

The Ten Commands: Introduction

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For many years, I met and prayed with a man named Dan Marbury. Dan was a phenomenal man and a great friend. He was humble and walked with the Lord. He loved his community and fought for its good on many levels. Our friendship took a turn for the better when we began praying together on a regular basis. Now Dan is not tall in stature. He's a relatively short man, less than 5 feet tall, yet what he lacked in stature was made up with his deep and resonant voice that boomed a low bass. He opened all his prayers this way: "God, we thank you that you are God, and you are God all by yourself..."

At first that caught me as an odd opening to prayer, which, as I say, he did often. "You are God all by yourself..." The more we prayed together, the more profound I saw his cry to God. In this prayer is an embedded humility, confession, admission, submission, acknowledgement, and worship of God rooted in the soil of the first commandment. God alone is God, and He's God all by himself. There are no other Gods before him.

This, of course, is the first of the Ten Commandments, the moral law given to Moses and the people of Israel. Over the course of the following months, I want to walk through the commandments of God given at Sinai and point out their blessing for life and show how each commandment drives us to Christ who is our righteousness.

Jesus did not dismiss questions about the greatness of the law. He answered in straightforward ways. When our Lord was tested by the Pharisees and asked, "*What is the greatest commandment?*" He masterfully answered, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets*" (Matthew 22:37-40). In this simple answer, Jesus summarized the two tables of the law. First, how we are to conduct ourselves before God, and second, how we are to conduct ourselves with our fellow man. This is what the Ten Commandments are doing. In the moral law, given at Mount Sinai, the glory of Christ is on display.

To begin our study, let's look at the Historic Preface to the Ten Commandments in verses 1-2. I say "Historic Preface" because the Ten Commandments given at Sinai follow a Historic Literary form of a Treaty or Covenant Document. God's covenants with his people have dominated the pages of scripture. God made covenants with Adam, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He made covenants with his people Israel, Moses, and King David. In all these covenants we find that God's overall intent from creation forward has been the establishment of a people for Himself in His place forever. It should be no surprise then that when we come to the Ten Commandments, we find God making a covenant.

The covenant of God at Sinai basically functioned as a treaty of God with his people. This was common in the ancient near eastern world. These treaties worked like this: A Lord, a King, a person of great power (in ancient terms, "Suzerain") would rescue a people or do something to provide for a people. He would expand his territory by taking people into his protection. Then he

would engage the people in a covenant contract spelling out the terms of their relationship. How should the people engage and interact with the relationship that was established? That's what is going on in the commandments that God gave Israel.

All of the prologue to the moral law is found in Exodus 20:1-2. Notice, God is speaking directly. The Name of God, the great King is front and center: "*I am the Lord your God.*" The History with the people would come next, recounting the actions of the King on behalf of the people: "*who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*" Stipulations of the covenant come next (verses 3-17).

For us to ever rightly view the commands of God, we must remember that God's commands follow after his grace. God has delivered his people. God has saved them. God has brought them from the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery. I think we often forget that God's grace is the backbone of his commandments. He's not suddenly meeting people in the desert. Far from it. God has come to Egypt to rescue his child out of slavery and bondage. Having rescued them, He now sets out what it looks like to live in a relationship with a Holy God.

The commands are still binding to this day. The commandments fill the teaching of Jesus and the life of the New Testament church, but not as a place of salvation. God's gracious deliverance PRECEDES the demands of the law. GRACE precedes and motivates good works. We need to hear Paul tell us again: Romans 3:20 "*For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.*"

Or Romans 8:3-4 "*For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.*" The moral law of God on the conscience of man and written in stone at Sinai is only perfectly completed in the righteousness of Christ our Savior.

A second word of introduction, which I hope this will become more clear as we approach the Ten Commandments in this study: The law has several uses in the life of the believer. Historically the church has been generally viewed through three lenses for the people of God. First, the law is a mirror: It shows us our sin and drives us to Christ. The law reveals what God is like and in doing so we see our reflection and the horror of the sin that is there. As we see ourselves rightly in this mirror, we are driven into the sheltering arms of Jesus, our perfect righteousness and our advocate before the Father.

Second, the law of God acts as a restraint from Evil in the world. While the law itself is powerless to change hearts and give eternal life, the law written on hearts and in stone can and does still act as an agent of justice in the world.

Third, the law is a guide for life. It reveals what is pleasing to God. As born-again children of God, the law enlightens us as to what is pleasing to our Father whom we seek to serve. The Christian delights in the law as God Himself delights in it. Jesus said, "*If you love Me, keep My commandments*" (John 14:15). This is the highest function of the law, to serve as an instrument for the people of God to give Him honor and glory.

Can any of us keep the moral law of God perfectly? The answer in your own heart and in mine is a resounding “No.” In this life we can be as devout as possible and not come anywhere close to the moral perfection of our holy God. Well, if we can’t keep the moral law perfectly, why should we even think about the moral law or write about it or read articles about it? The answer resounds again, so that we might grow in our sanctification. Being sanctified in this life looks like becoming more and more aware of our sinful nature and growing more and more in the forgiveness and grace of Christ. Also, keeping the law before us grows in us a desire to be zealous for good deeds and is a constant reminder of our need for the Holy Spirit to renew us from the inside out.

Growth in Christ is the goal of this series on the Ten Commandments. In the law we become more and more aware of our sinful nature. Paul said in Romans 7:7, *“What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”*

In the law we are shown our sin and driven to the righteousness of Christ. And by this grace we are more zealous for good deeds and more aware of our dependence on the grace of the Holy Spirit in our Christian walk.

I hope this series will be an encouragement to all of us to see the blazing glory and righteous holiness of Christ and will be a seed for growth in His grace and in our own Christian walk.