

# Why do we need to hear the Ten Commandments

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*A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 8th January 2006*

And God spoke all these words: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

"You shall have no other gods before me.

"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.

"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

"Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

"You shall not murder.

"You shall not commit adultery.

"You shall not steal.

"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor." (Exodus 20:1-17)

## **Introduction**

This passage contains the Ten Commandments. These are the ten laws which God gave to Moses to summarise how he wanted his people to live.

You might say, why do we need to study commandments which were given nearly 4,000 years ago to a people who lived in very different circumstances to our own? Surely people are very different now from what they were then? Surely our understanding of right and wrong has moved on from those days?

The answer to this is that these are the commandments not of man, but of Almighty God. God himself spoke these words from the mountain, and then wrote them on tablets of stone. Men's ideas and fashions about right and wrong might change, but God never changes. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13.8), and Jesus is the Word of God. It was through him that the Father spoke to Moses on the mountain. What Jesus wanted people to do 4,000 years ago he still wants people to do today. What was wrong then is wrong now. "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man that he should change his mind" (Numbers 23.19). It is true that God has given us additional teaching about the application of his law through the Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles, but what Jesus and his apostles taught in no way contradicts the Ten Commandments. Instead, Jesus' teaching "fleshes out" the Commandments with further application. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, as recorded in Matthew 5 verses 17 to 20,

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to

do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

We know that Old Testament laws to do with sacrifices, cleansing, eating and drinking have been fulfilled by the sacrifice of Christ upon the Cross, and therefore do not now need to be obeyed by us today. Equally, laws to do with the running of the State of Israel no longer directly apply, since situation of the Old Testament, where the State and the people of the God were one and the same, no longer pertains. But the Ten Commandments are manifestly moral commandments, laying down how we are to love God and love our fellow men. Therefore they continue to be binding upon all, Christians and non-Christians alike.

But someone might say, "Surely these are the laws of the Old Covenant? We are now under the New Covenant. We are no longer bound by the laws of the Old Covenant, since we belong to a new master, to Christ."

Those who would say this are right, up to a point. For those of us who are believers, we are in a glorious new age. We have the Holy Spirit. We know God personally. All our sins are forgiven. We have new hearts that want to please God and to love others. But what is it that Jeremiah promised that God will write on the hearts of his people in the New Covenant? His law. The promise of the New Covenant is found in Jeremiah chapter 31, verse 31. He says,

"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put *my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,*" declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31.31 – 34, emphasis mine)

So the very essence of the New Covenant relationship that we have with God is

that God has written his law upon our hearts. Before God had written his law on tablets of stone, which were external to the people. Now he has written his law on the hearts of all his people. He has made us want to obey his law. There is no indication, however, that the law that he has written on our hearts is any different from the law that he previously wrote on tablets of stone. It is the same law but written in a different place.

So I want to speak in what follows about the ways in which we can expect that studying the Ten Commandments, will help us. There are many things that could be said on this subject, but there are two benefits that we can particularly gain from studying the Ten Commandments:

1. The Ten Commandments show us our sin, leading us to put our faith in Christ
2. The Ten Commandments show us how to live once we have trusted in Christ

Let me explain these two things more fully.

### **1. The Ten Commandments show us our sin, leading us to put our faith in Christ**

The first benefit from studying the Ten Commandments is that doing so will help us to understand that we are sinners. This is exactly the point that the apostle Paul makes in Romans 7.7. He says, "I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet.'" Here of course Paul is quoting the tenth Commandment. He is saying, by way of example, that this commandment taught him that coveting was a sin.

We all have an innate sense of right and wrong from our consciences. Paul tells us in Romans 2 that God has written his law upon the hearts of all men, even of those who have never heard the Bible, so people know in their consciences when they have done wrong. But our consciences do not always work properly. Sometimes we feel guilty about things about which we do not need to feel guilty, and sometimes (more frequently) we do not feel guilty for things about which we should feel guilty. But the Ten Commandments provide an objective standard for our lives, and help us to see where we have been going astray.

One of the great problems today is that many have no sense of their need of salvation. Many are quite satisfied with their lives. While most would agree that “no-one is perfect”, few have any real sense of their sin, and therefore have no sense of need to get saved from their sin. This is where the Ten Commandments are so vitally important, to teach people their sin, and need of salvation, and so lead them to trust in Christ.

You might say, “What about where the apostle Paul says, ‘I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified’ (1 Corinthians 2.2)? If we teach the Ten Commandments, will we not be failing to present Christ?” On the contrary, if we teach people the Ten Commandments we are laying the foundation for Christ. As Paul says in Galatians 3.24, “The law was put in charge to lead us to Christ.” We should teach the Commandments trusting that the Holy Spirit will grant conviction of sin, which will in turn lead people to seek Christ for salvation.

This is why we who are parents need to teach the Ten Commandments to our children. Those who are involved in Sunday School work and who teach children in clubs need to include teaching on the Commandments as part of what they teach children. We need to make teaching the Commandments part of our evangelism, particularly for those who do not come from a Christian or Jewish background.

Before we move on from this point, let me ask you a personal question. How do you see yourself? Do you see yourself as a fairly decent sort of person, someone who is better than most, who has never really done any harm to others? You will never properly know Christ until you have been convicted by the Holy Spirit that you are a sinner. Ask God to show you your true condition before him. Meditate on the Ten Commandments. Read the Sermon on the Mount. Read the moral teaching in the letters of the apostle Paul. Examine your ways, and ask yourself how your life matches up against the teaching in the Old and New Testaments about how we should live.

## **2. The Ten Commandments show us how to live once we have trusted in Christ**

The second benefit of the Ten Commandments is that they show us how to live as Christians, once we have believed in Christ as our Saviour.

It is important to state that you should obey the Ten Commandments not because you hope to have a place in heaven by doing so, but because, if you have believed Christ for salvation, you *already* have a place in heaven. The Bible makes it very plain that no-one gets into heaven by obeying the Law. “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin” (Romans 3.20). “All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law’ “(Galatians 3.10).

Strictly speaking, if we perfectly obeyed the Ten Commandments and all the other moral teaching in the Bible for the whole of our lives, we would be counted worthy of going to heaven. But none of us perfectly obeys the Law, not even for a few seconds, let alone all of our lives, so none of us is qualified to go to heaven through our obedience to the Law.

But thanks be to God, there is one man who did perfectly obey the Law, Jesus Christ. This means that when he died on the Cross, he was able to be punished not for his own sins but for the sins of others. So he was punished in the place of sinners. He bore the punishment that they deserve for their wrongdoing. As Isaiah says,

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53.4 – 6)

So now God has provided a right standing before him, a righteousness, that is “apart from law” (Romans 3.23). This righteousness “from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Romans 3.24). Those who believe in Christ are “justified” before God, that is they are declared by God to be forever “not guilty” in his sight. So, says the apostle Paul, “we maintain that a man is justified by faith, apart from works of the Law” (Romans 3.28).

But having been justified by faith, we should then make it our aim to obey the Law, including the Ten Commandments. We do this not in order to gain a place in heaven, or in case we might lose our place in heaven, but because we *have* a place in heaven. Those who are not true believers, who do not have the Holy

Spirit, cannot begin to do this, because they do not love God. "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God" (Romans 8.7 and 8). By contrast, those who have the Holy Spirit have a mind that is friendly towards God. They can and should submit to his Law.

One of the great blessings of the Law is that it provides clear and safe direction for us as believers. Psalm 119 speaks about this. "How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word" (verse 9). "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (verse 11). "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (verse 105). So many in this world are floundering around, making a complete mess of their lives because they do not know God's Law, or if they do know it, they choose to ignore it. Some Christians, rather than basing their lives upon the Law of God, look for new prophetic words to guide them, and land up confused and in trouble. But thanks be to God, we have a sure and infallible guide for how to live in his Law. That Law is summarised by the Ten Commandments.

Those who live according to the Law of God find great stability and blessing in their lives. Psalm 1 famously contrasts those who live according to the Law of God with those who despise it:

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

So, whereas the unbeliever scorns and despises the Law of God, the true believer greatly cherishes and values it. The unbeliever sees the Law as a set of rules which have been laid down by a celestial kill-joy, who just wants to stop us from having fun and enjoying ourselves. The true Christian knows, by contrast, that God has given us his Law because he loves us, and he knows what is best for us. Psalm 19 speaks of the great blessings which come to us through obeying the Law of God:

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD



are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. (verses 7 – 11).

## **Application**

What lessons can we take from what we have seen here?

First of all, we all need to examine ourselves to see if we really are true believers. We have seen that a mark of a true believer is that he genuinely loves the Law of God, and especially the Ten Commandments. This is because God is now his friend and not his enemy. He sees how immensely valuable it is to have the Law of God. Do you delight in the Law of God? Or is reading or hearing it at best simply an intellectual exercise, or worse a bore to you. Or worse still, do you get annoyed or angry when the Law of God is proclaimed? If you find the Law of God boring or annoying then at the very least it indicates a serious spiritual sickness, and may indeed mean that you are not converted at all. Ask yourself, have you ever truly come to Christ for salvation? Have you ever depended on him, and him alone, to make you right with God? If the answer is “no” or “not sure”, then come to him today. We have seen how he died on the Cross for sinners. Come to him. Trust in him. Take him as your own Saviour.

Perhaps in your mind you answered the question I just asked by saying, “Yes, I really do believe I am a believer. Although I frequently fail to obey the Ten Commandments, and I do not treasure them as I ought, I really do believe in Christ as my Saviour. I know I cannot save myself. I know that faith in him is the only way to be saved, and I do depend upon him.” If so, what lesson can you take from this message? Surely it must be that we need to treasure the Commandments, and indeed the whole of God’s Word. We need to allow time to read God’s Word each day. And when we read it, we need to apply ourselves to concentrate upon what we have read and to remember it. We need to allow God’s Word to speak to us and challenge our attitudes and behaviour. Not only so, but we also need to memorise God’s Word.

As well as memorising God’s Law, we need to meditate upon it. It needs to



become thoroughly absorbed into our way of thinking. We should write out texts and put them around the house. You might find it helpful to have a note book where write down texts that have particularly spoken to you. Seek to turn the conversation at meal times to spiritual things. If you live in a family, gather your family together to hear the word of God and to pray. This is what God urged the people of Israel to do:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6.4 – 9)

You might say that you are too busy to have a daily “quiet time”. I know that there are some people who are exceedingly pressed. But I put it to you, can you really afford not to have a daily time with God in his Word? There are so many ways in which the world is trying to squeeze us into its pattern. If we do not keep up a constant habit of reading the Word of God, we are almost bound to become like those around us in our thinking. Remember Daniel. He had responsibility for running the whole Babylonian and then Persian empires. Yet he still made time to pray three times a day. Can we not make time once a day to seek God in prayer and read his Word. May the Lord give us grace to hear his Word and obey him.

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