Coveting is invisible; it doesn't produce immediate results. So, many people do not regard covetousness as sin. However, covetousness and greed are cousins. The Bible says that greed is idolatry (Col 3:5b). We should put to death covetous desire in our hearts before it produces bad fruit.

When God gave the Ten Commandments to his people, he also sent thunder and lightning, trumpet blasts, and billowing smoke from the mountain (18). The people trembled with fear. So they stayed at a distance and asked Moses to stand in the gap between them and God (19,21). Moses explained that God was planting the fear of God in their hearts to keep them from sinning (20). Moses did not think they would all die. Moses understood God's intention and helped the people to know God better. Thus, he served as their mediator. We, too, need a mediator. Jesus Christ is our Mediator (1 Ti 2:5). Through Jesus we have a relationship with the holy God.

Through the study of the Ten Commandments we learn several things. First of all, the Ten Commandments reflect God's character. God is full of love, compassion and mercy. But at the same time, God is holy. God wants his children to be holy, as well as loving. Leviticus repeatedly says, "Be holy, because I am holy" (Lev 11:44-45). Peter echoes this to all Christians (1 Pe 1:16). As God's children, we must resemble our Father in character. We should not follow patterns of the world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Ro 12:2). Then we can grow in God's holiness and be a good influence as the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Secondly, the Ten Commandments teach us to love God and love our neighbors. The Ten Commandments are written mostly in the negative. The key words are "you shall not." They limit our freedom by requiring us to worship God, respect life, and honor the families and property of others. If we try to keep these commandments literally without having the spirit and purpose of the law, we easily become legalistic, judgmental and self-righteous. Jesus summed up the Ten Commandments positively: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength," and, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mk 12:30-31). Jesus wants us to practice the spirit of the law, which is to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

In 2 Timothy we find what characterizes terrible times. It is when people become lovers of themselves rather than lovers of God. When they love themselves, they become lovers of money and lovers of pleasure. This violates God's order. God made man to love God first, others second, and himself third. When we love Jesus first we can love others and ourselves. Then true joy wells up in our souls. But when we love ourselves first, then we cannot love God or others. And terrible times follow. All kinds of corruption, wickedness and sickness come from loving ourselves. Pride, lust, laziness, selfishness, and so on, make people ugly and degenerate. The fundamental human problem is a love problem. God loved us so much that he sent his one and only Son Jesus to save us. As God loved us so much, God wants us to love him most and to have an intimate relationship with him, and to love others. When we practice love for God and others, we can fulfill the true spirit of the law.

Thirdly, the Ten Commandments lead us to Christ. The Ten Commandments do not teach us the way of salvation. They teach us what sin is so that we may come to Christ who saves. Galatians 3:24 says, "Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith." We need the law to recognize sin as sin. Otherwise, we would remain in our sins and die in our sins, for the wages of sin is death (Ro 6:23a). The Ten Commandments expose our sins. This is painful, like a diagnosis of cancer. But it is necessary. When we become conscious of sin we despair over ourselves and look to Christ, who alone can save us from our sins. This is really good medicine for our souls. Apostle Paul, as a Pharisee, thought he kept all the commandments. But the tenth commandment convicted him, "Do not covet." So he struggled a lot. He realized that God's law is holy, righteous and good. However, he had a sinful nature. Because of sin he could not keep the law of God. The problem was not the law, but himself--sin abided in him and made him powerless and unable to keep the law. Through this experience he realized how wretched a sinner he was. Then he cried out, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?" (Ro 7:24) He cried out for God's help. Then he met Jesus who forgave his sins and called him to a new life. We absolutely need the Ten Commandments in order to understand that we are sinners before God. This leads us to realize our absolute need of a Savior. When we cry out to God for help, he opens the way for us to know Jesus Christ, our only Savior. Let's pray to recognize our sins, and come to the cross of Jesus with humble and repentant hearts. As we do, we can grow deep in the grace of Jesus Christ in this Easter season.