

# Ten Commandments and the 21<sup>ST</sup> Century

Exodus 20:1-6

## Introduction

Someone gave me a newspaper clipping about a gentleman who owns his own cable TV news network – I will not mention his name. He, at a meeting with the employees of his company’s broadcasting system, made a startling declaration – He declared the Ten Commandments to be obsolete. I do not know what that had to do with the meeting, but he got off on the subject.

This man told the members of the National Newspaper Association, “We are living with outmoded rules. The rules we’re living under are the Ten Commandments and I’ll bet nobody here even pays much attention to them because they are too old. Today, the Ten Commandments would never go over because nobody likes to be commanded. Commandments are out.”

He then listed ten rules of his own and called them, “The Ten Voluntary Initiatives.”

I would submit that first of all, he is misinformed. The Ten Commandments do relate. In fact, the series that we are going to begin, that will take us through several discussions, I am entitling, “Ten Commandments and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”. They are so applicable to where we are today.

I also doubt that this man has ever sat down and looked at the Ten Commandments or even knows what they say.

I read the results of a recent survey. It revealed that fewer than fifty percent of people who attend church can list even four of the Ten Commandments. So, is the problem that they do not apply to our lives or that we do not know what they say and have never taken the time to look?

We are studying through the book of Exodus and are now in chapter 20. It is going to be delightful to spend time studying each of the Ten Commandments. We are going to see how they apply to our lives. We have a lot to cover today.

## An Overview

The first thing we need to do is take an overview of the Ten Commandments and answer the question, “Why did God give the Law?”

### Why did God give the Law?

We studied all of the fireworks in the previous chapter and now, God is about to give His revelation. Why did He give mankind the Law? Let us look at three reasons. There are more but I have boiled it down to these three.

#### To reveal His glory and holiness

1. First, God gave the Law to reveal His glory and His holiness.

Ultimately, everything that God says, everything that He reveals, everything that He commands, everything that He demands gives Himself glory and honor. Everything that we are to do in life is to reflect His purpose; and that is, to glorify and honor Him.

So the Law ultimately, provides the foundation in which His name, His power, His purity, His character can receive glory and honor.

#### To reveal man’s sinfulness

2. The second reason God gave the Law is to reveal man’s sinfulness.

It is easy for us, as humans, to rationalize any sinful activity that we may participate in. But, when we match it to the Ten Commandments, it is revealed that none of us are perfect and we cannot rationalize what we do. The Bible calls it sin; it is a violation of God’s commandments.

My wife and I watched a documentary that included an interview with a man who had killed several people. They talked about this individual’s life and that he is, in some ways, very intelligent, very sharp; he has earned a degree. The man finally had a chance to appear in one particular courtroom. The documentary showed a dramatization of his appearance in that court. It was interesting that this man, who has put a number of people in the grave, stood and said, “I know I knifed that person and I

know I shot that person, but I am not at fault. It is the system that has created what I am.”

We look at that and think, “Man, is he ever dodging the issue.”

That man may be dodging the issue, but you and I also rationalize the things that we do. For instance, the command says,

**“You shall not steal.” (Exodus 20:15)**

None of us would claim that we are thieves, but we would cheat on an income tax report; we would adjust the hours that we worked on a time sheet so that our employer does not get a full forty. We may find ways to cheat, but we would never consider ourselves thieves. The Bible says not to steal and we would never consider ourselves thieves, but are there areas where we, in fact, take what does not belong to us?

The Bible says,

**“You shall not covet . . .” (Exodus 20:17a)**

We would not consider ourselves covetous, but do we look at things that belong to others and secretly desire them?

The Ten Commandments are what we could call “straight talk” from God to mankind. He really does not “pull any punches”. The bottom line is whether or not we will apply them to every area of our lives.

You can hang a plum line next to a wall and it will reveal how crooked the wall is. The plum line cannot make that wall straight, it can only reveal that it is crooked. That is the nature of the Ten Commandments. They reveal that our nature is crooked; deceitful; cannot be rationalized away.

Why do the Ten Commandments serve to reveal that our nature is crooked? They reveal our sinfulness so that ultimately, we will come to Jesus Christ, who fulfills the Law, and find in Him, salvation.

### **To reveal a standard for godly living**

3. There is a third reason that God gave the Law and that is, to reveal a standard, a principle for godly living.

It is fascinating, as I have begun studying these commandments, that the first four reveal the relationship that we are to have with God. The final six reveal the relationship that we are to have with one another.

So the foundation for these commands is that you are to have no other gods before God, you are not to create some other image, you are not to take His name in vain, and you are to assign a day of worship and rest to Him. Then, on the basis of what we have in relationship with Him, we will not kill, we will not steal, we will not covet, etc.

The beginning and the foundation is a relationship with God – a principle that reveals the standard whereby we can live in a way that pleases God.

### **In the Bible, the Law is compared to . . .**

Now in the Bible, the Law is compared to several things. This is included in God’s overview of things in scripture.

#### **The Law is compared to a mirror – it reveals man’s sin**

1. The Law is compared to a mirror and it reveals man’s sin.

James, chapter 1, in verses 23 through 25, talks about looking into the mirror of the word. We should never look into it, see our reflection, leave, and then, forget to put into practice what we have learned. So the Law, that which is perfect, that standard reveals who we are.

My favorite painter is Norman Rockwell. One of his paintings has always fascinated me. In it, a lady is standing at the counter of a butcher shop and the butcher has a turkey on the scale. The lady is dressed quite properly and the butcher is wearing his apron and cap. They are smiling at each other and at first glance, everything looks just right. If you look closely, however, you notice that behind the turkey, the butcher’s thumb is pressing down on the scale. Then, you notice that the lady is discreetly pushing up on the scale with her finger.

It is interesting when you consider that those individuals would never call themselves thieves. Yet, when you look into the mirror of the word, its perfect standard reveals man’s sin and sin nature.

#### **The Law is compared to a yoke – disobedience to it brings bondage**

2. The Law is also is compared in scripture to a yoke (Acts 15:10), and disobedience to the Law brings bondage – bondage to sin.

### **The Law is compared to a schoolmaster – it prepares the way for Christ**

3. The Law is compared as well, to a schoolmaster (Galatians 3:23-24), who prepares the way for Christ.

The schoolmaster, in New Testament times, was usually a trained slave who took the children of the household and prepared them for adulthood. The Law is, in a sense then, a trained slave of God's character. It prepares you for the way of Christ, who is the only One who can ever fulfill it.

### **The Law is compared to letters written on stone – like the law of love written on our hearts**

4. Finally, the Law is compared to letters written on stone (II Corinthians 3), as compared to the new law, the summation of the law; that is, the law of love that is written on our hearts.

### **Remember, the Law cannot do several things**

Now remember, before we even begin to study the Law, that there are several things it cannot do. I am sure you are aware of this, but I fear we fail to apply it.

### **The Law can never justify from sin**

1. First, the Law can never justify from sin (Acts 13:38-39).

Keeping all of the Law could never declare a man righteous. There must be an act whereby a righteous God gives the declaration of righteousness, and that is justification.

### **The Law can never give righteousness**

2. The Law can never give righteousness; that is, perfection (Galatians 2:21).

### **The Law can never produce peace**

3. Thirdly, the Law could never produce peace (Hebrews 9:9).

Let me apply the fact that following the Law could never produce peace. We are so often intimidated; we are fooled by the moral person who

may live next to us or may work down the hall from us, who seems to be the epitome of clean living. Yet, if they do not know Jesus Christ, do not be fooled, they do not have peace of mind. If you went behind their façade; if you went beneath their veneer, you would find a person who has difficulty in their thoughts. In fact, the scripture talks about one who by the Law, could never receive a perfected conscience.

You may think, "Man, that person has really got it together. They don't need what I've got."

Do not be fooled. They need Jesus Christ. Even though they are, seemingly, the standard of morality, they do not have a clear, perfected conscience that only comes from knowing Christ.

## **The First Commandment**

Now with that overview as a foundation, let us take a look at Exodus, chapter 20. We will cover the first commandment today, which is given to us in verse 3,

*"You shall have no other gods before Me."*

### **The first commandment is based upon four principles**

We will begin with the first verse of chapter 20, and work our way to the first commandment. I will give several points or principles on which the first commandment is based.

### **The presupposition of faith in God**

1. First, there is the presupposition of faith in God.

Look at verse 1 of chapter 20.

*Then God spoke all these words, saying,*

When I read that and studied the way God would introduce His revelation, it reminded me of another passage that we previously studied; that is, Genesis, chapter 1, verse 1. Everything in the first three chapters of Genesis is so hard to swallow for the liberal or the critic or the scoffer because they have never come to grips with the very first verse,

*In the beginning God . . .*

It is on the basis of faith in this God that I can believe He created all of the things He said He created. That same thought can be applied to Exodus, chapter 20. It is on the basis of the fact that God

spoke the commandments, and I believe that God gave these commands as revelation, that I can now believe: it *is* wrong to kill; it *is* wrong to steal; it *is* wrong to covet. That belief is based on faith in God.

So at the very beginning, it is the believer being spoken to. It is the one who has acknowledged faith in God who can ever hope to apply the principles in this chapter.

### **The preeminence of God**

2. The second principle is the preeminence of God.

Look at verses 2 and 3 of Exodus, chapter 20. God says,

***“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me.”***

God says, “I am Yahweh; I am Elohim; I am preeminent; I am the One who brought you out of Egypt.”

Do you see how that is built upon the truth? Not only do we believe God exists, but that He is our Yahweh, He is our Elohim, He is preeminent in our lives, He is the master of our lives.

Now there are many false conceptions of God by the believer. These false beliefs make it impossible to apply revelation from God because God is viewed in a wrong fashion. In fact, I think He is beginning the commandments by trying to straighten out the perception of the people as to who He is.

### **Five false conceptions of God**

Let me take time to give five false conceptions of who God is. You may discover in your own thinking and your own heart, one or more of these conceptions.

#### **Eager bellhop**

- The first false conception of God we will call, an eager bellhop.

I do not mean to be sarcastic, but I think this title sums up an attitude that many people have toward God. This God is the individual who carries your baggage. This God never argues with you because you are the person in charge, not Him. All this God can ever hope for perhaps, is a smile and a pat on the

back, and maybe a tip. But you have Him around because He conveniently helps.

The mistake in this attitude, ladies and gentlemen, is in forgetting that God is sovereign. We should never fool ourselves into assuming that whatever we think is right, He thinks is right.

One time, in fact, Joshua was about to go into battle. You may remember, in Joshua, chapter 5, verse 14, the angel of the Lord appears, which is a pre-incarnate form of Jesus Christ. He appears with a sword drawn. Joshua asks, “Whose side are you on, theirs or ours?” The answer is incredible. The angel of the Lord says, “Neither. I command the host of heaven.”

That is something that we need to straighten out in our thinking. It is not that He is on our side. It is that we are on His side and we claim allegiance to Him. He is the sovereign God.

The point of that passage is not whose side the Lord is on, but whose side we are on. We do not demean His sovereignty. He is not a bellhop; He does not carry our baggage. He is a master; He is a sovereign, powerful God.

#### **Stern teacher**

- A second false conception of God is that He is a stern school teacher.

This is the kind of individual you may remember. You probably had one or two of these teachers. They were determined to ruin your life.

I had a teacher like that in junior high school. She was my science teacher. She was brilliant and she made that known to everyone. If you ever asked a question that seemed less than intelligent, she quickly put you in your place. Unfortunately, I was prone to ask questions that were less than intelligent. So after the first week, I determined never to ask another question. To this day, I hate the Periodic Table.

Some of you had teachers like that. We view God as perhaps, a stern teacher; some “killjoy” who makes life miserable because He always wants to teach us lessons that are way to difficult. And if I ever ask a question, He makes me seem ridiculously foolish.

Coming to church to worship this God is an obligation; a drudgery. Perhaps you watched, on public television, *Lake Woebegone Days*. The author, Garrison Keillor, gave the church he went to a nickname. To Keillor, going to church to worship God

was a drudgery; a difficulty, and God was someone less than enjoyable, so he nick-named his church, “Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility.”

Jesus Christ said, in Matthew, chapter 11, verse 28,

*“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, . . .”*

*“. . . and I will make life difficult for you.”*

No. Jesus said,

*“. . . and I will give you rest.”*

The person who views God as the stern school teacher is someone who does not understand the compassion of God. And keep in mind, men and women, our perception of who God is affects our lives; affects the way we think and act.

### **Impersonal scientist**

- Let me give another false conception of God. We will call this one, the impersonal scientist.

This is the individual, somewhat like the teacher, who has vast knowledge; who is very intelligent; who is an intellectual, but not emotional. This individual seems far removed from the events of our lives. He is a thinker; he is brilliant, but he could never know how to communicate with us.

I think an individual like the man I quoted at the beginning of our discussion today, who says the Ten Commandments never relate, has an impersonal scientist perception of God. This is the perception that God is some far removed, brilliant person who does not know how to communicate with mankind and does not really know how to straighten things out.

We forget what Hebrews, chapter 4, says of our God. We have a High Priest who can sympathize with all of our difficulties because He was touched in every point like we are.

### **Doting grandfather**

- Another false conception of God is one we will call a doting grandfather.

Picture in your mind, and those of you who are grandparents can easily do this, although you may not admit it, an individual who loves their grandchildren so much that almost anything they do is okay. They just want their grandchildren to acknowledge their love and to sit on their lap.

My family was in Atlanta recently, to visit Nanny, as the kids call my mother-in-law, who is a wonderful grandparent. One day while we were there, our kids were alone with Nanny all day. When my wife and I returned, our daughter, Candace, was in Nanny’s lap. I walked through the living room and heard Nanny ask Candace to get down and do something. Then, I heard a pause – and pauses are very loud things – followed by, “Noooooo.”

I stopped and turned around and saw Nanny kind of look at Candace and they broke into laughter and hugged. Nanny said, “Isn’t she so cute! She’s got a mind of her own.”

I wanted to send Nanny to her room!

This is the view of God that He will just pat us on the head and let us do whatever we want. He is just so happy that we say He is our God and we are in the family. The individual who holds this view of God finds it very difficult to apply the Ten Commandments because he figures that God will let him off. God is not grandpa and He hears and sees everything.

I read of a grandfather who lived with his family. He was losing his hearing and the family sort of ignored him. He would sit in his rocker and rock, unable to really hear what was going on.

Finally, one day, this grandfather decided it was time to fix the situation. He went out and bought a couple of hearing aids and could hear wonderfully. A couple of weeks later, he returned to the doctor for a check-up.

The doctor said, “How is it going?”

He said, “Wonderfully! I can hear everything.”

The doctor said, “Your family must be so happy.”

He said, “I haven’t told my family yet. I’ve just been sitting around listening.”

Then he said, “I’ve changed my will two times already.”

No, that is not God. That is cute, but it is not God. God is God.

### **Mr. Fix-it**

- The last false conception of God that I will give is that God is a “Mr. Fix-it”.

This is the individual who is there whenever you get into a jam; he is not there the rest of the time. He is the kind of person that you often hear people talking about – they got into a difficulty and they prayed and

something wonderful happened. But then you wonder, “Where is God the rest of the time?”

In this conception of God, He is sort of like a rabbit’s foot that you carry around. You can call His name if you need something – if you need a job; if you need something to work out – then you go running to God and He will fix everything. It is this view of Him that distorts our perspective.

The Israelites, in fact, had a problem with having this perspective. In I Samuel, chapter 4, they were battling the Philistines and they were having difficulty. So what did they do? They ran back and got the ark, saying, “If we can just bring this ark, which is the representation of God’s power and holiness, into battle with us, we’ll win. No problem.”

God allowed the Israelites to lose that battle to the Philistines. He is not a lucky charm. He is not a God that comes along to be used whenever you want; to make everything just perfect. He is not a “Mr. Fix-it”. He is a sovereign God.

You can surely see that believing different perceptions of God changes the way we view revelation from God. So God, in Exodus, chapter 20, says, “I want you to understand who I am. I am Yahweh. I am Elohim. I am powerful. I am in sovereign control and you are My people. You belong to Me.”

### **The provision of God**

3. On the basis of the preeminence of His character, God graciously reminds the people of His provision.

God says, in verse 2b of Exodus, chapter 20, “In case you’ve forgotten the power of Elohim, remember,”

*“. . . who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”*

“Did you forget? I make a claim on you because I am the One who brought you out of Egypt. I parted the waters. I brought the plagues. I gave you liberty. I have a right to be your God.”

Ladies and gentlemen, for all of you who have named Jesus Christ as your Savior, He has all rights in your life. He brought you out of the house of the slaves. He has forgiven you. He has redeemed you. You now belong to Him. He has provided so much. Do not forget.

### **The prominence of God**

4. Lastly, I think the first command could be summarized in this way – the prominence of God.

Let us look at verse 3 again.

*“You shall have no other gods before Me.”*

Isn’t that a logical conclusion of everything we have said? In light of who He is, His preeminence, and His provision, and the presupposition of faith in Him as God, doesn’t it make sense that He would say, “Now, I am to be the only One.”?

God would take Israel out of a polytheistic world; that is, many gods, and He would make them monotheistic; that is, one God. He says, “I am the true God, so don’t have any others trailing along. I’m it.”

Luther, of course, applied this to contemporary man, by saying, “That is a God whom you cherish and to whom you yield your life. That is who your God is.”

God says, “I want you to cherish Me. I alone hold the right to that position.”

He says, “I don’t want any . . .”

*“. . . other gods before Me.”*

The words “before Me,” or “al panyim” in Hebrew, could be translated, “in My face”. So in other words, “I don’t want any gods in My face.”

God will continue in the next commandments, that we will study, and explain in detail that He is it. God alone is sovereign.

### **Application**

Let us apply this with two thoughts.

#### **The Ten Commandments are universal, absolute truths**

1. First, the Ten Commandments are universal, absolute truths.

The Ten Commandments are not changeable; they do not fluctuate between cultures. These commandments are absolute because God is the God of the universe; He is the creator of all men. Because of that, He has not only given us written revelation, but the writers of scripture say that He has written the Law on our hearts. And that is, in Romans, chapter 1,

a perfect illustration of the person who does not know Jesus Christ, but who knows the Law.

If you go to some remote tribe in some distant country and get involved with that tribe, you observe, as missionaries have shared with us, that they know it is wrong to steal; they know it is wrong to commit adultery, and that there are certain penalties for wrongdoing. That tribe does not have the Bible. That truth is universal and absolute and it is not only in the Bible, but it is on the hearts of men and women.

No one in America could ever claim that it is right to lie because they know in their hearts it is wrong. In fact, because of that, our sin nature produces in us a tendency to what? To lie. Did you teach your child how to lie? Where did he pick it up? Did you teach him to steal? Where did he learn that one? There is a Law and with it is the opposition to the Law within every human being.

The Ten Commandments are universal, absolute truths.

The individual I mentioned earlier said, "Commandments are out because nobody likes to be commanded."

That is very true in our society today. The absolutes are being thrown out. No one likes "Yes" and "No," we want all of it to be gray. We want to hear, "Whatever makes *you* happy. Whatever *you* think you ought to do." The authority is gone because the Bible is, in effect, gone from our lives.

### **The first commandment is the foundation for the other nine commandments**

2. Secondly, the first commandment, as I have mentioned, is the foundation for the other nine.

In other words, my perspective of who God is and my acknowledgment of God as the sovereign God in my life, then produces the foundation for me not to steal, not to kill, not to covet, not to commit adultery. Why will I never commit these things, if possible? Because I have yielded to the first commandment, which is the foundation that God is sovereign in my life.

Let me ask a question. Do you have a problem with honesty? Do you have a problem with coveting? Do you have difficulty with stealing? Do you know where we go to find the foundation for a solution? In acknowledging that God is to be the sovereign God in

your life; by yielding to Him, you now have the basis whereby you can live honestly; you can live contentedly. And this is the foundation for the other nine commandments.

The question is, "Is God prominent? Is God preeminent? Are the false conceptions present in your life? Is He a bellhop, a teacher, a scientist, a grandfather, a fix-it? Or, is He, in your life, as He declares to the Israelite,

*"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You [therefore] shall have no other gods [in My face] before Me [I alone rule in your life]."*

Is God prominent? Is God preeminent? That is the question of command number one.