

# Exodus – Lesson 15

## The Ten Commandments

### Read Exodus 20:1-21

1. (a) Why does God *begin* with these words to the people when they first come to Sinai?

The Ten Commandments are the *first* words of God to the Hebrew people because they contain an exposition of *his* nature and character. The *first* thing that the people needed to hear was who God was: the Ten Commandments are an *expression* of the nature and character of God, and their obedience to them would reflect his holiness and sacred nature. The entire Ten Commandments, as an expression of the full nature of God, *flow* from his work to redeem them from Egypt, and their obedience to them would constitute their belief in his holiness and power over their lives.

- (b) Reread verses 18-21. What is the *relationship* of the people's fear to what God has just said to them in verses 1-20?

The *proper* response to this “standard of righteousness” is fear: 1) because the Ten Commandments reflect the full nature and character of God, a God set apart as infinitely greater in nature and power than them. To hear these commands is to “hear” the nature of God and to become aware of the awesome “gap” between humanity and God. Such a distance should produce a healthy fear; 2) because the Ten Commandments reflect a *perfection* of living that is impossible to keep. To hear these commands is understand the absolute perfection that God demands of his own people, and to realize the impossible nature of keeping these standards by sinful human beings. Thus, a natural fear will occur: a fear of the consequences of failure in keeping these commands.

- (c) What *irony* can you find between the words of vv. 18-21 and God's statement in v. 2 that he has brought them out of the “*house of slavery?*”

Egypt was a place of bondage, a “*house of slavery.*” There, in Egypt, the people toiled towards a virtually impossible goal: they achieved nothing in their work for themselves. All that the people gained in Egypt was value for *others*; they never profited from their own work. Thus, all that they did was for naught; the Egyptians gained from their work, but they achieved nothing for themselves that they would be able to own as their own. The same is true of their willingness to come under the Ten Commandments: to work for righteousness under the impossible standard of the law could produce *nothing*: such work could never produce the perfection that God demanded and was (in reality) a pursuit of nothing. This was, of course, not revealed until much later (i.e. under the New Covenant), but it was true nonetheless. Therefore, this is a great statement of irony: the people were being taken out of one form of slavery into another. In the first case, the slavery was to the Egyptians; in the second case, the slavery was to an impossible standard of righteousness. Both were impossible to achieve, and both were forms of slavery, even if they were in different *measure*.

(d) According to verse 20, *why* has God given them these commandments?

God gave these commands to “*test*” the people, to see if they would have the “*fear of God*” in them that would cause them not to “*sin*.” The “*test*” was to see if the people would commit themselves to holiness and righteousness, what was communicated in the commandments as an expression of the nature of God. They were being tested to see if they would draw near to God and come before him in obedience and faith. The key issue (as I see it here) revolves around the people’s willingness to trust in God *more than in themselves*. The Commandments put the people on the horns of dilemma: on the one hand, God insists on a standard of perfect obedience, a standard that he has the right to put us under. Yet, on the other hand, the standard is impossible to keep. Therefore, the dilemma comes in the *response*: the people respond in fear to this test. They intrinsically *know* that they cannot keep such a perfect standard (although they may have convinced themselves that they could) and they also *know* that God demands that the standard be kept. The *proper* response should be one of begging for mercy, but the people do not see that option because they can only see the commands set before them. The test is whether they would come in *faith* before God instead of submitting themselves to a self-righteousness. They choose, instead, to fear God instead of trusting in him by faith for his mercy. This leads to a very long period of *constant* disobedience culminating in the rise of the Messiah to save them.

2. (a) What do *you* think are the first four commandments given? Why do you divide them this way?

The Roman Catholic church defines the first commandment as a combination of having no other gods (v. 3) *and* not making any idols (v. 4), with the remaining commandments following from that with nine and ten being a division of the concept of coveting (v. 17). Protestantism, however, sees these first two concepts as *separate* making the first commandment a prohibition against having other gods and a prohibition against idols. Over against the Catholic position, this is 1) the most logical reading of the text itself, and 2) an obvious *theological* division (see question 2c for a further explanation of this division).

(b) List some reasons *why* the people were to have “*no other gods*” before Yahweh (see v. 3)?

There were a number of such reasons: 1) the people had just come from a polytheistic and anthropotheistic society, where there were multiple gods and that the Pharaoh himself was a god. Under the influence of Egyptian culture for 400 years, such thinking *may* have become commonplace; 2) the people were *about* to enter a land occupied by people who were polytheistic, as well. They would need to be “*prepared*” with a proper understanding of how they were to relate to God; and 3) the reality is: there is only *one* God and he is a *personal* being. Unlike the polytheistic beliefs of the nations surrounding Israel, the Hebrews *knew* their God as a *person*. To make anything else either as a god itself *or* as a substitute for God was to *deny* the personal being known as God. In other words, having other gods was to ignore the *real thing* in favor of something *unreal*.

(c) What is the difference between “*other gods*” (v. 3) and “*any graven image*” (v. 4)?

The concept of “*other gods*” refers to the making of divinity of anything else other than God, including the self. The command involves a *belief* in the *personal* existence of the One True God, and an elimination of polytheism (a plurality of *non-existent* gods). However, the concept of “*graven images*” is a different idea: verses 4-6 clearly involve the *manufacture* of anything that would serve as a *substitute* or *image* of God himself. While these would, of course, be “*gods*” in the limited sense, the difference between these commands has to do with a difference of *vision*: the first command deals with a vision *of God*, while the second deals with a vision *of everything else*. The first command instructs us to *keep* God as God, while the second *prohibits* us from making anything else as a substitute for God himself. It is a mistake to see these as the same thing. The issue is of the *personal* nature of God: as a personal, real Person, God cannot be substituted for.

3. (a) What does it mean that God is a “jealous” God (v. 5)?

The term jealous means to experience certain thoughts, feelings, or behaviors when a person believes a valued relationship is being threatened by a rival. For God to be “jealous” means that he *values* the relationship that he has with his own people, a people that he purposed, developed and redeemed. God becomes jealous when those people threaten that relationship by giving themselves to the worship of *anything* else other than him. However, it is important to recognize that this form of “jealousy” is divine, and not human. It is *not* based on the *need* for requited love, but, rather, on the *divine purpose* of God whereby he develops a people for his own and draws them *to himself* in love and in grace. To think of God as “green with envy” is not correct, for it assumes that God is simply looking for his love to be requited, something which can *never* happen given the distance between the love of God for his people and the *possibility* of their love for him. No, this “jealousy” is one in which God, in his infinitely perfect and holy way, draws a people to himself and then *holds them* as his own. In other words, this is a *jealousy of purpose*: God *purposes* to keep his people, and he will do so without failure. It is not just a *passive* set of feelings, but a concrete work of God.

- (b) Explain what the phrase “visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation” means (see v. 5).

This statement of God is suffixed with the phrase “of those who hate me,” which indicates what it is that causes God to punish generations of people. In the simplest sense, it is those who have *rejected* God that causes God to punish them and those that follow them. Those who reject God begin a path of hatred towards (or rejection of) God which travels from them to their children and their children’s children. Therefore, any rejection of God is likely to continue into the future and become *real* in the lives of those who follow. However, there is also a very *theological* concept expressed here having to do with the *sovereignty* of God. While we would like to believe that *only our sins* cause punishment to come to us, the suffering of sin is not limited *only* to those who commit it. This is seen, of course, in the modern problem of drug and alcohol abuse: the children of substance abusers are much more likely to follow in their parent’s footsteps. But it is also seen in the biblical account. Paul, for example (in Romans 5), discusses the concept of *original guilt*, the passing of guilt from one generation to the next *for Adam’s sin*. He makes it clear that all human beings are *guilty* for what Adam did and suffer the consequences of his act in death. This is the *sovereign* will of God for humanity: the guilt and suffering of one generation *will* be passed on to the next. This makes this a *very dire warning* when it comes to sin, and ought to cause us to pause when considering an act of disobedience.

- (c) How do human beings take the *name* of the Lord in vain (see v. 7)?

Ancient Jews treated this command *in a very literal sense*, refusing to speak or write the name of God (i.e. the tetragrammaton *Yahweh*) and chose, instead, to use substitute words like Lord (i.e. *Adonai*) in its place. They believed that to utter the name of God in a way that was *less* than reverent would result in a violation of this command, so they avoided the issue altogether. However, a proper understanding of this is to recognize what the *name* of God represents. Throughout Scripture, it is the *name* of God that represents his character and his power. The *name* of God is, therefore, not just some moniker like Jehovah or Yahweh, but, rather, the entire *expression* of the power of God that flows from his nature as holy. Therefore, to take the “name” of the Lord in vain is to *minimize* or *marginalize* the power and holiness of God and to treat him with *any form of disrespect*. In other words, to dishonor the name of God is to treat God as *less* than who he really is. It is to dishonor God by attempting to “fit” him into our notions of what “God” ought to be or ought to do!

4. Compare Exodus 20:8-11 with Matthew 12:1-14. How is Jesus the *fulfillment* of the Sabbath?

In Exodus 20, God instructs the people to *honor* the Sabbath day, to keep it holy by refraining from all secular work in order to focus on God and worship him. To honor the Sabbath, then, is to honor the *object* of the Sabbath, which is God. It is a mistake to assume that this command *limits* the Sabbath to a day of rest from employment; the Sabbath has the *focus* of honoring God by putting aside all other distractions so that God is the *only* focus of honor and worship. Jesus, then, is the fulfillment of the Sabbath because he is the *focus* of the Sabbath itself. In other words, the Sabbath was *created* for the purpose of honoring Jesus, who is “*Lord of the Sabbath.*” The Jews of Jesus’ day were *more* concerned about what was right and wrong to *do* on the Sabbath instead of being focused on the *central character* of the Sabbath. They were missing the point: the rest of the Sabbath *is not an end in itself!* Instead, the rest of the Sabbath is designed to allow us time to focus our hearts and minds on the Lord of the Sabbath, who is Jesus, the fulfillment of *why* the Sabbath was commanded in the first place.

5. Compare Exodus 20:12 with Ephesians 6:2-4. What *promise* is associated with keeping this command? Why is this so?

The promise of this command has to do with the *longevity* of the people in the land; Paul reminds the Ephesians of this promise as he discusses *family* issues with them. If the people would honor their parents, God would assure that they would live long in the land and prosper in it. The reason for this is fairly obvious: the honoring of parents is an integral part of the *honoring of family*. Since God considers society to be *based* on the family as a fundamental building block, the honoring of family would be sacrosanct to the survival of the society itself. To honor parents and (as Paul puts it) for a proper family unit to be developed within the framework of the worship of God is to guarantee that a God-centered society would continue to prosper and survive. To violate this command is to *dishonor* the family and to open the door to the destruction of society itself. This command, therefore, is *central* to the continuation of the Hebrew people, and it is also *central* to the makeup of civilized society in general.