
The Ten Words

Exodus 20:1-21

Introduction This is the Christmas or, better in my view, the Advent Season. This is not a text that most would think would be appropriate for this season of the year. This is the season of joy and lights and tinsel. Is this really a time to think about the Ten Commandments?

Yes it is. But do you remember our setting? The Ten Commandments were given from the fenced and fearful mountain. Israel was sitting at the foot of a mountain they cannot touch with the awesome and fearful presence of God on the very mountain itself. They were at Mount Sinai. God is entering a covenant with Israel. Chapter 19 makes this quite clear. We are told in the New Testament that “the Law was added because of transgressions until the promised one comes,” that is, the Lord Jesus. The Law was not given so that the Israelites could attain righteousness by keeping it (Romans 3:20; Galatians. 3:11). A righteous standing (justification) before God has always been attained only by faith in God and His promises alone (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3, 22; 5:1; Galatians 2:16; 3:6, 21). The Mosaic Covenant (the Law) primarily functioned as Israel’s national constitution and secondarily to show the Israelites their sinfulness (Romans 3:19-20b; 7:7) in contrast with God’s standards of holiness and righteousness, and to condemn mankind.¹⁴

So, what will be our approach? Do we do 10 sermons, one each commandment and follow the Catechisms by expounding on all their implications? Do we follow Thomas Watson on his exposition of the so-called Moral Law showing what each meant, what it requires and what it forbids?

No, because the Mosaic Covenant was then, but this is now. The Mosaic Covenant was a whole covenant. The Decalogue, the Ten Words, were an integral part of that covenant. It is possible to distinguish different elements of the Covenant. We have the Decalogue, the Social Law and the Ceremonial Law. But they are a whole fabric Jesus and the apostles warn that the breaking of any part of the Law is to break all of it. So, we must be very careful about speaking about the “Moral Law” referring to the Ten Commandments as though we are still bound to them and are under them.

John Reisinger, in *Tablets of Stone*, has given the clearest summary I know of.

God entered into a special and unique covenant relationship with the nation of Israel at Mt Sinai. The terms of that covenant are sometimes called the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are also called The First Covenant, especially when that covenant is contrasted with the New Covenant that replaces it. The First, or Old Covenant was made only with the nation of Israel at Mt. Sinai. The actual “words of the Covenant” are the Ten Commandments as they are written on Tables of Stone with the finger of God. This covenant document is also called the Old Covenant. It is also called the Tables of Testimony, or just the Testimony. The terms “Ten Com-

¹⁴John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985), 1:138.

mandments,” “Tables of Stone,” “Tables of Testimony,” “Testimony,” “Old Covenant,” “First Covenant,” “words of the covenant,” and “stone Tablets of the Covenant” are one and the same in the Scriptures. All eight terms mean exactly the same thing and they are all interchangeable with each other.¹⁵

Now, some of you are going to be tempted to hear me say that we can disobey the Moral Law. No, we are no longer under the Law both because of our place in history (Galatians 3-4) and because of being placed in Christ (Romans 6). The morality reflected in the Ten Commandments is an expression of the holiness of God. But the terms and the commands have been fulfilled in Christ. However, obedience to God from the heart is still required. It is just **not** the old obedience of the Old Covenant and the Mosaic Law. It is now the loving God and loving others as Christ has loved us in the New Covenant and by grace. The Old Covenant was insufficient both in its revelation of the holiness of God, in its requirements and commandments and most tragically, in its inability to cause what it called for.

So, we are going to carefully examine this text. I am endlessly intrigued by people who advocate the Moral Law as being eternally binding and then either misunderstand what it says or twist it to say something different than what it says. Even my favorite commentator on Exodus struggles with the plain words of the text and the application to post-cross believers.

The Parties to the Covenant

(v.1)

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

God was entering into a covenant with His people. During their stay and their deliverance from Egypt, they have become more than a clan. They are now a people group, a nation. In entering a covenant with them, God uses the idea and structure common to their day. This covenant was in the general form of a *Suzerainty* (sju:zərənti) treaty, which establishes the rule and protectorate of a people or nation by a powerful ruler. Yet it was also unique and different for it is providing a mediated relationship between God and His people.

God, in making the covenant, declared who He is and what He has done for them. He is going to manifest His character all through the prologue to the covenant. In these declarations, God reminded them of the two fundamental relationships He has with His people.

As their Revealer

First, it is God who reveals Himself to His people. His primary method is to speak and have that speech written down. The Mosaic Covenant was God setting the terms by declaring and recording the stipulations and conditions of the covenant. Israel was not negotiating. Israel was not proposing language to be included. God was speaking all the words.

¹⁵ Reisinger, John. *Tablets of Stone*, p.15

As their Ruler

In the declaration of His Name He was asserting that He is their ruler. He is the Lord, the eternal existent One who is their God. He was asserting His authority over them. He has the right as the Lord of the universe to enter into this treaty. He was representing Himself; He was not an ambassador for someone else.

As their Redeemer

He declared that He, God, was their redeemer. We tend to think of this word in terms of personal salvation, which is not what is in view here. He was not talking about redeeming them from their sins. While the word takes on that meaning as the Scripture unfolds, God was very clear that this redemption is the deliverance from Egypt¹⁶. The Hebrew word itself means, “to buy” or “to purchase.” Israel then is not just a people looking for a powerful benefactor or protector. They have been made God’s own possession. He has redeemed them. They are His by right of ownership and oversight.

The Content of the Covenant

(v.2-17)

Now, we come to the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. All through the Bible, these are referred to as an expression of two primary commands. Those two commands are to love God and love neighbor. All that the Law required could be fulfilled by simply loving God and neighbor as the Bible describes.

Commands Relating to Loving God

(v.2-11)

³ “You shall have no other gods before me.

The first command required absolute and unrivaled allegiance to God. There must be nothing that is set above or over against God. He is unique. He alone is God alone. He is the one and only true God. This command is a matter of the heart as well. To have or to set anything or anyone above or beside God as His equal is something a person does in their hearts. Then that expresses itself in various choices, actions, emotions and so on.

⁴ “You shall not make for yourself a carved 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. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

The second command forbade the making of any representation of God or the bowing down to any idol to serve them. This command was not forbidding art and sculpture as was evident from the design of the tabernacle and Temple. It was forbidding the worship of God through images. It was the forbidding of representing the transcendence of God through any man made thing.

¹⁶ Israel’s redemption from Egypt is a type of the redemption of God’s people as individuals that “saves” them in the New Testament sense. However, most of the Jews who were “redeemed” from Egypt were not believers possessing a personal salvation. It is very important to recognize the *typological* element but not confuse it with the individual, personal reality the type represents.

Why was this? In this text it was because of the holy jealousy of God. He, as the glorious God, demands that the gaze of the souls of His people be on Him alone. He will have no rival for their attentions and affections. Further, as a jealous God, as the One who demands absolute fidelity and loyalty, He will deal with the sins of His people. Sinning against God was characterized as hating God. Those who break the covenant by sinning incurred the wrath of God on themselves and their descendents. Now this is very important. At this point, God was establishing in the covenant the grounds on which, when Israel rejects and crucifies the Messiah, they are rejected by God as a nation.

This commandment also anticipated that Christ is the only image of the invisible God. Hebrews 1:3 says, “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.” Christ is uniquely and exclusively the image of God even in the incarnation. HE alone is the image of God in His essence and in His manifestation. To have seen Christ, is to have sufficiently seen the Father (John 14:8-11). Thus, Israel was not to worship idols and was not to make any representation of the Godhead itself.

⁷ “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

The prior commandment prohibited the making of carnal visual representations of God’s nature. This command prohibited making casual verbal representations of God’s name. This command was not primarily about swearing or cursing or taking oaths, per se. It was about treating God with irreverence. It was a heart attitude of not honoring the name or the character or the reputation of God. In other words, while cursing may be an expression of this, Israel was to carefully guard and uphold the honor of God. They were not to use His name for any “idle, frivolous or insincere purpose” (Carson, *New Bible Commentary*).

Why were they to honor the *name* of God? Because God has chosen to represent Himself through His names. The words He has chosen to represent Himself must be treated with respect and honor because His Son is the Word. God extends His holiness through all that is to represent Him. So His name is holy. His Spirit is holy. His people are holy. Thus, to dishonor and disregard the Name of God is to disregard and dishonor God Himself.

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 to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

The fourth command required the keeping of the Sabbath as holy to the Lord. Later, in Exodus 31:11-17 and Ezekiel 20:12-20, the Sabbaths were declared to be the sign of the Mosaic Covenant. Capital punishment was prescribed for those who broke this commandment. The Sabbath was not only one day in seven, but also referred to a sequence of festivals based on multiples of seven years. The sign of the Mosaic Covenant was rooted in the natural order, that is, in creation. In fact, all of the signs of the Old Covenant are rooted in some way in the natural creation order. In the Noahic Covenant, it was a rainbow. In the Abrahamic

Covenant, it was circumcision. In the Mosaic Covenant, it was the Sabbath. This is why Paul in the New Covenant questions why people would go back the first principles, to the old order of things. From the very beginning, God made it clear that the old was a part of the flesh, the fallen world, the old order of things.

Keeping the Sabbath was the center-piece of the Old Covenant Mosaic Law. It was grounded in creation, in the work-rest cycle. Now, the Sabbath has been kept in Christ who has given us our Sabbath rest through grace. Because Christ finished the work, we now in our salvation have already entered the Sabbath rest that remains for us. While we do set aside a special day to worship together as God's people, we do not have Sabbath services, nor Sabbath keeping, nor sanctuaries, etc. We are no longer looking back to the old creation. We are now looking forward to the New Heavens and New Earth which we have begun to experience when we became a new creation in Christ.

Commands Relating to Loving Neighbor (v.12-17)

The second suite of commands were expressions of loving neighbor. The principles and precepts, briefly given here are expanded through the expositions and the case law given in the rest of the Mosaic Law. This brief summary was to guide and guard relationships within Israel.

¹² "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

For Israel, the home was to be initial and primary place for spiritual formation. There the honor that was due to the name of God was also due to father and mother. This was not addressed just to children per se. This was a life long obligation. Obedience is required of children still in the home of a parent. This is evident throughout the Scriptures. What was being required here was a respect for parents that would shape and govern life all of life even when obedience itself was not in view. In learning to honor parents, respect for all authority was being instilled.

This was the first command that had a positive promise attached to it. Honoring parents in Israel meant that they would be long settled in the land God would give them. God tied honoring parents to national stability. It is not wonder then that one of the reoccurring condemnations of Israel by the prophets during the decline of the monarchy and the exile is the sinful breakdown of Israelite families.

¹³ "You shall not murder.

Our translation picks up this command in its proper form. It was murder that is being forbidden. Translations that say not "to kill" have made the command much broader than intended. It is the unjustified, unlawful killing of a human being that was in view. Judicial execution, killing during a just war and defense of life and property were justifiable homicides. Capital punishment, the prosecution of a just war by a nation state and personal defense of life and property were all allowed and explained more fully in the rest of the Mosaic Law.

Just a word here for us as Christians. We must be very careful that we conduct ourselves in a New Covenant manner. Just as with our responsibilities to parents,

the New Covenant requires for the imitation of Christ in laying down our lives willingly when it comes to the gospel and the faith. A believer who takes another life must never do so in the name of God or in defense against persecutors.

¹⁴ "You shall not commit adultery.

The command forbids all sex outside of marriage. It is that simple. While the Bible uses other words to speak of certain kinds of immorality, including fornication, bestiality and homosexuality, the word used here covers all forms and types of sex acts outside of marriage. It reserves the pleasures of intimacy for a man and a woman who are married to each other.

¹⁵ "You shall not steal.

This command forbade the taking of someone else's property. The previous command forbade the immoral taking of someone else's life; this forbids the immoral taking of someone else's property. Again, what was intended here is explained more fully elsewhere. For example, the taking of land by Israel in war was entirely justified and not stealing the land from the Canaanites. Yet, the permanent taking of someone's inheritance or the moving of the land boundary markers was stealing.

¹⁶ "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

This command forbade the giving of false testimony, whether casually as in slander and gossip, or formally as in a court of law. While many other Scriptures address the issue of lying and truth telling, that is in fact not primarily what is in view here. This command does not say, "You shall not lie." This command is invoked elsewhere in the Bible not to require total honesty in speech but to truthfulness when speaking of another person's character or conduct.

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 is your neighbor's."

The last command is central to the heart issues in loving one another. This command forbade coveting. It forbade the desiring to have for themselves what was another's. This command specifically spoke to the heart. It highlighted one's desires. The illustrative list that begins with wife (spouse) and servant extended coveting to persons. Israelites were being held accountable for the covetous desires of their hearts, not only for another persons things, but another person's spouse or servants.

So, these were the Ten Commandments. These were given as the foundation for the legal, covenantal relationship between God and Israel. Once again, I remind you that while these are Scripture and therefore profitable for our study and use, we are not under them for we are not under Law, but under grace. This is why I have chosen not to illustrate these commands with modern applications. Yes, we must still obey God. We still must be pleasing to Him. But we are not in this Covenant. It was broken by Israel and its requirements were kept by the Lord Jesus so that He has fulfilled it for us.

The Response to the Covenant (v.18-21)

Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off ¹⁹ and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." ²⁰ Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin." ²¹ The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

The nature of the giving of the Law and Covenant shapes the response of the Israelites. Their response to the Law and Covenant illuminates the nature of the Law down through Redemptive History.

The Fear of the People

The people are fearful. The Law does nothing to alleviate their fear. Coming to them off the dark shrouded, lightning struck, trumpet blaring mountain the Law and Covenant increases their fear in its solemn commands and requirements. The Law was a fearsome thing. There is no grace in the Law. Giving it may be a gracious act of God to show them their sin and restrain their unrighteousness. However, the Law will call for immediate obedience from the heart without in itself giving them the ability to do what was commanded.

The Call for a Mediator

The people plead for a mediator. They are willing to listen to the voice of Moses. But they want God to stop speaking to them. This arises from their fear and from their sin. The voice of God declaring His Law and Covenant comes with such force and fearsomeness that they want Moses to go and listen to what God says, then come down and speak to them. They made a mistake that will be made all through history. They did not want to hear the Word of God. They promised to hear Moses. But then, when Moses spoke and wrote the very words God declared, they refused to believe in an obeying way.

The Purpose of God

The reason for God speaking from the fenced and fearsome mountain in this way with these words is given here. God intends to test them. Will they continue to believe God, to treasure His Word and presence so that they will not be afraid? Yes, they ought to come in humility and reverence, but not in the abject fear they are experiencing and expressing.

God intends to restrain their sin. When God is truly feared and respected, then sin will be restrained. It is from sentences like this that Paul the Apostle concludes that the Law and Covenant were added because of transgressions. It was given from a fenced mountain to show that sin is a trespass where forbidden. It was given from the fearsome mountain to instill fear over the punishments for sin.

The closing sentence here says it all when it comes to the Mosaic Law, the Ten Commandments. The people must stand afar off. A mediator must draw near. And God who is revealing Himself through this Law is in a thick darkness.

Approaching the New Covenant

So, how is such a dark and dreadful giving of Law and Covenant a truly Advent sermon? Well, in one of the only references to the birth of Christ outside the gospels, Paul writes these amazing words in Galatians 4:1-7.

I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, ² but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. ³ In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. ⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. ⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

The fullness of time is marked by the coming of Jesus, sent forth from the Father to live among us as man. The Old Covenant age was the time of guardians and managers. But when it was the time for the Old Covenant to be fulfilled and the New Covenant to be inaugurated, God sent His Son into the world. He was born under the Law; that is, He was born in the Old Covenant era, born an Israelite and obligated to keep the Law, which He did exactly as the Father intended for the Law to be kept. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus redeemed those who were under the law so that we might be placed as sons in God's family. So the advent of Jesus is the completing of the age of the Law, the fulfilling of the covenant and launching of the new era of the New Covenant. This new age is marked by the indwelling of the Spirit and our living as children of God. So now, you are freed to address your heavenly Father with familial familiarity and are now heirs through God.

Applying to our Lives

In this season of the year, let us rejoice in what Jesus' coming has done for us:

He has fulfilled the Law and Covenant bringing to an end the old era of its rule. We are no longer under its dominion and its condemnation. We have been freed to live under grace in the Spirit as a son of God.

He has redeemed us from the debt to the Law. As a result of our sin, we owed the penalty and price the Law demanded. But the price has been paid and the punishment satisfied so that we are now God's own possession.

He has opened the entry to Mt. Zion so that we no longer come to this fenced and fearful mountain. The coming of the Lord Jesus launched the new era, the new creation, the way into the heavenlies.

So yes, the brightness of the glory of His coming is even brighter against the dark, smoking, fearsome mountain. That was then, but this is now. And this is now because Jesus has come.