

God instructs his people  
Exodus 20

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Today we have the privilege of talking about one of the most well-known sections of Scripture in the entire Bible. Even if you are someone who has never opened the Bible before, even if you are someone who is not a Christian or not that interested in religion, this is a portion of the Bible that you know at least something about. It is one of the most influential, notorious, and these days politically contentious documents in the entire world: the Ten Commandments. If you have your Bibles, will you turn with me to Exodus 20. As you are turning there, let me remind you what we discussed last week. Last week, in Exodus 19, we saw God make a marriage proposal to the people of Israel. He saved them out of Egypt, brought them through the Red Sea, provided for them through the wilderness, and then asked them if they wanted to enter into a covenant relationship with him, if they wanted to fully obey him, if they wanted to be his treasured possession, if they wanted to be for him a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, to represent him to the entire world? And the people resoundingly said, “Yes.” Exodus 19:8 **“The people all responded together, “We will do everything the Lord has said.”** Yes, God, we want to be in a covenant with you. In our passage today, we get to see more specifically what the Lord requires of them.

Before we jump in, there are three words I want to give you that I think will help us come to a better understanding of them. Here’s the first word: **History**. If we neglect to pay attention to the historical context of the Ten Commandments, we will end up way off base when it comes to application. Historically speaking, the Ten Commandments were given to the Jewish people when God brought out of slavery in Egypt. These are the commandments that teach the Jewish people, how to live in a covenant relationship with God. So what does that mean? They are not God’s rules for all humanity. These are not rules that God gave Muslims or Hindus or Sikhs or atheists. These are his rules for the Jewish people who entered into a covenant with him that day. Now that’s not to say the contents of the Ten Commandments are entirely irrelevant and unhelpful for other people; it’s simply to recognize the history and whom they were given to.

Here’s the second word: **Society**. God is establishing an entirely new society for his people. Think about their situation. Two to three million people had been slaves in Egypt for 400 years. They didn’t have their own culture, their own laws, or their own regulations. Everything was determined for them based upon their masters in Egypt. Now they are free. Egypt is in the rearview mirror, and they are going to establish a new community with a blank slate. What are our values and priorities going to look like? When it comes to behaviors and activities, what sorts of things are they going to collectively decide? We will do these things and we won’t do those things. This is a brand new nation, and God gave them the Ten Commandments to help them know how to build their society in such a way that would honor him and reflect his character to the world.

**History. Society. Authority.** These days, in a postmodern world, we are very suspicious of authority. Cultural experts tell us that the shift began to take place around the time of Nixon’s Watergate scandal. As a nation, when we discovered that our elected leader, the man we should have been able to trust the most, was lying to us, we, as a people, became suspicious not only of those in political authority but everyone in authority. To show you the state of where we are at

these days in regards to authority, a 2018 poll by the Wagner Group and Readers Digest asked more than 1,000 Americans who the most trusted person in society is today. Do you know their answer? **Tom Hanks**. An actor. Can you believe that? Maybe that was just a fluke though. Number 2? **Sandra Bullock**. Number 3? **Denzel Washington**? Number 4? **Meryl Streep**. I want to be clear; the question was not whom do you trust most in Hollywood, but whom do you trust most in the entire nation? Not our elected officials, our Supreme Court Justices, our doctors, scientists, Nobel prize winners - no, we chose people who are paid millions of dollars to pretend to be other people in movies. They are professional *actors*, and we trust them more than anyone else. We have an authority issue in our day.

We don't like to be told what to do by anyone. We don't want to be under authority. We want freedom and autonomy. And though we might be able to appreciate that perspective in this cultural moment, that is not God's vision for humanity. The Bible says that God is eternal, that he is sovereign and all-powerful, and that he is the one who, out of love, created the world. He is the creator. We are the creation. And as such, he is the one who is in charge. He is our authority. We don't like that very much these days! People these days love spirituality, but they don't like authority. They want the needs of their souls addressed, but they don't want to be told how to live. There was a recent interview with the guy who wrote *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. His books have sold, get this, over 500 million copies. Suffice it to say he's struck a nerve with our culture. He knows what we want. And in his interview, he said: **"People today want spirituality without morality. They want transcendence but they don't want to be told how to live."** He's hit the nail on the head. Spirituality without morality; transcendence without being told how to live. The Bible teaches that those two options cannot be separated. They are inextricably interconnected. The Bible teaches that true spirituality always leads to morality, that a genuine transcendent encounter with God always leads to surrendering control of your life over to God.

So those three words: History, Society, and Authority set the stage for our time in the Word.

Let's begin reading. **And God spoke all these words: 2 "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.**

**3 "You shall have no other gods before me.**

**4 "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.**

**7 "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.**

**8 "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. 11 For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.**

**12 "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.**

13 “You shall not murder.

14 “You shall not commit adultery.

15 “You shall not steal.

16 “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

17 “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

18 When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance 19 and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.”

Those are the Ten Commandments. There are several things we need to know about the Ten Commandments. Here’s the first: **The Ten Commandments teach us how to honor God.** That is the focus of the first four commandments.

<u>Honor God</u>
1) God’s rightful place
2) God’s proper worship
3) God’s holy name
4) God’s special day

**God’s rightful place:** God says that his people are to have no gods before him, that they are to worship him and him alone - not him and buddha, not him and Zeus, not him and Krishna, not him and their spouse, not him and their kids, not him and their job, not him and sports, not him and money, but him and him alone. Have no other gods before me.

**God’s proper worship.** Then he says, when you worship me, don’t make any graven images. The focus here is not so much worshipping other gods but worshipping the one true God in the proper way. Let me give you an analogy. Let’s say I came home one day and unexpectedly found pictures of cats all over my home. A picture of cats on our refrigerator, in the living room, on the nightstand, taped to mirror in the bathroom. And I’m just utterly confused. So I go to Keren and say, “What are all these pictures about?” And she says, “Dan, I love you so much. You are at the center of my heart and thoughts all day long. I just have to have a picture of you everywhere I look.” I’d scratch my head and say, “What are you talking about?!” She says, “Yeah, those are all pictures of you. I love you!” Even if my wife got really excited looking at pictures of a cat, I’m not a cat! And you can’t put up a picture of a cat, call that cat Dan, and have it work for me. God is the same way. God is not a cat. He is not a dog. He is not a cow. He is not a tree. He is not the ocean. He is not a mountain. He is not like anything in creation. He is the creator! So we cannot make any shape or form to represent him. We can’t make any idols or images of him.

**God’s holy name.** God says we are not to take his name in vain, to misuse his name. This may be the most misunderstood of all the Ten Commandments. Most people, when they hear this, think that God doesn’t want us to say his name followed by a curse word, or to shout his name

when we stub our toe. Though we probably shouldn't do those things, that's not what it means to misuse his name. To misuse his name is when I decide to do something on my own because it's what I want to do, but then I take the name of God, stamp it across my decision, and say, "This is what God wants me to do." Can I give you a common example? Maybe you are getting a little bit older and you are not married. And there just aren't as many viable candidates as you wish who are Christians. So even though the Bible specifically says we are not to be yoked together at a deep level with those who don't share your faith, even though the Bible specifically commands us not to marry a nonbeliever, you decide to date and seriously pursue a non-Christian. And then maybe someone in your life who cares about you, a close friend or a sibling or a parent asks you, "Why are you doing this?" And if you were to say, "I think God is okay with this," or even, "God told me to do this." That's taking God's name in vain, falsely claiming divine approval for a self-driven decision. We do it with how we spend our money, how we spend our time, with how we refuse to forgive certain people... We come up with our own plans and then to make ourselves feel better, or to throw others off the scent, we illicitly stamp God's name over it. And God says, "Don't you dare put my name on that and pretend that I endorse it. Don't misuse my name."

**God's special day.** Work for six days, rest on the 7th. Why does God give them this command? Two reasons: As he says here in Exodus 20, in six days God created the world, on the 7th he rested. God wants our life to mirror his life. He wants our work to pattern his work. But later on in the Scriptures, when the Ten Commandments are listed again, God tells the Israelites to remember that they were slaves in Egypt, and that when they were slaves they worked all day, every day. With the Sabbath, God is giving them a day of rest, because you are no longer slaves who are treated like property. You are sons and daughters in my family.

The first thing we need to know about the Ten Commandments is they teach us how to honor God. The second thing we need to know: **The Ten Commandments teach us how to honor people.**

<b><u>Honor People</u></b>
<b>5) Honor your parents</b>
<b>6) Honor your neighbor's life</b>
<b>7) Honor your neighbor's spouse</b>
<b>8) Honor your neighbor's possessions</b>
<b>9) Honor your neighbor's character</b>
<b>10) Honor your neighbor's blessings</b>

**Honor your parents.** Our parents brought us into the world. Our mothers carried us in their bodies, delivered us, and provided nearly everything we needed for the first 18 years of our lives, or nowadays, for the first 25 or 30 years of our lives! I remember this vividly when Keren and I welcomed Hudson into the world. Nine months of sickness; 25-hour labor. The sleepless nights, the feedings, all the diapers. I can't tell you how many times I called my parents in the first few

weeks of being a dad just to say thank you. God wants his people to honor our parents. And this is not just for five and six-year-olds. This is not just for teenagers. This is for grown-ups, too. We honor our parents later in life by loving them, caring for them, providing for them, just as they did for us. The Bible says that is how we repay. God wants his people to honor their parents.

**Honor your neighbor's life:** Which means we can't murder them. Pretty self-explanatory.

**Honor your neighbor's spouse.** Which means we can't sleep around with them. Pretty self-explanatory.

**Honor your neighbor's possessions.** Which means we can't steal. I remember how interesting it was visiting Japan a few years ago. I was at an outdoor market and I came to a tent with tens and tens of thousands of dollars of merchandise. I wanted to buy something but I couldn't find anyone. No one was there. I asked my friend who lived there, where's the owner, whose keeping people from taking all of this? He said, "Dan, do you realize how dishonorable it is to take something that's not yours?" No one in Japan steals. My friend's wife has lost her purse in public three times. Every time the person who found it personally returned it to their house! There are a lot of things about Japanese culture that need redemption, but because they have a culture of honor, they don't take each other's possessions.

**Honor your neighbor's character.** Don't give false testimony against them. They lived in a day without fingerprints, without DNA evidence, without video footage. If two or three people conspired to lie about someone, falsely accuse them and defraud them, they could ruin someone's life and walk away without any consequences. We have to be people who tell the truth.

**Honor your neighbor's blessings.** God says, "Don't covet," meaning that when other people are blessed by God, we should celebrate their blessings, not envy their blessings due to selfish desires in our hearts. When your coworkers get a raise, be excited for them, whether you got a raise or not. When your neighbor gets a new car, be excited for them, even if you are driving around in a 15-year-old clunker with the bumper strapped on with duct tape. Our excitement for them shouldn't depend on what we have. When you get on Instagram and see that your friend is on a beach in Hawaii and you are stuck at home in the cold, yeah, you can be mad then! It's okay to covet in that situation. No, be delighted that they got to go on vacation. God wants us to honor the blessings he's given others, not envy them.

Those are the Ten Commandments. They teach us how to honor God and honor people. And I want us all to stop and think: How much better do you think our world would be if everyone kept them. Just ten simple rules. If we did that, 99% of the police officers and judges in our city could retire. The lawyers in our city could do something useful with their time, like make donuts or pizzas or something like that. These commandments are good. They weren't given to be a burden but rather a blessing.

And that sets the stage for the second point: The Ten Commandments not only teach us how to honor God and others, **The Ten Commandments are an expression of God's love.** He gave these regulations to his people not to punish them, but for their flourishing. My little boy is only

ten months old. And there are some things he's not allowed to do. He's not allowed to play near the stairs; he's not allowed to go near the oven; he's not allowed to play with sharp objects. I don't give him those rules because I'm a prude or a killjoy that wants to rob all of his fun and suppress his well being, I give him those rules so he can be safe, so he can grow and thrive and live life to the fullest. The same is true for God with his people. God doesn't give us commandments because he wants to restrict our fun; he gives us commands so we can thrive. Parents who build a fence around their yard aren't being cruel. They are being loving, they are keeping dangers and threats out and giving you freedom with the confines of what is safe.

Because all of God's commandments are good, when we violate them, we are not just hurting God, we are hurting ourselves. We are the ones who suffer the consequences. G.K. Chesterton has said, "**Man cannot break the laws of God, he can only break himself against them.**" Think about the law of gravity. You can try to break that law, but I guarantee there will be consequences. It is not about hurting gravity's feelings; it's about living in alignment with reality. Let me give you another analogy: Think about it like a carpenter. If you have ever worked with wood, you know that wood has grain to it. If you run your hand with the grain it is nice and smooth. What happens when you run your hand against the grain? Ouch! You get splinters. When God gives us commandments, he is telling us how he designed the world and humanity to work. When we walk in step with them, things are smooth. When we rebel against them, we feel the pain. Walking in step with God's commandments is how we live with the grain of the universe. He gives us these commandments because he loves us.

Here's the last thing we need to know: **The Ten Commandments are ultimately unattainable.** You might think that is too bold of a statement. But think about that for a moment. I know we can all have some pretty good stretches where we feel like things are really clicking but think about the course of your entire life. How many of these commandments have you broken? Have you ever coveted something that your friend or neighbor had? Have you ever told a lie? Have you ever stolen something that wasn't yours? Have you ever not put God first at all times? Most haven't broken all of these, but we have all broken at least some of them. And that's bad news for us. Listen to what it says in James 2:10 **For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.** Every single one of us has broken God's law. We have fallen short of God's perfect standards. We weren't able to keep them. Not a single one of us has lived a perfect life. But Jesus did. Jesus didn't just keep God's commandments, he embodied them. His life is the perfect example of how to love and honor God, and how to love and honor people. And because Jesus lived a perfect life, his death on the cross covers our sins. Listen to what it says in **2 Corinthians 5:21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.** The ten commandments are unattainable to us, but Jesus embodied them, and paid our penalty for breaking them.

There's one more thing we have to know about the Ten Commandments: **The Ten Commandments have been replaced.** When you understand the history, you know that the ten commandments were given to the Jewish people to govern the old covenant. Jesus' death on the cross brought that covenant to an end and established a new covenant with God and people. And in this covenant we don't have a long list of rules God wants us to keep. We have God's Holy Spirit inside of us, showing us how to love and honor him, how to love and honor people. In the Sermon on the Mount, that's what Jesus says God has wanted all along--it's not about murdering

your brother; it's about not even having anger in your heart toward him. It's not about committing adultery; it's about not even having lust in your heart toward someone. I know there are a few people these days who have gotten really worked up about people taking down the Ten Commandments from courtrooms or city centers. I guess what I want to say to that is, let's not focus so much on the Ten Commandments being displayed. That's the old covenant. Our focus is on the new covenant that Jesus established and the hearts that he has transformed. We don't honor God in the world by displaying the Ten Commandments from an old covenant in public. We honor God by displaying transformed lives that have been changed from the inside out by the grace of Christ. Let me say that again: How does the world come to know how God is? Not by looking at a list of ten rules displayed in a courtroom, but by looking at the transformed lives of those who have been changed by his love. That's what he wants us to be about!