

The Ten Commandments - Part 1
(Exodus 20:1-17)
Expository Lessons from the Book of Exodus

I. Review from Previous Lessons

- a. About two months after departing Egypt, Moses and the Israelites are summoned to the foot of Mount Sinai (also called Horeb) to meet with the Lord.
- b. The people are told to prepare for three days. On the morning of the third day, the Lord descends upon the mountain, and tells Moses to bring Aaron back up with him. The Israelites are terrified.
- c. The Ten Commandments are found in two places in the Old Testament: here in **Exodus 20**, and later in **Deuteronomy 5** when Moses is retelling the story near the end of his life.

II. The Day of the Assembly

- a. In the speech he gave before being martyred, Stephen spoke about the history of the Jewish people and mentioned the day that the Israelites met with the Lord at Mount Sinai.
- b. (Speaking of Moses) “...This is he who was *in the congregation in the wilderness* with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us...” (**Acts 7:38**, NKJV)
- c. The word here translated “*congregation* in the wilderness” in Stephen’s speech is the Greek word ἐκκλησία (ekklesia) from which we get our English word *ecclesiastical*, which means “pertaining to the church”.
 - i. It is the same word Jesus used in **Matthew 16:18**, when He said:
 1. “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My *church*, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” (**Matthew 16:18**, NKJV)
 - ii. This is also the same word used by the apostles to describe the body of believers, “the church”, regardless of whether the people are physically gathered together or dispersed.
- d. Stephen uses this word “ἐκκλησία (ekklesia) / church” here because that is the word used in the Septuagint (LXX) in **Deuteronomy 4** when Moses recounts the story of the day the 10 Commandments were given.

- i. Read **Deuteronomy 4:8-13**, from the LXX.
 1. This happens to be one of the three places where the expression “the *Ten Commandments*” is found in the Bible. The other two references are in **Exodus 34:28** and **Deuteronomy 10:4**.
 - a. The expression “the Ten Commandments” from the LXX can also be translated “the Ten *Words* (of God)” or “the Ten *Sayings*”.
 2. This passage also includes the phrase, “especially concerning the day you stood before the Lord your God in Horeb, *on the day of the assembly....*” (**Deuteronomy 4:10**, LXX, OSB)
- ii. Here, the day that the 10 Commandments were first given, is referred to in the LXX as “the day of assembly” (again, same word as “church” in the New Testament).
- iii. This is the first place in the Bible that we find the word ekklesia/congregation/church.
 1. Actually it is used rather commonly in the LXX (about 80 times).
 2. As used throughout the LXX, the word simply means “assembly”.
 3. There is nothing inherently spiritual or good implied in the word meaning assembly. In fact, we find it used in **Psalm 26:5** (designated **Psalm 25:5** in the LXX) where David says (in the LXX) “I hate the assembly (= ekklesia) *of the evildoers*”.
- iv. While the term “assembly” appears throughout the LXX, and can apply to any assembly or congregation of people, this one particular gathering, also the first time the term is used, is referred to as “*the day of the assembly*”.
 1. This reference will have particular importance in connection with the prophecy of **Deuteronomy 18:15-19**.
- e. Therefore, we find the origin of the word “church” in this story, one that would take on special meaning and significance in connection with the specific assembly that Jesus came to build.
 - i. When Jesus said “on this rock I will build My church” (**Matthew 16:18**), He used the same term to apply to the new assembly *that He would create*.

- ii. Again, we see that the Israelite nation which God wanted to be “a royal priesthood...a holy nation...His own special people” (**Exodus 19:5-6**, applied to the Christians by Peter in **1 Peter 2:9-10**).

III. The Ten Commandments Given the First Time

- a. Read **Exodus 20:1-17**.
- b. How do you number the 10 Commandments?
 - i. While everyone comes up with ten commandments, there are a few different ways that people and groups have numbered these over the years.
 - ii. Issues that come up in the numbering:
 - 1. Whether the statement about believing in one God only, and the prohibition of making images, are one single command or split into two.
 - 2. Whether the prohibition against coveting at the end of the 10 Commandments are all one single command, or split into two (the first one about not coveting neighbor’s wife; and the other one about not coveting anything else of his, his possessions).
 - 3. Comparing the Masoretic Text with the LXX on the Ten Commandments.
 - a. *In the LXX*, the order of three middle commandments (regarding murder, adultery and false witnessing) is slightly different between the **Exodus 20** and **Deuteronomy 5** versions.
 - b. *In the Masoretic Text*, in the last commandment (or last two), the order of the things of our neighbor that we must not covet is different between the **Exodus 20** and **Deuteronomy 5** versions.
 - iii. The earliest Christian example of numbering the 10 Commandments that I am aware of is by Clement of Alexandria, in *The Stromata or Miscellanies*, Book 6; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, pp. 513-515.
 - iv. The ‘Catholic’ order, generally following Augustine, has:
 - 1. First commandment: No other gods & no images.
 - 2. Second commandment: Don’t take Lord’s name in vain.
 - 3. Ninth commandment: Do not covet your neighbor’s wife.

4. Tenth commandment: Do not covet your neighbor's goods.
- c. The common 'Protestant' (Reformed) and Orthodox arrangement is as follows:
 - i. First commandment: No other gods.
 - ii. Second commandment: Make no images of God.
 - iii. Third commandment: Don't take Lord's name in vain.
 - iv. Fourth commandment: Observe the Sabbath.
 - v. Fifth commandment: Honor parents
 - vi. Sixth commandment: Do not murder
 - vii. Seventh commandment: Do not commit adultery.
 - viii. Eighth commandment: Do not steal.
 - ix. Ninth commandment: Do not bear false witness (lie).
 - x. Tenth commandment: Do not covet your neighbor's wife, house or possessions.
 - d. A few observations about the 10 Commandments.
 - i. The first few (4) are related to loving God and worshiping Him.
 1. Only one God; no images/idols; not taking Lord's name in vain; keeping the Sabbath.
 - ii. The remaining commandments (6) are related to loving other people, and how we should relate to them.
 1. Starts with honoring our parents
 2. Do not murder, commit adultery, steal or lie to others.
 3. Do not covet what others have.
 - iii. Jesus said the same thing (that all the commandments hang on these two).
 1. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' *On these two*

commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:36–40, NKJV)

- a. The greatest commandment is from **Deuteronomy 6:5**.
 - b. The second greatest commandment is from **Leviticus 19:18**.
- e. Often I have heard people claim that the Law of Moses was only concerned about external observances, while (in contrast) under the New Covenant, God is *now concerned about the heart*. However, that claimed distinction clearly *is not true*.
- i. Jesus said that the whole Law hung on two commands related to *loving* God and others. Therefore, God’s primary focus was on the heart *even then*.
 - ii. Also, the last commandment is purely about the heart: not lusting after (not coveting) the wife, house, fields, servants nor other possessions of our neighbors. We are called to be content with what we have; we must not envy others.

IV. Considering Some of the Specific Commands

- a. Commandment No. 2: No idols.
 - i. Unfortunately, the people would ignore this very specific command in a matter of a few weeks. While Moses was delayed in coming down from the mountain, the people made and worshiped a golden calf as “the God who brought us out of Egypt” (**Exodus 32**).
 - ii. Read **Deuteronomy 4:12-19**.
 - 1. It is helpful to read the parallel passages from **Deuteronomy** whenever studying the book of **Exodus**, since we often will find more details by studying both together.
 - 2. The people saw no form at Mount Sinai; therefore do not create any image of God.
 - a. Neither male nor female
 - b. Neither in the form of cattle nor bird nor any other animal of land or sea
 - c. Don’t worship things in the heavens, either (sun, moon, stars).
 - d. A person is guilty of the sin of idolatry by either:

- i. worshiping *another god, or*
- ii. worshiping the real God *in the form of an image.*

3. Read **Deuteronomy 4:25-31**.

- a. If their descendants turn and create idols and worship them, the Lord warns:
 - i. He will remove them from their inherited land. He will destroy them.
 - ii. They would be scattered among the nations.
 - iii. There they would indeed end up serving the “gods” of other nations: gods of wood and stone that neither see nor hear anything.
 - iv. Yet, even then He would not utterly forsake them.
 - 1. When they return to God and obey Him, He would remember His covenants with their fathers, and restore them. He is a *faithful God, who keeps all of His promises.*
 - 2. The Lord also reveals here that He is a *merciful and forgiving God.*
- b. This is, essentially, the roadmap of much what is to follow in the rest of the Old Testament history.
- iii. Regular idolatry was finally “burned out” of the nation of Israel, it appears, as a result of the Captivity in Babylon. We see no more evidence (that I am aware of) of idolatry after that time.
- iv. Idolatry was a significant problem in the pagan nations that the apostles were evangelizing. It was a sin that the apostles *had to confront head-on.*

1. Read **Acts 17:16-31**.

- a. Paul’s preaching to the Aereopagus is focused on *blasting the pagan idolatry* he saw in Athens.

2. Read **Acts 19:23-34**.

- a. So many people were becoming Christians and turning away from idolatry that the idol makers for Diana (= *Artemis*) were *losing business!*

- b. The idol makers stirred up chaos in the city, with the whole city gathered in the theatre and shouting for two hours.
3. The *first* of four sins that Paul addresses to the Corinthian Christians in **1 Corinthians 10:1-13** (based on the lessons for us from the **Exodus-Numbers** journey through the Wilderness) is *idolatry*.
4. In the beginning of Romans, Paul takes turns addressing two groups: the Jews and the Greeks (pagans, Gentiles). He starts by going after the Greeks.
 - a. For more on this framework in understanding Romans (which is much different from the position advanced by Martin Luther 500 years ago, that has dominated in Protestant circles ever since), consider Origen's *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. In Book 2, chapter 14 he describes Paul as being "like an arbiter sitting between the Jews and the Greeks (= *believing Gentiles*)".
 - i. Paul is addressing two groups of people in his **epistle to the Romans**.
 - ii. Paul challenges and encourages first one group; then he turns his attention to the second group.
 - iii. In **Romans 1** Paul addresses the depravity of the Greek (Gentile) world, the process of spiritual decline and degradation that led to their current condition.
 - b. Read **Romans 1:18-32**.
 - i. God's qualities are on display everywhere, at all times, in His creation.
 - ii. There is no excuse for not believing in the one unseen God who created all things.
 - iii. The people refused to glorify and thank God.
 - iv. Their hearts were darkened as a result, and they were degraded by making images of created things and worshiping them, rather than the unseen Creator.

- v. This led to every type of human depravity.
- v. Idolatry is still a problem today for hundreds of millions of people (notably but not exclusively in Asia and Africa) *still making and worshiping man-made idols*.
- vi. **Question:** But is idolatry *still a problem the West*, in places like Europe and North America?
 1. Consider the famous art of Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, in Rome.
 - a. On a trip to Rome many years ago to attend a Bible teaching conference, I went on a group trip to visit the Vatican.
 - b. Before entering the Sistine Chapel, the tour went through parts of the museum, which included sculpture areas. The guide showed us part of a statue, the head of an ancient Greek/Roman god, I believe it was Zeus/Jupiter, and said that this was what Michelangelo used for his model for the face of God in the ceiling fresco, *The Creation of Adam*.
 - c. When we entered the Sistine Chapel, I looked up and sure enough, the most famous part of the ceiling was the famous scene with the finger of 'God' reaching out to touch the man, Adam.
 - i. This is brilliant artwork done from scaffolding on the ceiling, originally done in wet plaster. These frescos from a distance almost seemed to be three-dimensional.
 - ii. 'God' is portrayed as muscular old man with a beard and white hair, who is reaching out with his hand to touch the hand of the man (Adam).
 - iii. This image, unfortunately, is how many think of God. It has ruined the minds of many, by trivializing God...
 1. "who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen." (1 Timothy 6:16, NKJV)

- d. I was both amazed and horrified by what I saw. This was a clear and blatant violation of the Second Commandment, especially as illuminated in **Deuteronomy 4**, “*Do not make any images, male nor female...*”
 - i. Yet there were thousands of people coming to this chapel from all over the world, every day, to gaze up at this famous artwork; many of them Christians.
 - ii. How many thousands (or millions?) of people have had their view of God corrupted and trivialized by this terrible attempt to express God, the Father in the form of an image of an old man?
 - iii. Muslims in particular have been offended by the idolatry, statues and images they have seen in certain branches of the Christian faith. They are aware that we are not supposed to make images of God nor to venerate images, and (incorrectly) associate this with Christianity.
 - 1. This disregard of the Second Commandment (as well as others involving statues and images) has provided an unnecessary and tragic stumbling-block for many Muslims when they look at the Christian faith.
- 2. Idolatry is still a problem in our world.
 - a. Read **Colossians 3:1-7**.
 - b. Paul calls covetousness “idolatry”. Why?
 - c. **Question:** He could have pointed to the Tenth Commandment (do not covet). Why, instead, did he choose the Second Commandment (no idols)?
 - i. My Opinion: Because this goes back to *what we worship*. Do we worship the Creator, or *created things*?
 - 1. This reveals what is *the most important thing* in your life.

- ii. “And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home. He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in what is another man’s, who will give you what is your own? No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.’ Now the Pharisees, who were *lovers of money*, also heard all these things, and they derided Him. And He said to them, ‘You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God.’” (**Luke 16:9–15**, NKJV)
- iii. The ESV translates the last statement in **Luke 16:13**, “You cannot serve God and money” This is more familiar to most of us than the word “mammon” used in the KJV and NKJV.
- iv. Who (or what) do you serve? Money is not just something you own; it can own you! You can spend your life serving it, or serving God.
 - 1. I recall something often said by Dave Ramsey, a popular money management coach in many Christian circles. (I don’t agree with everything Dave teaches, but he is very good on responsibility, debt and some other basics.)
 - a. Dave asserted that rather than drifting financially and acting like victims of circumstance, we should act like generals: ordering every dollar of our financial resources (money) to go precisely where we assign it to go (for example: X dollars to groceries/month, Y to

emergency savings fund, Z to loans repayment).

- b. Ironically, Jesus *turns it the other way around*. Rather than we ordering around our money, in reality it is often our money that orders us around! Jesus said, “You cannot serve God and money”. Those who are not serving God will end up serving money, instead.
 2. Jesus said *is not possible* to serve *both* God and money! We will serve *one or the other*.
 3. Jesus followed up this teaching with the story of the Rich Man (who served money) and Lazarus (who did not) to drive home His point (**Luke 16:19-31**).
- b. God says He is “a jealous God”.
- i. “You shall not bow down to them (idols), for I, the Lord your God, am a *jealous* God.” (**Exodus 20:5**)
 - ii. **Question:** Isn’t jealousy a sin? Maybe sometimes it is?
 - iii. The Greek word used here and throughout the LXX and the New Testament can mean either “zealous” or “jealous”. While we have two distinct words in English, the word is the same in Greek; you need to sort out what is meant from the context.
 1. For example, when it says in **John 2** “*zeal* for your house will consume me” (quoting from **Psalms 69**, designated **Psalms 68** in the LXX), this is the word used.
 2. When it speaks of one of the apostles, ‘Simon *the Zealot*’ (**Luke 6:15**) the same word is used.
 - iv. Also, since the terms “envy” and “jealousy” are similar, many are confused regarding the two related terms. Let us clarify the distinction.
 1. *Jealousy* results when *you have something* (a person, a thing or a special relationship) that *you are afraid of losing*.

2. *Envy* results when you *want something that someone else has*.
3. Here is an illustration of the difference, borrowed from the popular “fairy tale”, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*.
 - a. Every day the wicked queen asks her mirror the famous question, “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?”
 - b. In this fairy-tale, the mirror daily answered the queen’s question by stating that *she* was the most beautiful one in the land.
 - c. However, one day the mirror tells her that there is another who is threatening her position as the “fairest of them all”. At this point (she is still considered the most beautiful), the wicked queen is *jealous* of her rival.
 - d. When on another day the mirror responds *that Snow White has become “the fairest in the land”* (thereby relegating the evil queen to #2), the queen becomes *envious*.
- v. With this understanding, we can better appreciate the statement in **Exodus 20:5**. God is indeed a *jealous* God, and this is totally appropriate. He does not want to cede his relationship with His people (which He possesses) to another “god”.
- vi. Later Moses will explain that God is a jealous God, *Who will be provoked to anger by His people turning to serving idols*, which are not gods.
 1. Read **Deuteronomy 32:19-21**.
 2. Then, as a result of Israel’s unfaithfulness, Moses warns that the Lord *will provoke Israel to jealousy* “by those who are not a nation”.
 - a. The Lord, who is a jealous God, *will provoke jealousy in Israel*, to accomplish His purposes.
 - b. This reminds me of what Peter will later say to the Christians, in **1 Peter 2**:
 - i. “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His

marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.” (**1 Peter 2:9–10**, NKJV)

- c. Paul speaks of Israel becoming jealous, as a result of the Gentile Christians supplanting them as God’s people. Paul made the point in **Romans 11** that the Jews had been broken off of the tree and the Gentile believers grafted in.
 - i. “I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles. Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness! For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if by any means I may provoke to jealousy those who are my flesh and save some of them. For if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?” (**Romans 11:11–15**, NKJV)
 - ii. Paul then warns the Gentiles Christians that we cannot be complacent; if the Jews were broken off through unfaithfulness, we can be broken off (if we become unfaithful) as well! (**Romans 11:16-22**)
 - iii. Jealousy is not always bad; *sometimes* it can be a good motivation. Paul hopes to use it (and God does as well) to lead to the salvation of more people who see the danger they are in of being pushed aside, and their favored relationship being given to others.
 - iv. Paul warns us not to be complacent, either. They were broken off through unbelief; we can be broken off as well if we do not remain faithful.