

The Book of Exodus, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 14: The Ten Commandments

Exodus 20:1-26

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Exodus 20 is the doctrinal summit of the whole Sinai section, and the teacher must handle it with both reverence and care. Establish first the great pattern of grace and law: God redeems Israel out of Egypt before He gives a single command, so the Ten Words are never a ladder by which Israel climbs up to God but the grateful shape of life with the God who has already come down to them. This order, grace then obedience, is the same gospel order in which we are saved by grace through faith and then created for good works (Ephesians 2:8-10). Miss this and the law becomes a system of merit; keep it and the law becomes the contours of covenant love.

The heaviest doctrinal work in this lesson is the relationship between these commandments and the New Covenant, and the teacher should give it the most weight, especially at question nine and at the Sabbath. Teach plainly that the Ten Commandments belong to the Old Covenant God made with Israel at Sinai, a covenant now fulfilled and taken out of the way in Christ (Colossians 2:14; Hebrews 8:6-13). The Decalogue as such is not bound on Christians as our covenant. Yet do not swing to the opposite error, as though these words no longer matter. Nine of the ten are explicitly taken up and bound again under the New Covenant as the abiding will of God: no other gods, no idols, reverence for God's name, honor for parents, no murder, no adultery, no stealing, no false witness, no coveting are all restated and even deepened in the New Testament. The one exception is the fourth, the Sabbath. It alone is never reissued as a command for Christians; Paul calls it a shadow whose substance belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:16-17). Christians gather to worship on the first day of the week, the Lord's Day (Acts 20:7), which is not a transferred or Christian Sabbath under Old Covenant rules, and the rest the Sabbath foreshadowed is fulfilled in the rest we have in Christ (Hebrews 4:9-10). Be careful, clear, and pastoral here, because sincere people teach otherwise.

Beyond the doctrine, this lesson aims at the heart. Each commandment is a window into the holy character of God and a mirror that shows us our need. The class should leave not merely able to list ten rules but moved to love the God who spoke them, convicted of the idols, careless words, and covetous desires the law exposes, and driven to the One who alone kept this law perfectly and fulfilled it for us. The goal is worship and transformation, a people who love God with all their heart and their neighbor as themselves because they have first been loved and rescued by Him.

Question 1

Student Question:

Read 20:1–2. Before the first command, God identifies Himself as the One who brought Israel out of slavery. How does this opening establish that the commandments rest on grace and redemption already given, rather than being a way to earn God's favor (compare Deuteronomy 7:7–8; Ephesians 2:8–10)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin where God begins. Before the first imperative, God declares the gospel of the exodus: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (20:2). The commands rest on this foundation. Israel does not obey in order to become God's people; they obey because they already are God's people, redeemed by His mighty hand.

Press the order, because it is the order of grace everywhere in Scripture. Deuteronomy 7:7–8 makes plain that God set His love on Israel not because they were great or deserving but simply because He loved them and kept His promise. The same pattern runs through the New Testament: by grace you have been saved through faith, and we are then His workmanship created for good works (Ephesians 2:8–10). Salvation is never earned by law-keeping; obedience flows from a salvation already given.

Guard the class against a subtle legalism here. Many sincere believers quietly invert the order, treating their performance as the basis of God's acceptance. The exodus preface forbids this. God rescued first, then spoke His commands. Help students feel the relief and the motivation of this: we obey not to win a love we do not have, but in response to a love that has already claimed us.

Note too that this grounds the authority of the commands. Because the Lord is the One who redeemed them, He has every right to direct their lives. Redemption creates rightful lordship. The God who bought a people may also shape that people, and they are glad to be shaped.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Redemption precedes and grounds obedience; the commandments rest on grace already given (Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 7:7–8).
- Salvation by grace through faith, with obedience as the response, not the cause (Ephesians 2:8–10).
- The danger of inverting the order into legalism, treating performance as the basis of acceptance.
- God's redemption establishing His rightful lordship over the lives of His people.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does it matter so much that God reminds Israel of His grace before giving any command?
- How does the order of grace then obedience protect us from legalism?
- Where do you catch yourself trying to earn a love God has already freely given?

Question 2

Student Question:

God grounds His claim on Israel in what He has already done for them. Where are you tempted to treat your obedience as the reason God should accept you, rather than as the grateful response of one already rescued by Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question turns the exodus preface inward. Israel was redeemed before they obeyed, and so are we. Yet the heart drifts constantly toward treating obedience as the reason God should accept us, as though our record were the foundation of our standing rather than His grace.

Help students recognize the symptoms of this drift. It shows up as anxiety about whether we have done enough, as pride when we feel we are doing well, as despair when we fail, and as a quiet sense that God is pleased with us on good days and disappointed on bad ones. All of these reveal a heart standing on its own performance rather than on Christ.

Point them back to the right ground. The believer's acceptance rests on what God has done in Christ, received by an obedient faith, not on the believer's flawless record. Obedience matters enormously, but as the grateful response of the rescued, not as the rescue itself. Help students rest their assurance where God placed it and obey from that rest.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to treat our obedience as the reason for God's acceptance.
- Anxiety, pride, and despair as symptoms of standing on our own performance.
- Resting assurance on God's redeeming work received by faith, not on a flawless record.
- Obeying from a settled standing in grace rather than to secure that standing.

Discussion Prompts

- How do you tell whether you are obeying out of gratitude or to earn acceptance?
- Where does anxiety about your performance reveal a misplaced foundation?
- What changes when you obey from God's love rather than for it?

Question 3

Student Question:

Read 20:3–6. The first two commandments forbid having other gods and making carved images. What do these reveal about God's exclusive claim on our worship and devotion, and how does the New Testament still bind this truth on Christians (1 Corinthians 8:4–6; 1 John 5:21)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The first two commandments guard the worship of God Himself. The first, you shall have no other gods before me (20:3), forbids any rival to God's place in our devotion. The second, you shall not make for yourself a carved image (20:4-6), forbids reducing the living God to something we craft and control. Together they establish that the true God will be worshiped as He is, with undivided loyalty and on His terms.

Note what God reveals about Himself: He is a jealous God (20:5). This is not petty jealousy but the rightful zeal of a covenant Lord for the exclusive love of His people, like the jealousy of a faithful spouse for the marriage. God will not share His glory with idols (Isaiah 42:8) because He alone is God and because divided worship destroys the worshiper.

Show how the New Testament binds this on Christians. There is one God and one Lord (1 Corinthians 8:4-6), and the apostle still warns, little children, keep yourselves from idols (1 John 5:21). The command against idolatry is not an Old Covenant relic; it is the abiding will of God, restated and unchanged. The Lord's exclusive claim on our worship runs straight through the whole Bible.

Help the class see that idolatry is rarely about literal statues for us. An idol is anything we trust, serve, or treasure in the place that belongs to God, money, success, romance, security, self. The first two commandments expose every such rival and call us back to undivided devotion.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's exclusive claim to be worshiped as the only God, with undivided loyalty (Exodus 20:3-4).
- God as a jealous God, rightfully zealous for the love of His people (Exodus 20:5; Isaiah 42:8).
- The New Testament binding the same truth on Christians (1 Corinthians 8:4-6; 1 John 5:21).
- Idolatry as trusting or serving anything in the place of God, not only literal images.

Discussion Prompts

- What does God's jealousy reveal about the kind of love He desires from us?
- Why does the New Testament still warn Christians to flee idolatry?
- What modern idols compete most for the devotion God claims for Himself?

Question 4

Student Question:

An idol is anything we love, trust, or serve in the place that belongs to God alone. Honestly, what functions as a rival god in your life, the thing you turn to for security, identity, or comfort instead of the Lord?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question presses the first two commandments into daily life. Since an idol is anything we love, trust, or serve in God's place, every heart must ask what rival gods it harbors. The point is not to feel vaguely guilty but to name the specific things to which we run for what only God can give.

Help students locate their idols by following their hearts. We can find our functional gods by asking where we turn for security when afraid, for identity when we want to feel significant, for comfort when we hurt, and for hope when we dream. Whatever answers those questions in God's place has become an idol, however good the thing itself may be.

Be honest that the best things make the strongest idols. Family, work, reputation, ministry, even good gifts from God can be twisted into rivals when we look to them for what belongs to God alone. The cure is not to despise these gifts but to dethrone them, returning God to the center and receiving everything else as His gift rather than as our god.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- An idol as anything trusted, loved, or served in the place of God.
- Locating functional idols by where we turn for security, identity, comfort, and hope.
- Good gifts becoming rival gods when we look to them for what only God can give.
- Dethroning idols by returning God to the center rather than despising His gifts.

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you turn first for security or comfort when life feels shaky?
- What good thing in your life is most in danger of becoming a god?
- What would it look like this week to dethrone that idol and return God to the center?

Question 5

Student Question:

Read 20:7. The third commandment forbids taking the name of the Lord in vain. What does it mean to treat God's name as holy rather than empty, and how does Jesus deepen this concern for reverent, truthful speech (Matthew 5:33–37; 6:9)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The third commandment, you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain (20:7), guards the holiness of God's name. To take His name in vain is to treat it as empty, light, or false, whether by careless cursing, by false oaths sworn in His name, or by claiming His name while living a lie. God's name represents His very self, His character and reputation, and He will not hold guiltless the one who treats it as nothing.

Help the class see how broad this is. It includes more than profanity. It reaches to hypocrisy, wearing God's name as a label while denying Him by our lives, and to flippant, casual

invocations of God that drain the wonder from His name. To bear the name of the Lord is a weighty and holy thing.

Show how Jesus deepens this concern. He teaches His disciples to pray, hallowed be your name (Matthew 6:9), making reverence for God's name the first request of prayer. He warns against casual oath-taking and calls His followers to such truthful speech that a simple yes or no suffices (Matthew 5:33–37). The New Testament everywhere assumes that those who name the Lord will honor His name in reverent, truthful speech and lives.

This commandment, like the others except the Sabbath, carries straight into the Christian life. Reverence for God's name is not an Old Covenant peculiarity but the abiding response of anyone who knows who God is.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's name as holy, representing His very character and reputation (Exodus 20:7).
- Taking the name in vain through profanity, false oaths, and hypocrisy alike.
- Jesus deepening the command: hallowing God's name and truthful speech (Matthew 6:9; 5:33–37).
- Reverence for God's name as the abiding response of all who know Him.

Discussion Prompts

- What are the different ways we can take God's name in vain beyond profanity?
- How does praying hallowed be your name shape our reverence?
- Why does Jesus connect honoring God's name with simple, truthful speech?

Question 6

Student Question:

Our words reveal our hearts. Where has reverence for God grown thin in the way you speak, in careless oaths, casual use of His name, or empty religious talk, and what would honoring His name sound like instead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question follows the third commandment into our actual speech. Our words are the overflow of the heart (Matthew 12:34), so the way we speak of God reveals how much we revere Him. Where reverence has thinned, it shows up in careless habits of speech we have stopped noticing.

Help students examine the specific patterns. This may be using God's name as a casual exclamation, swearing oaths we do not mean, joking about holy things, or the more subtle sin of religious talk that is loud on Sunday and empty the rest of the week. Each of these treats as light what God says is holy.

Move from conviction to renewal. Honoring God's name is not mainly about policing words but about recovering wonder. When we remember who God is, our speech naturally grows more careful and reverent. Encourage students to ask God to restore awe, so that His name becomes too precious to use lightly and too dear to wear falsely.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Speech as the overflow of the heart, revealing the level of our reverence (Matthew 12:34).
- Careless habits: casual exclamations, empty oaths, joking about holy things.
- The hypocrisy of reverent talk on Sunday and empty living the rest of the week.
- Recovering wonder so that God's name becomes too precious to use lightly.

Discussion Prompts

- What does your everyday speech reveal about your reverence for God?
- Where has casualness crept into the way you use or hear God's name?
- How might recovering a sense of God's holiness change the way you speak?

Question 7

Student Question:

Read 20:8–11. The fourth commandment, to keep the Sabbath holy, was given to Israel and became a sign of God's covenant with them (Exodus 31:16–17). Since that covenant has been fulfilled and taken away in Christ (Colossians 2:14–17), why is the Sabbath the one commandment not carried over and bound on Christians, and how do believers rightly worship on the Lord's Day instead (Acts 20:7) while resting ultimately in Christ (Hebrews 4:9–10)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the most carefully handled commandment in the Decalogue, and the teacher should give it real weight. The fourth commandment directs Israel to remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, resting on the seventh day as God rested in creation (20:8–11). It was a genuine gift to Israel, a holy rhythm of rest woven into their week and tied to creation itself.

Establish what the Sabbath was within the Old Covenant. God explicitly made it a sign of the covenant between Himself and Israel (Exodus 31:16–17). It was given to Israel through Moses, never commanded of the patriarchs, and it belongs to the law of that covenant. Like the rest of that law, it was holy and good for its time and purpose.

Now teach plainly why this command is not carried over to Christians, while the other nine are. The Old Covenant, with its Sabbath, has been fulfilled and taken out of the way in Christ (Colossians 2:14; Hebrews 8:6–13). Of all ten commandments, the Sabbath is the one the New Testament never reissues as binding on the church. On the contrary, Paul names it directly: let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a

new moon or a Sabbath, these are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:16–17). This must be said clearly and lovingly, because many sincere people teach a continuing Sabbath obligation.

Then show the fulfillment. For worship, the disciples gathered to break bread on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7), and Christians set aside their giving on that day (1 Corinthians 16:2). The Lord's Day is the day of Christian assembly because it is the day our Lord rose, not because the Sabbath has been transferred to Sunday or rebranded as a Christian Sabbath under Old Covenant rules. For rest, the Sabbath pointed forward to a deeper rest that remains for the people of God (Hebrews 4:9–10), the rest of ceasing from our own works to trust in Christ's finished work. So we honor the truth the Sabbath taught, the goodness of God-given rest and trust, while finding its substance in Jesus rather than in a day.

Keep the tone pastoral. The goal is not to win an argument but to free the class to worship rightly on the Lord's Day and to rest deeply in Christ, rejoicing that the shadow has given way to the substance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Sabbath given to Israel as a holy rhythm of rest tied to creation (Exodus 20:8–11).
- The Sabbath as a sign of the Old Covenant between God and Israel (Exodus 31:16–17).
- The Old Covenant, with its Sabbath, fulfilled and taken away in Christ (Colossians 2:14; Hebrews 8:6–13).
- The Sabbath alone among the ten not reissued as binding on Christians; a shadow whose substance is Christ (Colossians 2:16–17).
- Christians worshiping on the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, not a transferred or Christian Sabbath (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2).
- The Sabbath rest fulfilled in the rest we have in Christ from our own works (Hebrews 4:9–10).
- Teaching this plainly yet pastorally, to free the class rather than to win a debate.

Discussion Prompts

- Why was the Sabbath given to Israel, and what did it signify under the Old Covenant?
- Why is the Sabbath the one commandment not carried over and bound on Christians?
- What is the deeper rest in Christ that the Sabbath was always pointing toward?

Question 8

Student Question:

The Sabbath taught Israel to stop striving and rest in God's provision. Where in your life are you driven, restless, and unwilling to stop, and what would it look like to find your deepest rest not in a day but in Jesus?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes the truth the Sabbath taught and presses it into the restless modern heart. Though the Sabbath command is not bound on us, its lesson remains: God made us to rest, and we cannot find true rest in ourselves. Many of us live driven and depleted, unable to stop, as if the world depends on our striving.

Help students see the spiritual roots of their restlessness. Often it grows from the same idolatry the earlier commandments exposed, trusting our own effort, our productivity, or our control to give us the security only God provides. We cannot rest because we do not really trust that God is holding what we have to let go of.

Point them to the rest Christ offers. Jesus says, come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28–29), and Hebrews speaks of a Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God, entered by ceasing from our own works and trusting His (Hebrews 4:9–10). Encourage students toward concrete rhythms of rest, worship, and trust, not as law, but as the practice of a people learning to lean their full weight on Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The abiding lesson that God made us to rest and we cannot rest in ourselves.
- Restlessness rooted in trusting our own effort and control rather than God.
- The rest Christ offers to the weary and heavy laden (Matthew 11:28–29).
- Entering God's rest by ceasing from our own works to trust in Christ's (Hebrews 4:9–10).

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most driven and unwilling to stop, and what does that reveal?
- How is your restlessness connected to what you are really trusting in?
- What would it look like to rest your full weight on Christ this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Read 20:12–17. The commandments turn from honoring God to honoring people: parents, life, marriage, property, truth, and the heart's desires. How do these reveal God's enduring concern for human dignity and love of neighbor, and how does the New Testament restate these as binding on Christians, even reaching to the heart (Romans 13:8–10; Matthew 5:21–30)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question gathers the second table of the law, commandments five through ten (20:12–17), which turn from honoring God to honoring people. Honor your father and mother, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not covet. These

guard the dignity, life, marriage, property, reputation, and even the inward desires of our neighbor. They reveal God's enduring concern that His people love one another rightly.

Show that these are not arbitrary rules but expressions of love. Paul gathers them up: the commandments are summed up in this word, you shall love your neighbor as yourself, for love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law (Romans 13:8–10). Each command protects something precious in our neighbor, and love is what holds them all together.

Teach that the New Testament binds all six of these on Christians and deepens them. Jesus traces murder back to the anger and contempt of the heart, and adultery back to the lustful look (Matthew 5:21–30). The tenth commandment, do not covet, already reaches into the heart's desires, exposing that God's law was never merely about outward behavior but about the inner person. Far from loosening these commands, the New Covenant intensifies them, writing them on the heart (Hebrews 8:10).

This is the place to make the larger point clear. Of the Ten Commandments, nine, including all of these in the second table, are taken up and bound again under the New Covenant as the abiding will of God. Only the fourth, the Sabbath, is not. So while the Decalogue as a covenant document belongs to Israel and has been fulfilled in Christ, the moral truths it reveals about loving God and neighbor remain, restated and deepened in the gospel.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The second table guarding the dignity, life, marriage, property, reputation, and desires of our neighbor (Exodus 20:12–17).
- Love of neighbor as the summing up and fulfilling of these commands (Romans 13:8–10).
- Jesus deepening the commands to the anger and lust of the heart (Matthew 5:21–30).
- The tenth commandment reaching into inward desire, showing the law was always about the heart.
- Nine of the ten commandments restated and bound under the New Covenant; only the Sabbath is not.

Discussion Prompts

- How does each of the second-table commandments protect something precious in our neighbor?
- Why does Jesus trace murder and adultery back to the heart?
- What does it mean that love is the fulfilling of the law?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over all ten of these words spoken from the fire. They show us the holy character of God and how far we fall short of it. Name one specific way Jesus, who alone kept this law perfectly and fulfilled it for us, is using these commandments to shape your love for God and for your neighbor this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers all ten words into one personal response. Spoken from the fire, they reveal the holy character of God, His exclusive claim, His holiness, His care for human dignity, His concern even for the heart, and in revealing Him they expose how far every one of us falls short.

Help students hold two truths together. First, these commandments still show us God's holy will, nine of them bound again under the New Covenant, and so they remain a mirror that humbles us and a guide that directs us in love. Second, none of us has kept them; the law leaves us needing a Savior, which is exactly where it was always meant to lead, as a guardian until Christ came (Galatians 3:23-25).

Point finally to Jesus. He alone kept this law perfectly, He came not to abolish it but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17), and He bore in His own body the penalty our lawbreaking deserved, nailing the record of debt to the cross (Colossians 2:14). Invite students to name one concrete way these commandments are shaping their love for God and neighbor this week, received not as a burden to earn God's favor but as the will of the God who has already rescued them, and lived out in dependence on the One who fulfilled the law for us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Ten Commandments revealing God's holy character and exposing our need (Romans 3:20).
- The law as a mirror that humbles and a guide that directs us in love.
- The law as a guardian leading us to Christ (Galatians 3:23-25).
- Jesus alone keeping and fulfilling the law and bearing its penalty for us (Matthew 5:17; Colossians 2:14).

Discussion Prompts

- How do these commandments both humble you and direct you?
- Why is it good news that the law leads us to Christ?
- What is one specific way the Lord is shaping your love for God or neighbor through this passage?