

Exodus Chapter 20

Verses 1-17

The Ten Commandments, also referred to as the Decalogue (Deut. 5:6-22), were written in the form of great king-vassal treaties from the second millennium BC, complete with preamble, prologue, and a statement of responsibilities and conditions.

Earlier (19:5-6), the LORD had stipulated how He would bless the people if they honored this covenant.

The phrase “the LORD your God” is repeated five times in the first 12 verses here to emphasize the authority behind these commandments as well as His personal relationship with His people.

Exodus 20:1 "And God spake all these words, saying,"

“All these words”:

This general description of the commands to follow also received from Moses the title “Ten Commandments” (34:28; Deut. 4:13).

By this emphasis on God himself speaking these words (Deut. 5:12, 15-16, 22, 32-33), all theories on Israel’s borrowing legal patterns or concepts from the nations around them are unacceptable.

Exodus 20:2 "I [am] the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

The binding nature of commands upon the conscience depends upon the authority of the person who issues them.

That there might be no dispute as to what the authority was in the case of the Decalogue, God prefaced the commands themselves by this distinct statement.

By whomsoever they were communicated (see the note on Exodus 20:1), they were the commands of Jehovah Himself.

"Which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt":

Thus, exhibiting at once Almighty power and the tender compassion and care.

God desires the obedience which springs from love, not fear.

In these first two verses, God stated once more that He was their absolute God.

He reminded them that no effort of their own got them out.

God did everything for them.

He was about to give them the Ten Commandments which the whole law is based upon.

Mark 12:29-31 "And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments [is], Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord:" "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this [is] the first commandment." "And the second [is] like, [namely] this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these."

The first four of the Ten Commandments deal with God, and the six latter deals with man.

Jesus just said, "Get everything in order with God and with man and you have fulfilled God's law."

We remember now that the people and the priests have cleansed themselves.

God would give these commandments for them to hear.

Some call these Commandments the moral law.

These Ten Commandments spoken by God are, also, called the Decalogue.

This voice of God which speaks and the finger of God which writes give no room for change of this law.

It is divine in nature.

Verses 3-4

The people of Israel were constantly beset with the idea of many gods.

Yet only one true God exists, and He insists on "no other gods before" or besides Him.

In ancient times, true monotheism (belief in one god) was unique to Israel.

Verses 3-17

The Ten Commandments, also known as the Decalogue, which follow upon the opening historical prologue (verse 2).

Are then formed as a precept or direct command which is given in the second person.

This form was something rather uncommon in that day.

Ancient Near Eastern law codes for the most part were casuistic (reasoning used to resolve moral problems by extracting or extending theoretical rules from particular instances and applying these rules to new instances).

Or case-law, in form, i.e., and “if ... then” construction written in the third person wherein a supposed offense was followed by a statement of the action to be taken or penalty to be exacted.

The Ten Commandments may also be grouped into two broad categories.

The vertical, namely man’s relationship to God (verses 2-11).

And the horizontal, namely man’s relationship to the community (verses 12-17).

Concisely listed prohibitions mark the second category, with only one exception, an imperative plus its explanation (verse 12).

Explanation or reason appended to a prohibition marks the first category.

By these Ten Commandments, true theology and true worship, the name of God and the Sabbath, family honor, life, marriage and property, truth and virtue are well protected (see note on 24:7).

Commandment number 1:

Exodus 20:3 "Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

“Before me”:

Meaning “over against Me,” this is a most appropriate expression in the light of the next few verses.

All false gods stand in opposition to the true God, and the worship of them is incompatible with the worship of Yahweh.

When Israel departed from the worship of the only one and true God, she plunged into religious confusion (Judges Chapters 17 and 18).

The phrase “before me” has been the subject of no small debate.

Some suggest it means “in addition to Me,” as the preposition is used this way (in Genesis 31:50 and Deut. 19:9).

Others take “*before*” to indicate “in preference to Me.”

The preposition is translated “in hostility toward” (in Genesis 16:12).

Thus the first commandment teaches that no deity, real or imagined, is to rival the one true God, who is the only One who matters. It demands an exclusive covenant relationship with Yahweh (Psalm 81:9-10).

They had just left a nation with many false gods.

God had shown them, that without any doubt at all that He (Jehovah), is the one true God.

Many confuse this to mean only the Father when in fact God the Father, God the Word, and God the Holy Ghost make up this one God.

1 John chapter 5:7 "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one."

They are one Spirit.

God is a Spirit as we read (in John 4).

John 4:24 "God [is] a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship [him] in spirit and in truth."

God is a jealous God, and will not share us with false gods.

Verses 4-6

The second commandment banned all idolatrous images in Israel.

The Lord is "jealous" for His singularity in the lives of His people and will not tolerate any rivals for their affection (Zech. 1:14; 8:2; James 4:5).

This is an expression of His love; He wants the very best for His people.

The mode or fashion of worship appropriate to only one Lord forbids any attempt to represent or caricature Him by use of anything He has made.

Total censure of artistic expression was not the issue; the absolute censure of idolatry and false worship was the issue.

Violation would seriously affect succeeding generations because the LORD demanded full and exclusive devotion, i.e., He is a jealous God (34:14; Deut. 4:24; 5:9).

The worship of man-made representations was nothing less than hatred of the true God.

Commandment number 2:

Exodus 20:4 "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness [of any thing] that [is] in heaven above, or that [is] in the earth beneath, or that [is] in the water under the earth:"

The prohibition of “any graven image” forbids, among other things, the making of any likeness of what is in the heavens above.

Obviously, that would include images of Yahweh.

Archaeologists have observed that a figure of Yahweh has yet to be found in debris of an Israelite town.

This would also seem to substantiate the antiquity of the second commandment, since such images of other gods are frequently found at later periods.

Verses 5-6

“unto the third and fourth generation ... thousands”:

Moses had made it clear that children were not punished for the sins of the parents (Deut. 24:16; see Ezek. 18:19-32), but children would feel the impact of breaches of God’s law by their parents’ generation as a natural consequence of its disobedience, its hatred of God.

Children reared in such an environment would imbibe and then practice similar idolatry, thus themselves expressing hateful disobedience.

The difference in consequence served as both a warning and motivation.

The effect of a disobedient generation was to plant wickedness so deeply that it took several generations to reverse.

Exodus 20:5 "Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God [am] a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth [generation] of them that hate me;"

That is, "make in order to bow."

Under the auspices of Moses himself, figures of cherubim, brazen serpents, oxen, and many other things in the earth beneath, were made and never condemned.

The mere making was no sin, it was the making with the intent to give idolatrous worship.

Not in the sense in which He was regarded as “jealous” by some of the Greeks, who supposed that success or eminence of any kind provoked Him.

But jealous of His own honor, one who will not see “His glory given to another” (see Isaiah 42:8; 48:11).

Or allow rivals to dispute His sole and absolute sovereignty (compare Exodus 34:14; Deut. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15; and Josh. 24:19).

“Unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me”:

As all idolaters must be thought to do, whatsoever love and affection they may pretend to God, by worshipping idols before Him, besides Him, along with Him, or Him in them.

"The third and fourth generation":

These are mentioned, because sometimes parents lived to see these, and so with their eyes beheld the punishment inflicted upon their posterity for their sins, which must be distressing to them.

Or, however, these being but small removes from them, might impress their minds and affect them, to think what their sins would bring upon their descendants, who would quickly come after them.

And share in the sad effects of their iniquities, and so be a means to deter them from them.

Exodus 20:6 "And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments."

Rather, to the thousandth generation, as is distinctly expressed (in Deut. 7:9).

God's mercy infinitely transcends His righteous anger.

Sin is visited on three, or at most four generations.

Righteousness is remembered, and advantages descendants for ever.

"Them that love me, and keep my commandments":

This conjunction is very observable, both against those that falsely and foolishly pretend or insinuate that the inward affection of love to God is not absolutely and always necessary to salvation.

And also against them who, pretending inward love to God, live in the customary breach of God's known commands.

These chosen people of God were about to commit a sin by making a golden calf.

You see, they could not say that they did not know, because God told them (in verses 4- 6 above), that they must not do this.

In Egypt, it was the practice to make statues of animals and other things that they worshipped.

Many times they believed that a spirit entered these statues and so they bowed to the false gods.

We see here that God would not permit any type of false god to be worshipped by His people.

Objects of false worship in other cultures should not be in a Christian's home either.

In our day professing Christians have totem poles, little Buddha's, horoscope signs, and all sorts of objects of false worship in their homes.

Some people even have little stuffed devils and witches.

This is very displeasing to God.

Many people take exception to the sins of the fathers being passed down to the children, but you can easily see how this would come about.

If a family does not pray at meals, a child grows up believing that it is not important to pray.

We pick up many bad habits and traits from our families.

Parents, who drink heavily, can expect their children to drink heavily and take drugs.

You see, unless the pattern is broken, several generations will make the same mistakes their parents made, and will displease God.

Anything that displeases God is sin.

Commandment number 3:

Exodus 20:7 "Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain."

"Take the name ... in vain":

To use God's name in such a way as to bring disrepute upon His character or deeds was to irreverently misuse His name.

To fail to perform an oath in which His name had been legitimately uttered (22:10-11; Lev. 19:12; Deut. 6:13), was to call into question His existence, since the guilty party evidently had no further thought of the God whose name he had used to improve his integrity.

For the believer in the church age, however, the use of the name of God is not a needed verification of his intention and trustworthiness since his life is to exhibit truth on all occasions.

With his “yes” meaning “yes” and his “no” meaning “no” (Matthew 5:37; James 5:12).

“In vain”:

This reflects the Hebrew term that is written in the absence of a distinct vowel sound.

It means “emptiness, vanity.”

It is used in Scripture to describe vain works (Psalms 127:2), worthless idols (Jonah 2:8), and false prophecy (Ezek. 12:24), among other things.

So, the basic meaning provides an accurate description of a vowel that has been reduced to almost nothing.

So here, in addition to what most think of as a prohibition of cursing or swearing, it has the primary connotation of not using it in vain empty or worthless fashion.

It certainly forbids profanity and false oath-taking in the LORD’s name, but also forbids frivolous usage (see the note on Deut. 5:11).

This third commandment is based on the sacredness of God’s holy name, Yahweh.

“In vain” means to regard as having no worth.

“The name of the LORD”:

Should never be used manipulatively (Num. 22:18), caustically, crudely or casually, because it trivializes the character and work of God.

No one who truly loves God will curse and use God's name.

My own opinion is that when we reject the name of Jesus and deny the power in the name of Jesus, which is taking His name in vain.

You see, the name of Jesus carries power in it.

I believe that swearing a lie in His name, is what is intended here.

Anything that would defame God would be included in this also.

You see this would be disrespectful to God.

Any defamation of Jesus, the Father, or the Holy Ghost would be included in this.

To deny any of the three would be very dangerous.

Verses 8-11

Rooted in the Creation account (Gen. 2:1-3), the fourth commandment provides a weekly reminder of God's holiness.

For the people of Israel, the requirement of "Sabbath" meant no member of one's household, not even one's "cattle", should do any work at all on "Rest-Day."

It also served as a special sign between the LORD and Israel (31:12-17; Neh. 9:13-15; Ezek. 20:12, 20), for no other nations officially observed this.

Commandment number 4:

Exodus 20:8 "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy."

"Sabbath":

See 31:12-17).

Each seventh day belonged to the LORD and would not be a work day but one set apart (i.e., holy), for rest and for time devoted to the worship of Yahweh.

The term "Sabbath" is derived from "to rest or cease from work."

The historical precedent for such a special observance was the creation week; a span of time equal to what man copied in practice.

Each Sabbath day should have reminded the worshiper that the God whom he praised had indeed made everything in both realms of existence in 6 twenty four hour days.

The Sabbath would also stand, therefore, as a counter to evolutionary ideas prevalent in false religion.

Moses, in the review of the Decalogue, also linked the observance of the Sabbath with Israel's exodus from Egypt and specified that this was why Israel was to keep it (Deut. 5:12-15).

Significantly, the command for the Sabbath is not repeated in the New Testament, whereas the other nine are.

In fact, it is nullified (Col. 2:16-17).

Belonging especially to Israel under the Mosaic economy, the Sabbath could not apply to the believer of the church age, for he is living in a new economy.

Exodus 20:9 "Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work:"

The form is certainly imperative; and it has been held that the fourth commandment is "not limited to a mere enactment respecting one day, but prescribes the due distribution of a week, and enforces the six days' work as much as the seventh day's rest.

But the work on the six days is really rather assumed as what will be than required as what must be.

And the intention of the clause is prohibitory rather than mandatory, "thou shalt not work more than six days out of the seven."

Exodus 20:10 "But the seventh day [is] the sabbath of the LORD thy God: [in it] thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that [is] within thy gates:"

The proper meaning of "Sabbath":

Is, "rest after labor".

Compare Exodus 16:26.

"Nor thy cattle":

Partly, to teach us to exercise mercy towards the brute creatures (compare Deut. 5:14).

Partly, because the use of cattle must have drawn along with it the attendance and employment of men.

And partly, that by observing the rest of the cattle, they might be more minded and quickened to the observation of this sacred rest.

"Thy stranger that is within thy gates":

Not a "stranger," as is an unknown person, but a "lodger," or "sojourner."

In this place, it denotes one who had come from another people to take up his permanent abode among the Israelites, and who might have been well known to his neighbors.

That the word did not primarily refer to foreign domestic servants (though all such were included under it), is to be inferred from the term used for "gates," signifying not the doors of a private dwelling, but the gates of a town or camp.

Exodus 20:11 "For [in] six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them [is], and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it."

And neither in more nor less time, as he could have done.

"Rested":

I.e. ceased from his creating works; otherwise he worketh still (John 5:17), by his providence and grace; and neither is idle nor weary (Isa. 40:28); but this rest is ascribed to him for our admonition and imitation.

"The LORD blessed the Sabbath day":

I.e. made it a day of blessing; as well of receiving blessings and praises from men, as of conferring his blessings and favors upon those that religiously observe it.

The day is said to be blessed when men are blessed by it, and in it, by a common attribute, as a man's field (Genesis 27:27), and basket and store (Deut. 28:5).

And the work of his hands (Job 1:10), are said to be blessed when a man is blessed in them.

It is remarkable, the blessing and sanctification are not appropriated to the seventh day, but to the Sabbath day, whether it should be the seventh day, as to the Jews it then was, or the first day, as to us Christians now it is, which change seems hereby to be insinuated.

"Hallowed it":

I.e. separated it from the rest of the days, and from all common employments, and consecrated it to His own holy service, and man's holy use.

In Mark chapter 2:27, we see an explanation from Jesus about why the Sabbath was instituted.

Mark 2:27 "And he said unto them, The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath:"

You see, God realized that mankind needed to rest one day out of every seven.

Man's body will not hold up to work continuously without any rest.

Even worship was set up for mankind, as well.

Mankind has a desire inside of them self to worship.

They are well aware of the weakness within themselves and are on a never ending search in life to find something.

Or someone that is greater than self, that they can look up to and depend upon.

Our mankind are miserable creatures until they find God.

Nothing but God can satisfy this need in man.

Six days man works to satisfy the needs of the flesh, but there is a soul and spirit of man that needs to be fed, as well.

I believe God set this one day aside to feed the spirit of man.

Romans 14:5-6 "One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day [alike]. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind." "He that regardeth the day, regardeth [it] unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard [it]. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks."

This is saying that physical Israel (Hebrews), celebrates Sabbath which is Saturday.

We, Christians, (spiritual Israel), celebrate first fruits which is Sunday.

Both days are a special day set aside to worship God.

The formality of the day is not what is important.

The important thing is that we love God enough to set aside one day in seven to worship Him.

Of course, if we are believers, we do not worship Him just once a week, but He is the center of our daily life as well.

Notice that if we are an employer, we are to allow the people working for us to have their day of rest also.

Even our children are to have a day to rest.

Horses and cattle which carried heavy loads needed this time of rest as well.

You can readily see from the animals resting, that this day was not only to worship God, but to rest from the week's labor.

We see here that God is not so interested in which way we worship.

He just wants us to set aside one out of seven to worship Him.

With physical Israel, it must be Saturday or Sabbath.

Exodus Chapter 20 Questions

1. What did God remind them, one more time, here at the mount, before he gave them the commandments?
2. How many did Jesus need to cover the Ten?
3. Which Commandments deal directly with pleasing God?
4. What is another name for these Commandments?
5. What two things leave no doubt who gave the law?
6. This law leaves no room for _____ and ____ _____.
7. What was different this time about God speaking to the people?
8. What is the first commandment?
9. In 1 John 5:7, we learn what about this one God?
10. What name that God has lets us know for sure that He will not share us with other false gods?
11. What is the second Commandment?
12. Iniquity in a family can go for _____.
13. Whom will God show mercy on?
14. Can the pattern of sin be broken in a family?
15. How?
16. Do not elevate _____ or _____ above _____.
17. What is the third Commandment?
18. What does the author believe about taking the name of Jesus in vain?
19. What is the fourth Commandment?
20. What day is Sabbath?
21. What day is firstfruits?
22. Who was Sabbath made for?
23. When we celebrate a particular day as our holy day, how should we regard it?
24. Why were the animals not to work one day in seven?