



TEN WORDS OF WONDER

The Ten Commandments for Today's Christians

WHAT IT'S ABOUT

The Ten Commandments or Decalogue points to Israel's God as a savior and sustainer of human well-being. Reclaiming this key text for our lives will help us grow closer to that same God today.

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For Further Reading

Brown, William P., ed., *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2004).

Miller, Patrick D., *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

God's Justice is Our Freedom: The Ten Commandments for Today's Christians

The Ten Commandments are familiar territory for most Christians. We learn them in childhood. This is appropriate, because they originally were arranged for easy memorization by beginners. Ten fingers, ten commandments! They orient believers to the patterns of life that make a decent society possible. Though they do not cover every imaginable area of human existence, they do provide a starting point for moral reflection.

To understand them, we should pay attention to several elements:

- (1) **Structure.** There are different ways to understand the structure of the Ten Commandments. One common understanding breaks the list into two recognizable sections, with a bridge linking them. Commandments 1-4 (worship God, make no idols, avoid false oaths, and keep the Sabbath) point us to God. Commandments 6-10 (avoid murder, adultery, theft, lying in court, or coveting) focus on human relationships and processes. Commandment 5 (honor parents) links the two because reverence for those who give us life relates closely to reverence for the ultimate source of life. Other understandings focus on the actions of the one obeying (or disobeying) the commands, such that the first several revolve around acts of honor, with the rest about acts of other emotions. There is also the question of just how to number the commands. Some traditions split the commands to worship God and avoid making idols, and some lump them together. Some distinguish two types of covetousness, and others merge them. Some Jewish traditions understand the first statement of the Decalogue "I am the LORD your God" as a command, while other Jewish traditions do not understand the text that way. All of these variations have good reasons behind them, and they all point to the richness of the Decalogue itself. They all end up with ten commandments, however, because Deuteronomy 4:30 and 10:4 speak of the "the ten words."
- (2) **Content and Character.** Commandments against violence, sexual infidelity, theft, and abuse of judicial process need no explanation or defense, and they receive none in this text. A society that tolerates such behaviors will face many problems. On the other hand, some of the other commandments seem less than obvious. Take the last one first. How does one enforce a command against covetousness? Answer: the commandment is trying to form character, not merely to create external rules. This commandment directly concerns justice because it instructs us to allow to each person what is rightfully his or hers. It assumes that humans need certain things to exist and that God's people should make sure that persons receive that much. While the original commandment probably focused on social justice and external relationships, interpreters soon came to see its value for personal formation.

Extend this point further to other commandments. For example, the rule of the Sabbath, because it concentrates on how a community regards itself in the presence of God, reveals two important aspects of justice. (a) Justice involves every person in the community, not just those with power. (b) Justice is rooted in God's creative act. We treat others justly because doing so helps return us to the state God intended for us in the first place.

Moreover, the Commandments connect human behavior with the nature and actions of God through the foundational commandments against idolatry and "taking God's name in vain" (involving God in our plans when we do not intend to be godly). The God of Israel

does not act like the unjust, fickle, cruel gods of the nations, but rather seeks the wholeness and happiness of human beings. To please God, to live as God intended humans to live, and thus to become God's people, we must treat each other well.

- (3) **Stories, laws, and spiritual formation.** Behind the Ten Commandments lies a story, as the introductions in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 make clear. The story is that God has rescued slaves from bondage and led them to a land in which they can flourish as free people. No longer must they be subject to the cruel whims of others. Now they must act as moral agents on their own. This story of faith creates the context in which the laws make sense.

We can draw two further lessons from this observation. The first is that many of the biblical stories make sense as ways of reflecting on the norms of behavior set forth in the Ten Commandments and other biblical laws. Think of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39; adultery), or the murder of Naboth (1 Kings 21; bearing false witness), or the failed siege of Jericho (Joshua 7; involving God and the things of God in one's own nefarious plans), or the many stories of idolatry. The moral reflection that goes on in storytelling assumes a set of basic orientations like those of the Ten Commandments.

The second lesson is that the story of the people of God constantly returns to a consideration of the norms guiding us. The commandments get lived out in the lives of men, women, and children. Committing to the practices of justice in the Ten Commandments will allow the story of our lives to unfold in a godly direction.

- (4) **So it may go well for you, and you may live long.** The commandment concerning parents states a goal that applies at some level to all the commandments. God's desire for humans is that we should flourish as fully as possible. This happens when we show sustained concern for the welfare of all those around us. Responsibility is the name of the game. And taking responsibility leads to true freedom and happiness.
- (5) **Education.** Remember that the Ten Commandments are easy to learn and very suitable for children. This is no accident. We want to raise just people from childhood on, not allow them to discover this major part of their discipleship late in life.

A Key Idea

The Ten Commandments expose a major triangle of interests in the Old Testament: the wonders of God, the beauty of a community sharing a story of joint redemption, and a passion for justice. We'll explore all these interests as this series progresses.

But first, we should take up the most controversial topic. What is justice? Despite the Bible's near obsession with this question, it too often is neglected in today's church. Perhaps we think the term is too political, or too ambiguous. Perhaps we define the term too narrowly, associating it with "retributive justice," punishment for bad deeds and reward for good deeds. In any case, justice is a pursuit in which we need to re-engage.

The Bible itself talks about justice in many ways. It uses a set of vocabulary words that we can translate as the noun "justice" or the verb "exercise justice" with some frequency. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *mishpat* ("judgment, justice") shows up 425 times, and the noun *tsedaqah* another 150. (English translations often render the latter as "righteousness," but the word does not refer to abstract morality, but rather to a set of relationships based on justice.) Numerous stories reflect on particular aspects of fair treatment or equity.

But what is justice? Philosophers think about it in several ways, such as having everyone follow the same rules, or everyone receiving what he or she is due, or whatever some moral code requires. All these are certainly aspects of justice. But the biblical views of justice involve more. First, justice demands relationship: I am just with respect to someone else. Everyone is my neighbor, and so everyone has a claim on me. Second, justice demands reciprocity. We exchange with each other not only things, but also intangible goods such as respect, care in times of need, and protection in times of vulnerability. Justice is thus a very broad term.

Often in church we try to play off love against justice. This is a fundamental mistake, as the Ten Commandments remind us. Appeals to love can be mere abstraction, a matter of wishful thinking or even self-righteous posturing unless we have a strong commitment to seeing to it that each person has what he or she needs. Conversely, justice becomes dry retribution without love. No, love and justice go hand in hand. As Psalm 85:10 puts it, “Loyalty and trustworthiness embrace; justice and peace kiss.” The church that loves must seek justice for all.

Important Lessons

The Ten Commandments rest, then, on some assumptions that we do well to explore.

1. The people of God are a community in which the welfare of each is the concern of all. We cannot view each other as objects to be used, but as fellow heirs of the saving acts of God.
2. God works to establish justice in the world. God does not validate the power structures as we see them. Therefore, we must question those same power structures so that we can work for their eventual demise and their replacement by a world of peace. At the very least, we must make sure that they do not become characteristic of the church.
3. Justice operates in the family (honor father and mother), in the economy (let everyone rest), in friendships (do not covet or lie), and so, in short, in every human relationship. Our work for justice is, at its core, work to build relationships with as many as possible.
4. Worship of one God leads us to see the people of God as one people. We cannot truly worship God while allowing our brothers and sisters to remain in want.
5. The story of redemption is an ongoing story initiated by God but lived out by us all. In practicing justice in our own lives, we imitate God’s acts of deliverance and so become more faithful to our own calling.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. When have you seen injustice in your own life? In the workplace? In the school system? In church? What did you do about it?
2. How can we encourage practices of generosity, honesty, and attentiveness in our children? Give examples from your own experience, if you can.
3. How could hospitality be a way of doing justice? Whom do we have in our homes and why? How could we grow in this area?

Lesson 1: One Lord, One Life

Focus: All the work of the church's life rests on its understanding of the nature and activity of God. Awe before God leads to an ethical life, and the life of the church rests in the life of God.

The Bible portrays its chief character, God, in many ways. Some of the descriptors include promise-keeper (Genesis 12, 22); inspiration for human goodness (Leviticus 18-19; Deuteronomy 5); cohabitor with people (1 Kings 8; John 1:1-18); the rescuer of the perishing (Psalm 80); the source of justice (Amos 6; Micah 6); the One who cares for all humanity (Isaiah 49, 56; Acts 8-11); the companion of the lowly (1 Samuel 1; Luke 1); the king (Matthew 5-7); the bringer of freedom (Exodus 14-15; Romans 8); the self-emptying One (Philippians 2:5-11); the One who calls us to ministry (2 Corinthians 4); and the One to whom we go (Revelation 21-22). These and many other attributes or actions of God appear in Scripture because they remind us of who we are and whose world we live in.

In describing God, the Bible also describes the human search for God in many ways. Without being overly simplistic, we could say that, in some respects, the Bible is a how-to book for approaching God. Human beings come to God through prayer, moral lives, humility and sacrifice, and, in general, a recognition of our status as creatures. We bring to God only ourselves, as the hymn says, "Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me." The search for God involves the whole of our lives, and it will never finish until we die, or rather, until we are united with God in the final time.

One of the most powerful treatments of the nature of God appears in the book of Exodus, which contains a richly layered set of stories exploring the question, "What sort of God do we have in our midst?" This story lies behind the Ten Commandments and gives them their rationale. Rather than creating a long philosophical discourse on God, the scroll of Exodus weaves together stories about divine actions and conversations around those actions. The narrative commences with an absent God who becomes present in plague and destruction. This introduction opens the door to the rest of the story, which must ask whether the plague-bringing deity has other job descriptions. In exploring the implications of a God who makes covenant and practices a radical commitment to mercy, Exodus looks into some interesting, even troubling, problems. It does not avoid the challenges that belief in a redeemer God poses. Along the way, it helps us address some of the most vital questions we still face related to God.

In meditating on Exodus, we should not imagine that it provides all the answers to our questions about God. In truth, it makes little sense to expect complete answers in regard to the infinite, and we can safely conclude that anyone claiming to have deity figured out and made describable is simply unaware of what the term "God" refers to. We should see theological reflection as the search for partial answers and life-giving questions that will shape our commitments and attitudes for a lifetime. The proper attitude is not that of the technician holding God under a microscope, but of the poet trying to find words for the inexpressible. God truly is Other.

Yet on the other hand, we are not completely in the dark with respect to God, as the frames around the Ten Commandments make clear. The introduction and conclusion of the Decalogue in each of its appearances set the tone for understanding the commands themselves. They do not come to us merely as rules to be slavishly obeyed but as invitations to a new sort of life.

Exodus 20:1-6 and Deuteronomy 5:1-10 contain the prologue to the Ten Commandments and the first commandments proper. Deuteronomy is an expanded version of Exodus. We should notice the elements of each text:

Exodus

God's name (the Lord your God)
God's action: deliverance from Egypt
Command: do not have other gods
Command: do not make an image
Qualification: no image fitting any habitat
or appearance known to people
(compare Genesis 1)
Repeat command: do not serve them

Reason: "I am the Lord"
Qualifications of God: "jealous/loyal,"
Attentive to sin but merciful

Deuteronomy

Charge: love and keep God's words
Reminder: God made a covenant with Israel
Reminder: God spoke face to face with
Israel
Reminder (and qualification of previous
one): Moses is the mediator
God's name
God's action: deliverance from Egypt
Command: do not have other gods
Command: do not make an image
Qualification: no image fitting any habitat
or appearance known to people

Repeat command: do not bow to or serve
them
Reason: "I am the Lord"
Qualifications of God: same as Exodus

The basic ideas here are clear enough, but to understand the text's theological aims, we must notice how it portrays God acting and how humans should respond to those actions. (1) God is separate from the creation yet profoundly involved in it. Unlike other ancient and modern religious texts, which either risk making God simply a feature of the natural world or isolating God so fully from the world as to leave us out of touch with the divine realm, the biblical account seeks to maintain a balance. (2) Worship risks idolatry whenever it confuses the creature with the creator, no matter how blessed or perfect the creature may be. (3) Worship of God derives from the story of God's people. Worship does not happen in a historical vacuum, but rather in a continuum of past, present, and future experience.

Turning to Deuteronomy 5, we notice several important distinctive dimensions of this text. First, it opens with Moses repeating the story of the giving of the Ten Commandments at

Sinai. In doing so, he reminds his audience of the relationship between God and Israel that lies behind the Decalogue. This relationship's long history revolves around the deliverance of the people from Egyptian slavery, a moment that Israel repeatedly celebrates and reflects upon as a source for moral and spiritual renewal. Moses takes up the role not just of lawgiver but of teacher, the one who reminds Israel of its core identity.

This core identity, in turn, includes not just the past but also a sense of the future. So, v. 3 takes pains to insist that the agreement at Sinai was "not with our ancestors ... but with us, ourselves, these here alive today, all of us...." The text finds four different ways to say that the covenant involves each generation hearing of God's story and committing itself to it. That is, Deuteronomy asks hearers to place themselves inside the story of redemption. As part of the book's culture of memory, the Decalogue will address those who remember who they were called to be.

Second, Deuteronomy 5 precedes the *Shema* ("Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One"; Deut 6:4), the key confession of Judaism. The Decalogue itself begins with the affirmation of God's difference from idols. While God is the creator, idols are artifacts that humans create in imitation of God's creation. While God chose to create a story with Israel, the idols can only have the story that the Israelites or other people wrongly invent. And while the idols place no moral demands on their worshippers, Israel's God does. Israel needs to hear (and so needs to say to one another) that God's uniqueness calls them to awareness of their own opportunity to be in relationship with God in a special way.

Third, following the Decalogue, Deuteronomy 5 refers to a discussion between the ancestors and Moses as they stood at Sinai. Like Exodus 20 but in a different way, the conversation emphasizes the wonder that they felt at being present for the giving of Torah. The people express fear at hearing more from God, though they seem grateful for the experience so far. They understand that such an event has no parallel in other parts of the world, and yet it also poses a threat to their safety. The encounter with God allows them to think about themselves and their relationship to all around them. Arguably, this is still true.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. The Ten Commandments assume that our worship reflects the nature of God. How does our worship reflect our understanding of the nature of God? When does it fail to do so?
2. What does idolatry look like in our own setting? What are some elements of life that take on the trappings of the holy when they are not?
3. What past events, of your life or the Bible or of church history, have revealed to you aspects of the nature of God? What do you learn from such events?
4. Why do people struggle to talk about the past? What does it take for us to be more honest and constructive in doing so?

Lesson 2: The Decalogue and the Life of Wonder (Exodus 20)

Focus: *Because the Decalogue comes from God, it points back to the wonder Israel experienced in encountering God. Wonder has several components: it comes from encounter; it involves other people; it both connects and separates; and it must be expressed in language.*

Last week Deuteronomy, now Exodus. In Exodus, the giving of the Ten Commandments comes just weeks after the dramatic exit from Egypt. No longer does Israel experience the soul-withering blows of slavery. Its king is not the tyrant Pharaoh, but the liberator God. And yet in leaving slavery, it also left behind the encounter with that God that came in the form of devastating plagues, the unspeakable horrors that befell Egypt as the only method through which that nation could be persuaded to let its captives go. Now that encounter will take new form in the giving of Torah at Sinai. The law, and the Decalogue in particular, will remind Israel of its saving story and the sense of wonder it experienced in its encounter with God. And it will feed ongoing encounters as well.

Exodus 20's presentation of the Ten Commandments fits into a larger context, Exodus 19-24. This section begins with the entire people's arrival at Sinai and ends with the ascent of a select group of leaders to the divine throne room itself. In the middle comes Law, first the Ten Commandments, and then the Covenant Code, which gives much greater detail on some basic ways to live together as a people in communities.

Speaking of Awe

The text speaks of the awe-inspiring nature of the encounter at Sinai in several ways. The first is through the depiction of sacred space. God had promised Moses that the sign of liberation would be Israel's arrival at the holy mountain, where it would finally be safe from Egyptian reach (Exodus 3:12). The time on the mountain would signal Israel that it has been reborn. The people must mark off the sacred space (as would be the case for an ordinary temple) by drawing lines beyond which they could not go. And yet the mountain differs radically from ordinary sacred space in that thunder and fire and loud noises emanate from it at all times (though see Psalm 29, which depicts God speaking from the temple).

It also differs from the sacred space the former slaves have grown accustomed to, the temples of Egypt. Sinai is God's space, while the magnificent temples belong to the thoroughly discredited gods of the house of slaves. Sinai belongs to the God who values Israel as a people, while Egypt belongs to the gods who value Israel only for its economic value.

Second, the wonder of the Sinai experience does not come simply from the pyrotechnics atop the mountain. The most marvelous aspect of all lay in the fact that God has now encountered a people. Not long before, they had lacked even the most basic knowledge of their deity's identity. (Remember Moses' question, "if they ask who sent me, what should I tell them?") Their lack of peoplehood had gone hand in hand with that lack of religious awareness. Now they experience the beginnings of group identity when they experience the tangible presence of God, even if they cannot bear the full force of that presence. The transformation that has begun in them is more marvelous even than the wonders happening uphill from them.

The Ten Commandments as an Expression of Wonderment

Exodus's version of the Ten Commandments relates the wonderful story of Israel. It is not merely a list of dos and don'ts. If we read the text this way, we notice several important things.

- The prologue to the Decalogue in Exod 20:1-2 emphasizes God as speaker, the one who has broken centuries of silence in order to address an expectant people. And what is the message? Just the identity of the no longer silent God. That identity revolves around God's work of delivering Israel from bondage.
- The structure of the Decalogue itself as it moves from one topic to another, not in order to exhaust all imaginable ethical or religious issues, but to give a larger sense of the whole.
- The first two commands distinguish between Israel's God, who can act on their behalf, and other possible objects of worship, who have no such relationship to them. Idolatry is a denial of miracle, an unsatisfying search for a brave new world that cannot come about. While the Decalogue does not go as far as some biblical texts in denying outright the ability of idols to help (see Psalms 115; 135; Isaiah 40-41), the text does assume that such gods have done nothing for Israel and never will. So worshiping them makes no sense.
- The command to honor parents proposes that doing so will lead to the long-term survival and flourishing of the entire people. The community of free people will continue to be free.
- And finally, the epilogue to the Ten Commandments instructs Moses to build an altar on which the people may sacrifice to God. Sacrifice is a way of building bridges with God, not just appeasing God. Sacrifice is about relationship, communing with God and other people. In that way, the dramatic experiences of Sinai can be perpetuated across the generations.

Implications

A major task for us today is to cultivate a sense of wonder. That may come from paying close attention to the ordinary things of life and seeing the beauty in them. But it also means becoming free from whatever enslaves us so that we can begin to imagine a different sort of life with our relationship to God – both as individuals and as a church – at the center.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. When have you seen God at work in your congregation in a dramatic way? Who was involved, and what happened? What did it take to be sensitive to that experience?
2. Sometimes we think of law and religious experience as incompatible or at least radically different things. But Exodus puts them together as patterns of behavior within a community. How would adopting its viewpoint change how we interact with each other? What would happen if we saw our responsibilities to each other as aspects of God's marvelous work?
3. What amazes you in a positive way and why? Or is it easy to say why since being amazed sometimes challenges our linguistic abilities? How does this sense of amazement relate to your faith and the actions you take based on that faith?

Lesson 3: No Other Gods

Focus: *How we respond to our understanding of the nature of God will shape how we treat others, understand ourselves, and construct our lives. Worship and ethics flow out of and into each other.*

Whenever Christians have tried to describe our beliefs and practices, we have usually begun by confessing faith in God. The classical creeds usually open with the statement, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of Heaven and Earth.” Beginning with God highlights the fact that Christianity is not merely a human achievement or an expression of human longing. Rather, faith is a gift from God, offered freely to all human beings, and made alive in all who accept it. Faith does not begin with us, but with God.

The statement “I believe in God” implies a relationship between two persons, between God and me. Faith does not erase the human person or in any way diminish our dignity or personal integrity. To the contrary, faith expresses fully the truth that we live in relationship with God and that this relationship gives meaning to our existence, just as it seems to do something to God.

In fact, the confession “I believe in God” implies not just two (God and me), but three persons. The third is the one who hears this confession. In the first instance, the third person is the church who teaches us who God is. The hearer of this confession may also be the world, as we see in many Old Testament texts that underscore the importance of the nations’ hearing of the news about God’s saving work.

As one ancient commentary on the Decalogue puts it, “If the name of every idol were to be specifically mentioned, all the parchments in the world would not suffice” (*Mekilta of Rabbi Ishmael*, edited by Jacob Lauterbach). Human ingenuity at creating gods leads the Decalogue to forbid any possible one and focus the hearers on Israel’s redeemer.

The opening commandment orients its audience to the nature of the God who has called them. Without addressing the question of whether other gods exist, the text insists that Israel must not worship anyone other than the Lord. This is because it thinks of worship as what we give to God as God’s due. Just as we treat other human beings with the respect to them in their various states of life, the proper act of respect toward God can rightly be called worship. We do not flatter God or make a deal with God. But we engage in worship as the fit movement of our own souls toward their source.

A few observations, then. First, the Decalogue reminds Israel that the question “who is God?” is not just their question. It is a human question, and even the nations will take an interest in it (see Exodus 32:12; Psalm 115; Isaiah 41:1-13). And the answer we give to it will profoundly shape how we answer the question, “who are we?”

Second, this God is infinitely more powerful than the kingdoms of the world. The Bible operates with a particular understanding of human powers. They are temporary. They cannot command the ultimate allegiance of any reasonable people, much less followers of God. The

powers may sometimes serve the cause of goodness and truth in the world, but they do not do so automatically.

Third, the Decalogue talks about God's work and in doing so reminds us of an earlier text, Exodus 15:1-18, without necessarily quoting it. Both texts think about a pattern of behavior: God saves Israel from oppression, Israel offers allegiance to God. God is an active God who pays attention to the sufferings of people who cry out to him for help.

Fourth, as Mark Twain once said, "History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme." God's story with the saved people rhymes again and again. So Israel must do some hard thinking about how God's work, which always goes before ours, should inspire their own behavior. If they believe that God works in the world, they must seek out the locations where they can join in that work. Israel, according to Isaiah 40-55, lacks confidence in God. Their older theologies attempting to manage God failed miserably (as older prophets point out) because God cannot be managed. The inscrutability of God implies a need for us to pay close attention.

Fifth, as the great twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth used to say, "God is God." This means that everything we say about God will fail to capture God completely. Our language is imperfect. But some ways of representing God present more problems than others. Reducing God to human form, whether in statuary or in words, makes a gigantic mistake.

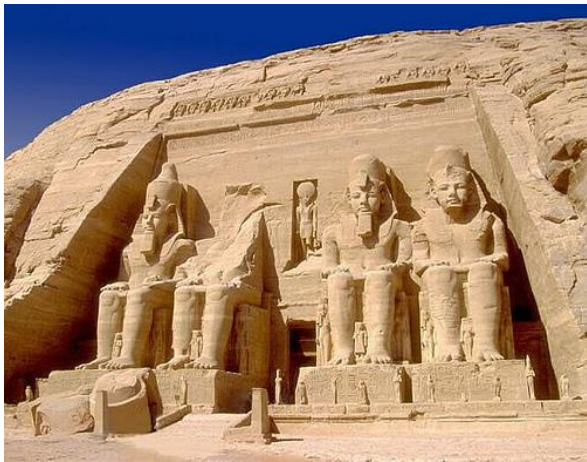
Questions for Further Reflection

1. Polytheism, the worship of many gods, allows human beings to manage their lives by seeking help with specific problems from deities who specialize in those issues. Monotheism, on the other hand, presupposes that God is available to all people concerned about any subject. But at the same time, manipulating God to get our way becomes impossible. Does this fact matter for how our prayer life works? If so, how?
2. Idolatry is a matter of assigning ultimate value to something or someone other than God. What forms does idolatry take in your world? In the workplace? In families? Neighborhoods?
3. We know God by considering God's deeds of saving vulnerable people from the various forms of the power of sin, whether individual or social. What have you seen God doing in the life of your church, or the church more generally, to liberate people from sin? How do we learn to see that work more clearly?

Lesson 4: On Not Trying to Limit God

Focus: *As human beings we are constantly tempted to grab the easiest available ideas or symbols that seem to offer a path to understanding about life and death, love and fear, and all other deepest aspects of life. We seek to retain control by making God in our own image. Israel must find an alternative approach.*

Closely following the prohibition of worshipping other gods comes the command against making images that resemble anything in the world humans know. Israelites all know that every culture in their world created statues, paintings, and other media that represented deities to which they pay homage. The deities often look like human beings, only grander and longer lasting.



The attached picture comes from the entrance to a temple built at Abu Simbel in Egypt by the great Pharaoh, Ramesses II, thought by some to be the villain of the exodus. Notice the grandeur and serenity of the deities as they look out upon the world their worshipers believe they control. Notice also that they look like the Pharaoh who had them carved. Divinity in polytheistic systems easily becomes a mirror image of human power.

Several biblical texts recognize this point. Perhaps the closest to the Decalogue itself appears in Deuteronomy 4:15-20. The text enjoins Israelites not to make images of deity (the Lord or anyone else) based on any observable creature in any habitat because when they met God at Sinai they did not see an image. In other words, their ongoing encounter with their Lord should be image-less like the original encounter at the holy mountain. The absence of images means the absence of human control and the recognition that we encounter God on God's terms, not ours. Though God takes account of our weakness and lack of understanding, we do not control the process of religious experience.

While the Decalogue wants to avoid making images of Israel's Lord, other biblical texts primarily focus on foreign gods. For example, Psalms 115 and 135 contrast Israel's God "who lives in the heavens" and so cannot be contained or controlled by human beings (compare 1 Kings 8:27). Isaiah 46:1-2 describes the procession of Babylonian deities (Bel a.k.a. Marduk and his "son" Nabu), whose statues human beings carried around at certain festivals. The next verses

note that, unlike these famous gods, Israel's Lord carries people rather than being carried by them.

Similarly, both Isaiah 40-41 and Jeremiah 10 describe the process of idol-making, whether from wood or precious metals. Jeremiah 10 is especially interesting because it recognizes that ancient people did not believe they were praying simply to the statue but to the god dwelling in it. They could speak of this deity as ruler of heaven and earth, as Jeremiah 10:11 notes. There the prophet changes language from Hebrew to Aramaic to remind his hearers that it's possible to say the right words but be speaking in a way alien to the truth. The prophet also notes that the "customs of the people are puffs of air" (v. 3) and that those with access to the knowledge of God's oneness and radical difference from all created things should not be terrified of portents in the sky (v. 2), nor should they try to channel their piety toward things they have made.

For modern western Jews or Christians, the temptation to think of God as represented by human art has become remote. The Bible's move to represent God's nature and actions in words alone (preached or recited or sung) has carried the day. Yet even those words can turn into idolatrous images of God if we forget that they represent aspects of the truth. God is far greater than our concepts or words. Yet we have access to God through those concepts or words.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. What are your favorite biblical images of God (king, judge, shepherd, parent, etc.)? Why do these images resonate with you? What limits do you place on the validity of these images (how can you press them too far, if you can)?
2. The Decalogue's introduction emphasizes God as the one who delivered Israel, a view that the Bible believes to exclude the making of images. Why is this emphasis on God as the actor/maker/creator and humans as the recipient of God's action so important? What are its implications?
3. In Christian art, portraying Jesus' human nature and the Holy Spirit as a dove has usually not met opposition because we believed that such representation points us to signs of God's nature, not that nature itself. Are there occasions, however, when even these benign figures can be a problem? Why or why not?

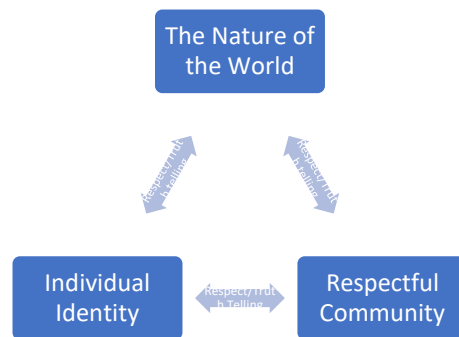
Lesson 5: Words and Deeds That Build a World

Focus: *The command not to invoke God’s name for dishonest purposes assumes that words have power, and that those who call on God’s name do so with respect both for God and for the human beings with whom we deal. To do otherwise destroys the social relationships that the election of Israel was intended to create.*

The commandment instructs Israel not to “lift up the Lord’s name for emptiness.” In the Old Testament, the verb “to lift up” (Hebrew: *nasa’*) can take as its direct object a physical object, as well as a body part or a bodily function. So “to lift up eyes” is “to look up,” to “lift up a face or head” is “to show approval of,” and to “lift up a heart” is to “pay attention to.” The biblical texts outside the Decalogue rarely refer to lifting up “a name” except in Psalm 16:4. That text offers an oath of innocence according to which the psalmist insists on not calling the name of idols. On a related note, Psalm 24:4 again speaks of the innocent person who has been the victim of people lifting up his life to “emptiness,” or endangering him somehow. And Psalm 139:20 speaks of enemies who left up Israel’s cities to emptiness – these foes try to talk their gods into attacking Israel. These few samples tell us just enough about the Decalogue’s prohibition of “lifting up” God’s name. Human beings can bring God into our business, but if we do so, we must approach God with respect.

How do Christians help build a culture of respect? The charge not to take God’s name “in vain” offers us a starting point for answering that question. Reverencing the name of God leads to a culture of respect because we recognize that everyone is made in God’s image, just as we are, and that we cannot assume God’s responsibilities of evaluating the world or deciding who is good and who is evil. Our tasks are much humbler.

The following graph illustrates the levels of reality with which we must interact in building a respectful world. We must honor God and the world God has made. We must see in ourselves the image of God, covered by sin, to be sure, but still intact and still capable of goodness. We must treat others justly and graciously and ensure that the ways in which we all interact promote the same ends.



When the commandment enjoins Israel not to take God’s name lightly, it means primarily that human beings should not try to involve God in our sinful activities. We should not presume

that God will endorse what we do simply because we want coverage for our actions. Rather, we should submit our will to God's will. The commandment primarily forbids false oaths, but by extension, it also applies to any form of communication that involves God under false pretenses.

Several texts illustrate what respect for God might look like. These examples, though far from exhaustive, give some sense of how we might grow in our respect for God.

Deuteronomy 6 explores human use of God's name in several ways. (1) Verses 4-5 lay the groundwork by noting the uniqueness and unity of God ("one" cuts both ways) and the need (and possibility) for humans to love God with their entire being. (2) Verses 10-19 talk about how God uses language. God's words are always true. Intent and action always match up. (3) Verses 13-14 call on Israel to swear by the name of God (rather than other, false gods) whenever they swear. That is, they should match their actions and words to the intent of God. (These verses have an informative parallel in Exodus 23:1-3, which talks about avoiding abusive or negligent words.) And (4) Verses 20-25 use respectful words both to recite the story of God's saving acts and to invite Israel to remember those acts and live in light of them. The honor God showed them should inspire their respectful actions toward both their Redeemer and the rest of the redeemed.

Another relevant text is Exodus 34:6-7, in which God uses the language of worship (probably the same language used in the Temple by the priests) to describe the divine attributes relevant to our religious lives. God shows mercy to those who, though sinful, try to live righteous lives. God can perfectly balance mercy and justice, something no human can unfailingly do. Anything we say about God must portray Him in this way. Any overemphasis on divine wrath or the uncompromising nature of divine commands is blasphemous and disrespectful.

A third relevant text is Philippians 2:9-11, part of the great hymn to Christ. This early Christian song, quoted by Paul and undoubtedly familiar to many of his readers, speaks of Christ's self-abasement, redemptive death, and subsequent exaltation. Christians give honor to the Triune God by celebrating both divine glory and divine humility. We thus assume our destined position as those who bow the knee to the right person, not to false gods, but to the true one.

In his detailed book, *The Ten Commandments* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009], 82-90), Patrick Miller notes five features of the Old Testament's use of God's name.

- Revering God's name is the same as worshipping God alone. Monotheism is respectful.
- The primary place for the use of God's name is in worship.
- The name of God is what makes worship true and proper.
- The proclamation of the name distinguishes true worship from whatever comes from outside the story of faith or opposes God's self-revelation.
- Speaking God's name in worship leads to the blessing of God's presence.

In short, the discussion about taking God's name in vain is not just about what we do not say. It is more about what we do say. We use God's name in honoring, world-creating ways rather than dishonoring, life-destroying ones.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. Other than profanity, what are ways in which God's name is abused? Can religious people have their own ways of doing so?
2. Miller claims that the use of God's name is an avenue to blessing. What does that mean to you? When and how do you invite God to be present in your life?
3. This lesson claims that respect for God is the foundation for respect among human beings. Is this claim plausible to you? Why or why not?
4. How can we Christians contribute to a culture of respect among ourselves and toward others? What would we need to change to make such a reality possible?

Lesson 6: Stop and Rest!

Focus: *Human beings are not just economic units; we transcend our work and the status that comes from work. Rest is necessary for creating spiritual space so that the work week can also be more meaningful.*

The law of the Sabbath rests on the assumption that we can trust God enough to lay aside our habits of acquisitiveness and our desires to reduce others to the level of things. The law also creates a way for free people to preserve their freedom by creating a community of respect and dignity involving all its members. The Bible roots the practice of observing Sabbath in creation (Genesis 1:1-2:4; Exodus 20) and in the exodus (Deuteronomy 5), events that it often sees as two of a kind. Both events and the stories reporting them point to a deep feature of reality, the status of everything and everyone as a creature of God.

Hence some of the details of the story in Exodus 16, which we might well consider this week. In this story, Yahweh feeds Israel with “bread from heaven,” instructing them to gather just enough manna each day for solid meals, but twice as much on Friday so as to allow them to rest on the Sabbath. None would be available that day. The story of the miracle of the manna reveals a God anxious not just to feed slaves, but to bring them dignity through rest, planning, and commitment. Israel’s deep need to learn trust explains several details of the story, including the unexpected rotting of the surplus manna (except on the Sabbath), the attention to the special nature of the Sabbath itself, the emphasis on the vision of God’s glory (Exodus 16:7-8), the strange manner of winning the battle with the Amalekites (Exodus 17:8-16), and so on. These unanticipated behaviors teach Israel to think in new ways. Also, the narrator helps us think in new terms by introducing several words or phrases that point us to these new ways of thinking, such as “all the community/assembly,” “bread from heaven,” and “Sabbath.” The stories thus paint a strong contrast between Israel’s confusion and complaining, on the one hand, and Yahweh’s patience and mercy, on the other. Israel becomes a people when its suffering becomes an occasion for learning, rather than a source of despair or infighting.

This last point is most clear whenever God speaks in these chapters. Consider two examples, Exodus 16:4-5 and 16:28-29.

And Yahweh said to Moses, “I am going to rain down bread from heaven on you. The people should go and gather a day’s worth each day so that I can test whether they will go by my instructions or not. But on the sixth day they should make sure to come and there will be twice the normal amount to gather.” And Yahweh said to Moses, “How long will you [plural] refuse to observe my commands and my instructions?” Recognize that Yahweh has given you the Sabbath. Therefore, he is giving to you on the sixth day enough bread for two days. Each person should stay put and not go about from his or her place on the seventh day.

In the first speech, God responds to the cry for food by promising to give human beings angelic food (whatever that is, hence the Israelites’ word *manna* or “thingamajig”) and thus to provide for them the best possible sustenance, signaling the deepest possible care for their fate. God gives manna as both a gift and a test to see if Israel can obey a single instruction (Hebrew:

torah). Thus at some level the story foreshadows the giving of the law at Sinai, and it shows how that law reflects God's generosity.

Similarly, the second speech, which shifts from words of God (Exodus 16:28) to words of Moses speaking for God (Exodus 16:29), states God's frustration at Israel's foolish refusal to follow instructions that are for their own good (and are, in any case, easier to follow than to break). The speech also returns to the theme of "my Torah and my commandments," again foreshadowing what is to come.

The point is that the first law of God that Israel learns is the law of the Sabbath. Unlike their lives in Egypt, in which every day offered the same drudgery and utter vulnerability, their new life with God will be one in which they can afford to rest from their labors in the confidence that they will be provided for. They can cease being animals and become human beings, just as God originally intended them to be. The lesson of trust could hardly be clearer.

In addition to this narrative of Sabbath in action, other texts explore the role of the day as a time of deliberate rest, as a means of ensuring social justice (since everyone gets to rest, regardless of social status), and as a way of providing a rhythm to life.

For example, even the book of Psalms itself never uses the word Hebrew *shabbat*, the superscription to Psalm 92 says that it is a psalm for the Sabbath day. If so, what would the Psalm tell us about observing that day? The opening (vv. 1-4 in English) remarks on the joy of worship, while vv. 5-9 praises God for vindicating the righteous and disciplining the wicked. Verse 5 reminds us of how remarkable such a thing is because only God can accurately decide when to time punishment so as to allow for repentance but also protect the innocent. Meanwhile, vv. 10-11 expand the idea by thanking God for protecting the psalmist. Then, finally, vv. 12-15 speak of how God continues to give life to those who worship. Like the wise person of Psalm 1, the righteous Sabbath-keeper of Psalm 92 can expect, if not an easy life, then a blessed one.

Mark 2:23-28 operates in a similar world of faith and piety, even if, on the surface, it seems to contradict it. The text reports a dispute between the Pharisees and Jesus on how to observe the Sabbath properly. Jesus does not argue for careless breaking of the day. Rather, he notes that it serves people by bringing them to God, rather than being simply a hoop through which we must jump. The clincher verse seems to indicate that the disciples may break the Sabbath because they are in the company of the one who brings them to God. Thus the purpose of the Sabbath will be served whether they keep it strictly (in every circumstance) or not. Note that the parallel story in Matthew 12 "fixes" Mark by reporting (Matthew 12:1) that the disciples were "hungry." This fact would alter how one understood the disciples' actions: hungry people may preserve their life even when breaking, at a technical level, the rules against work on the Sabbath.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. The law of Sabbath assumes a rhythm to life centered on a time of quiet. Eventually the day takes on an explicitly religious quality. How do we find a religious rhythm to our lives? What helps us do so? What hinders us?

2. The law also has a social justice aspect: no one can be treated as a tool for the use of others. How do our own religious practices help free people from being reduced to the status of property (or at least a lower status)? What do we need to change for this reality to exist?
3. In Mark, Jesus' comments on Sabbath observance seem to fit all religious practices: they serve human beings. In what ways do you find this to be true? When does it seem untrue in your experience?
4. What specific practices of worship do you use to shape your life? What would you like to grow in?

Lesson 7: Honoring Our Predecessors

Focus: *Fidelity across generations insures the health of a society, a church, and a family. Recovering such fidelity rooted in a notion of honor should transform us all in our daily lives. Note, however, that honor does not necessarily equal obedience if parents are abusive. The exact shape of such honoring will vary somewhat.*

The commandment to honor parents forms a bridge between those commandments that have to do primarily with God and those that have to do primarily with neighbor. It leads us from the encounter with God, through the encounter with family, to the encounter with the neighbor. However, the shift from God to people does not leave God behind. Not at all. Rather, we come to understand respect and love for those closest to us – and those responsible for our upbringing and faith development – us a window onto our love for God. If we cannot honor those closest to us, then how can we honor either other people or God?

The commandment has several consequences:

- It protects the well-being and good of other members of the community;
- It helps us understand our own identity, as well as the identity of others in our family, our community, and our world;
- It promises a positive outcome for those who honor their father and mother. What is heard and obeyed brings long life and good experiences for the one who obeys. Obedience has good results, so obeying makes sense;
- It creates communion between generations and thus makes broader community possible;
- It highlights the responsibility that each of us bears to those older and younger than we are;
- It connects to other texts, such as Deuteronomy 6:4-9, which require passing on the commandments of God to the next generation and gives a mechanism and a context for doing so;
- It reminds us that respect for authority is not a bad thing when that authority is used to honor God and bless people;
- It fosters in us an attitude of reverence.

These features of the commandment, or rather the assumptions behind it and goals to which it points, paint a complete picture of an ideal according to which human relations function harmoniously. How do we make that ideal a reality?

What does “honor” mean in the command to “honor father and mother”? First, remember that as with all the commandments, the audience of this one is adults. It is not primarily addressing little children. Thus honor and respect are behaviors of adults toward adults. Second, the Hebrew verb *kabbēd* means to count something as significant (or even heavy, when physical mass is under consideration). Thus to “honor” parents means to recognize their importance and gravity. Third, to honor is to demonstrate fidelity across generations and thus to insure the health of a society, a church, and a family. Recovering such fidelity rooted in a notion of honor should transform us all in our daily lives. Fourth, honor is not just an internal

state, nor is it a matter of words or emotions only. Rather, it is about practices and structures that use physical and social resources in ways that benefit everyone appropriately. Fifth, note, however, that honor does not necessarily equal obedience if parents are abusive. The exact shape of such honoring will vary somewhat. In some cases, we may honor parents by saying no and calling them to honor God.

A number of other texts are relevant to this discussion. Some of these include Leviticus 19:2-8, 14; 20:9; Deuteronomy 27:16; Proverbs 23:22-25; and Ezekiel 22:6-8. (Some of these texts contrast respect with dishonoring or belittling people.) At this point, we can focus on just two.

In Ruth 4:11-17 we see a good example of honoring parents. Here, the tragic story of Naomi's loss takes its final turn toward a happy resolution. The wedding of the Moabite Ruth and the Israelite Boaz is accompanied by a ritual in which the town of Bethlehem adopts Ruth into Israel's story of faith by asking God to make her like their greatest female ancestors (a case of honoring parents at a long distance). Then, when the baby Obed is born, he is counted as an honorary offspring of Naomi, continuing her name and lineage. The people of the village remind Naomi that the new baby will take care of her in old age and bring to her great joy. This story is what the biblical text has in mind when it imagines honoring parents.

At the other end of the Bible, Ephesians 6:1-4 reflects on the commandment to honor parents by noting that the command has a promise associated with it – and thus it is a gospel saying – and then by flipping it around. Just as offspring honor ancestors, so do those of us being honored show honor to those who follow us. The relationship is mutual. A child's honoring of parents should evoke a response of parents to be worthy of the honor of the child. Thus parents have a moral obligation to avoid harassing their children. The parental role is to bring up children to honor God and conduct themselves as Christians. Thus the commandment is not about power and obedience, but about responsibility and respect. It is important to get this focus right.

Many biblical stories about families involve strife and struggle. Thus the command to honor has important practical implications.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. What do words like honor, respect, and obligation mean to you? How do you show them? Receive them?
2. How could hospitality toward our elders be a way of doing justice? How could we grow in our relationships to those older than we are?
3. What are the challenges of honoring our parents or grandparents in their old ages? What are the benefits of doing so? What can we learn by taking on the obligation to respect them?
4. In a recent study, 40% of women and 26% of men caregivers reported “very high levels of emotional stress.” How can we recognize their duty to support and honor the work of these caregivers in our midst?
5. Elder abuse or neglect often occur in situations of family stress and economic hardship. How can we help the victims of such abuse?

Lesson 8: On Stopping Violence, Adultery, and Theft

Focus: *Breaking human relationships can occur in several ways, and so the Decalogue pulls together three of those with the straightforward prohibition, “do not, do not, do not.” Without any unnecessary further explanation, the Decalogue reminds Israel that the illegitimate taking of life, the violation of marriage commitments, and the disregard for property rights all destroy human community because they treat the other person as an object for our gratification.*

Unlike the previous or subsequent commands, the three “thou shalt nots” in the middle lack any sort of qualification or explanation. They do not need them because anyone can understand them. And yet, as Jesus’ exposition of them in the Sermon on the Mount makes clear, their apparent simplicity is deceiving. Jesus shifted the focus from behavior to character, from the external action to the internal state leading up to the action, while the Decalogue itself focused on the surface of human existence in a more clear-cut way.

At the same time, many biblical texts explore the horrors of murder, adultery, and theft, and so the Decalogue can rightly stick to the blanket prohibition. The text seems to say that no excuse can justify these behaviors and so they should not enter anyone’s heads as an option.

On Not Murdering

The taking of another human life should fill God’s people with abhorrence. The sanctity of human life is a high value that must be celebrated. Note that the command’s word for “kill” extends in other biblical texts to accidental death and to judicial execution. This is why the Ten Commandments underline the fact that the default move of the people of God is the protection of life.

The Old Testament explores the various dimensions of homicide through the telling of stories. So we see murders within families (Genesis 4), abuse of power by leaders (1 Kings 21), deaths in combat (much of Judges), and so on. At the same time, biblical law does distinguish among what we would call premeditated murder vs. manslaughter vs. accidental death. For example, the law regulating an out-of-control ox that kills someone determines the owner’s fate by the degree of responsibility he or she has taken (Exodus 21:28-32). And the laws of asylum distinguish among various sorts of homicide depending on the killer’s intent, the weapon used, the emotions in play, and so on (Numbers 35). Because it lacked a police force to enforce the law and protect the accused from lynch law, biblical law provided for cities of asylum (also called “cities of refuge”) to which people who had killed someone accidentally could flee.

Behind the Decalogue’s commandment to avoid homicide lies a crucial value: humans reflect the image of God, and each human being bears a basic dignity worth preserving.

On Avoiding Adultery

Just as it explores the subject of violence, the Bible also thinks about adultery because such an action can destroy the most important social institution, family. Marriage provides a vehicle for God’s grace to many human beings. It can also be a place of suffering and faithlessness. Christians need to make choices that allow for the first rather than the second outcome.

Quite a few biblical texts talk about marriage and even sex within marriage (for example, Genesis 2; Leviticus 18:6-18; Deuteronomy 22:13-21; 2 Samuel 11-12; Song of Songs 8:6; Hosea 1-3). While recognizing that human beings have often engaged in sexual activity outside the marriage relationship, the texts always argue for a different way of life, in which sexual expression comes from the deepest part of the human psyche as it expresses deep love for the marital partner.

The Decalogue does not clarify what it means by “adultery.” Jesus’ clarification focuses on desire as an internal mental state, or even a disease of the emotions, that translates into action (Matthew 5:27-30). This shift of focus has the advantage of pointing us to the steps leading up to the act itself and calling us to act against bad impulses before it is too late.

In Opposition to Theft

The next two-word command, “don’t steal,” presupposes the legitimacy of personal property. The accumulation and use of property need not be problematic in itself, though it often creates temptations to false security, arrogance, greed, or lack of concern for others. Theft does not cure economic injustices. It merely makes them worse.

Several other biblical texts are relevant to the banning of theft. For example, some rules call upon members of the community to help each other out in taking care of property (Exodus 23:4-5; Deuteronomy 22:1-4). Other laws understand overly high rates of interest on emergency loans as a form of theft (Leviticus 25:35-38; Deuteronomy 24:10-13). The goal is to build a community in which people respect and help each other.

These texts recognize the need for property and the protection of human dignity through its proper use. They also recognize that power tends to allow some people to steal, often under various disguises. Christians who think of their property as a trust and themselves as stewards will take a somewhat different angle on these texts than those merely defending our culture’s egocentric and consumerist impulses.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. If adultery breaks us away from relationship with God, how does faithfulness in marriage help us grow in that very relationship?
2. While private property is important, there must be rules about acquiring and keeping it. What are some of those rules, in your view? What biblical texts are relevant to your answer to that question?
3. If followers of God are to be in the business of avoiding not only violence but its causes, what contributions can the church make to ensuring that people have options other than violence available to them in their interactions with others?

Lesson 9: Truth-telling and the Love of Neighbor

Focus: *The command to avoid bearing false witness in court recognizes the social interconnectedness of people and the ways in which lying can tear those relationships. Subversion of the legal system leads to injustice.*

The next commandment addresses words, especially words that can harm or help others. “Do not answer with lying testimony against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16) or “Do not answer with empty testimony against your neighbor” (Deuteronomy 5:20) point to different diseases of language that harm in the same way. Exodus uses the ordinary word for “lie” (Hebrew: *sheqer*), assuming that the one speaking in court about a neighbor is simply lying. Deuteronomy uses the same word as in the commandment about misusing God’s name (Hebrew: *shav’*), which implies both deceit and folly. The testimony might be strictly true but still misleading or incomplete.

A good commentary on the law appears in Exodus 23:1, which says, “you shall not lift up an empty report. You shall not shake hands with an evil person to be a violent witness.” In other words, Israelites should not be in the business of helping each other abuse defenseless people. This verse is part of a longer section that tries to regulate court proceedings so that everyone can find a fair hearing and the power structures will not become the tool of the powerful. By preventing bribery and fraud (Exodus 23:8; see also Deuteronomy 10:17; 16:19; and 27:25), Israel should be able to find a way to live together as a people.

Still other texts emphasize other aspects of lying in the public sphere or community sphere. Leviticus 16:15-16 talk about the abuse of court proceedings whether by demagogues helping the poor unfairly (a rare event) or the rich (much more common). Such abuse leads to violence against the “neighbor.” The choice of that word emphasizes the ideal behind the law: the human beings around us should be our neighbors, not just strangers. Similarly, Deuteronomy 19:15-20 requires multiple witnesses for any accusation in court. This procedural rule reduces potential for wrongful conviction, especially in capital cases (compare Deuteronomy 17:2-7). These text all recognize that lying equals violence.

But does the command to avoid slandering a neighbor apply only to the courtroom setting, where such an action is most dangerous? Obviously lying in court can wreak havoc on people’s lives, as the stories of Susanna (Additions to Daniel) or Naboth (1 Kings 21) illustrate. But bearing false witness can take other forms.

Numbers 12 tells the story of how Aaron and Miriam falsely accused Moses of abusing his power. Deuteronomy 24:8-22 reminds its readers of this story, first by pointing to Miriam’s punishment of a dermatological condition and then shifting to a series of rules against mistreating the poor. What do these things have in common? They are all commenting on the ninth commandment’s underlying idea that we must see the other person as our neighbor, regardless of that person’s social status. We owe each other the truth about ourselves. The most important truth is our shared need for God’s mercy, which this text refers to by recalling the story of the exodus – Israel was a people redeemed from slavery in order to live out the original intent God had for human beings.

There are many ways to betray this intent through lying. So we have the story of Ananias and Sapphira, who lied about the gift they had given in order to enhance their reputation

while hanging on to their resources (Acts 5). Or Ephesians 4:25 reminds the Christians to speak truth to and about each other. This admonition fits in a string of behavioral norms (Ephesians 4:25-5:2) that includes self-control of desires and behaviors that affect other people. These norms connect the interior of the individual's life with the interactions of a community so that human beings live in the fulness of their nature, now redeemed in Jesus Christ.

It is tempting in our world of verbal excess to underplay the importance of this command. We teach children the ditty, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." But we also know that the saying is untrue. Words can create, and they can kill. Management of oneself includes mastery of our language especially as it evaluates other people.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. Defaming or denigrating another person diminishes that person and denies his or her value before God. What are some ways this kind of bearing false witness happens? How do we avoid breaking this law?
2. Truth-telling involves risk to the one speaking, who may lose misbegotten opportunities for self-advancement. How do we learn to accept this risk given the strong temptation to bend the truth to our own advantage? How can we encourage each other along this line?
3. The law calls upon God's people to think of each other as the neighbor rather than a stranger. Strengthening that viewpoint would make lying harder. So how do we build up the social capital that would allow us to see each other in that way?

Lesson 10: Against Illicit Desire

Focus: *How do we discipline our desires so that they help us grow spiritually? That is a topic that the Bible attends to often but our contemporary culture often does not. The Decalogue takes on desire from several angles.*

Desire is a necessary feature of the human psyche. Our passion for some things and not others allows us to choose good over evil, beauty over ugliness, truth over falsehood. Computers do not have desires but humans inevitably do. Yet we need to tame our desires lest they become misdirected. If we pursue good ends, our character will become good. If we consistently pursue bad ends, then the opposite will occur. This is true of individuals and of communities. The anarchy of desire creates social disharmony or even chaos, and it destroys vulnerable people as those who pursue every desire create a dog-eat-dog world.

Or so the Ten Commandments assume. The list is structured around the idea of desire, in fact. It opens with a call to orient oneself to Israel's key story and thus to desire a relationship with the deliverer God rather than with idols. And it ends by naming desires to be avoided.

English translations usually translate the last prohibitory verbs of the Decalogue as "covet." Do not covet your neighbor's wife or property. This translation is appropriate, but it deserves a little clarification.

Exodus 20 uses the same verb for all the objects of covetousness (Hebrew: *chamad*, with a hard "ch" as in "chorus"). The verb often refers to something one may want but should not, such as metals to inlay an idol (Deuteronomy 7:25), loot from a war (Joshua 7:21), someone else's property (Micah 2:2), or opportunities for violence (Prov 12:12). It is also possible to desire something positive, as when God *chamads* Mount Zion as a dwelling place (Psalm 68:16). There is nothing intrinsically wrong with desire, but it can be misdirected.

Deuteronomy, however, distinguishes desire for the neighbor's wife from desire for that person's property by using a different verb for the second. That verb (*'avah*) can also be directed toward legitimate things such as food (Deuteronomy 12:20; 14:26; compare Micah 7:1) or proper government (2 Samuel 3:21; compare 1 Kings 11:37) or even the presence of God (Isaiah 26:9). But it can also be directed toward very evil objects or objects wanted in an evil way (Numbers 11:4, 34; similarly, Psalm 106:14). Desires can be unwise, as when David dared his men to steal some water from Philistine controlled land, risking their lives in the process (2 Samuel 23:15 = 1 Chronicles 11:17) or when wicked people think they want God to intervene on their side (Amos 5:8). In Deuteronomy 5:21, the verb form is in the intensive form (Hithpael for Hebrew nerds!), and whenever that form is used, the object of desire is almost always negative (for example, Proverbs 21:26; 24:1; an exception is probably Psalm 45:12).

Vocabulary is not everything, of course, but it does say something. Illicit desire is a problem either because it has a bad object or because it is too intense in some way. Badly aimed desire leads to badly conceived actions.

A very interesting commentary on the Decalogue's attempt to eliminate covetousness appears in Exodus 34:21-24. In this scene, God appears to Moses after the disaster with the Golden Calf and reboots the Torah, so to speak. These verses call upon Israel to worship at three different festivals, which will bring together the whole community at some (unspecified) central

location. As v. 24 says, “no one will covet (*chamad*) your land when you go up to appear before the LORD your God....” That is, no one will take advantage of your absence to move boundary markers or steal your crops or annuals plants. The community that keeps the Decalogue will not have to worry about its members taking advantage of each other. That promise seems attractive even today.

Finally, this managing of desire in the Decalogue, at least as Deuteronomy sees it, has two dimensions. One involves a spouse. While we may not be able to eliminate entirely our attraction to the wrong person, we can control what we do about it. Fantasizing or pursuing contact in isolated situations, whether welcome or otherwise, can cause a destructive spiral to be avoided. The second one involves property. Desire that leads to illegitimate acquisition is obviously wrong. So is allowing desire for property or status to undermine friendship or mutual respect.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. We speak of “managing” desire. How do we learn to do this, in your opinion? How do we find a middle space between repressing legitimate desire and allowing all desires free rein? What models have you had in your own life for this?
2. What are areas of desire you struggle with? How do you address those struggles?
3. Unlike Deuteronomy, Exodus seems to lump together desire for another’s spouse with desire for another’s property. How are they connected, if they are? How can we avoid connecting them, if we must?

Lesson 11: Christians and the Ordered Life

Focus: *The commandments fit together well. They concern the formation of human character as it can reflect divine character. How, then, do we move from discrete rules to broad patterns of behavior? This lesson should allow us to pull together the various strands of the previous weeks.*

In the periods after the writing of the Old Testament, the Decalogue became one of the core texts of Judaism, and then of Christianity. Many thinkers commented on the list, finding in it a basic orientation to the good human life. Consider for example a spread of texts:

- *The first commandment that went forth from the mouth of the Holy One (blessed be his name) ... “my people, the children of Israel, I am Yhwh your God who released you and brought you out of the land of Egypt, away from the house where slaves serve.” (Targum Neophyti to Deut 5:6)*
- *... the texts and the dicta of the Sages permit considering as admissible that all Israel only heard at that Gathering [at Sinai] one voice on single time – the voice through which Moses and all Israel apprehended “I” and “Thou shalt not have,” which commandments Moses made them hear gain as spoken in his own speech with an articulation of the letters that were heard. (Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:35 [pp. 364-65 trans. Pines])*
- *Is it not impious to slander God by forbidding doing a good deed on the Sabbath day? (Epistle to Diognetos 4:3)*
- *And if someone swears falsely, he will not be justified, for his house will be filled with struggles. (Sirach 23:11)*
- *For Moses said, “Honor your father and your mother” and “whoever speaks against father or mother will surely be put to death.” But you say, “If people say to their father or mother, ‘It’s a gift (qorban), reserved for me’ and you decide to withhold it from father or mother, aren’t you annulling God’s word ...? (Mark 7:1-13)*
- *“Honor your father and mother,” which is the first commandment marked by promise.... (Ephesians 6:2)*
- *For the one saying, “do not commit adultery,” also says, “do not murder.” But if you don’t commit adultery but do commit murder, aren’t you a lawbreaker? (James 2:11)*
- *Do not owe anyone anything except loving each other, for the one loving the other has fulfilled the law. “Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not covet” – and if there is any other law, it is summed up in the statement, “You should love your neighbor as yourself.” For love toward the neighbor does no harm. Therefore, love is the full meaning of the law. (Romans 13:8-10).*

These texts and many others show how ongoing reflection on the Decalogue led to several insights.

First, the Decalogue is not just a list of arbitrary rules. It focuses on the formation of the person and the community. By taming desires and seeking truthfulness, the one keeping the law becomes a different sort of person.

Second, the law is social. It seeks to order relationships among people so that all are able to flourish.

Third, keeping the law demands thinking about the principles behind it, not just nitpicky adherence to the surface of the text. The stickler finds way to keep the letter while ignoring the spirit. And yet the focus on the principle does not allow us to be less committed to doing right. Rather, as the Mark text above makes clear, when we focus on the principle we learn to question behaviors that are not forbidden in so many words.

Fourth, the law is seamless. As James puts it, each rule connects to the others.

And fifth, the law leads to a deeper spirituality because it is rooted in the work of God in redeeming humankind. As John Calvin put it in the sixteenth century, “since the Lord well knows, and also attests through his prophets, that no benefit can come from us to him, he does not confine our duties to himself, but he exercises us ‘in good works toward our neighbor [Ps 16:2].... It is certain the Law and the Prophets give first place to faith and whatever pertains to the lawful worship of God, relegating love to a subordinate position. But the Lord means that the law only enjoins us to observe right and equity toward men, that thereby we may become practiced in witnessing to a pious fear of him, if we have any of it in us.”

These thoughts lead to a further set of reflections on the Decalogue as we conclude this study.

- It is tempting to think of only the surface of the text, the “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not,” but true encounter with this text takes us inside the conversation of which the text is the surface. We ask why the text says what it says and why it says that how it does.
- To get inside the text in this way, we must think about the Decalogue’s structure, argumentation, and function in a larger literary context. *How* a text says something is often just as important for its meaning as *what* it says.
- The structure of the Decalogue moves from the cultivation of memory (the reminder of Israel’s relationship to the redeeming God) to the cultivation of desire (“do not covet....”). That movement is relevant because it gets us inside the possible motivations of the implied audience of the text. Idolatry is a disease of desires, a misapplication of the legitimate human need to reach out to God. And the obsession with obtaining things – even good things – leads us back to idolatry.
- The middle of the list addresses primal human relationships (see below) directed toward God, ancestors, peers, and dependents. But the placement of these commands in the middle creates a meaning not explicitly laid out but certainly hinted at: life involves others, and we need to get our connections to others right.
- The laws of the Decalogue usually gain deeper meaning when we connect them to stories or prophetic texts that relate to the same subject matter. For example, the story of Naboth’s vineyard shows what it means to steal or suborn witnesses. The prohibitions take on concrete shape in real people’s lives.
- At the same time, the absoluteness of the commands reminds us that we should not use the complexity of our lives as an excuse for moral flabbiness. Moses did not give the Ten Suggestions.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. The point of reading the Decalogue is not just to understand but to integrate its values into our lives. How do we learn better how to do that?
2. Which commandment is the biggest growth area for you personally? For the church as a whole?
3. How can we best help each other internalize the commandments so that we can grow in our experience of God's redeeming power?