

The Commands of God

(The Ten Commandments)



When thinking of the commands of God, it is easy to put them off as something the Lord spoke many years ago. Relics of the past and possibly not even relevant to the manner in which our lives are carried out today. However, given the eternal nature of God, He is always relevant, no matter the year, generation, time period or otherwise. God does not necessarily have to do a new thing either. The immutability of God says that He doesn't change (*Malachi 3:6 For I am the LORD, I change not...*). He is the same yesterday, today, and will be forever more.

Although God is immutable, that does not mean He doesn't understand the ever changing and evolving nature of our world and societies. Therefore as we seek to address the immutability of God in an ever-changing world, what of the commands of God. They have not changed either. They need not change, and they never will. It is the unchanging nature of God's commands that offer stability in this cosmos as it evolves. What is needed now more than ever before is to know what God commands relative to our relationship with him, and then secondly how we are to love and care for one another. The one set of constructs or "Commands of God" that address this as well as, if not better than any other is the Ten Commandments. In this study (of a two-part study) we will look at the commands of God within the context of the Ten Commandments: what they are, what they mean, and their relevance in our ever-evolving world.

The Ten Commandments

The commands of God are just that, commands. Today, we need to know that they are not suggestions (as we tend to relax the meaning of some biblical disciplines), but commands. Commands are to be followed and obeyed. Suggestions are a bit more subjective and lenient allowing a person to adhere or not adhere to them. To know what we must obey, let us be clear on what they are. So, here are the Ten Commandments as cited in Exodus 20.

- #1) Ex 20:2 I am the LORD thy God, ... Ex 20:3 *Thou shalt have no other gods before me.*
- #2) Ex 20:4 *Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image*, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth:
- #3) Ex 20:7 *Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain*; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.
- #4) Ex 20:8 *Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.*
- #5) Ex 20:12 *Honour thy father and thy mother*: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.
- #6) Ex 20:13 *Thou shalt not kill.*
- #7) Ex 20:14 *Thou shalt not commit adultery.*
- #8) Ex 20:15 *Thou shalt not steal.*
- #9) Ex 20:16 *Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.*
- #10) Ex 20:17 *Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house*, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's. (KJV)

The Ten Commandments are known by a number of expressions, some of which are...

- The Decalogue [translated to mean: Deca-10; logue-word(s)]

- The Ten Words
- “The Words”, Spoken by Yahweh
- The Covenant
- The Tables of the Covenant
- The Testimony

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Introduction and History of the Commandments

The title “the Ten Commandments” does not come from the two passages that list the commandments, but from three other references (Ex 34:28, Deut 4:13; 10:4). The Hebrew in these verses translates literally as “the 10 words,” from which the term “Decalogue” is derived.¹

The "ten words" were spoken by Yahweh Himself from the top of the mount under the most awe-inspiring circumstances. In the early morning there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of a trumpet exceeding loud. It is no wonder that the people trembled as they faced the smoking and quaking mount, and listened to the high demands of a holy God (Ex. 19:16-18). Their request that all future revelations should be made through Moses as the prophet mediator was quite natural. The promulgation of the Ten Commandments stands out as the most notable event in all the wilderness sojourn of Israel. There was no greater day in history before the coming of the Son of God into the world.

After a sojourn of 40 days in the mount, Moses came down with "the two tables of the testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God." At the foot of the mount, when Moses saw the golden calf and the dancing throng about it, he cast the tables out of his hands and broke them in pieces (Ex 31:18; 39:15-20). Through the intercession of Moses, the wrath of Yahweh was averted from Israel; and Yahweh invited Moses to ascend the mount with two new tablets.. The Ten Commandments were written on the stone tablets by Yahweh Himself (Ex 34:1-4; 2Ki 2:2; Deut 4:13; 10:4); but just how to delimit them one from another is a task which has not been found easy.

So, just what are the Ten Commandments? The Decalogue is a summary of the immutable moral law (Ex 34:28; Deut 10:4, marg. "ten words"). These commandments were first given in their written form to the people of Israel when they were encamped at Sinai, about fifty days after they came out of Egypt (Ex 19:10-25). They were written by the finger of God on two tables of stone. The first tables were broken by Moses when he brought them down from the mount (Ex 32:19), being thrown by him on the ground. At the command of God he took up into the mount two other tables, and God wrote on them "the words that were on the first tables" (Ex 34:1). These tables were afterwards placed in the ark of the covenant (Deut 10:5; 1Ki 8:9). Their subsequent history is unknown. They are as a whole called "the covenant" (Deut 4:13), and "the tables of the covenant" (Deut 9:9,11; Heb 9:4), and "the testimony." ²

The Ten Commandments were made known to Israel and us as theophanic (*manifestation of God in a real way*) utterance, the Ten Commandments serve as the foundation for the Deuteronomic Law; the absolute imperatives (*apodictic law*—expressing or of the nature of

¹ Easton, M. G. (1893). In [Easton's Bible dictionary](#). New York: Harper & Brothers.

² Easton's Bible Dictionary

necessary truth or absolute certainty.; e.g., “do not”) of the Ten Commandments serve as the general foundation for more specific laws (casuistic law; e.g., “if ... then ...”). It is important to note here that most all systems of juris prudence around the world in some way has its roots and basis for ethics, morality, and premise of law both implicitly and explicitly in the Ten Commandments.

Generally, the first four commandments focus on obligations toward God, while the latter six focus on obligations toward others in the community. In the New Testament, Jesus summarized this twofold focus: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:37–39 ESV; see also Mark 12:29–31).
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The moral vision of the Ten Commandments plays a central role in both Old Testament and New Testament ethics (Greenstein, “The Rhetoric,” 1). Though they are listed in their entirety only twice in Scripture, biblical authors mention them numerous times in partial lists and allude to them in diverse contexts:

- Lev19 explains ritual and relational elements of the Decalogue.
- Psa 50:16–20; 81:9; and 119 allude to the Decalogue.
- The Prophets use the commandments in their charges against Israel (e.g., Jer 7:9; Ezek 20:16, 20; Hos 4:2).
- Paul incorporates portions of the Decalogue into his sin lists (e.g., Rom 13:9; 1 Cor 6:9–10; 1 Tim 1:9–10; 2 Tim 3:2–5).
- The Catholic Letters mention the commandments in Jas 2:11; 1 Pet 2:1; and 1 John 3:15.
- Jesus offers commentary on the Ten Commandments in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7), refers to them in Luke 18:20, and alludes to them in John 10:10, among other places.³

A more in-depth and scholarly undertaking of the Commands of God would most certainly take us beyond the scope of this first part of our lesson. With this in mind, in the following lesson, we will look specifically at each of the commands: their groupings, how Jesus dealt with their historical significance and relevance during his ministry, and finally, how we can relate to the Ten Commandments in a very practical way today.

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³ Easton, M. G. (1893), Ibid.