

## [Exodus 20:1-20](#)

I begin with three contrasting stories.

Firstly, many years ago when I was a young Local Preacher, an elderly lady said to me after a service, 'If only this country could get back to the Ten Commandments, things would be better.'

Secondly, when Margaret Thatcher's government proposed to allow substantial Sunday trading, I wrote a letter to my MP opposing it, outlining the harm it would do to families and society. In part of his reply he wrote, 'You cannot run a country on the Ten Commandments.'

Thirdly, two circuits ago a young South African couple joined one of my congregations. Looking for work, they applied for jobs when Wilkinson's opened a new local store. They said they would work all and any days, except Sundays.

For that reason, they were not offered employment. And they would have got nowhere with their argument had they pursued it legally, because in one court case where a Christian did not want to work on Sundays, the judge ruled that keeping the Sabbath was not an essential part of Christianity.

Now I know all those three little cameos concentrate on the same single commandment of the ten – keeping the Sabbath. But they show the chasm that has been opening up between traditional Christian values and the direction of our society for decades now.

So when we come to a reading like today's, how do we regard the Ten Commandments?

In answering that, I'm not going to discuss every commandment in detail – this is not a ten-point sermon! But I shall use individual commandments to illustrate the big picture of how we regard these ancient, venerated laws as Christians.

**Firstly**, let me remind you of something I've said several times, even in sermons that are not specifically on the Ten Commandments.

I urge you to remember the timing of the giving of these laws. Remember that they come after God has saved his people from Egypt, and not before. God saved them out of sheer grace. He saw their plight, and he acted. It is only in

response to this salvation that God sets out the way he wants his people to live.

Therefore, we keep the Ten Commandments not *in order to* be saved but *because* we are saved. The Ten Commandments are not there as a sign to say, live this way in order to go to heaven. Rather, they say, God has begun the life of heaven in you when you found his love, now live this way.

Keeping the Ten Commandments is therefore meant to be an act of gratitude to God. Israel was to remember her great deliverance from Egypt and live thankfully in this way. We are to remember our great deliverance at what Jesus called his own 'exodus' at the Cross and in the Resurrection. When we recall all that Jesus did for us there, we want to show him how grateful we are for the greatness of his sacrificial love at the Cross and the indestructible hope that the empty tomb gives us.

There is nothing cold about the Ten Commandments. They are not cold laws. Rather, what they call us to is a warm-hearted response to the great love of God.

In classic terms, this is the difference between justification and sanctification, to use the traditional words. In justification, God forgives our sins and makes us right with him through the merits of Jesus. It is as if we had never sinned. In sanctification, the process begins of erasing that sin from our habits and practice. It's something we do because we are filled with gratitude for all God has done for us in Christ.

Today, we take Holy Communion. We particularly concentrate on the Cross of Christ. As we reflect, meditate, or pray after eating the bread and drinking the wine today, it might be worth us quietly asking God, in what ways can I keep your commandments in order to show you how grateful I am for your great love in Jesus?

Now that's a big ask. Keeping the Ten Commandments is a big ask. We cannot do it on our own.

And in the New Testament, we can only be sanctified with the help of the Holy Spirit. So when we pray after communion today, let us not only ask God in what areas of the Ten Commandments he might most want us to please him. Let us also ask him to send his Holy Spirit afresh upon us to enable us to please him.

**Secondly**, the Ten Commandments show us how society is meant to be under the reign of God, but of course it's not like that, and that's the problem. If society had been like this, then God would never have had to deliver the Israelites from Egypt. In the words of an Old Testament scholar named Peter Enns,

The giving of these commands is not simply the introduction or rules that help us hold society together – to make us good citizens, as it were. Rather ... The giving of the law ... is an act of re-creation.<sup>1</sup>

The Ten Commandments show us what God's coming kingdom looks like, in which he is 'making all things new', in the words of Revelation 21.

So when God calls his people to live by these standards, he is not only addressing the relationship between us and him where we show our gratitude in response to his love, he is also addressing our relationship with the world. As we live by these commandments, we are providing a witness to the world of what God's coming kingdom looks like.

Do you remember how the Roman world commented on some of the early Christians by saying, 'See how these Christians love one another'? Well, that's part of this. It isn't for nothing that the church has classically been described as 'a sign and foretaste of the kingdom of God'.

What we are doing in the Ten Commandments is modelling for the world how we live by the two great commandments – to love God and to love our neighbour. The first four commandments directly address how we love God – we have no other gods but him, we make no idols, we do not misuse his name, and we keep the Sabbath holy. The final six commandments address how we love our neighbour – we honour our parents, we do not murder or commit adultery, we do not steal, we do not give false testimony, and we do not covet.

I'm uneasy with that popular Christian slogan that you find on t-shirts or the rear windows of cars that says, 'Christians aren't perfect, they're just forgiven.' It's a half-truth. It's true that we aren't perfect. It's not true that we're just forgiven. We are forgiven, but then called to live differently. The world has a right to see a different way of life from the church.

Does that sound like quite a challenge? It is! But remember two things: one, remember what I said about calling on the Holy Spirit to help us keep the commandments. We cannot do it alone!

Two, when you hear the words 'You shall' or 'You shall not', remember that such wording can be interpreted as both a command and a promise. This is what we are to do. But it is also what we shall become, by the grace of God, in his kingdom. So let's start now.

**Thirdly** and finally, I want to emphasise something that lies behind all I am saying. It comes out in the way that Jesus treats the Ten Commandments – and indeed, God's laws generally. And it's this.

On their own, the Ten Commandments are challenging. But Jesus deepens them and makes them harder, by looking at our inner motives and attitudes, not just our outward actions. He has an expression where he says of some laws, 'You have heard it said ... but I say to you ...' and suddenly we are being held to an even higher standard. Even those commands which we thought we could keep relatively easily now come booby-trapped, because we might not have broken them outwardly, but we almost certainly have inwardly.

What does this do to us? For one thing, it reminds us that none of us can be complacent about the laws of God. We all remain sinners who are dependent upon the grace of God. Christians aren't perfect, indeed. Any self-righteousness or superiority complex needs the chop. We need God's grace through Jesus Christ, and we need the renewing power of the Holy Spirit.

For another, it reminds us that outward religious observance cuts no ice with God. Outwardly keeping the rules, even if we could, does not meet what God is looking for.

No – the challenging standards of Jesus, where he says, 'But I say to you,' show that what he is looking at is our heart attitude.

Go back to the ancient story of the prophet Samuel seeking to anoint a king over Israel in succession to Saul. He arrives at the house of Jesse in Bethlehem, who parades all his sons before him. But Samuel knows God has told him not to look on the outward appearance, for God looks on the heart. And so eventually David is reluctantly brought before Samuel and anointed.

Let the Ten Commandments, complete with the deeper meanings that Jesus gives them, not just be a tick list of which ones we are keeping but a means to reflect on whether our hearts are full of love for him.

So in **conclusion**: is there any place for the Ten Commandments in society today? What about those three vignettes with which I began?

The elderly church member who wanted society to return to the Ten Commandments had a noble vision, but only saw them as like the law of the land. She didn't grasp that these were things we take on in gratitude to God. Without the relationship with God, the following of the Ten Commandments won't happen.

The MP who said you couldn't make a nation's laws based on them was partly right if we are a society that has rejected God. But that is a chilling thing to say. He spoke of our society on the premise that Christianity is a small, unimportant minority.

The young South African couple who didn't want to take a job where they had to work on Sundays found themselves immersed in just such a society, where Christianity is a small minority. They had come from a land where Christian faith had a higher profile. Perhaps they and we need to learn how to live our faith as a minority – like the Jews in exile in Babylon, or like the Christians in the Roman Empire.

And incidentally, those early Christians in the Roman Empire who had to work on a Sunday held their worship early in the morning.

I think we get a clue about our relationship with the world from the way John Wesley typically preached. He began with the bad news. He preached the law of God, explaining God's standards, and leaving people desperate that they could not meet them. Well, there's plenty in the Ten Commandments to do that today. How about 'You shall not covet' in a consumer society or 'You shall not commit adultery' in an epidemic of online pornography, especially given how Jesus interpreted that command?

When his hearers knew they couldn't reach God's standards and were perhaps despairing, then he preached grace.

Is that where we go wrong? The church makes all sorts of moral pronouncements, but forgets the gospel dimension – that our hearers will not

be able to attain God's standards, but that forgiveness and a new start are available in Christ.

So we won't adhere to the Ten Commandments like the law of the land, where we have to, say, keep two metres apart from one another, not gather in groups exceeding six, and wear face masks whether we like those rules or not.

Instead, we shall seek to live by the Ten Commandments out of gratitude to God who in his grace took the initiative to save us in Christ, relying on the Holy Spirit.

We shall seek to live corporately as the church by the Ten Commandments, because by doing so we witness to the world what the coming kingdom of God looks like – a place of peace, harmony, faithfulness, and contentment.

And we shall seek to live by the inner meanings of the Ten Commandments because we are disciples of Jesus and we want to show that our love for him is not a matter of external rule-keeping but an affair of the heart.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Enns, *Exodus (The NIV Application Commentary)*, p411, drawing on Terence Fretheim, *Exodus*, p204.