

—Westminster Shorter Catechism—
Lesson 37—The Moral Law in Sum, Q. 41

How were the Ten Commandments given?

- I. The Ten Commandments were given to Israel after they came out of their Egyptian bondage, for “they that cast off Satan’s yoke, must take on the Lord’s” (1Th 1.9). And they were given in two ways:
 - A. By an audible voice from the Lord on Mount Sinai.
 1. Never was any law given in such a solemn and terrifying manner, with such dread and awful majesty, Ex 20.7-20; Heb 12.18-21.
 2. The people were commanded to wash their clothes. Boundaries were set at the foot of the mountain, beyond which they could not cross. There were great thunderings and lightnings; “the artillery of heaven was shot off.” Angels were in attendance, “mustered as the heavenly militia on this important occasion.” “In a word, the law was promulgated with the marks of supreme majesty. God by all this was showing how vain a thing it is for sinners to expect life by the works of the law, and thereby also showing the necessity of a mediator.”
 - B. Written by the finger of God on two tablets of stone.
 1. The stone tablets signified the hardness of men’s hearts, but the finger of God wrote the law on them to show that He alone can write them on the hearts of men.
 2. The two tablets were afterwards laid up in the ark of the covenant, in order to be fulfilled by Christ, who is the end of the law for righteousness for all who believe (Rom 10.4), and under the mercy seat, where the blood of the sacrifices was sprinkled, to show that Christ’s blood covers all the law which we have broken, Eph 1.7.
- II. The law was given in writing by God to confirm the natural law written on men’s hearts, Rom 2.14-15, as well as because man’s faculties (understanding, conscience, affections, and will) were all disordered after the fall. In the face of man’s wicked distortions of His law and proud self-justifications, God would have His law freed from all darkening corruptions by inscribing it Himself, in stone, for all to see.

How is it that the moral law is summarily comprehended in just ten Commandments?

- I. The ten Commandments are the heads of all the duties of the moral law contained in the Bible. They are the text which the prophets, Christ, and His apostles expounded in specific applications and directions for the people of God. There is nothing that God requires but it may be reduced to one of these Commandments, and there is nothing that is a sin before God that isn’t a breaking of one of these Commandments.
 - A. The first commandment *regulates the object of worship*, requiring us to know and acknowledge God to be the true God, and our God, and to worship Him and glorify Him as such, in heart and life.
 - B. The second *regulates the manner of worship*, requiring us to receive, observe, and keep pure and entire all such religious worship and ordinances as God has appointed in His Word.
 - C. The third *regulates the attitude of worship* and requires the holy and reverent use of God’s names, titles, attributes, ordinances, words, and works.
 - D. The fourth *regulates the rhythm of worship*, requiring us to keep the Sabbath day holy, as the day which God has set apart for His own worship and service and not for own work and play.
 - E. The fifth *commands reverence for all authority* and relates to the duties we owe to one another in our several places and relations, as superiors, inferiors, or equals.
 - F. The sixth *commands reverence for life* and requires the preservation of our own life and that of others.
 - G. The seventh *commands reverence for marriage* and requires the preservation of our own and our neighbor’s chastity, in heart, speech, and behaviour.

- H. The eighth *commands reverence for property* and relates to the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others.
- I. The ninth *commands reverence for truth* and requires the maintaining and promoting of truth between man and man, especially in witness-bearing.
- J. The tenth *commands reverence for providence* and requires us to be content with our own condition, and to have a right and charitable frame of spirit toward our neighbor and all that is his.

What are the rules for a right understanding of the Ten Commandments? WLC 99, cf. also 91-148

- I. The commandments require perfection, Ps 19.7; Js 2.10; Mt 5.21-22.
- II. They have regard not only to outward actions, but also to the inward motions of the heart, Rom 7.14; Dt 6.5; Mt 22.37-39; Mt 5.21-22, 27-28, 33-34, 37-39, 43-44.
- III. One and the same thing, in different respects, is required or forbidden in several commandments, Col 3.5; Amos 8.5.
- IV. Whatever sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded; and where any duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden (and likewise a threat and a promise), Isa 58.13; Dt 6.13; Mt 4.9-10; Mt 15.4-6; Gen 2.17.
- V. Whatever God forbids in His law is at no time lawful to be done; and whatever He commands is always our duty, and yet every particular duty is not to be done at all times, Job 13.7-8; 36.21; Rom 3.8; Heb 11.25; Lk 17.10; Mt 12.7.
- VI. Under one sin or duty, all of the same kind are likewise forbidden and commanded, together with all the causes, means, occasions, and appearances thereof, and provocations thereunto, Mt 5.21-22, 27-28; Mt 15.4-6; Jude 23; Gal 5.26; Col 3.21.
- VII. Whatever is forbidden or commanded with respect to ourselves, we are bound, according to our places and stations, to endeavor that it may be avoided or performed by others, according to the duty of their places, Ex 20.10; Lev 19.17; Gen 18.19; Josh 24.15; Dt 6.6-7; Heb 10.24-25.
- VIII. In what is commanded to others, we are bound, according to our places, and callings, to be helpful to them; and to take heed of partaking with others in what is forbidden to them, 2Cor 1.24; 1Tim 5.22; Eph 5.11.
- IX. The prohibition of the effect includes also the prohibition of the cause, from which the effect flows, Mt 5.27-28; Job 31.1; Eph 4.31; Col 3.8.
- X. The precepts of the second table must yield to those of the first, and every commandment to the ones above it, when they cannot be both performed together, Lk 14.26; Acts 4.19.

Inferences

- I. The rule of man's obedience is not wrapped up in shadows and nuances and is not ambiguous or difficult to understand. It is plain and obvious to the understanding of men, Mk 10.19. It is contained in ten plain words and explained and illustrated in every book of the Bible; and in some measure it is written on the hearts of all men, Rom 2.14-15.
- II. We ought to seriously and prayerfully study the spirituality of the Ten Commandments. God is never pleased with a mere outward obedience, and Christians, in whom the Spirit of God dwells, should never be either. We are to strive for an obedience that is born in the heart and engages the whole man, a living sacrifice, Ps 119.32; Pr 4.23; Col 3.22; Rom 13.5; Josh 24.14-15; 2Cor 1.12; Acts 23.1; 24.16; Phil 3.12-14. We are to strive for an obedience that is: *sincere*, flowing from right principles of faith and love in the heart and directed to right ends in the glory of God; *universal*, giving oneself to all the Commandments, without mincing; *cheerful*, striving to obey with joy and thankfulness in our heart; and *constant and perpetual*, striving to obey all the time in all our ways.
- III. Yet, given the requirements of the law, life and salvation are utterly unattainable by it. It demands an obedience that we cannot perform. So let us take ourselves to the obedience and satisfaction of Christ, by which the law is magnified by His perfect obedience and honored by His perfect satisfaction. I.e., let us beg for mercy and seek to be saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone, Gal 2.15-16; 3.21-26; Phil 3.8-9.