

The Ten Commandments

The Way of the Righteous

The Ten Commandments: An Awkward Gift?

I was eating dinner in a home recently when I saw something I hadn't seen in years. There they were, nicely framed and hanging above the kitchen table. I remembered seeing them framed in homes and churches when I was younger—and even remember the days when people used to memorize them. But those days are long gone. It is rare to see them at all anymore, and even rarer to find people who can quote them like a previous generation could. And then I wondered to myself, “What ever happened to the Ten Commandments?”

It is fascinating that in a day in which religious leaders fully engage in the heated debate over the presence of the Ten Commandments in schools and court houses, these same commands are almost entirely absent from Christian churches and homes and are far from the minds of Christian people. It is as if we know what the world should do with them, but we are not sure what we should do with them. We treat them as if they were an unusual Christmas gift we received from a distant family member that we know we can't return, but we have no idea what to do with. It's just a bit awkward. This is a problem. It is a problem because the Ten Commandments are an essential moral compass for believers as they travel from Calvary to Zion. They are the way of the righteous as they seek to live for the glory of God in a lost and confused world. And a proper understanding of these commands must be recovered in these post-modern times in which it is certainly not in vogue to talk of God's law. But, in order for that recovery to take place, some critical questions must be answered. Here are a few that will give us a good start.

1. What was the original purpose of the Ten Commandments?

The book of Exodus is the story of God's people being saved for their good and ultimately for God's glory. For centuries God's people had lived under the oppressive rule of Pharaoh, but God saved them through the blood of a lamb and liberated them in one of the greatest salvation moments in history. After He saved them, He

brought them to Mt. Sinai. It was there He clarified for the people His original intention to create a people for His own possession that would exist to make Him known to the nations through their display of God's character. Therefore, as a newly liberated people traveling to their own land, God gave them the law to reveal His own holiness, to give them instruction on how to live for His glory, for their good, and ultimately to point them to their need for grace. The standard of the law pointed them to the way to live as grace bearing children of God.

2. Were people ever saved by following the Ten Commandments?

The intent of the Ten Commandments was not to give the people a means by which they might be saved. Remember the story line of Exodus: they were saved, and then they received the law. This gives us a picture of how it has always been. No one can be saved by keeping the law because no one can keep the law perfectly. The Israelites, like us, were saved by the grace of God through their faith. Grace has always been the key (Exodus 34:7; Romans 9:7-8).

3. Do Old Testament laws still apply to us today?

The reason the New Testament speaks in so many different ways about the Old Testament law is because the Old Testament gives three kinds of laws: moral law, civil law, and ceremonial law. All of these laws are Scripture and therefore profitable, but they are not applicable in the same way. The **civil laws** were given to Israel as a nation and included guidelines for how they were to function in every area of civil life. These laws no longer govern us because God's people are not governed by a theocracy; they are governed by the church. **Ceremonial law** is profitable to us today in that it points us to all that has been fulfilled for us in Christ as priest and prophet, although it does not still dictate the way in which we worship. They were all a shadow of the real thing (Col. 2:17). The **moral law** is summarized in the Ten Commandments and was given by God the Father in order to show His people how they were to live as redeemed children in a lost world. These commands, flowing from the eternally unchanging character of God, are the basic and eternal standard for God's people. They are, and always have been, the way of the righteous.

4. What was Jesus' relationship to the Ten Commandments?

Jesus tells us that He did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17-19). What He meant was that He, the sinless Son of God, was the only one who ever completely lived up to the standard set by God in the Ten Commandments. He never broke one, and completely fulfilled the requirements of the law. Paul made an interesting statement regarding the relationship between the law and Christ when he said that Christ was the "end of the law" (Romans 10:4). The proper translation is that Christ was the "termination" of the law, meaning that now we no longer judge ourselves according to the Old Testament law, but we judge ourselves according to the person of Jesus Christ—the perfect fulfillment of that law. Jesus upheld the law and valued the law. He just fought the idea that mere outward conformity to the law was what pleased God.

5. What is the relationship between the Ten Commandments and the Gospel?

The relationship between the Ten Commandments and the Gospel is a close one. **First**, no one has ever been saved by adherence to the law. People have always been saved by grace through faith. In the Old Testament people were saved by seeing their sin in light of their inability to keep the law and then turning to God in desperate need for a savior. **Second**, whereas the Old Testament saints looked to the law to see their shortcomings, we look primarily to Jesus as the fulfillment of that law. When we look to him and behold his glory, we see how we have come short of the glory of God and then call out to him to save us. The law, fulfilled in Christ, shows us our sin and drives us to Him for salvation. The law, fulfilled in Christ, also shows us how to live in this world as people saved by Christ.

6. How should we use the Ten Commandments today?

The Ten Commandments should be viewed by Christians today as the basic summary of the way in which they should live for God's glory. They are the way of the righteous. They are a parental guide given by God the Father to his children telling them the way to live a joyful, productive, free, and Christ exalting life. We are called to live the Ten Commandments. We should think of them often; we should

commit them to memory; and we should seek to follow them with every ounce of our being.

A Final Word

Finally, we must understand that salvation is by grace, not by works of the law, and is for our good and His glory. The Ten Commandments, the basic summary of God's moral law, have been given to us that we might know how to *live* as redeemed children of God in a way that is for our good and His glory. We strive to obey them because by faith we know it is for our good, and because we want God to be glorified in every area of our lives. Our obedience is motivated and made possible by the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. David says in Psalm 119:32, "I run in the path of your commands, *for* you have set my heart free."

COLUMN, Volume 2

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August 20, 2008