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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

UNIT 12: THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

BIBLICAL TEXT:

Read Exodus 19:1-20:17 and Deuteronomy 5:5-21 carefully before reading the following sections.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The book of Exodus tells us that “In the third month, on the same day of the month that the Israelites had left the land of Egypt, they came to the Wilderness of Sinai ... and Israel camped there in front of the mountain” (Exodus 19:1). In Exodus the mountain is called Mt. Sinai, and in Deuteronomy it seems to be called Mt. Horeb, but in any event, it is unclear exactly which mountain the biblical story is describing. There are as many as a dozen peaks that have been suggested as likely candidates – ranging from several mountains in the Sinai Peninsula to others in northwestern Arabia. The mountain probably most often thought to represent the Mt. Sinai of Exodus is the 2,285-metre (7,497 ft) peak near the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula traditionally known as Jebel Musa (Mount Moses).

Whichever mountain the biblical account references as Mt. Sinai, we are told that it was there that God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses inscribed on two tablets of stone (Exodus 20:1–17; 21:18). These commandments formed the legal basis of the great covenant made between God and the people of Israel – what Christians call the “old covenant” – and it is important to understand their role in this setting. The Ten Commandments were not “normal” laws of their time and even went beyond the concept of law. In fact, the Bible nowhere calls them the ten “commandments” – the Hebrew calls them the ten *devarim* or “words” (just as the term Decalogue or “ten words” is often used of the commandments) and this is an expression with a wider meaning than just “commandments.”

While we tend to think of the Ten Commandments in terms of “laws,” they were much more than that. A number of “law codes” were proclaimed by rulers of ancient Near Eastern civilizations – such as the famous “code” of the Babylonian (Mesopotamian) king, Hammurabi (1754 BC). But these law codes almost all provided examples of “case law” in which legal cases were described and penalties recorded in the format “if a person does X, then the penalty must be Y.” Unlike these basically inflexible examples of “casuistic” law, the Ten Commandments (and many of the laws found in the Old Testament) were formulated as “apodictic” laws, which simply state what must be done or not done, leaving the penalty for failure to obey them to be decided by judges who would look at the circumstances involved in the case. This type of law was very rare in the ancient world and represented a huge development in the history of legal thought and actually forms the basis of much modern law.

Although they were not like the laws of most ancient cultures, the Ten Commandments actually fit into the form of ancient contracts or treaties between nations. In the ancient Near East such international treaties were sealed by covenants that were formalized in a particular way. The dominant party – usually the great king making the treaty – first identified himself, then often enumerated what he had done to show his good intentions toward the other king or society. This was followed by a list of “stipulations” specifying what was expected on the part of those with whom the covenant was being made. There might also be a list of blessings or curses on the other party for keeping the covenant or failing to keep it. The Ten Commandments clearly fit into this kind of treaty covenant:

Identification: “I am the Lord your God” (Exodus 20:2)

Benefits: “Who has brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exodus 20:2)

Stipulations: “You shall have no other god but me ...” (Exodus 20:3)

Blessings and curses: (see Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28; etc.)

When we understand this background to the commands given at Sinai, we realize why, in addition to being Ten Commandments, they were also intended as “Ten Commitments” – a unique set of guidelines to a relationship with God (see Note 1).



Summarized Ten Commandments in Hebrew. Image: James Steidl

A final background issue to keep in mind when studying the commandments is the fact that although the Hebrew does indeed call them the “ten,” that is based on the units of text rather than the actual imperative “do’s” or “don’ts.” The Ten Commandments actually contain fourteen or fifteen imperative statements depending on how we count them. This fact has led to different ways of dividing the commandments – and, as a result, the numbers assigned to them. For example, while according to Jewish as well as Orthodox, Anglican, Reformed, Evangelical, and most other Christian reckoning, the statements “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exodus 20:3) and “Do not make an idol for yourself” (Exodus 20:4 CSB) are regarded as the first two commandments respectively, Roman Catholic and Lutheran tradition regards both of these statements to be part of the first commandment. In a similar way, the statements “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house” and “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife” (both found in Exodus 20:17) are regarded as parts of the same commandment by Jews and most Christians, while Roman Catholics and Lutherans regard them as separate commandments. Ultimately, it does not matter how we divide the commandments as long as they are all acknowledged, though the way they are divided does affect our understanding of them, as we will see in the next section.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

In this section we will look at the meaning and significance of each of the Ten Commandments (using the division and numbering most widely accepted by Jews and Christians as noted above):

1) Exodus 20:3: When God says that we must not have any gods “before” him, it does not mean that we must not place other gods in a higher position – the phrase “before me” means “in my presence.” As God is everywhere, the first commandment means that we acknowledge only one God – monotheism – and in this it was unique in the ancient world. It was not uncommon in that age for people to worship one god, but to also accept many others (monolatry). But this commandment is about more than just the worship of “gods.” As has been wisely said, it can apply to anything we elevate in place of God – such as material things, relationships, or even religion itself. The first commandment’s insistence on monotheism also has far-reaching ethical implications. In fact, without monotheism morals are often seen as merely social conventions or individual preferences – as has largely happened in the modern world. The first commandment also provides the basis for all those that follow.

2) Exodus 20:4-6: Christians who believe this is a separate commandment feel that it cannot be referring to the same kind of idolatry as Exodus 20:3 for if it were, it would simply be repetition. Instead, they take the second commandment to mean that just as worship of false gods is wrong, so also is the worship of the true God by false means such as images (see also Deuteronomy 34:17). But whether we divide these commandments or treat them as one, the point of Exodus 20:4-6 is clearly that we are not to limit our conception of God by means of any physical thing that deflects our worship away from him and toward it. This command is unique in stressing punishment on the extended family of the worshiper for its violation and blessing on those who keep it – a mark of how seriously the command is to be taken.

3) Exodus 20:7: In Jewish tradition, this command was understood to mean that the personal name of God, “Yahweh,” is too sacred to speak out loud, or in many cases, to write. Thus, Jews began to substitute the title Adonai, meaning “My Lord,” or Elohim, meaning “God.” In the Christian tradition the commandment has been viewed differently: it is not that the name itself is too sacred to be uttered (if so, why would it have been given?), but it is the misuse of the name of God – in any form – that is being prohibited. This understanding is based on the fact that the Hebrew translated “in vain” is literally “worthlessness,” and the same Hebrew term can also be translated as “wickedness” or “evil” (for example, Job 11:11; 31:5). The spirit of the law explained by Christ would include the casual use of God’s name as well as any form of blasphemy or cursing (Matthew 5:33-37). While punishment for breaking this command is mentioned, blessings for keeping it are not; it is viewed as a basic requirement.

4) Exodus 20:8-11: Observance of a Sabbath day as described in the fourth commandment is unique to the Bible and was not found in any other culture of the ancient world. It also included the only known command to grant servants, slaves, and even animals a day free from work. Although the text tells us God rested on the seventh day, it does not specifically command rest; rather, cessation from work. And rather than using the general Hebrew word for “work,” Exodus 20:10 uses the more specific term *melachah* signifying work that creates or produces. In the New Testament Christ made this clear by showing that it is right to do good or to heal on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:11-13). The mention of God’s activity also indicates that part of the reason for the Sabbath is to focus on the nature of God and our relationship with him as the Creator. Like the command to honor one’s parents, this is one of only two in the Decalogue that is stated positively in the form “you shall ...” And like that commandment, the fourth command, if not explicitly stating so, implies a blessing for keeping it (Exodus 20:11).

5) Exodus 20:12: The fifth commandment acts as a hinge between the commands regarding our relationship with God and our relationships with others. Although our parents are human, the biblical perspective is that when we are young, they act as representatives of God's authority. In cases where parents might command their children contrary to God's ways, they automatically relinquish the binding nature of their commands. That is what the apostle Paul meant in quoting this commandment and saying "Children, obey your parents in the Lord" (Ephesians 6:1) – meaning insofar as the parental commands are in harmony with the law of God. But under normal circumstances, we first learn to obey and submit to God by obeying and submitting to our parents. When we are older, the command to "honor" them continues to work both negatively and positively: to prohibit any kind of action such as the cursing or striking of parents, and to promote actions such as helping and caring for them.

6) Exodus 20:13: Like English, the Hebrew language has two different words for the taking of life: *harag* ("to kill") and *ratsach* ("to murder"). It is *ratsach* that is used in the commandment. As such the command has nothing to do with issues such as capital punishment, pacifism, or animal rights. If this commandment forbade killing of any kind, the offering of animal sacrifices that God commanded would have been wrong, as would be killing in self-defense or the defense of another person, and no war would ever be justified, no matter how evil the aggressor or the genocide being committed. In all these cases the Bible shows that killing is not always wrong (Exodus 21:12-14; 22:2; etc.), but the sixth commandment is unequivocal in showing that the deliberate taking of an innocent human life (at any stage of that life) is murder. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus expanded this basic definition to condemn the anger, hatred, despising, and other mental precursors that eventually lead to murder or a murderous attitude (Matthew 5:21-24).

7) Exodus 20:14: Because the family was the foundation of society, adultery was condemned as far back as the era when polygamy was accepted in ancient Israel. Even the pagan societies around Israel understood this. Adultery was called "the great sin" in a number of ancient Near Eastern cultures, as it was considered to be extremely detrimental to society and ultimately characteristic of anarchy. Jesus extended the concept of marital faithfulness by showing that adultery can be an attitude as well as an action (Matthew 5:27-28). This obviously condemns not only lust, but in our own society, a great deal of music and entertainment as well as pornography of any kind. The ancient Greek translation of Exodus 20:17 and both the Hebrew text and the Greek translation of Deuteronomy 5:21 all place "you shall not covet your neighbor's wife" before "you shall not covet your neighbor's house."

8) Exodus 20:15: The eighth commandment, "You shall not steal," may seem at first sight to apply only to items of tangible property, but in reality, the command is much broader in its possible applications. In addition to forbidding the taking of items that are not ours, it also includes problems as diverse as cheating (which invariably steals something from someone else), human trafficking and kidnapping (stealing someone's freedom), and even denigration (the stealing of someone's dignity and self-respect). Although we might not think of it as stealing, not giving help and aid to people in genuine need when it is within our power to do so also comes within the spirit of this law.

9) Exodus 20:16: Like the previous one, the ninth commandment is surprisingly broad in its possible applications. Although its literal wording applies to the giving of false witness in legal contexts (the setting in which lying can often cause the most irreparable damage), the prohibition also has other aspects. Slander, libel, and any form of character assassination (including much "harmless" gossip) are also covered in principle by this commandment. Ultimately, while the earlier commandments focus on protecting people in personal and direct ways, this prohibition is about not hurting people in social contexts.

10) Exodus 20:17: In the ancient Near East the principle of wanting something that is not rightfully ours (often referred to as “lifting the eyes” toward something) was socially disapproved of, but the Ten Commandments are the only laws that have forbidden this often undetectable and essentially unprovable crime. All the other commandments may be kept – or broken – in thought, speech, and action, but the tenth is unique in focusing on the mind as the origin of, and only potential barrier to, sin. Just as it is often said that the first commandment includes all the others, it is probably not exaggeration to say that the last commandment, if it is kept, stops us from breaking all the others. It has been said that we are not prohibited from wanting similar items to what our neighbor has – just prohibited from wanting *what* our neighbor has; but the New Testament also develops the principle of controlling desires – and, when possible, of being content with what we have (1 Timothy 6:6).

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

The importance and application of the Ten Commandments have been viewed in varying ways in different branches of Christianity. Generally speaking, the Catholic and Orthodox Churches teach that the Ten Commandments are still obligatory for Christians. Reformed Christians likewise view the commandments as continuing under the new covenant, as do Anglicans, Methodists, and a majority of other Christians. Lutherans and some others, while teaching that a “distinction between the Law and the Gospel is to be maintained in the Church,” accept the application of the Ten Commandments today. A minority of Christians believe that the commandments no longer apply to believers as they feel we are completely “under grace rather than law.” The view of most Christians – that the principles found in the Ten Commandments are still applicable today – is based on one or more of the following reasons:

A widely accepted understanding is that there are three types of laws found in the Old Testament: ceremonial, civil, and moral. The New Testament clearly teaches that the ceremonial (“ritual” or “sacrificial”) laws foreshadowed Christ and came to an end at his death (Hebrews 9:11-14). The civil laws were given for the regulation of the physical nation of ancient Israel and likewise no longer apply because the Church is not a physical nation and the conditions extant at the time of ancient Israel no longer exist. Most of the principles found in the moral law as summarized in the Ten Commandments can be seen before the commandments were given at Sinai, however, and are also seen throughout the New Testament. This subject will be covered in detail in our course on the New Testament, but that is why, for example, the apostle Paul draws a clear distinction between the ritual laws of the Old Testament and the spiritual or moral laws in verses such as this: “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts” (1 Corinthians 7:19).

Another way of looking at this situation is that the underlying principles of all the laws found in the Old Testament apply to us because they all teach us something about love for God and neighbor. All the hundreds of laws of the Old Testament can be summarized by the Ten Commandments, which can themselves be summarized by two, that we should: “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” as Jesus affirmed (Matthew 22:37–40). Jesus certainly transformed the Ten Commandments, but he did not do away with them (Matthew 5:17), and the apostle Paul confirms this understanding (Ephesians 6:1-2; etc.).

Yet another view of the importance of the commandments is found among those who believe that even if the law of Moses, including the Ten Commandments, has ended, this does not mean that one can worship idols, take God's name in vain, disobey parents, steal, kill, commit adultery, or do other things that the commandments condemn. Because at least nine of the laws enumerated in the Decalogue are found in New Testament books written after the death of Christ, they should be obeyed today.

Whatever our own background may be, it is important to remember that for many centuries, basic instruction in the Christian Church has been based on the Ten Commandments. Their principles are of continuing importance (see Note 2), and although as Christians we should not strive to obey them from the wrong motivation and for the wrong reasons (the New Testament shows that God's gift of salvation is not the reward for our obedience, but the reason for it), the principles of the commandments apply as much now as when they were given. As one respected Christian pastor and scholar has recently stated, "The Ten Commandments have been central to God's people in the Old Testament, central to God's people in the New Testament, central to God's people throughout church history, and they should be central for us as well" (see Note 3).

* Note 1: The introduction to the commandments also echoes God's call to Abraham: "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans" (Genesis 15:7), "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus 20:2) – showing a similar beginning of a new era of God's working with humanity.

* Note 2: Winston Churchill called the ethical system summarized by the Ten Commandments "a system of ethics which, even if it were entirely separated from the supernatural, would be incomparably the most precious possession of mankind, worth in fact the fruits of all wisdom and learning put together." (*The Illustrated Sunday Herald*, 8 February 1920).

* Note 3: Kevin DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments: What They Mean, Why They Matter, and Why We Should Obey Them* (Crossway, 2018). Dr. DeYoung (PhD, University of Leicester) is senior pastor of Christ Covenant Church in Matthews, North Carolina, board chairman of The Gospel Coalition, and assistant professor of systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary (Charlotte).

REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

In what ways is the first commandment the most important of all the Ten Commandments?

What are some of the ways the fifth commandment, that of honoring one's parents, forms a bridge between the commandments regarding our relationship with God and our relationship with others?

How does the final commandment – not to covet – help protect us from breaking each of the other nine commands?

Looking Below the Surface:

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus referenced many of the final six commandments – those dealing with our relationships with others – and showed how we should expand our understanding of those commandments. What are some of the ways in which we can expand the first four commandments?

Everyday Applications:

Think about how you personally would list the Ten Commandments in order of importance. Does your list differ from that God gives and does that fact affect your spiritual life in some way?

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