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INTRODUCING THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Matthew 22:37-40

One Main Thing

Throughout history and still today the Ten Commandments have served as a helpful summary of what God expects from his people.

Introduction

On the plains of Moab outside the Promised Land, Moses reminded the people of Israel about what had happened decades earlier when they arrived at Mt. Sinai:

You came near and stood at the base of the mountain, a mountain blazing with fire into the heavens and enveloped in a totally black cloud. Then the Lord spoke to you from the fire. You kept

hearing the sound of the words, but didn't see a form; there was only a voice. He declared his covenant to you. He commanded you to follow the Ten Commandments, which he wrote on two stone tablets. (Deut 4:11–13)

This retelling of the Sinai narrative that readers first encounter in Exodus 19–20 highlights the special importance of the Ten Commandments, the first rules that God spoke directly to the people and wrote himself on two stone tablets. In Deuteronomy, Moses goes on to remind the people of what these Ten Commandments are (ch. 5), an account that corresponds to the original giving of these commandments in Exodus 20:1–17. Though Jewish tradition finds 613 commandments in the entire Torah,¹ these ten stand out as having special importance.

Going Deeper

We know that the Ten Commandments are important for a number of reasons. First of all, they appear twice as a group in Scripture (Exod 20; Deut 5). Secondly, they are the first and most important commandments in the Torah, judging by their unique status as inscribed on stone tablets by God's own hand.² In this way, it seems that these Ten Commandments serve as the foundation of the entire Law. Perhaps we should

1. See the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Makkot, 23b–24a.

2. On God's writing the Ten Commandments, see Exod 34:1; Deut 5:22; 9:10; 10:2; cf. Exod 34:28.

say that the remaining laws in the Torah explicate the Ten Commandments, demonstrating how one ought to fulfill them in particular situations. In fact, some scholars believe that the entire law code of Deuteronomy (chs. 12–26) is structured according to the Ten Commandments.³ The only part of the Law kept inside the ark of the covenant is the two tablets with the Ten Commandments.⁴

The title “Ten Commandments” comes, as we have seen, from the Bible itself, which three times uses the phrase (Exod 34:28; Deut 4:13; 10:4). But actually the word for “commandment” does not appear in these verses, which more literally speak of the “ten words,” or, perhaps, the “ten statements,” which explains the other common title for these laws, the “Decalogue,” a Greek word meaning “ten words.”

These passages reveal that we are supposed to find specifically ten statements or commandments in Exod 20:1–17 and Deut 5:6–21. They tell us the number, but they do not tell us how to arrive at the number, so it may (or may not) be surprising that people have not always agreed on how to divide the Ten Commandments. Jews, Roman Catholics, and different Protestant groups have varied slightly in their arrangements of these commandments.

3. See Georg Braulik, “The Sequence of the Laws in Deuteronomy 12–26 and in the Decalogue,” in *A Song of Power and the Power of Song: Essays on the Book of Deuteronomy*, ed. Duane L. Christensen (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1993), 313–35.

4. Deut 10:5; cf. Exod 25:16, 21; 1 Kings 8:9; Heb 9:4.

Readers of this lesson are probably most familiar with the following arrangement.

Commandment / Exodus 20:1-17

	¹ Then God spoke all these words:
PROLOGUE	² I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.
1	³ You shall have no other gods before me.
2	⁴ You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. ⁵ You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love me and keep my commandments.
3	⁷ You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes his name in vain.
4	⁸ Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.
5	¹² Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you.
6	¹³ You shall not murder.
7	¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery.

8	¹⁵ You shall not steal.
9	¹⁶ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10	¹⁷ You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Jewish tradition has usually considered the Prologue to be the first “word” of the Ten Words, counting what is labeled above as commandments 1 and 2 together as the second “word.”⁵ But Jewish tradition is not uniform. One of the earliest Jewish orders that we can determine is found in the work of the first-century historian Josephus, who arranges the commandments precisely as in the chart above.⁶ On the other hand, the Samaritans, like the dominant Jewish tradition, combine commandments 1 and 2, thus making room within the Ten Commandments for an additional command found only in the Samaritan Pentateuch, enjoining worship on Mt. Gerizim, the holy site of Samaritans.

5. See the Jerusalem Talmud, tractate Berakhot 1.4 in the edition of Tzvee Zahavy, trans., *The Talmud of the Land of Israel: A Preliminary Translation and Explanation*, vol. 1: Berakhot (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 42–44.

6. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 3.90–92. See also Philo, *On the Decalogue* 51, who presents the same basic arrangement but inverts the adultery and murder commands. This divergent order for the sixth and seventh commandments reflects a confusing picture in the manuscript history of the Septuagint, which probably originally had the order adultery/stealing/murder in Exodus and adultery/murder/stealing in Deuteronomy. For other orders for these commandments, see Jer 7:9; Hos 4:2; Matt 19:18 // Mark 10:19 // Luke 18:20; Rom 13:9.

There are also various Christian traditions regarding the grouping of these “words.” The arrangement above finds expression in John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2.8) from the sixteenth century. Calvin’s older contemporary, Martin Luther, combined commandments 1 and 2, and so he divided the tenth commandment into two, calling the prohibition against coveting a neighbor’s house the ninth commandment and the prohibition against coveting other assets of a neighbor the tenth commandment.⁷ Similarly, the Catholic Church interprets commandments 1 and 2 as a single command, dividing the tenth commandment into two so that it partly addresses sexual lust and it partly addresses other ungodly desires.⁸

This survey of different arrangements for the Ten Commandments shows that very often the prohibition against worshiping other gods and the prohibition against making idols have been treated as a single “word.” This combination certainly makes sense, but another venerable tradition separates these two prohibitions, which is the practice followed in this study.

7. See Luther’s *Small Catechism*, available online: <http://bookofconcord.org/smallcatechism.php#tencommandments>.

8. See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2.3, available online: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM

Application

Jesus thought the whole Old Testament boiled down to how we treat people: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matt 7:12). He wanted his followers to understand that the religious revolution he came to inaugurate was in fundamental agreement with this Old Testament ethic. Surely there is no need here to demonstrate that Jesus considered proper behavior toward others to be the very essence of true religion. Sometimes he labels such behavior toward others "justice" or "mercy" (23:23), often he calls it "love." As it turns out, "love" is another way of summarizing the Law and the Prophets: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands" (22:37–40).

Whereas the Golden Rule is articulated entirely in terms of a person's treatment of other people, in the exposition of the two greatest commands, a person's love for neighbor is explicitly given second place behind that person's love for God. There is no inconsistency here, once we recognize that in the Bible our treatment of people serves as a concrete expression of our regard for God (1 John 3:17; 4:20). Leviticus 19, the passage from which Jesus draws his second greatest command (see v. 18), routinely punctuates its ethical exhortations

with the declaration, “I am the LORD” (15x in the chapter). For instance:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you are not to reap to the very edge of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not strip your vineyard bare or gather its fallen grapes. Leave them for the poor and the resident alien; I am the LORD your God. (Lev 19:9–10)

Or, later:

Do not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages due a hired worker must not remain with you until morning. Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but you are to fear your God; I am the LORD. (vv. 13–14)

Or, again:

Do not harbor hatred against your brother. Rebuke your neighbor directly, and you will not incur guilt because of him. Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against members of your community, but love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD. (vv. 17–18)

According to Leviticus 19, a person's acknowledgment of the Lord's position as God entails certain behaviors toward other people, particularly behaviors like justice and mercy and love. So, there is no diminishment of the importance of the greatest command when some New Testament writers magnify love of neighbor as itself the fulfillment of the entire Law (cf. Rom 13:8–10; Gal 5:14; Jas 2:8). Love of neighbor and love of God go hand-in-hand.

And this is what the Ten Commandments also summarize. First we are to love God, demonstrating this love by denying our allegiance to any other god, shunning idolatry, properly using God's name, and setting aside time to worship him and contemplate his mighty deeds. Second, we should love our neighbor, especially by avoiding harming them in any way, whether through murder, adultery, stealing, or lying, even desiring their belongings. The transitional commandment about honoring parents fits both categories, in that it is an action directed to some very important neighbors who, in a sense, represent to us God's own authority.

Conclusion

God first reveals his ethical demands to Israel through the Ten Commandments, which serve as the first and foundational summary of God's covenant with his people. These commandments guided the ethical reflections of Jesus (Mark 7:10), Paul (Rom 13:8–10; Eph 6:1–4), and James (2:8–13). We can also use them

to help us reflect on the ways we need to show our love for God and our love for our neighbors.

Discussion

1. What value do the Ten Commandments have for Christians today?
2. How are the prohibitions against other gods and against idolatry related, and how are they distinct?
3. What is the relationship between love for God and love for neighbor?
4. Do the Ten Commandments serve as a good summary or encapsulation of God's requirements for humanity?