

The Story (4) – The Ten Commandments and Beyond

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I. God's Prefacing Declaration (Ex. 20:2): *I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*

A. Before God explains what he demands from the people as covenant partners, something they have already pledged to give him, he reminds them, as he did in Ex. 19:4, that he is the one who has graciously blessed their lives by delivering them from the terrible bondage of slavery in Egypt.

1. This demonstrates that he is the promise-keeping God who, in fulfillment of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, brought them up out of the land of their sorrow (e.g., Ex. 2:23-25). He is absolutely faithful, absolutely trustworthy, so that whatever he says can be relied on with one's last breath.

2. And tied to this is the fact he is the *Almighty* God. No Pharaoh, no so-called gods, nothing in heaven or earth can thwart the will of God. No plan or purpose of his will ever fail, because he not only is completely trustworthy but also is all-powerful. Israel's very presence at Mount Sinai is a testimony to his unrivaled power. They were unarmed slaves in the determined grip of the greatest military power in the world, and yet there they were with a drowned army in their wake.

B. And beyond reminding the people of his faithfulness and power, this declaration of his having delivered them reinforces the rightness of their serving him. Any king or ruler who rescued a people from a powerful and seemingly hopeless oppression would have every right to expect loyalty, faithfulness, and grateful service in return. Rebellion against a king who had acted so beneficently would be seen by everyone as an outrage. And rightfully so.

II. The Commandments

A. *You shall have no other gods before/besides me.*

1. The people of the ancient Near East believed in and worshiped many so-called gods. No one god was thought to be ultimate or to possess unlimited wisdom or power. Rather, they were more like superhumans, beings that had an origin and that had impulses and committed evil acts. The various forces of nature were associated with different gods.

2. It was widely thought that the various gods could be manipulated by magic and ritual to act in one's favor. Religion was largely a way to satisfy various gods so as to ward off harm or obtain some benefit.

3. Whether the preposition be understood as "before" or "besides," the point of the very first commandment is clear from the Law: God demands absolute allegiance, to the exclusion of all other deities. There can be no third party in one's relationship with God. Jeffrey Tigay notes (quoted in Rooker, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 26): "In practical terms the commandment means that Israelites may have no relationship of any kind with other gods; they may not build altars, sanctuaries, or images to them, make offerings to them, consult them, prophesy or take oaths in their names, or even mention their names."

4. We see in the New Testament that the gracious gift of life offered by God in Christ requires a complete surrender to Jesus as Lord of our lives. He can have no rival for our allegiance; he is God in the flesh. He must be more important to us than anything else, even our own lives. For example, Jesus says in Mat. 10:37-39 (ESV): *Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*³⁸ *And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.*³⁹ *Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

B. *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.*⁵ *You shall not bow down to them or serve them, 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,*⁶ *but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.* (Ex. 20:4-6 ESV)

1. Idolatry was rampant in the ancient Near East of the Old Testament era and in the later Roman Empire. People would make physical representations of the various gods which, after some sort of ritual, were thought to be portals for interaction with the gods. As you can imagine, this sense of being a representative of the god often morphed into viewing the image as the god itself. The second commandment comprehensively forbids the making and the worship of any idol.

a. Making idols of pagan gods implies they are real and reflects an inappropriate interest in them. And, of course, worshipping them is to give them what rightly belongs only to God.

(1) That would arouse his holy jealousy, his rightful claim to exclusive worship. Moreover, since the focus of idolatry was a pagan god, it often flowed into sexual immorality, which is rebellion against God.

(2) Idolatry is associated with greed in texts like Col. 3:5 and Eph. 5:5. The idolater and the greedy both trust, love, and serve gold and silver objects rather than the living God. And one can extend the comparison to any other thing that vies for the worshiper's heart and devotion.

b. Making an idol of Yahweh, on the other hand, inherently demeans him, diminishes his power and glory, because he is far too great to be expressed by any finite, material

image produced by man. And thus worshiping him by means of such a forbidden object is an abomination.

2. Of course, Israel was plagued by idolatry throughout the Old Testament, and the temptation remained in the New Testament era. "Believers were admonished to flee idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14) because it was a sin (1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5; 1 Pet. 4:3; Rev. 21:8), and not to associate with [so-called brothers who are] idolaters (1 Cor. 5:11)" (Rooker, p. 53).

C. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. (Ex. 20:7 ESV)

1. God's name is an expression of his essence or character and must be treated reverently. There is uncertainty as to the precise meaning in this context of the phrase that commonly is translated "in vain," but it seems to carry the broad sense of "misuse" (see NRSV, TNIV, NIV, CSB).

2. This encompasses using God's name as a kind of magical incantation whereby one seeks to bring God under one's control for personal benefit, using it to back up one's false assertions, or just using it frivolously, in a way that is not commensurate with the dignity and glory of God. This last case of "misuse" certainly would cover all mocking or profanity that involves God's name, but it also would include all flippant or trivializing uses of that name such as the pervasive "Oh my God." (Putting that same phrase in a shortened form "OMG" or changing the use of Jesus' name to Jeez does not rectify the trivialization.)

D. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Ex. 20:8-11 ESV)

1. I previously did two full classes on the Sabbath and explained why Christians are not bound by this commandment. I cannot go into all of that now, but you can get more information from "Christians and the Sabbath" at my website: theoutlet.us.

2. In a nutshell, God "rested" on the seventh day of creation, meaning ceased from his work of creation, and then thousands of years later, after the Exodus, commanded *Israel* likewise to rest on the seventh day because he had delivered them from slavery in Egypt where they had no rest (Deut. 5:15). Observing the seventh day as a day of rest was *a sign between God and Israel*, a reminder of the covenant he had made with Israel after freeing them (Ex. 31:12-17; Ezek. 20:12-13, 20).

3. Just as the commands regarding sacrifices, circumcision, and food laws are no longer applicable because they find their fulfillment in Christ, so the commandment regarding Sabbath rest finds its fulfillment in Christ. As indicated in Heb. 3:7-4:11, those in Christ now

share by faith in the rest of God, which rest will be fully realized when Christ returns. The Sabbath rest of the Mosaic Law thus is transcended by the Christian's participation in the divine rest. And that is why it is the only of the Ten Commandments not reiterated in the New Testament.

E. *Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.* (Ex. 20:12 ESV)

1. This is a command to treat one's parents with the respect and deference that their position deserves. In Lev. 19:3 Moses is told to command the Israelites to "fear" their mothers and fathers, meaning fear the consequences of rebelling against them.

2. Other passages in the Old Testament make clear that honoring one's parents involves obeying them (Deut. 21:18-21) and adhering to their teaching (Prov. 1:8-9). It prohibits cursing them (Ex. 21:17; Lev. 20:9), treating them with scorn (Deut. 27:16), and insulting and behaving disrespectfully toward them (Deut. 27:16; Prov. 30:17).

3. Honoring one's parents also seems to carry the duty of caring for them when they are old. This is implicit in the Lord's remarks in Mk. 7:10-13 and Mat. 15:4-8. In the context of widows, Paul says in 1 Tim. 5:4, *But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let these first learn to be religious toward their own family and to repay their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God.*

F. *You shall not murder.* (Ex. 20:13 ESV)

1. This is a prohibition of the premeditated, nonjudicial taking of a life. Humans are made in the image of God and thus human life is absolutely precious, which is why God in Gen. 9:5-6 and Ex. 21:12 prescribed the death penalty for the wilful taking of human life. Murder is so heinous that one forfeits one's right to live. Anything less trivializes the value of the life that was maliciously taken.

2. Of course, Jesus in Mat. 5:21-22 draws out the full implication of the sixth commandment. The root of murder is anger, and anger is murderous in principle. One has not conformed to the better righteousness of the kingdom merely by refraining from murder. The angry person will be subject to *God's* judgment (presupposed since no human court is able to try a case of inward anger).

G. *You shall not commit adultery.* (Ex. 20:14 ESV)

1. As Douglas Stuart summarizes the meaning of this commandment (p. 463): "No one is allowed to have sex with any married person except his or her spouse, and no married person is allowed to have sex with anyone other than his or her spouse." Fornication, which is sexual relations between unmarried consenting adults, also was condemned in the Old Testament, but that is not the point of this commandment.

2. Again, Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount intensified the command and drilled down to the spiritual root. He combined this seventh commandment with the ninth commandment's prohibition of coveting a neighbor's wife in declaring in Mat. 5:27-28 (ESV), *You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'*²⁸ *But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

3. As a footnote, merely noticing and even appreciating female beauty is not looking with lustful intent. But as all men know, the line between that and looking with lustful intent is quickly and easily crossed and is easily rationalized away. So guard your hearts brothers, beware of the kind of images you allow into your mind, and don't lie to yourselves.

H. *You shall not steal.* (Ex. 20:15 ESV)

1. This prohibits taking something that does not belong to you. Notice that it assumes the right of people to own property; otherwise, taking it would not be stealing.

2. Stealing is deeper than the property involved. By depriving a person of the fruit of his labor, stealing treats with disdain God's intention to bless the person with the ability and means to earn. It is rebellion against God's immediate command but also against his larger purpose. Of course, the principle behind this command extends to all forms of fraud and dishonest or unjust deprivation of property.

I. *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.* (Ex. 20:16 ESV)

1. This prohibits accusing someone falsely, slandering them, and also giving false testimony in a legal dispute. God calls his people to speak the truth.

2. Doing otherwise perverts justice, robs a person of his reputation, and destroys the unity of the community. Lying is the currency of the devil, who is the father of lies (Jn. 8:44).

J. *You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.* (Ex. 20:17 ESV)

1. This prohibits the desire to take what belongs to someone else. It is the craving, the attitude of the heart, which is condemned independent of any accompanying actions.

2. Of course, the desires of the heart lead to overt behavior; indeed, that is the root from which every sin springs (Mat. 15:19 [Mk. 7:21]; Jas. 1:14-15).

III. The Covenant Confirmed

A. When God delivered these words, the people were terrified and said to Moses (20:19), *"You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die."* In Ex. 20:21 Moses then went back up the mountain where he met with God and received many additional laws, instructions, and promises.

B. In Exodus 24 Moses told the people all the words of the Lord and all the rules, and they said (v. 3), "All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do." Moses then wrote down all the words of the Lord. After that, he built an altar, had sacrifices offered, and threw half the blood of the sacrifices against the altar. And after that, he read the words of the Lord he had written down, the people again said they would obey them (v. 7), and then he threw remaining blood on the people saying (v. 8), "Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words."

B. This was followed by a covenant meal which was eaten by the representatives of Israel part way up the holy mountain.

IV. Moses' Forty-Day Visit on the Mountain Top

A. God again summoned Moses to come up, this time to receive the tablets of stone that God had written for the people's instruction. At the end of chapter 24 Moses entered the cloud at the top of the mountain, where he remained for forty days and forty nights.

B. During this time God gave Moses laws on the means of worship, dealing with such things as where it is done, how it is done, and with what it is done. Douglas Stuart says (p. 561-562) these concerns "dominate the rest of the Sinai covenant, that is, the law through the rest of Exodus, through all of Leviticus, and up to Num. 10:10. Not all of these materials are strictly legal in genre; . . . But the overwhelming emphasis of the rest of the covenant is worship."

C. While Moses was on the mountain, we see in Exodus 32 that the people had made a golden calf and engaged in idolatry.

1. Moses interceded for the people to prevent God from destroying them. Moses broke the two stone tablets that had been engraved by God, burned the golden calf, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the people drink it.

2. The way I understand Ex. 32:25-28 is that Moses summoned the Levites who were on the Lord's side to come to him. They all did, which includes Aaron who had clearly been involved in the rebellion, so at least Aaron was given the opportunity to repent. That suggests to me that when the Levites were then sent throughout the camp they likewise called the people to renounce their conduct and reassert their loyalty to God. Only the active idolaters who refused to do so were then executed, about 3000 men.

3. The remaining people, however, were still guilty for having tolerated the rebellion. Moses returned to the Lord to intercede for them, and God tells him to lead the people to the promise land and that his angel will go before them. This means that he is not going to wipe them out. But he sends a plague on them to reinforce for them the seriousness of idolatry in the community. The text does not say whether anyone died from this plague.

V. Command to Leave Sinai – In Exodus 33:1 God commands Moses to depart for the promise land, and in Num. 10:11-12 they head out.