

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Written with the finger of God on tablets of stone, the commandments of the Decalogue are everlastingly binding on the creatures who bear God's image. The Ten Commandments existed before Moses, formed the heart of the covenant law God gave to Israel, and were observed by Christ, the apostles, and the entire New Testament church. They are still in force today. They are for your neighbor—and they are for you!

We live in a world filled with lawlessness. In most societies, murder, theft, adultery, deceit, and perversity are commonplace. Many, even in religious communities and among human behavioral specialists, scoff at the idea of moral absolutes that apply universally. One man's morality, it is believed, is another man's immorality. What seems unnatural and abnormal to one is considered perfectly normal and natural for another.

In the last several decades, the Western World has witnessed an increasing acceptance of homosexual behavior as normal and natural, of abortion as a right, and of premarital cohabitation as a healthy alternative to marriage. Time-honored Judeo-Christian standards are being challenged, even by professing Christian clergymen, some of whom are calling for a new reformation, claiming that Christianity must abandon its belief in a God who punishes sinners and radically revise many of the moral standards it inherited from its predecessors.

But God does not change! He made human beings in His own image and after His likeness and gave them specific instructions on how they were to relate to Him and to each other. In other words, *He gave them His HOLY LAW!*

The Law of Love

God's law is summarized in one word—*love*. When asked to identify the “great commandment in the law,” Jesus Christ replied,

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:37–40).

This is God's law in its simplest form. The two commandments are an indissoluble unit—*one* law—and are universally binding. One cannot keep only one of the two commandments, for to hate one's neighbor is to fail to love God, who commands one to love one's neighbor. John put it this way:

If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this

commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother (1 John 4:20–21).

John twice reminds us “God is love” (1 John 4:6,16). Genuine love flows from Him, and through loving Him (who first loved us), our capacity to express love is perfected. Therefore, to fail to love God with all our being is to fail to love our neighbor as we should. We see, then, that the commandments to love God with all our being and our neighbor as our self are two aspects of one indivisible law, with the two commandments so linked that it is impossible to obey one and not obey the other or break one without breaking the other. To break one point of the law of love is to fail to love; thus, the *whole law* is broken.

Interestingly, Jesus was not introducing a brand-new law when He named the two preeminent commandments. He was simply quoting from the Old Testament—right out of the old “Law of Moses.” The first commandment is a part of the famous *Shema*, or Hebrew confession of faith, which was recited in the synagogues every Sabbath; and the second commandment was taken from the book known for its exposition of the ceremonial law—the book of Leviticus.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might (Deuteronomy 6:4–5).

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD (Leviticus 19:18).

The law of love is also mentioned in the New Testament epistles (Romans 8:28; 13:8–9; 1 Corinthians 2:9; Galatians 5:14; 1 John 4:18–20; 5:2; James 1:12; 2:5–8), so there can be no doubt that this law was carried forward to the New Covenant. *It is as binding today as it ever has been at any time in the past.*

To fulfill God’s moral and ethical requirements, all you have to do is love Him with all your being and love your neighbor as yourself. Love, however, is not a mere sentiment or “warm fuzzy feeling.” On the contrary, love—*godly* love—“does not insist on its own way” (1 Corinthians 13:5). This means that the person possessing this kind of love is not guided by his or her natural inclinations or things that feel good. Genuine love involves loyalty, commitment, and generosity. It is a *way of life*, not a temporary emotional response.

God’s law of love, as we have noted, consists of two general commandments: You shall love God with all your being, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. These two commandments, forming one indissoluble law, are further defined through the *ten moral categories* set forth in the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments.

The Decalogue: the Law of Love Spelled Out

One can easily prove from Scripture that the law of love and the Decalogue are one and the same law. The Decalogue, therefore, is an indissoluble unit of divine law. To break one of its commandments is to break the whole law. James put it this way:

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing

sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law (James 2:8–11).

Notice these points: (1) The “whole law” James speaks of is the Decalogue. It has ten “points,” and James cites two of those points. (2) James sees the Decalogue as an indivisible unit of law. To “stumble in one point” is to be “guilty of all,” for the individual commandments come from one Source. (3) The “royal law”—“You shall love your neighbor as yourself”—is obviously a summation of the commandments that pertain to human relationships. James links the “royal law” with the “whole law,” or Decalogue.

Jesus, in His reply to a wealthy young man inquiring about what “good deed” he should do to have eternal life, said, “If you would enter life, keep the commandments” (Matthew 19:17). When the young man asked, “Which ones?” Jesus replied by naming five of the Ten Commandments, each having to do with human relationships, and summarized these by citing the commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (verses 18–19). Doubtless, Jesus intended to equate the command to love one’s neighbor with the commandments concerning murder, adultery, stealing, bearing false witness, and honoring one’s parents. It was a *summation* commandment, not merely one more law in a list of laws.

The apostle Paul affirms the same principle in Romans 13:8–10:

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

Here, Paul is dealing only with those commandments that concern human relationships. In other writings, he clearly condemns blasphemy, idolatry, and other sins that are committed against God in a more direct sense.

Two points stand out here: First, the passage makes clear that the “word,” “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” is a *summary* of the specific commandments (of the Decalogue) pertaining to human relationships. Second, Paul shows that Christians *do* have a responsibility to fulfill the law. If the law Paul refers to had been abolished, as some claim, the apostle would not speak of the Christian’s responsibility of fulfilling its requirements.

So, plainly, the law of love, consisting of *ten cardinal points*, was carried forward to the New Covenant. These ten points are ten moral categories that transcend the Abrahamic and Sinaitic Covenants. They were central to the Old Covenant, and they are central to the New Covenant.

Centrality of the Ten Commandments

In Exodus 34:28, the “Ten Commandments” are called the “words of the covenant which He commanded you to perform.” In Deuteronomy 4:13, “His covenant” is identified as the “Ten Commandments,” which God wrote “on tablets of stone.” And in

Deuteronomy 9:9, the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written are called the “tablets of the covenant.”

Because of these passages, some argue that the Decalogue *is* the Covenant. They further argue that since the first covenant was abolished with the advent of the New Covenant (Hebrews 8:13), the *whole law*—including the Ten Commandments—was abolished.

At first glance, the passages cited above *do* seem to say the Ten Commandments and the Old Covenant are one and the same. But other scriptures show plainly that the Old Covenant includes civil and ceremonial laws as well (Jeremiah 34:13–14; Ezekiel 44:6–8; Hebrews 9:1). The Old Covenant included *all* the terms and promises set forth in the Pentateuch. The Covenant was the *agreement* God made with Israel, and its terms included all the civil, ceremonial, and moral laws God gave to Israel.

Why, then, do the passages cited earlier speak of the Ten Commandments as if they were the entire content of the Old Covenant? The answer is that the Ten Commandments are *central* to the Covenant. As Jesus says, the Law and the Prophets “hang on” the commandments to love God with all one’s being and love one’s neighbor as one’s self, which we have identified as a two-point summary of the Ten Commandments. The Decalogue could be described as the hub of the Covenant law. Without a central moral law, the ceremonial, sacrificial, and civil laws become meaningless. How can the bloody sacrifices serve as a reminder of the sin problem if there is no central moral law to define sin? How can transgressions be punished if there is no central moral law identifying transgressions?

The following points further underscore the preeminence of the Decalogue:

- God gave the Ten Commandments to Israel *by voice* (Exodus 20:1,19; Deuteronomy 5:22), giving them special emphasis in the midst of many other commandments.
- God, not Moses, wrote the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone (Deuteronomy 5:22; 10:1–4), symbolizing their permanency and revealing their special place among the commandments, statutes, and judgments of the Covenant.
- The tablets of stone were kept inside the Ark of the Covenant (Deuteronomy 10:5), symbolizing their preeminence and centrality in the Covenant.

It should be obvious to anyone that the Ten Commandments stand high above the other commandments, statutes, and judgments of the law. As a unit of law central to the Covenant, the Decalogue consists of ten moral categories that are foundational to the other components of the law. For instance, all the sexual abominations named in Leviticus 18—adultery, incest, bestiality, and homosexuality—are covered under the moral category established by the Seventh Commandment: “You shall not commit adultery.” The Ninth Commandment—“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor”—specifically forbids a false testimony that might lead to harm for one’s neighbor. But the broad principle established by this moral category precludes *all* dishonesty and falsehood, whether expressed by voice or through one’s actions. The annual holy days of Leviticus 23 are rooted in the principle established through the Fourth Commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.”

The Ten Commandments, as the fundamental moral law, are also central to the New Covenant. God, through the prophet Jeremiah, reveals some of the main differences between the Old and New Covenants.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more (Jeremiah 31:31–34).

Notice three points on how the New Covenant differs from the Old:

1) "...for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest...." To *know* God is to experience *spiritual regeneration* through the power of the Holy Spirit. Membership in the Old Covenant community did not require spiritual regeneration. One cannot be a member of the New Covenant community *without* spiritual regeneration.

2) "For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." As the writer of the book of Hebrews tells us, the Old Covenant sacrifices, offered continually year after year, could never "make perfect those who draw near" by permanently removing the people's sins (Hebrews 10:1–4). Every year, the sin-offering ceremony on the Day of Atonement reminded the people that the sin problem was ever present and pictured a time when something would be done about it. The New Covenant differs in that "by a single offering he [Christ] has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified" (verse 14). "Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin" (verse 18). Christ's once-for-all-time sacrifice is the solution to the sin problem. Everyone under the New Covenant is forgiven.

3) "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts." There can be no doubt that the "law" spoken of here is the Decalogue. God's promise to "write it on their hearts" obviously alludes to His writing the commandments on tablets of stone when the previous covenant was established. The people who first received this prophecy must have immediately connected God's action of writing the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone with His future action of writing His law on the people's hearts. They understood the "law" to be the *very same law* that was central to the first covenant. That law was the Decalogue, the basic moral law that stands high above all the other commandments, statutes, and judgments contained in the Old Covenant.

In summary, the law of the Old and New Covenants is the same law but written in different places. In the Old Covenant, the Ten Commandments were written on tablets of stone. In the New Covenant, the same commandments are written in the heart.

The Ten Commandments in the New Testament

Jesus said it plainly:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:17–19).

This is not a “hard saying.” It is abundantly clear! The Law and the Prophets—the whole of God’s previous revelation—will remain in effect until the consummation of the ages, the eschaton, when the old creation is replaced entirely with a new heaven and new earth.

Jesus “fulfills” the Law and the Prophets, not by abolishing them, but (1) by fulfilling the Messianic prophecies contained in both the Law (Pentateuch) and the Prophets, (2) by perfectly modeling the moral requirements of Scripture, and (3) by expounding the original intent of God’s laws and exposing the erroneous interpretations and applications the scribes and Pharisees had adopted.

Having declared that He had not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill, Jesus goes on to bring out the *original intent* of several Old Testament precepts. He does not abolish or even radically revise Old Testament law; He simply *corrects* erroneous teachings about the law. Murder and adultery were *always* matters of the heart as much as physical actions. Marriage did not become sacred and binding at the advent of the New Covenant; it was sacred and binding *from the very beginning*. The oath laws of the Old Testament were given to encourage faithfulness and truthfulness but had been so corrupted by the Pharisees that Jesus advised to avoid oaths altogether.

Jesus and the writers of the New Testament emphasized the *spiritual intent* of the law and the fact that the law identifies the *sinful condition* of the unregenerate heart. Each specific transgression of God’s commandments emanates from the old, unregenerate self. For this reason, the apostle Paul could say that “sin” is both an *act* and a *condition*.

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me (Romans 7:18–20).

It is the unregenerate condition of the heart that produces acts of sin, and Paul identifies that condition as “sin that dwells within me.” But without a law that identifies sinful acts, the sinful condition of the heart goes unrecognized. Paul therefore says, “So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (Romans 7:12), and, “For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin” (verse 14).

Several New Testament passages show clearly that the Ten Commandments remain in force today and continue their function of identifying sin and sinners.

As previously noted, both Jesus and Paul identified the commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” with several commandments of the Decalogue (Matthew 19:16–19; Romans 13:8–10), showing that the Ten Commandments are still in force. James, as previously noted, cited the Sixth and Seventh Commandments and stated, “If you do not commit adultery [break the Seventh Commandment] but do murder [break the

Sixth Commandment], you have become a transgressor of the law” (James 2:11). He confirmed the unity of the Decalogue when he said, “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it” (verse 10).

A particularly interesting passage is in Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land” (Ephesians 6:1–3).

Notice that Paul urges the Ephesian youth to obey the Fifth Commandment and reminds them that the promise accompanying the commandment applies to them. The original promise was aimed at Israelites living in the Promised Land (cf. Exodus 20:12), but Paul understands that both the commandment and the promise apply to Gentile converts living in Ephesus, a city on the western coast of Asia Minor. Paul recognizes the *universal* scope of this commandment.

Having established, then, that the Ten Commandments remain in force as the moral law written on the hearts of the members of the New Covenant community, let’s look more closely at each of the commandments.

The First Commandment

*I am the LORD your God... You shall have no other gods before me”
(Exodus 20:2– 3; Deuteronomy 5:6–7).*

The First Commandment identifies the Author of the Decalogue and forbids worship of anyone or anything apart from, or in addition to, Him. The expression “before me” means not only “*ahead of me*” but also “*besides me.*” Israel was to worship only the one God. This commandment identifies the true God as the One who “brought you [Israel] out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (verse 2) and separates Him from the myriad of false gods worshiped in the ancient world. The same God who delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage delivers people today from the spiritual bondage of sin and the false religions and philosophies of this world. Now, as then, this commandment has first place among the ten moral categories identified in the Decalogue.

God Alone is Worthy of Worship

Scripture reveals plainly that there is only one true God, the Creator of the cosmos. This is both a fact of divine revelation and the conclusion of sound scientific investigation and uncorrupted reason. Creation reveals the existence of a Creator. Design reveals the existence of a Designer. Even many of the ancient philosophers were able to observe nature and, through logic, conclude that God exists, though some of their ideas about Him were flawed.

Anyone should be able to see that it makes no sense to worship anything that is not God. But once we know God exists, it makes no sense *not* to worship Him. He gives us life, breath, the ability to think, reason, plan—all that we have, *our very existence*—so we owe all to Him.

As noted earlier, Jesus Christ models moral perfection, thus setting the example for the New Covenant community. When the devil offered Him “all the kingdoms of the

world and their glory” if He would but “fall down and worship” him (Matthew 4:8–9), Jesus replied, “Be gone Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve’” (verse 10; cf. Deuteronomy 6:13).

While most people would instantly recoil at the very thought of worshiping the devil, it is nevertheless true that if we live to gratify the “desires of the body and the mind,” we are yielding to the “prince of the power of the air [Satan], the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2–3). This is precisely what Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden. By relinquishing their God-given dominion to Satan, they gave first place to the devil. They broke the First Commandment.

Consequences of Rejecting God

The apostle Paul, describing the unfortunate legacy of sinful man, says that the ancients “exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:25). Once they rejected God, they plunged headlong into gross immorality. Soon, they were “filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (verses 29–31).

As noted earlier, the Ten Commandments are a unified whole. Rejecting God—breaking the First Commandment—results in breaking *all* His commandments, a wholesale abandonment of the moral law.

We see this ugly phenomenon in today’s world. Atheistic philosophers speak of “moral atheism,” claiming that morality is not rooted in a belief in God. But the “morality” they speak of is a “morality” of their *own* making. *They* decide whether abortion and homosexual practice are morally acceptable. *They* decide whether marriage is between one man and one woman or between persons of the same sex, or whether sex outside marriage is right or wrong. *They* decide what is right and wrong, good and evil. For them, morality is a relative term.

But atheism is not the only philosophy that puts God out of the picture. Many who believe God exists and who even say they believe the Bible is His inspired Word refuse to put Him first, which is what the First Commandment demands. They believe God exists, but they do not retain God in their knowledge. They put him out of their minds as they go about fulfilling the lusts of their flesh.

Believing in God is not the same as *loving* God. And one who does not love God does not put God first—does not “have no other gods before” the true God. Deuteronomy 6:5 captures the full intent of the First Commandment: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

Loving God is equated with keeping His commandments in Deuteronomy 20:6. John says “we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments” (1 John 2:3), adding, “Whoever says ‘I know him’ but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected” (verses 4–5).

So merely believing in God is not enough. “Even the demons believe—and shudder” (James 2:19). The belief that is acceptable to God is an *active* belief—a belief motivated by putting God first. Such faith begins with the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me!”

The Second Commandment

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them (Exodus 20:4–5; Deuteronomy 5:8).

The Second Commandment is closely associated with the First. In fact, some churches, following Augustine’s enumeration of the Decalogue, include the prohibitions against other gods and idols under one commandment. This seems sensible since hand-carved idols *are* “other gods.” Those of us who prefer to read these as two commandments do so because the first one tells us *whom* we are to worship, and the second one tells us *how* we are to worship Him.

“God is spirit,” Jesus said, “and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). Worshiping in “spirit and truth” precludes the use of idols, for no man-made image can truthfully portray the incomprehensible God. We are to worship God *only* in the manner He tells us to worship Him.

Ancient Idolaters

Hand-carved idols were pervasive in the ancient world. The Israelites were exposed to idolatry in Egypt, and God knew that the influence of idolatrous worship would likely affect His people, since it was so widespread and they were so familiar with it. He also knew that the use of idols would produce a distorted concept of His nature and lead to other practices He did not approve. So He gave Israel a commandment forbidding such worship.

Many who practice idolatry today claim they use images as reminders of the “god” those images represent, insisting they are not actually worshiping the image itself. No doubt, the pagan idolaters of the ancient world made the same claim. While the ancients probably believed special benefits were imparted *through* images of those deities, they believed the “gods” they worshiped dwelt in an otherworldly realm. In some cases, the so-called gods were real beings; they were *demons*.

Idolatry existed long before Moses. Laban, Jacob’s father-in-law, was an idolater (Genesis 31:30–37). When God told Jacob to go to Bethel and make an altar there to God, Jacob had his household and associates to put away the “foreign gods which were in their hands” (Genesis 35:1–4). Jacob knew that idolatry was not compatible with the worship of God, so he had all those traveling with him purify themselves by getting rid of the idols they had picked up (perhaps while they were living in Shechem). This shows that the second point of the law God would later give to Israel at Mount Sinai was already a part of the moral law in the days of the Patriarchs.

Idolatrous Israelites

Idolatry was a major problem throughout the history of ancient Israel. At times, the Israelites combined idolatry with the worship of Yahweh, the true God. The first incident, which occurred in the wilderness while Moses was in the mountain, was an attempt to

worship Yahweh through use of a gold calf they had made (Exodus 32:1–6). The molded calf was apparently seen as a representation of the God who had brought Israel out of Egypt (verse 4), and it was used in a “feast to the LORD” Aaron had proclaimed (verse 5).

Rather than wait for Moses to return from the mountain with God’s instructions, the children of Israel chose to follow their own *desires*. In their “feast to the LORD,” they “sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play” (verse 6), putting their own self-centered desires ahead of God’s will. Idolatry, then, involves *shaping God according to one’s own desires*.

The Israelites could not have retained a proper understanding of God and how they were to relate to Him had they been permitted to worship Him through the calf image. In time, their use of the gold calf would so alter their concept of God that they would see Him as merely one of many gods. The calf image would reduce Him to creaturely status and inevitably have spiritual and moral repercussions. Soon, prostitution, adultery, and sexual perversity would be a “normal” part of religious practice, as it was in the pagan cultures surrounding Israel. God would be seen as a temperamental being who had to be pacified from time to time through animal and, possibly, human sacrifices. He would be seen as indifferent where ethics and morality were concerned, and the Covenant would be reduced to a “deal” in which material rewards are exchanged for sacrifices.

The First Commandment rules out polytheism altogether. The Second Commandment reinforces the First by excluding any image as an object of worship. Here, again, we see the logical order of the Decalogue. The Second Commandment naturally follows the First, and these two, along with the Third and Fourth, form the most essential principles of the great overarching edict, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:4–5).

Idolatry and the New Testament Church

The problem of idolatry led to disaster for Israel and posed a threat in the New Testament period. Paul knew “that an idol has no real existence” (1 Corinthians 8:4) but warned of the danger associated with eating meat offered to idols. He pointed out that “some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled” (verse 7). He also cautioned that those who could eat meat sacrificed to idols without consciousness of the idol and with a clear conscience could easily cause a “weak” brother to stumble (verse 10).

After citing Israel’s problem with idolatry, the apostle urges, “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry” (1 Corinthians 10:14). Anything that smacks of idolatry should be avoided, not because an idol is anything, but because “what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God,” and any participation in idolatrous practice means being “participants with demons” (verse 20). Such a practice has no place in Christian fellowship or in the commemoration of Christ’s self-sacrifice (verse 21).

Paul refers to the warning associated with the Second Commandment when he asks, “Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He?” (verse 22). In His prohibition against idolatry, God said, “...for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exodus 20:5).

In the book of Revelation, Christ sternly warns the churches that tolerate false teachers who teach believers “to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols” (Revelation 2:20). In this case, eating things sacrificed to idols was actual participation in idolatrous practice. New Testament scholar Paul A. Rainbow summarizes the problem confronting Christians in Asia Minor:

One apocalyptic expectation looked for antichrist to set himself up as an object of worship.... John saw this partially fulfilled in the imperial cult, as enforced in proconsular Asia in the last decade of the first century, with its priests, counterfeit miracles, ventriloquistic use of statues and economic or capital punishment of Christians who would not offer incense or decorate their doors for civic processions (Rev 13:11–17)” (P.A. Rainbow, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, InterVarsity Press, p. 530).

To refuse participation in the idolatrous practices associated with emperor worship and trade-guild festivities was to risk economic privation or even capital punishment. To avoid these dreadful consequences, the false teachers—including advocates of the “teaching of Balaam” and “teaching of the Nicolaitans” (Revelation 2:14–15) and “that woman Jezebel” (verse 20)—apparently adopted and advocated a philosophy that “justified” Christian participation in these customs.

Idolatry Today

Various forms of idolatry still exist today. It is common in polytheistic religions, and it exists even among professing Christians.

Religious art is not necessarily wrong, but any work of art that creates a false concept of God or distorts the true Gospel is certainly not acceptable, especially when such an object is perceived to have mystical, magical, or sacramental value. One professing Christian “visionary,” for example, claimed that his pocket icon of Jesus imparted special graces. Not only is this an illegitimate use of artwork; it is flagrant *idolatry*—a clear violation of the Second Commandment.

It is true that great spiritual benefits are imparted from the living Christ to true Christians, but to claim that icons or statues serve as “sacraments” through which those benefits are imparted to the believer is completely foreign to the revelation of Scripture. Such a claim is reminiscent of the pagan practice of worshiping God or “gods” through molded and hand-carved images.

Idolatry is more than an outward act or practice. Like other sins, the outward expression reflects a condition of the heart. Even false concepts about God can be idolatrous. If our mental portrait of God is based on what we *want* Him to be rather than what Scripture reveals Him to be, we harbor the spirit of idolatry.

In Ephesians 5:5, Paul identifies one who is “covetous” as an “idolater,” declaring that no such person “has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.” In Colossians 3:5, the apostle equates “covetousness” (translated “greed” in the New International Version) with “idolatry.” XXXX explains, “This attitude is identified with idolatry because it puts self-interest and *things* in the place of God” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, GET PAGE, etc.).

Paul names “idolatry” in his list of “works of the flesh” (Galatians 5:19–20). Peter includes “lawless idolatry” in his list of evil deeds (1 Peter 4:3). And Christ warns, “But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8).

Idolatry has *no* place in the life of a Christian.

“Little children,” urges John, “keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21).

The Third Commandment

*You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain
(Exodus 20:7; Deuteronomy 5:11).*

The “name” of God is more than merely a term we use to identify Him. His name is His reputation; it is who and what He is. The Third Commandment forbids the misuse of any of the names or titles we use to identify Him. A stern warning accompanies the commandment: “...for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain” (Exodus 20:7). The positive side of the Third Commandment is a directive to praise and honor God in our thoughts, our speech, and our actions.

Anyone who does not respect God’s name does not properly respect God, so he is guilty of breaking the First Commandment. His disregard for the sacred indicates he puts his self-interests in the place of God, so he is also guilty of breaking the Second Commandment. Again, we see how the Ten Commandments form a unit wherein each point overlaps with the other points of the law.

Profanity

The Third Commandment is violated through common profanity. We hear it in the workplace, on the playing field, in movies and television sitcoms, and on the street. For many, it’s a habit. Tens of thousands thoughtlessly sprinkle their speech with “God” and “Jesus,” using these terms as fillers and exclamatory expressions without giving a second thought to the profane nature of their language.

Even “religious” people have been known to abuse God’s name in this habitual and thoughtless manner. Yet, God strongly condemns the misuse of His name. In Israel, the punishment for this sin was severe: “Whoever blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death” (Leviticus 24:16).

Paul’s advice is rooted in the moral category set forth in the Third Commandment. “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths,” the apostle says, “but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:29).

While any abuse of the names and titles of God and Christ are certainly a violation of the Third Commandment, most people who clutter their speech with profanity probably do so as a matter of habit rather than a malevolent or premeditated motive of expressing disdain for the Deity. Swearing in God’s name to deliberately mask falsehood is another matter.

Swearing Falsely

The term “vain” in “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in *vain*” is translated from the Hebrew word *shav*, which may be rendered “falsehood.” The Third Commandment forbids taking God’s name *with falsehood*. This commandment, therefore, condemns swearing falsely. To testify falsely under oath (“in God’s name”) is a direct violation of this commandment, as is invoking God’s name in an oath that is not going to be kept. Such acts link God with a lie and is therefore an abomination in the eyes of the One who “cannot lie” (Titus 1:2).

God says, “And you shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:12). This verse expands our understanding of the Third Commandment. God’s name is abused through false oaths and through vulgar use of His name.

In Deuteronomy 6:13, Israel is told to “fear the LORD your God” and “take oaths in His name.” This presupposes *truthful* oaths, for proper respect for God encourages truthfulness, especially when God’s name is invoked.

Jesus discouraged swearing (Matthew 5:34), but He did not mean there is never a right reason to take an oath. The Old Testament has many examples of righteous persons taking oaths in the name of God and, as we have seen, gives instructions on taking oaths. Paul called on God as a witness to the truthfulness of his statements (2 Corinthians 1:23; Galatians 1:20). This is essentially the same kind of oath or affirmation required of witnesses in a court of law.

Jesus’ negative view of oaths should be understood in light of corruption of Old Testament oath laws. Jesus says,

Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.” But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply “Yes” or “No”; anything more than this comes from evil (Matthew 5:33–37).

Jesus is not overturning the oath laws of the Old Testament. On the contrary, He is upholding and magnifying the *underlying principle* of the oath laws. First, the oath laws encourage truthfulness. Jesus requires His disciples to *be* truthful in all their obligations and affirmations. Their word was to be as good as an oath. Second, Jesus has in view the common notion that swearing in the name of God and swearing *toward* Jerusalem were binding, while swearing by heaven and earth or *by* the temple were not binding at all. In a world where oaths are often used to sidestep truthfulness, it is best not to swear at all.

Jesus condemns this corrupt practice in His powerful polemic against the Pharisees:

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, “If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.” You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, “If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.” You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it (Matthew 23:16–22).

All the things Jesus mentions—the temple, the gold in the temple, the altar, the gift on the altar, and heaven itself—relate to God; thus, swearing by any of these things is the same as swearing “by the throne of God and him who sits upon it.” The phony oaths He condemns are a violation of the Third Commandment.

The Name of Christ

James apparently has the same blasphemous “oath” practice in mind when he urges, “But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your ‘yes’ be yes and your ‘no’ be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation” (James 5:12). Christ is the head of His body, the church. He is “called Faithful and True” (Revelation 19:11), “and the name by which he is called is The Word of God” (verse 13). Reckless oaths on the part of members of Christ’s body do not concur with the Head of the body, so oaths—especially in a world where oaths are suspect—should simply be avoided. They can lead to dishonoring the Head, resulting in condemnation.

James points out that when the rich oppress poor Christians and drag them into court, they “blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called” (James 2:7). Since the poor saints belong to Christ, to treat them badly is to blaspheme the name of the One who owns them. Just as swearing by the temple is swearing by Him who dwells in it, so mistreating those indwelt by the Spirit of Christ is to blaspheme the name of Christ.

From this we can see that when a person identifies himself as a Christian but does not live accordingly, he dishonors the name by which He is called. He is guilty of breaking the Third Commandment.

Living inconsistently with one’s profession of faith can also lead unbelievers to blaspheme God’s name. Paul writes, “You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you’” (Romans 2:23–24). Similarly, those who openly claim Christ as their Savior but are seen abusing alcohol or known for immoral behavior can cause unbelievers to speak despairingly of the name of Christ and of Christianity. For this reason (among others), an “overseer”—an elder or pastor—“must be above reproach” (1 Timothy 3:2).

On the positive side, Christians who let their lights shine by expressing their love for others through good works and godly behavior may lead others to “give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

This principle goes to the heart of the Third Commandment. Rather than abuse God’s name or allow our words or actions to lead others to blaspheme the name of God, God’s people are to worship and honor Him in all they say, think, and do. As noted previously, this is the positive side of the Third Commandment.

“The LORD is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. Let them praise your great and awesome name.... Exalt the LORD our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he!” (Psalm 99:2–3, 5).

The Fourth Commandment

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy

(Exodus 20:8; Deuteronomy 5:12).

The first three commandments of the Decalogue forbid worshipping other gods, corrupting worship through idolatry, and abusing God's name. As noted, the First Commandment tells us whom we are to worship, and the Second Commandment tells us how we are to worship Him. The Third and Fourth Commandments provide further instructions on how we are to worship Him.

Many believe nine of the Ten Commandments were brought forward to the New Covenant, the Fourth Commandment being the only exception. Apparently, some suppose that the command to keep the Sabbath holy is more ceremonial than moral, and that it is the one commandment that cannot be naturally discerned.

It is true that nothing in nature indicates that the seventh day is any different from the other days of the week, but to suggest that the Fourth Commandment is devoid of moral content is clearly erroneous. *What can be more "moral" than a Sabbath of holy worship?*

All our time belongs to God. We are to honor Him every day in all that we do, but He established the seven-day week and commands that we devote one day—the seventh day—of every week as a day of rest and time for special worship. The seventh day is “a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation” on which “no work” is to be done (Leviticus 23:3; cf. Exodus 20:9–10; Deuteronomy 5:13–14). It is a divinely appointed time for God's people to assemble in worship, sing praises and offer thanks to Him, and build one another up in faith, love, and hope.

The Sabbath is rooted in God's creative and redemptive acts. In Exodus 20, the Sabbath is linked with God's work of creation (verse 11). In Deuteronomy 5, the Sabbath is linked with God's work of delivering Israel from Egypt (verse 15). Thus, the Sabbath is both a celebration of creation and of redemption. This means the Sabbath has special significance for members of the New Covenant community, for they are a “new creation” in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15) and have been redeemed through the blood of Christ from the bondage of sin (Romans 3:24; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14; 1 Peter 1:18–19).

A Covenant Sign for Israel

In Exodus 31, God links the Sabbath with His creative acts and the redemption of Israel and, in this light, emphasizes the critical importance of keeping the Sabbath.

And the LORD said to Moses, “You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among the people. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed’ ” (Exodus 31:12–17).

The expression “Above all” emphasizes the importance of keeping the seventh day holy, and the sentence of death for breaking the Sabbath underscores the gravity of this sin. The day is to serve as a perpetual sign of the Covenant, reminding the people of Israel that God, the Creator of heaven and earth, redeemed them from Egypt and set them apart as His special people. It was not a “god” who delivered Israel from bondage; it was *the* God—the one and only true God, Maker of the heavens and the earth—who redeemed the people of Israel and made them His special people. The Sabbath was to perpetually signify all this.

Unfortunately, Israel “greatly profaned” the Sabbath (Ezekiel 20:13). Because of this and other grave sins, God refused to bring the Exodus generation into the Promised Land. But profaning the Sabbath did not cease with the Exodus generation. It was a major problem throughout the history of Israel.

The prophets often singled out the Sabbath because it stood for the whole law. They understood that the Sabbath was a sign of the Covenant, so when they spoke of profaning the Sabbath they were speaking of Israel’s unfaithfulness to the Covenant in general.

The fact that the Sabbath was given to the people of Israel while they were in the wilderness (Exodus 16) and served as a sign of the Covenant God made with them at Sinai, separating them from the other nations, has led some to conclude that the Sabbath was for Israel only and is inseparable from the Mosaic Covenant.

As we shall see, however, the Sabbath long predates the Mosaic Covenant.

A Creation Ordinance

Many claim that the Sabbath was first instituted in the time of Moses, but the commandment itself points to a much earlier origin. All the Israelites and the sojourners who dwelt among them were to refrain from work on the Sabbath, “For in six day the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Exodus 20:10–11).

When did God bless and make holy the Sabbath day? Shortly after He delivered Israel from the land of Egypt? In the wilderness during the time of Moses?

No! Genesis 2 tells of the origin of the Sabbath:

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested [ceased] on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation (Genesis 2:1–3).

The Sabbath and the marriage covenant (Genesis 2:22–24) have been called the two great creation ordinances. Both were instituted at the beginning of human history. It is illogical to assume that the latter is permanently binding while the former would remain in suspension until the time of Moses and later be abolished.

The entire creation narrative focuses on the arrival of man. God prepares an environment suitable for humans and then creates man and puts him in a place specially prepared for him. On the seventh day—the day after man’s creation—God “rests” from His work and makes the seventh day holy. This is the first recorded example of God making a thing holy. Obviously, the Sabbath was not created in a vacuum, as if God’s

making the seventh day holy were unrelated to the origin of man. God was not exhausted; He didn't need to rest. When He "rested" and made the seventh day holy, He had man in view. *The Sabbath was made for man*. It signifies communion between the Creator and the creature who bears the Creator's image.

The Sabbath was instituted long before there were any Jews. It took on new meaning under the Mosaic Covenant, but it predates the Covenant by many centuries. Its new function as a sign of the Mosaic Covenant could not negate its previous function as a creation ordinance signifying God's relationship with man; nor could the cancellation of the Covenant nullify the Sabbath or its original function and intent.

Some argue that there is no evidence that the patriarchs who lived before Moses kept the Sabbath. This, they claim, is evidence that the Sabbath was unknown before the time of Moses, and that the Sabbath rest of the creation narrative simply reflects a Mosaic interpretation.

Indeed, while we could show from the book of Genesis that worshiping false gods, idolatry, blasphemy, dishonoring parents, murder, adultery, theft, lying, and covetousness were all sins long before the time of Moses, there is no passage stating that any one of the patriarchs kept the Sabbath. There's no mention of the righteous men and women who lived before Moses resting on the Sabbath. But we do find some bits of information that may suggest an awareness of the Sabbath before the time of Moses.

In Genesis 26:5, God says, "Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws." The mention of "commandments...statutes...and laws" suggests a system of law was in place in the time of Abraham. If this system of law included commandments against serving false gods, idolatry, blasphemy, adultery, and so on, we may logically assume that the creation ordinance of the Sabbath was included as well.

Genesis 29:27–28 shows that the "week" was known in the days of the patriarchs. With Mosaic authorship as a given, we might assume that the week known to the patriarchs was seven days in duration. An awareness of the weekly cycle of seven days may also be suggested in Noah's sending out a dove from the ark every seven days until the dove did not return (Genesis 8:10–12).

Since the seven-day week instituted at creation concludes with the Sabbath day, it is reasonable to think that the week known to the patriarchs was the seven-day week and that they kept the Sabbath. Of course, the passages cited above do not prove this, but they do provide evidence for that possibility. In any case, the lack of clear references to the Sabbath in the accounts of the patriarchs' lives does not support the view that the Sabbath was unknown to them. A section of Scripture that covers a vast period of Israel's history makes no mention of the Sabbath or anyone keeping it, though we know it was being kept during that time. So the lack of any mention of the Sabbath in the Genesis narratives proves nothing.

Jesus and the Sabbath

Jesus Christ was an observant Jew. He called the temple "my Father's house" (John 2:16; cf. Matthew 23:16–22), upheld tithing laws (Matthew 23:23), recommended Mosaic sacrifices (Luke 5:14), taught in the synagogues on Sabbath days (Mark 6:2; Luke 4:16; 6:6; 13:10), and observed festivals (Matthew 26:17–20; Luke 2:41–42; 22:15; John 7:10). He clearly respected customs normally deemed "Jewish."

While He respected “Jewish” institutions such as the temple and priesthood, He did speak of the termination of the temple and its services (Matthew 23:37–39; 24:1–2; John 4:21); but He said nothing similar about the Sabbath or the Decalogue. On the contrary, He plainly said that He did not come to abolish the law (Matthew 5:17), declaring that “whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (verse 19).

Obviously, Jesus recognized the distinction between the moral law (the Ten Commandments) and the ceremonial law. In His “Sermon on the Mount,” He cites several laws from the Old Testament and brings to light their true meaning. As noted earlier, Jesus takes issue, not with the law, but with erroneous interpretations of the law.

Through His personal example, He also underscored the true meaning of the Sabbath day. He ignored the unscriptural traditions the scribes and Pharisees had tacked to the Sabbath; and, in so doing, He brought to light the Sabbath’s meaning as a day picturing liberation from bondage. In short, *He restored the original meaning and purpose of the Sabbath day.*

In Deuteronomy 5:14–15, Moses links the Sabbath rest with Israel’s liberation from bondage in Egypt, thus showing that the Sabbath is a day picturing redemption and liberation. Similarly, Jesus—the “Prophet like Moses”—performed numerous healings on the Sabbath, linking the day to liberation and demonstrating His power to forgive sins. (See Matthew 12:10–13; Luke 13:10–17; 14:1–6; John 5:5–13; 7:21–24; 9:1–34.)

In each of these instances, the Pharisees accused Jesus of breaking the Sabbath. It was the Pharisees, not Jesus, who abused the Sabbath. Through their erroneous traditions, they had made the Sabbath burdensome. Jesus’ actions were in complete accord with the intent and purpose of the Sabbath. He pointed out that “it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:12), and informed His accusers that the “Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27), meaning that it was to be a delight (Isaiah 58:13), not a burden.

On one occasion, Jesus’ disciples plucked heads of grain and began to eat as they passed through a grainfield on the Sabbath. The Pharisees accused them of breaking the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1–2). Of course, there is nothing wrong with satisfying hunger on the Sabbath. Plucking a few heads of grain and eating is hardly the kind of “work” the Fourth Commandment forbids. Jesus refuted the Pharisees’ accusation by citing the example of David, who violated a ceremonial law in a time of need and was excused, and by pointing out that the priests perform temple duties on the Sabbath but are guiltless (verses 3–6).

Jesus used this occasion to show that the One who permitted the disciples to pluck heads of grain and eat on the Sabbath is greater than the temple (verse 6). The Pharisees must have been stunned when He declared, “For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath” (verse 8). In making this statement, He was affirming His Messiahship and declaring His dominion over creation and redemption, both of which are pictured in the Sabbath day.

Far from abolishing the Sabbath, Jesus confirmed it, declaring His lordship over it, and restoring its true meaning and intent.

The Sabbath and the Early Church

The earliest Christians observed the Sabbath and the annual festivals. The New Testament church was born on the Day of Pentecost, an annual holy day (Acts 2; cf. Leviticus 23:4–7, 15–16). The coming of the Holy Spirit at that time gave new meaning to the day, just as Christ’s death at the time of the Passover sacrifice gave new meaning to the Passover festival. No doubt, the New Covenant community—entirely Jewish at first—came to recognize the Christological and New Covenant significance of all the festivals and holy days, including the weekly Sabbath.

The writer of the book of Hebrews would later link the seventh day of creation (Hebrews 4:4; cf. Genesis 2:2) with the “Sabbath rest” awaiting the people of God in the future (Hebrews 4:9), showing that the Sabbath continues its function as a shadow of future realities. The Sabbath, then, is much more than a Covenant sign for Israel. It symbolizes the eschatological “rest” promised to the New Covenant community. The shadow and the reality have not yet merged, so the Sabbath has not been abolished.

The apostle Paul observed the Sabbath (Acts 13:14; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4). The thousands of Jewish believers at Jerusalem were “zealous for the law” (Acts 21:20). They were Sabbath-keepers. James, writing to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (James 1:1), identified as Christians (James 2:1), mentions “your assembly” (verse 2). Stern writes, “The word [assembly] in Greek is ‘*sunagoge*’; it appears 57 times in the New Testament. Fifty-six times it refers to a Jewish place of congregational assembly and is translated ‘synagogue’ in virtually all English versions” (David Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, p. 728). James’ use of the term suggests the “twelve tribes” to whom the epistle was addressed observed the Sabbath.

Some cite Colossians 2:16–17 as proof that the Sabbath was abolished. But the passage does not say that at all. Paul writes, “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” The false teachers insisted on “asceticism and worship of angels” (verse 18), with “regulations—‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’ (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings” (verses 20–22). They were passing judgment on the Colossian believers for the *manner* in which the believers were keeping the Sabbath and festivals. The false teachers insisted on observance of the Sabbath and festivals according to their man-made “regulations.” Paul reminds the Colossians that the Sabbath and festivals are a “shadow” of which Christ is the “substance.”

The “days and months and seasons and years” the Galatian believers were observing (Galatians 4:10) were probably related to Jewish astrological beliefs. These were the “weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more” (verse 9). Paul would not have described simple Sabbath observance in such a way.

In Romans 14, Paul says, “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord” (verses 5–6). This probably refers to days set aside for fasting—perhaps the well-known fasts and partial fasts traditionally observed by the Jews. (Rome had a large Jewish population, and the churches of Rome were made up of Jews and Gentiles.) The Sabbath is a time for *community* worship; this text speaks of observing days as a matter of *personal* devotion.

Paul was not opposed to traditions that did not conflict with God's law. He simply didn't want members of the New Covenant community judging each other over such matter.

The New Covenant community is made up of "those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (Revelation 12:17). The commandments of God include the Fourth Commandment: "Remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy."

The Fifth Commandment

Honor your father and your mother (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16).

The Fifth Commandment is accompanied by a promise: "...that your days may be long in the land the LORD your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12). Proper respect for legitimate authority is essential to orderly society, and it begins in the home. Children who grow to maturity in a happy family environment are more likely to become productive members of society than those who grow up in an environment filled with anger, resentment, hatred, and disrespect.

The Fifth Commandment calls for children (and adults) to honor their parents, but it also calls on parents to conduct themselves honorably. Respectable, law-abiding parents are more likely to produce law-abiding children, and parents who live lawlessly are more likely to produce lawless children. Righteousness begets righteousness. Iniquity begets iniquity.

The warning accompanying the Second Commandment refers to the pattern of iniquity begetting iniquity. "...I am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exodus 20:5-6).

Some have supposed that the curse brought on by sinful fathers is automatically passed on to the children regardless the behavior of the children. This is clearly not so. Notice that the curse is passed on to the third and fourth generation of *those who hate God*. If the children *turn from* the iniquity of the fathers and choose to love God and keep His commandments, they will reap the benefits of God's steadfast love. Unfortunately, this is often not the case.

The pattern of iniquity begetting iniquity is seen again and again in Israel's history. Wicked kings often produced wicked heirs. The terrible consequences of wickedness were felt until the pattern was broken. Unfortunately, the influence of righteous kings was usually short-lived. The people of Israel always returned to the sins of their fathers. They rejected the authority of their true Father (Deuteronomy 14:1; 1 Chronicles 29:10; Isaiah 1:2; 63:16; 64:8; Jeremiah 3:19; Hosea 1:10; 11:1) and for this reason failed to reap the blessing of the promise attached to the Fifth Commandment: "...that your days may be long in the land the LORD your God is giving you."

Honoring parents does not mean following their ungodly ways. It means rather respecting them *as* parents and recognizing the legitimacy of their parental authority. But parents have no legitimate authority to teach their children to disobey God, from whom all legitimate authority ultimately arises. In fact, a person may honor his parents through *refusing* to follow them in ungodly behavior. In so doing, he is honoring his spiritual Father and setting a proper example for his parents and other members of his family.

Crucial to Israel's National Well-Being

Obedience to the Fifth Commandment was crucial to Israel's survival as a nation. The importance of this commandment is seen in the penalty for striking or cursing one's parents. Anyone who "strikes" or "curses his father or his mother shall be put to death" (Exodus 21:15, 17). This warning is reinforced in Deuteronomy 21:18–21:

If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they discipline him, will not listen to them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, and they shall say to the elders of the city, "This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard." Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you shall purge the evil from you midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear.

This is not speaking of the child who occasionally has a "temper tantrum" or displays stubbornness from time to time. Rather, it speaks of a long-standing pattern of sinful behavior and rebellion. If the people of Israel were to reap the blessings of obedience to the Covenant, then they had to keep God's commandments from generation to generation. This would be impossible if rebellion were allowed to persist and if honor and respect were not learned and practiced in the home.

God expected parents to teach His commandments to their children (Deuteronomy 6:7; 11:19; 32:46) and tell them of the wonderful works He did for the people of Israel when He delivered them from Egypt (Exodus 12:26–27; 13:8, 14–15; Deuteronomy 4:9–10). Such teaching is reinforced in an environment of love and respect, where disciplinary measures are guided by love, not anger. The family unit is the foundation of a stable society, and the Fifth Commandment is essential to family stability.

Had the people of Israel diligently adhered to the Fifth Commandment and all it entails, they would not have turned to idolatry and other sins that resulted in their expulsion from the Promised Land.

Repeated in the New Testament

The apostle Paul urged the youth of the church in Ephesus to obey the Fifth Commandment.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:1–4).

As noted previously, the promise accompanying this commandment originally specified the Promised Land—"the land the LORD your God is giving you." But Paul, by applying the commandment to Gentile converts far away from the Promised Land, shows he recognizes the universality of the Fifth Commandment. He also sees the connection between loving parental guidance and the children's responsibility to honor and obey their parents.

Honoring one's parents means more than obeying and respecting them during one's youth. It also means expressing love for them in their latter years, whether through financial or other forms of help or simply being there for them and taking time out to show appreciation for them.

The Jews of the time of Jesus recognized this responsibility toward parents, but the Pharisees had a tradition that permitted a person to sidestep this obligation. The tradition permitted a person to vow to reserve his possessions as a gift of God, which released him from the obligation to use his possessions to help his aging parents. Jesus sternly rebuked them, calling them "hypocrites" and charging them with leaving the "commandment of God" in favor of the "tradition of men" (Mark 7:6, 8).

And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban' (that is, given to God)—then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do" (Mark 7:9–13).

Jesus clearly upheld the Fifth Commandment as a "commandment of God" and part of the "word of God." His strong condemnation of rejecting this commandment in favor of a man-made tradition connotes the timeless nature of the commandments of the Decalogue. Just as it was a sin to dishonor one's parents in the time of Jesus, it's a sin to dishonor one's parents today.

A Commandment For Our Time

Our world would be vastly different if every child learned to honor his or her parents and if every parent sought to instill godly principles in his or her children. Respect for legitimate authority and the rule of law would go up, and the soaring crime rate that plagues our cities would dramatically drop.

The Fifth Commandment is the first of the Ten Commandments that deals directly with human relationships. Children who are taught to esteem their parents are better equipped to learn to love and honor the Father of humankind and develop wholesome relationships with other human beings. They learn a proper respect for human life, for the property, privileges, and rights of others.

The book of Proverbs is filled with helpful advice for parents and children. A father who loves his son "is diligent to discipline him" (Proverbs 13:24; cf. 19:18; 23:13–14; 29:15, 17). "A wise son makes a glad father" and "hears his father's instruction" (Proverbs 10:1; 13:1). The "father's instruction" and "mother's teaching" are a "graceful garland" for a son's head and "pendants" for his neck (Proverbs 1:8–9), strengthening him against the enticements of the wicked.

The path of wisdom is the path established by God's holy law. The best time to begin the journey along that path is in childhood, with the help of loving, God-fearing parents. "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6).

The Sixth Commandment

You shall not murder (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17).

From the early days of human history, when Cain killed his brother Abel (Genesis 4:8), murder has been a sad reality of human societies. Murder statistics in the United States alone are astronomical. We read of homicides every day in our newspapers and hear of them on televised news reports. Of all the crimes one human being could perpetrate against another, murder tops the list. For this reason, it is the first “You shall not” commandment of the part of the Decalogue pertaining to loving one’s neighbor as one’s self.

Like the first four commandments (which pertain to man’s relationship to God), the last six (which deal with man’s relationships with man) are presented in a logical order. The Fifth Commandment is foundational to human relationships, for the family unit is basic to the health of human societies. The next four commandments forbid, in descending order, the worst acts a person can commit against his neighbor: murder, adultery, theft, bearing false witness. The last commandment—“You shall not covet...”—goes to the root of the problem of human sinfulness. Covetousness is an internal matter—the desire for something that cannot be lawfully obtained—and leads to the sinful acts condemned by the commandments preceding the last one.

Murder is a major problem in the United States and throughout the world. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the homicide rate nearly doubled from the mid 1960s to the late 1970s and peaked at 10.2 per 100,000 population in 1980. The rate fell to 8.0 per 100,000 in 1984. It rose again in the late 1980s and early 1990s, peaking in 1991 at 9.8 per 100,000, but sharply declining between 1992 and 2,000. Since then, the rate has remained stable, but homicide remains a serious problem in the United States.

And then there are the terrorists, murderous dictators, and cruel regimes that have demonstrated little regard for human life. As in ancient times, murder is a grisly reality in today’s world.

Respect for Life

The Sixth Commandment forbids murder. On the positive side, the Sixth Commandment is a directive to respect human life. It stands in bold opposition to the philosophy embraced by what some have called the “culture of death,” which insists that euthanasia and abortion are “rights.” Opponents of these so-called rights are often called “right-wing extremists” whose fanaticism drives them to impose their religious views on others. Yet, politics and religion aside, it should not be difficult for anyone to see that a society’s health is directly related to its regard or disregard for the sanctity of human life, and to exclude the unborn from the right of life is to exclude the most innocent of the innocent.

Abortion is legal in fifty-six countries and illegal in ninety-seven countries. Some 126,000 abortions are conducted (legally and illegally) every day, totaling approximately 46 million per year. An estimated 1,370,000 abortions occur annually in the United States.

Some argue that there is no biblical law against abortion or nothing in Israel’s criminal code forbidding it. This argument overlooks the fact that, in Israel, children were seen as a gift from God. Human beings bear the image and likeness of God, and the

unborn were not excluded from “human being” status. So the absence of a specific injunction against abortion was not needed; such an act would have been considered the taking of innocent human life and would have been viewed as a criminal act.

Further, there is evidence in the Mosaic legal code that killing a fetus was viewed as a serious matter.

When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman, so that her children come out [prematurely], but there is no harm [to the mother or the child, or children], the one who hit her shall surely be fined, as the woman’s husband shall impose on him, and he shall pay as the judges determine. But if there is harm [to mother or child], then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe (Exodus 21:22–25).

The word translated “children” here is the word usually used for “child.” The penalty imposed is to be proportionate to the damages. If the woman or the prematurely born child is injured or dies, the penalty is to be administered in proportion to the loss. If the child emerges prematurely and dies (or emerges dead), the striker is guilty of culpable negligence resulting in death and is to be punished accordingly. This shows that the penalty for killing an unborn baby and a born baby was the same—so, in Israel, a fetus was viewed as a human being.

Abortion is a violation of the Sixth Commandment. (It is beyond the scope of this booklet to address arguments about exceptional cases, such as the extremely rare instance when a woman’s life is at stake, or in a case involving rape.) The underlying problem with the “abortion on demand” argument is a lack of respect for life, particularly the life of the unborn.

The Spirit of Murder

John says it plainly: “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” (1 John 3:15). John is speaking of the *spirit* of murder. If there were no hatred, there would be no intentional homicide. The Sixth Commandment, then, pertains as much to the intentions of the heart as to the acts resulting from those intentions.

John’s equating hatred with murder accords with the teaching of Jesus: “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (Matthew 15:19).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire” (Matthew 5:21–22).

The “anger” Jesus speaks of here is not righteous indignation or the momentary feeling of outrage one may experience after being wronged; it is anger stemming from *hatred*. Jesus Himself must have been indignant when He condemned the hypocritical practices of the scribes and Pharisees, calling the religious leaders “hypocrites,” “blind guides,” “blind fools,” “serpents,” and a “brood of vipers” who make a proselyte “twice as much a child of hell” as themselves (Matthew 23). Paul cautions, “Be angry and do not

sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil” (Ephesians 4:26–27). So Jesus does not condemn *all* expressions of anger. His “But I say to you” exposition in Matthew 5:22 pertains to anger motivated by *hateful spite*—the spirit of murder.

Murder and the hatred that motivates this horrendous crime are condemned throughout Scripture. In the end, all murderers will have their part “in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8).

The Sixth Commandment—“You shall not murder”—was in force in the beginning of human history. It remains in full force today.

The Seventh Commandment

You shall not commit adultery (Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18).

According to statistics compiled by the Associated Press, 22 percent of men and 14 percent of women have admitted having at least one extramarital affair at some time in the past. Since adulterers are rarely truthful, one wonders how many questioned in surveys on infidelity actually told the truth.

The “success” of the pornography industry—with Internet porn, “adult” book and video stores, and other markets available to smut peddlers—reflects the moral decay of modern societies. According to an online survey of 38,000 Internet users, one in ten admitted being addicted to sex and the Internet. No doubt, the easily accessible and widely available pornographic materials have stimulated the depraved appetites of rapists and sexual predators.

The “Sexual Revolution” of the 1960s opened the door to a variety of immoral behaviors, including infidelity, premarital sex, and homosexuality and other forms of perversity. The new sexual “freedom” brought with it a rash of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), some previously unknown and some incurable, and a lower view of the sanctity of marriage and traditional family values.

Today, many view sex outside marriage as a normal and healthy expression. Advocates of “safe sex” through the use of condoms have encouraged promiscuity and the changing attitudes toward cohabitation and premarital sexual relations. For many, the idea that sex should be reserved for marriage and that abstinence is the solution to the STD problem is “prudish,” a long-outdated notion stemming from our Puritanical past and pushed by the fanatical “religious right.”

Nevertheless, the views of the many or the few cannot change the *fact* that the traditional family unit is the backbone of a healthy society. Moral degeneracy can only *weaken* the backbone and result in societal decay.

God, not man, established the institution of marriage! He intended that marriage be between one man and one woman, a *covenant* that remains binding as long as both partners draw breath. No matter what advocacy groups say, *God* says, “You shall not commit adultery!”

As noted previously in this booklet, the commandments of the Decalogue are ten broad *moral categories*. The Seventh Commandment specifically forbids adultery, or extramarital sex, but as a moral category it forbids a broad range of sexual misconduct, including fornication (sex outside marriage), homosexual activity, bestiality, and incest (see Leviticus 18).

In ancient Israel, the penalty for infidelity was severe. “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death” (Leviticus 20:10).

New Testament Admonitions

Paul urges, “Flee from sexual immorality” (I Corinthians 6:18). Citing Israel’s unfaithfulness as a warning for Christians, he writes, “We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day” (10:8). He lists “sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality” among the “works of the flesh” (Galatians 5:19), sternly warning that “those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (verse 21).

Peter warns of following the false teachers who “have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin” (2 Peter 2:14). For those who return to such defilements after escaping them through the knowledge of Christ, Peter says, “the last state has become worse for them than the first” (verse 20).

Adultery is not against the law in many countries, but it is a direct and very serious violation of *God’s* law. In the final judgment, the “sexually immoral” will be among those whose “portion will be in the lake of fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8).

But there is hope for *all* sinners. The key is *repentance*. God will forgive the sinner who turns to Him in wholehearted repentance, which is not merely temporary remorse arising from self-pity, but is a *change of mind*—a resolve to submit to God on *His* terms. It means a commitment to put away evil thoughts as soon as they arise. It means avoiding *anything* that might lead to temptation, including movies with sexual content, all forms of pornography, and “singles” bars or other places where temptation is likely to occur. As Paul says, “*Flee* from sexual immorality!”

A Matter of the Heart

Immoral *acts* are the end result of immoral *thoughts*. Jesus speaks of adultery of the heart (or mind), and offers a radical solution:

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell [*Gehenna*, the “Valley of Hinnom,” a garbage dump outside Jerusalem where fires burned continually—a symbol of the final judgment of the wicked]. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell [*Gehenna*]” (Matthew 5:27–30).

Of course, a person’s eyes and hands do not cause him to sin, so Jesus is not recommending self-mutilation. The “hand” and the “eye” symbolize actions and intents. Jesus simply means that a person’s intent to commit adultery *is* adultery. A Christian must “cut off” or “tear out” adulterous intents and all actions associated with them.

“Lust” is the desire for that which cannot be lawfully obtained. To desire sexual relations with another person’s spouse is lust; it is adultery of the heart. “But each person

is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:14–15).

Christians must make every effort to “abstain from the passions of the flesh” (1 Peter 2:11), taking “every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5), “plucking out” and “cutting off” every impulse, thought, action, attitude, and desire that would lead to sin.

The Eighth Commandment

You shall not steal (Exodus 20:15; Deuteronomy 5:19).

Theft is a day-to-day reality throughout the world. Probably, each person reading these words has had something stolen from him at least once in his lifetime. And most have probably stolen something at one time or another.

We lock our cars when we leave them unattended. We lock the doors and windows of our homes, install burglar alarms, and join neighborhood crime-prevention groups to prevent thieves from helping themselves to our belongings.

Theft comes in many forms and occurs at every level of society. It occurs in large corporations and in small communities—and everywhere in between. A thief is a thief, whether he is rich or poor, and all thieves, to a greater or lesser extent, disregard the rights and property of others. A person who steals from his neighbor does not love his neighbor.

Like other sins identified by the Ten Commandments, theft arises from the sinful condition of the heart. “For out of the heart,” says Jesus, “come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (Matthew 15:19). And, generally, a thief is not *just* a thief. His lack of moral character usually gives rise to other sins, such as adultery, bearing false witness, and slander.

The Positive Side of the Commandment

The Eighth Commandment presupposes the right to own property. Any social structure that precludes the right to own property undercuts a basic principle contained within the broad parameters of this commandment. Communism is among the worst offenders in this regard.

The commandment also underscores the virtue of the work ethic, which is a part of the apostolic tradition (2 Thessalonians 3:6–9). “If anyone is not willing to work,” Paul says, “let him not eat” (verse 10). Here, Paul is urging able-bodied believers to work for a living so as not to be a burden on others.

The opposite of taking is giving. The Eighth Commandment, on the positive side, brings to light the responsibility to help those in need. As Paul says, “Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need” (Ephesians 4:28). A timeless maxim comes to mind: “Whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor” (Proverbs 22:9).

The Bible—Old Testament and New—abounds with exhortations on helping the poor. “For there will never cease to be poor in the land,” Moses said to his fellow Israelites. “Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to

the needy and to the poor, in your land” (Deuteronomy 15:11). Give freely, not grudgingly, Moses said, adding that “for this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake” (verse 10).

Paul points out that “whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:6–7).

Consequences of Stealing

A thief, because of his self-serving disposition, can never be truly content with life. The act of stealing may bring momentary excitement due to a rush of adrenalin, but the things he steals never satisfy his deepest needs. The thief generally lives with a certain fear of getting caught, and he knows the penalty for stealing can be quite stiff.

In ancient Israel, a thief caught with a stolen ox, donkey, or sheep had to repay two animals per stolen animal (Exodus 22:4). If, however, the thief killed or sold a stolen ox or sheep, the fine was five oxen per ox or four sheep per sheep (verse 1).

Ultimately, the consequences of unrepented theft are much more severe. “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?” asks Paul. “Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, or idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9–10).

The Ninth Commandment

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor (Exodus 20:16; Deuteronomy 5:20).

In ancient Israel’s judicial system, a conviction for a crime was to be based on the evidence provided by two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15). The problem was that an innocent person could be falsely charged and consequently punished on the basis of false testimony. The Ninth Commandment addresses this concern. To curtail the likelihood of false testimony, a person found guilty of testifying falsely was to receive the same punishment the person he falsely accused would have received (verses 16–21).

The first of the numerical sayings in the book of Proverbs lists “six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him” (Proverbs 6:16). These include “haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers” (verses 17–19). Notice how many of these things relate directly to the sin identified by the Ninth Commandment.

While the Ninth Commandment directly forbids false accusations, the broad general principle forbids *all* falsehood and dishonesty. We see dishonesty in advertising, in politics, and even in religion. Since time immemorial, whole social structures have been built on foundations of legitimate hopes mingled with lies.

Truthfulness and Godliness

Truthfulness is absolutely essential to godliness. All relationships, if they are to maximize the value due to each person involved, must be founded on truthfulness. Human beings bear the image of God and are entitled to the truth. A liar, therefore, disregards the dignity of others. Put another way, *lying is dehumanizing*. It is spiritually and psychologically harmful to the one telling the lie, and reflects a lack of proper respect to the one to whom the lie is told.

Scripture emphatically condemns lying as a serious sin with serious consequences. The law, says Paul, is laid down “for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine” (1 Timothy 1:9–10). In latter times, “some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared” (1 Timothy 4:1–2). Ultimately, “murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars” will be destroyed in a lake of fire, “which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8).

Satan the devil “has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). His servants—masters of deception—“disguise themselves as servants of righteousness” (2 Corinthians 11:15).

Lying, when compared with murder, adultery, or theft, may seem benign—a relatively slight character flaw. Often, however, lying stems from a much more serious character defect than we might imagine.

In his book, *People of the Lie*, Dr. M. Scott Peck observes, “We lie only when we are attempting to cover up something we know to be illicit. Some rudimentary form of conscience must precede the act of lying. There is no need to hide unless we first feel that something needs to be hidden.” Peck further explains, “We become evil by attempting to hide from ourselves. The wickedness of the evil is not committed directly, but indirectly as a part of this cover-up process. Evil originates not in the absence of guilt [as in the psychopath] but in the effort to escape it” (p. 76).

Painful Confession

Those Peck describes as “the evil” often lie, both in word and deed, in order to create an image pleasing to others and then see themselves the way others see them, thus creating and adopting a phony self-image. They are, in effect, lying to themselves. This, of course, prevents genuine *repentance*, which is a prerequisite to true conversion and godly living.

When God forced David to come to terms with the enormity of his sins (2 Samuel 11–12:13), David stopped lying to himself, stopped his effort to escape his guilt. The depth of his repentance is seen in Psalm 51:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,

and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem; then will you delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Repentance—true, godly repentance—requires “truth in the inward being.” This means no more cover-ups, no more pretense, no more mental games and false self-images. It means openhearted—and often painful—*confession* of sins, *all sins*, not just the “minor flaws” that allow us to continue lying to ourselves and deceiving others. It means *honestly* looking into the darkened recesses of our own hearts and minds and, no matter how painful, laying our hearts bare before God, confessing the true nature of our own motives, admitting our “secret” sins, and resolving to put an end to all lying, both to ourselves and to others.

The Tenth Commandment

*You shall not covet...anything that is your neighbor's
(Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21).*

The word “covet” may be simply defined as the desire to have something. But the Tenth Commandment speaks of an inordinate or excessive desire, or desire for something that cannot be lawfully obtained. This commandment differs from the previous commandments in that it pertains specifically to the heart. It goes directly to the underlying cause of external acts of sin, so it is intimately connected with all the preceding commandments.

The physical act of adultery is a direct violation of God’s law, but Jesus tells us adultery is also a matter of the heart. “I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). The same is true of murder (verses 21–22). The physical acts of murder and adultery are preceded by an unlawful desire.

The first human act of covetousness occurred in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve had full permission to eat fruit from any of the trees of the garden except one, the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:16–17). Yet, under the deceptive influence of the “snake” (Satan), Eve “saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate” (Genesis 3:6).

Certainly there is nothing wrong with the normal human desire to satisfy hunger and enjoy the good taste of food. The problem with Adam and Eve was not desire, per se; it

was *misdirected* desire, which is covetousness, or lust. They engaged in an act God had forthrightly forbidden. They permitted their misdirected desire to overwhelm their sense of right and wrong; thus, sin entered the world of humankind.

The forbidden fruit was appealing to the senses. It looked good (“a delight to the eyes”), undoubtedly tasted good (“was good for food”), and was seen as a means of obtaining wisdom (“was to be desired to make one wise”). These are precisely the things John identifies as basic components of the post-Eden world:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever (1 John 2:15–17).

Inordinate and unlawful desires—covetousness, lust—are at the root of every deliberate sin, every wanton act of violence, every act of idolatry, adultery, and theft. *Every* deliberate act of sin involves some form of covetousness. Even pride itself is a form of covetousness; it is nothing more than the inordinate *desire* for possessions, power, or prestige.

God’s Word tells us “the treacherous are taken captive by their lust” (Proverbs 11:6). God ordered the Israelites to burn the carved images of their vanquished enemies and to avoid coveting or taking the silver and gold on the idols—“lest you be ensnared by it” (Deuteronomy 7:25).

There is nothing wrong with acquiring possessions, increasing wealth, or laying up for the future. In fact, Scripture reveals these are worthwhile goals. They are a problem only when one’s priorities are out of order. Jesus urges, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). Putting God first through striving to obey His commandments and rely on His promises gives meaning to life and direction to one’s desires.

Covetousness—the Root of Evil

Inordinate and unlawful desires lie behind all sinful actions. Perhaps this is why Paul’s discussion on the law, sin, and Christian responsibility focuses on the Tenth Commandment.

Had it not been for knowledge of the law, Paul says, “I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’ But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness” (Romans 7:7–8).

While sin may be defined simply as the transgression of the law (see 1 John 3:4), here the word “sin” refers to the disposition or inclination that motivates transgressions. The inner “sin” that leads to transgressions, or acts of sin, is covetousness. The self-serving carnal nature revolts against the Tenth Commandment by becoming even more covetous.

The process that ultimately leads to eternal death begins with unrestrained desire. James says, “God...tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:13–15).

History provides examples of political leaders who began their careers with the motive of bringing needed changes to their societies but, unfortunately, became dictators once they were under the corrupting influence of power—or, more accurately, once they permitted their desire to hold or increase their sphere of power to corrupt them. The same is true of some religious leaders. The ancient Hasidim, for example, arose from the need to keep the Jewish people mindful of their heritage and of the painful consequences of falling under the influence of pagan nations. Unfortunately, the well-intentioned Hasidim, once they assumed power in Jewish religious affairs, permitted their desire to maintain their prestige and sphere of influence to corrupt them. By the time of Jesus, they were known as scribes and Pharisees.

It is often said that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Wealth, sex, and fame are also said to have a corrupting effect. Actually, this is not true. None of these things, of themselves, are corrupting. Corruption results only when an inordinate or unlawful *desire* is involved.

God is *all*-powerful, but He is perfectly righteous, so power is not the problem. He owns the cosmos and gives power to gain wealth, so wealth is not the problem. He created human sexuality and declare it “very good,” so sex is not the problem. He has put men in high positions, giving them popularity and fame, so fame is not the problem.

The problem is unrestrained and misdirected desire, or *covetousness*. Only when covetousness enters the picture do power, wealth, sex, and fame become a problem.

Conquering Covetousness

Overcoming covetousness may prove to be difficult, but with God’s help it can be done. There are several steps you can take to bring your desires under control.

First, *confess the sin of covetousness*. To overcome any problem, a person has to admit that he has the problem. It’s easy to enter into denial and redefine our motives; it may be tough to honestly admit our innermost motives and desires. But anyone serious about following Christ must do it. *Truthful confession is the key to genuine repentance*.

Second, *ask for God’s help*. Ask every morning upon arising. Ask each time a wrong desire begins to arise. Ask before retiring each evening. Remember, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7).

Third, *avoid evil influences* as much as possible. This may mean staying away from certain clubs, limiting social involvement with certain people, or resolving to avoid certain types of entertainment.

(If you haven’t read them, please write immediately for your free copies of *How YOU Can Be An OVERCOMER* and *Ten Facts You Should Know About Repentance*.)

CONCLUSION

The moral categories set forth in the Ten Commandments are foundational to the health and well being of a society. They reflect the holy character of God Himself and are an everlasting code of moral law designed to serve human beings, who bear the image of their Creator. It is indeed unfortunate that some, misguided in their interpretation of a few difficult passages of Scripture, have concluded that the Decalogue was set aside with the advent of the New Covenant.

Far from being a curse that was nailed to the cross of Christ, the Decalogue is a precious *gift* God has given to all mankind. Christ, the model of perfection, kept God's commandments and instructed His followers to do the same. The law went forth from Jerusalem to the nations through the teachings of the apostles and early disciples and has since made its way into the hands of millions around the world. This would not have happened had it not been for Christ and the commission He gave to His followers.

By no means are we suggesting that one can earn salvation through keeping the Ten Commandments. The law identifies the problem; it does not "fix" it. It exposes sin but does not remove it. It reveals the right path, but does not enable us to walk it. Remission of sins and spiritual regeneration are gifts made possible by the redemptive work of Christ. The law simply informs us of our need for a Savior.

Yet the righteous standards set forth in God's law are timeless. For the redeemed, they are light to the path of life and reminder of what the blood of Christ is all about.

The Psalmist says it best:

Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts.... How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through your precepts I get understanding.... Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:97–100, 103–105).