

# 20. TEN COMMANDMENTS

## DOCTRINAL STATEMENT

The Ten Commandments, as revealed by God, codified by Moses, and ratified and magnified by Christ, are the perfect expression of God's law. They are the foundation of all biblical teaching, showing man how to express love toward God and fellowman, and are consequently the focal point of Christian life.

## DOCTRINAL OVERVIEW

When God initially spoke to the Israelites from Sinai, He gave them the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1-17). It is true that the full covenant made with Israel at Sinai also contained other rules, regulations and commands (Ex. 20-24). Yet the only code spoken directly to the people, rather than through Moses, and written on the tables of stone placed in the ark of the covenant was the code of the Ten Commandments. The vital importance of these ten major precepts to our culture has been recognized even by historians who see no uniqueness in the Old Testament as a religious document.

Jesus Christ specifically listed five of the *Ten Commandments* (fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth commandments) when He told the young rich man, "*If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments*" (Matthew 19:17). He also pointed out that the Ten Commandments have two basic objectives (Matthew 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 18:18-23): (1) the first four show how one is to love, worship and honor God, and (2) the final six give the basis for how to love other human beings. Indeed, Jesus summarized the two basic objectives of the Ten Commandments when He answered the Pharisee's question:

"Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:36-40).

James wrote that "whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it" (James 2:10). What "law" was James so strongly upholding in this context? He makes this plain in the next verse by discussing two of the *Ten Commandments* (the sixth and seventh commandments).

John wrote profoundly about God's commandments in his first epistle: "And hereby we do know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments" (1 John 2:3), for anyone "that saith, I know Him, and keepeth not His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in Him" (v. 4). Moreover, "whatever we ask, we receive of Him, because we keep His commandments" (1 John. 3:22).

Ultimately, the whole object is the love of God, which is the essence of God's being: "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John. 5:3). The entirety of the law—in both its major and minor points—has the object of teaching us what godly love is. Yet even though each part is a section of the whole, unique stress has always been placed on the specific ten points first enumerated as such at Mount Sinai. One can see an obvious reason for this.

The problems of our modern legal system are well-known. Some laws are so badly worded that the individual citizen is hard put to know exactly what the legislators had in mind in framing them and how he is to adhere to those laws. On the other hand, each individual is continually beset on all sides by a welter of picayune regulations which seem to irritate more than help. How is one to come to grips with the situation without having to become a professional lawyer, as it were? The Ten Commandments, by contrast, are a paradigm for the

modern legislator. The Ten Commandments provide a few convenient categories by which all laws can be summarized and organized.

To illustrate the importance of the Ten Commandments as the basic summarizing principles of God's mind, the following section gives a precis of each and shows how it serves as a major category of rubric under which many important but more detailed commands can be systematized.

*First Commandment: Worshipping No Gods But the True God.* Many regulations of the Old and New Testaments relate to worshipping and honoring only the one God. In today's society there are few who follow blatant polytheism. And though historians acknowledge Israel as the cradle of monotheism, most educated Romans and Greeks also thought in terms of a basic monotheism by the time of Jesus. Yet polytheism easily exists in a more subtle form in every age and society. Human nature naturally places the self rather than God at the center of the personal universe. Man by nature first worships himself. Even the initial impulse to worship a superior being—a god—or even the true God—is often a selfish one, since such worship is undertaken in order to stave off disaster (by sacrifice or other propitiatory means), or to ask a favor, or to obtain salvation. Worship of God for its own sake is completely possible only by means of the Holy Spirit.

*Second Commandment: No Manufactured Images of God.* Human beings naturally like to deal with physical objects. Worshipping an invisible God and recognizing that He is more real than even the physical world does not come easily. Therefore, man seeks physical "aids" in worshipping God rather than coming to grips with the true reality of the transcendent, invisible God inaccessible to the five senses. Pagan worshippers seldom regarded their idol as the actual deity itself. On the contrary, the idol was merely a representative of the invisible god in heaven. The idol served as an aid to worship just as the icons and statues still used in various religions, do today. Since the use of images in reality only serves to impede true understanding of the spiritual and invisible Creator God, it was—and is—forbidden.

*Third Commandment: Not Taking God's Name in Vain.* Respect the world over is to a considerable extent demonstrated by the manner in which one refers to the object of respect. One does not address the chairman of the board frivolously or familiarly. To make use of God's name lightly—whether as an interjection in day-to-day conversation, or as a witness to an event which really doesn't concern Him (swearing and taking oaths), or in a context which does not show respect or honor—shows an unacceptable attitude toward God Himself. We all eventually have to come to see God as the center of the universe and of all reality. That required insight is impossible without the utmost respect and honor toward God. How one uses His name is an outward indicator of how one really feels towards Him.

The third commandment has a deeper meaning as well—we are not to do anything that could hold God's name up to scorn. As Christians—and as God's Church—what we do, what we teach and how we teach it directly reflects upon God. We should take this responsibility seriously.

*Fourth Commandment: Sabbaths for Rest and Worship.* The Sabbath command is very much a pivotal one, serving both as a means of honoring and worshipping God and of aiding man. First of all, the Sabbath is a memorial of Creation pointing to God as the Creator. Secondly, the human body requires rest for efficient bodily function and a proper mental outlook. Therefore, God commanded man to rest a full day once a week plus setting aside certain other days for annual times of rest and rejoicing. Man by nature needs periodic holidays. Had God not given some to Israel, they would have invented their own. Moreover, God not only gave weekly and annual days of rest, but He required that slaves—and even beasts of burden—be allowed to enjoy rest on these days. This was a demonstration of love for one's fellow man as well as kindness to animals.

Thirdly, while periodical physical rest is sufficient to meet physical needs, the Sabbath and annual holy days serve a spiritual function as well. Indeed, this is their primary purpose. They provide the opportunity for study and for meeting to receive instruction in the ways of God. They provided the opportunity for worship and intellectual and spiritual pursuits which may not be possible during the day-to-day task of making a living.

Again, any day of the week would suffice for this as well as for physical rest. The spiritual aspect lies in the fact that (1) it is a time *God* has chosen, a fact significant in itself since one shows respect to God by worshipping when, and as He says, rather than as the individual chooses; and that (2) the choice of the seventh day also points back to Creation and, as a consequence, to the Creator. Further, both the weekly and annual Sabbaths serve to point out God's overall plan to man. This is all part of the process of acquiring God's mind, which is perfect love. (An expression of the fourth commandment to include the annual festivals is indicated by some of the scriptures which utilize the plural form of the Hebrew word *shabbat*.)

*Fifth Commandment: Honor of Parents.* The parents are the first authority in a child's life. They are also the first source and the first object of his love. By respecting and honoring his parents the child learns respect for constituted authority in general, and eventually learns respect for the ultimate authority, God. In the same way, he learns love from the love of his parents. As he returns that love, he begins to see how love must also be directed toward a broader circle, and eventually toward the Source of all things. Familial love is the basis of a stable family unit, which in turn is the basis of a stable society. Loving one's parents is thus crucial in a positive environment in which love is learned and expressed, and God thereby worshipped. It is also a necessary step in learning to love God.

*Sixth Commandment: Respect for Another's Life.* Any orderly society has certain restrictions on the taking of human life. Absolute prohibition against taking human life does not exist in human society, but the basic principle is, at least, recognized. A number of Old Testament laws governing warfare and the execution of criminals relate to a physical nation rather than to a spiritual church. Life could be taken under certain circumstances. However, Jesus showed that even hating was wrong, since hating preceded murder and murder never embodied love. Even Old Testament laws clearly taught that lack of care for the safety of another was only one step removed from deliberate murder. A number of laws regulated potential or actual cases of manslaughter. If a man accidentally killed another, the law protected him by allowing a place for him to flee to. That is, it prevented another life from being taken in revenge for the accident. On the other hand, the one guilty of manslaughter had to suffer a temporary exile, which demonstrated the seriousness of the incident, showing that he might perhaps have prevented a death had he been more careful. In other cases, the guilt of the careless individual was more clearly defined, as for example, in not building a guard rail on his roof or not keeping a belligerent farm animal safely locked up. Clearly, more than just premeditated murder is being regulated and punished.

*Seventh Commandment: The Marriage Institution.* Adultery is probably the most blatant offense against another person's marital partner. Forcible adultery (rape) or consenting adultery both violate an intimate bond between husband and wife, even if the wronged partner is not aware of it. Consenting adultery strikes at the very bedrock of society, the marriage family unit, shattering the most intimate human bond. Rape constitutes a violation of another person's body, mental and physical health, and right to make personal decisions. Rape could never be considered an act of love.

Other unlawful sexual practices (e.g. homosexuality, bestiality) are illegal, both because they degrade the human mind and body, and because they are a substitution of the God-ordained marital bond. Sexual relations with near of kin are potentially hazardous to unborn offspring. Premarital sexual relations are potentially adulterous since the partners in such relations may eventually marry someone else. Similarly, to live together sexually before marriage is to give a distorted view of the purpose of marriage and perhaps to take away an important physical incentive for marriage in the first place. All of these have consequences for one's ability to love others.

Finally, since marriage is also a picture—in miniature—of God's plan, a wrong approach towards marriage can cause one to overlook the important spiritual truths about the ultimate and eternal Family of God which can be learned from a proper marriage.

*Eighth Commandment: Respect for the Property of Others.* Love for another requires respect for his empirical self, which includes his family and his physical possessions. While the greatest possession one has is life, and the next greatest is one's marital partner and family, personal property may be an important necessity for continued existence. To take another's property in a poor society, may sentence him to malnutrition and a slow death. In a more affluent society, it may produce mental and emotional consequences. Consequently, we must learn to respect the rights and needs of others.

*Ninth Commandment: Honesty in Dealing with Others.* This commandment is phrased in a legal manner because one of the most obvious ways to defraud another is to testify falsely against him in court. This could cause loss of property, freedom, or even life. Yet, complete honesty and aboveboard dealing is also envisioned. One has, in a sense, witnessed falsely when he uses a scale which has been tampered with. Misrepresentation to get ahead means that a more deserving person is passed over. Lying to boost one's ego, thereby deflating someone else's, is also blatant disregard for another. Such self-centered dealings to the exclusion of others are unconscionable and the antithesis of love—a violation of the ninth commandment.

*Tenth Commandment: The Beginning of True Love is in the Mind.* The specific phrasing of this command proscribes desiring what is not lawful for an individual to have: another person's property or mate or position or whatever. In a sense, this gets at the heart of the four previous commands. One does not kill unless he desires something another person has or can give him (such as property, a better position, an improved reputation, the elimination of a threat or problem, etc.). Even revenge can usually be traced back to envy, a form of covetousness. One does not commit adultery or other sexual sins unless he has first desired what he was not entitled to, what he was not allowed to have. One does not steal or gain through dishonesty without first taking possession of the forbidden object in one's mind. If a person can control his nature at this point, many of the other temptations shall take care of themselves. Indeed, the tenth commandment is *Spirit* in form and content—it is concerned with the unlawful desire in the mind as well as the specific act. In this sense, it points to and foreshadows the future teachings of Jesus Christ. As Paul wrote in Philippians 2:3,5: "Let nothing be done through strife or vain glory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.... Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus."

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This publication is intended to be used as a personal study tool. Please know it is not wise to take any man's word for anything, so prove all things for yourself from the pages of your own Bible.

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