

The Book of Exodus

Lesson 14: The Ten Commandments -- Exodus 20:1-26

Stand with Israel at the foot of the mountain. The ground is trembling, the summit is wrapped in smoke and fire, and a trumpet blast grows louder and louder until the people beg it to stop. This is not a quiet devotional moment. This is the living God descending to speak, and the whole camp is shaking. Then, out of the thunder, a voice. Not the voice of a man, not the voice of Moses, but the very voice of God speaking words for everyone to hear. And the first thing He says is not a command at all. It is a reminder of grace: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Notice the order, because it changes everything. God does not say, keep these rules and then I will be your God. He says, I have already rescued you, I have already made you Mine, now here is how a rescued people lives. The commandments do not earn the deliverance; they flow out of it. Grace comes first, then the call to obey. That is always God's way, and if we miss it here we will misread every command that follows. These ten words are not the price of God's love. They are the shape of life with the God who already loves us.

And what words they are. Ten short sentences, etched by the finger of God in stone, that have outlasted every empire that ever tried to ignore them. They reach up to heaven, telling us how to honor God, no other gods, no idols, no empty use of His name, a holy rhythm of rest. And they reach across to our neighbor, honor your father and mother, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not lie, do not even covet. The first table guards our love for God; the second guards our love for people. Jesus would later gather all of it into two commands: love God, love your neighbor.

Here is the question we will wrestle with all through this lesson. These ten words belong to a covenant, the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai, a covenant that has since been fulfilled and taken out of the way in Christ. So are Christians simply under the Ten Commandments today? The answer is more careful and more wonderful than a flat yes or no. Nine of these ten commands are taken up and bound again on us in the New Testament, not as the old covenant but as the abiding will of a holy God. One of them, the Sabbath, is not. As we listen to this thundering voice, we are learning the unchanging character of the God who spoke, and we are learning to read His law through the One who came not to abolish it but to fulfill it.

Group Discussion: God prefaced all ten commandments with a reminder of grace, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of slavery, before He gave a single command. Why does it matter so deeply that redemption comes before obedience, and how do we keep that same order straight in our own walk and in the way we teach others?

Personal Reflection: The tenth commandment moves from outward action to the inward desire of the heart, do not covet. Where in your own heart is a quiet, hidden covetousness shaping the way you look at what others have, and what would it mean to bring that to God?

Read Exodus 20:1–26

Study Questions

1. 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)?
2. 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?
3. 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)?
4. 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?

5. 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)?
6. 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?
7. 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)?
8. 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?
9. 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)?

10. 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.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Matthew 5:17–20, where Jesus declares He came not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it; Colossians 2:14–17, where Paul says the legal record was nailed to the cross and the Sabbath was a shadow whose substance is Christ; Romans 13:8–10, where the commandments concerning our neighbor are summed up in love; Hebrews 8:6–13, which shows the first covenant becoming obsolete and replaced by a better covenant in Christ; Galatians 3:23–25, where the Law is described as a guardian until Christ came, so that we are no longer under it.

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