

The 10 Commandments – are they still valid today?

Reading: Romans 7:7 “... *I would not have known sin except through the law* ...”

Introduction:

Most people in western society have heard of the Ten Commandments – even people who would not claim to be religious. And most would know some of its contents, such as, “*Thou shall not kill*”, “*Thou shall not commit adultery*”, “*Thou shall not steal*” (**Exodus 20:13-15**). In fact, some would even justify their own spiritual status by saying that they do not break these commandments.

But is our spiritual salvation today based on, or does it involve, obedience to the Ten Commandments? For those of us living today, do the 10 Commandments have any bearing on our relationship with God? Is it enough to say, “*I keep the ten commandments*”, and consider that that is sufficient for our salvation?

In this lesson, we will look at five points;

- to whom were the 10 Commandments given?
- the 10 Commandments were only a part of what is called, “The Law”
- what was the role of the Law in the eternal scheme of redemption?
- when did the Law end? and,
- what commandments, if any, do we follow today?

LESSON

1) To whom were the 10 Commandments given?

The 10 Commandments were not given to all nations. They were given to only one group of people – the Hebrew nation.

About 3 months after the Hebrews had left the land of Egypt, on their way to the Promised Land, they came to a mountain¹ in the Wilderness of Sinai (**Exodus 19:1-2**). Here, God told the people through Moses to consecrate themselves, and then approach the mountain at the appointed time, but not to touch it (verses **10-13**) When the time came, the people assembled at the foot of the mountain. There was thunder and lightning, a loud sound of trumpets, and a thick cloud² descended on the mountain, causing the people to tremble (verses **16**). God then spoke, giving the people what we call the “10 Commandments” (**Exodus 20:1-17; Deuteronomy 5:4-22**). But because they were afraid of the sights and the sounds, the people drew back and asked Moses to speak with God on their behalf (**Exodus 20:18-19**).

And so, Moses drew near the mountain (**Exodus 19:21**), where God spoke to him other commandments and ordinances that were included in what is called “The Law” (**Exodus 20:23 – 23:19**). Moses then “... *wrote all the words of the Lord* ...”, offered sacrifices, and read the Book of the Covenant to the people, along with the sprinkling of blood (**Exodus 24:4-8**)³.

¹ Mount Sinai – **Exodus 19:11, 18; Acts 7:38**.

² One reason for the thick cloud was so that “... *the people may hear when I speak with you, (i.e. Moses) and believe you forever.*” (**Exodus 19:9**).

³ This is the event that **Hebrews 9:17-20** is referring to when talking about covenants coming into effect after the death of the testator.

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Moses (and Joshua) then went up on the mountain again where he stayed for 40 days, receiving other commands and instructions (**Exodus 24:9-18**).

Shortly before his death, at the end of the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, Moses again read the words of the Law to the people. It is here in **Deuteronomy 5:3** that we read;

“The Lord did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, those who are here today, all of us who are alive.”

We learn a couple of things from this verse;

- The covenant, which contained the 10 commandments and many other laws, was not given to the previous Hebrew generations. It was given to the generation that came out of Egypt after the 400 years of bondage. It was, however, to be passed on to their future descendants throughout the years (**Deuteronomy 6:1-9**).
- The covenant was given to the Hebrews – those who were gathered at the mountain. It was not given to other nations⁴.

2) The 10 Commandments were only part of “The Law”

During the wilderness wanderings, God gave many laws to the people through Moses, not just the 10 Commandments as found in **Exodus 20:2-17**. These laws related to religious practices, instructions for the Tabernacle, rules and regulations for moral and social living, and punishments for crimes⁵. The combination of all these laws, including the 10 Commandments, constituted what is called “The Law”. Consider the following verses which illustrate this point;

- a) In **Romans 7:7**, the apostle Paul stated that he would not have known sin **except through the law**. He then gave an example of sin – covetousness – and states what **the law** said, “*You shall not covet*”. This instruction, “*You shall not covet*”, was explicitly one of the 10 commandments, the 10th one – see **Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21**. Therefore, we can see that the 10 commandments were part of what was known as “the law”.
- b) In **Matthew 22:36**, Jesus was asked by the lawyer, “*Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law* (emphasis mine – SK)?” Jesus replied by saying;

“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 neighbour as yourself”. (**Matthew 22:37-39**).

⁴ We don't know what arrangements God had with other nations, but we do know that they were still accountable to God – e.g. **Jonah 1:2; 3:1-10**. Consider also **Romans 2:12-16**.

⁵ These laws and regulations, etc, can be found in the following passages;

Exodus 20:1 – 23:19; 25:1 – 28:43; 29:38 – 31:18;
Leviticus 1:1 – 7:38; 10:8 – 25:55; 27:1-34;
Numbers 15:1 – 41; 18:1 – 19:22; 27:1 – 30:16;
Deuteronomy 12:1 – 15:23; 19:1 – 26:15

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Jesus was not quoting from the 10 commandments⁶; He was quoting two commands from amidst all the other instructions that were given to the Hebrews by God through Moses – see **Deuteronomy 6:5** for the first of His answers, and **Leviticus 19:18** for the second. The context of the lawyer's question was what was contained **in the law**. Therefore, the two commands quoted by Jesus in response to that question were commands that were part of the law, even though they were not specifically part of the 10 commandments.

So “the Law” consisted of the 10 commandments, plus the other rules and regulations found in various places throughout the books of **Exodus**, **Leviticus**, **Numbers** and **Deuteronomy**. The 10 Commandments were not something separate from the Law. Rather, they were a part of it.

3) What was the role of the Law in the eternal scheme of redemption?

The Law, which included the 10 Commandments, enabled the Hebrews to be aware of sin, and they were required to follow the commands that God had given them (**Deuteronomy 6:1-2**). And as Paul said in **Romans 7:12**, “... *the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good*”, and in verse **14**, “... *the law is spiritual...*”. So there was nothing wrong with the law, in and of itself. It was there for spiritual guidance.

But laws do not save people when they break them. If you break one of the laws, then the law condemns you (**Romans 7:10**), because it highlights the fact that you have been disobedient. It stands there in contrast to your deeds. It can't “fix up” the fact that you have been disobedient. When the Jews sinned under the law (for sin is a transgression of the law – **1 John 3:4**), they were required to offer sacrifices (e.g. **Leviticus** chapters **4 - 6**). But these sacrifices, in and of themselves, did not take away the sins (**Hebrews 10:1-4**).

In order for us to be saved through the law, we would have to live perfect lives, just like Jesus did (**Hebrews 4:15**). **James 2:10** says;

“For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.”

In other words, you only have to break one of the laws, and you are guilty of being a law breaker – you stand condemned. It doesn't matter if you never broke any of the other laws - if you broke one law, then you are a law-breaker. No wonder Paul wrote in **Galatians 3:10**;

“For as many as are of the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written; Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.”

However, the Law was never intended to be a permanent measure. Even during the time of Jeremiah⁷ the prophet, God had revealed that He would introduce a new Covenant, a covenant “... *not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt...*” (**Jeremiah 31:31-34**; **Hebrews 8:8-13**). The Old Covenant was

⁶ Although one could argue that what is contained in the 10 commandments is the implication and application of following these two principles/instructions – consider **Matthew 22:40**.

⁷ Jeremiah prophesied during the period approximately 627 – 587 B.C.

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not the ultimate plan that God had in mind. It was merely a shadow (or representation) of what was to come (**Hebrews 10:1a**) - it was a stepping stone towards something that was coming later. In **Galatians 3:19** we read;

“What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made.....”

Therefore, we can see from this verse that;

- a) because people sinned, the law was given to make them aware of what sin was so that they could avoid it, and,
- b) it was only ever intended to be in place until “the Seed” was to come.

4) When did the Law end?

We saw above that the Law was to be in place until “the Seed” was to come. But who or what is “the Seed”? **Galatians 3:16** tells us – “...*And to your Seed, who is Christ...*”. Jesus was the long promised “Seed”.

When Jesus came, He was born under the law (**Galatians 4:4**), and lived under the law⁸. He Himself stated that the law would remain in place “... *till all is fulfilled..*” (**Matthew 5:17-19**). This “fulfilment” took place at the cross. Jesus’ death paved the way for the Old Covenant to be removed, and for the New Covenant to be introduced (**Hebrews 9:15-16**). In **Ephesians 2:14-16** we read;

“For He Himself is our peace having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross”

Previously, the Jews were the “*commonwealth of Israel*”. They had the Law as a central part of their covenant with God, whereas the Gentiles were separate, excluded from that commonwealth (**Ephesians 2:11-13**). But with the death of Jesus on the cross, and the removal of the old covenant with all its ordinances (**Colossians 2:13-14**), the two groups of people now follow the one new covenant. As a result, all those who obey the gospel, be they Jew or Gentile, are now “.. *one in Christ ...*” (**Galatians 3:26-28**). The spiritual distinction (or separation) that once existed through The Law no longer exists, because it has been replaced by the New Covenant (**Hebrews 8:13a**).

5) What commands, if any, do we follow today?

With the old Law having been abolished, does that mean we are no longer under any sort of law today? Does that mean that we are free to do whatever we want to do?

The answer to these questions is an emphatic, “*No!*”. In **1 John 5:3** we read; “*For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments ...*”⁹. If we are not under any sort of law, then this verse does not make sense. Rather, this verse

⁸ That is why He attended the various feasts, *etc*, that were required by the Law, e.g. the Passover (the Feast of Unleavened Bread) – **Deuteronomy 16:16; Mark 14:12-18**.

⁹ Consider also **1 John 2:3-4; 3:22, 24**.

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demonstrates that there are commandments that we are to follow, and the way we demonstrate our love for God is to obey those commandments (**2 John 6a**).

Some may ask, “*Where are these commandments?*” The answer is, “*In the New Testament*”. Besides the teachings of Jesus that are found in the gospels, the other books of the New Testament contain many commands and instructions on how we are to live faithfully (**1 Corinthians 14:37; 1 Thessalonians 4:2**). For example, “*Let him who stole steal no longer ...*” (**Ephesians 4:28**) is a command. “*Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth ...*” (**Eph. 4:29**) is a command. “*Husbands, love your wives...*” (**Eph. 5:25**) is a command. When we obey these commands, and walk according to His Word (**Eph. 5:8-10**), we are “*... fulfilling the law of Christ...*” (**Galatians 6:2**).

But the key point to remember here is this. We do not “earn” our salvation through the keeping of God’s commandments. If we try to do this, we will fail. At some point, we all stumble and sin (**Romans 3:23**). Rather, our salvation is ultimately reliant upon God’s grace and mercy (**Ephesians 2:8-9**), not our works.

But this does not mean that we can be indifferent to, or disregard, God’s commandments and continue to sin wilfully. Paul was quite emphatic in **Romans** when he pre-empted some who may think that way – “*... Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! ...*” (**Romans 6:1-2, 15**). The Hebrew writer gives an even more sobering exhortation;

“For if we sin wilfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgement” (**Hebrews 10:26-31**).

Rather, the Christian is required to “*.... walk in the Spirit not fulfil the lust of the flesh ...*” (**Galatians 5:16**). The Christian is required to “*... walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him ...*” (**Colossians 1:10**). And what is it that pleases Him? – “*... keeping His commandments ...*” (**1 John 3:22**).

Conclusion:

The Old Law, which included the 10 Commandments, ended when Jesus was nailed to the cross. It is no longer valid. It has been replaced by the New Covenant, and as Christians, we are to follow its commands and ordinances **1 Thessalonians 4:1-2; 2 Thessalonians 2:15**). Included in the New Testament are teachings and principles that were also contained in 9 of the 10 Commandments. But we follow these teachings today, not because they were part of The Law or the 10 Commandments, but because they are taught in the New Covenant. (see Annex A at the end of this lesson for examples of these teachings.)

As Christians, we are not saved by “law keeping”, but by the grace of God (**Ephesians 2:4-9**) through our faith in Jesus (**Galatians 2:16**). However, we are required to obey Him and keep his commandments (**John 15:10; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; Hebrews 5:9**). But when we do sin, we have His promise that He will forgive us if we repent (**Acts 8:22**) and confess our sins to Him (**1 John 1:9**).

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Annex A – Principles of the 10 Commandments found in the New Testament

Old Covenant Exodus 20:2-17		New Testament (Covenant) teachings that follow the same principle ¹⁰
1	You shall have no other gods before Me	Ephesians 4:46 “ <i>There is only one God and Father....</i> ” Also Romans 1:22-25, 2 Corinthians 6:16
2	You shall not make for yourself a carved image not bow down to them...	1 Corinthians 6:9 “ <i>... nor idolaters... will inherit the kingdom of God.</i> ” Also Romans 1:22-25; 1 John 5:21.
3	You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain	Colossians 3:8 “ <i>... put off ... blasphemy ... out of your mouth</i> ”. Matthew 5:33-37 regarding oaths. See also Ephesians 4:29 about the type of speech we should use.
4	Remember the Sabbath (7 th day of the week) to keep it holy	No such command given or implied in the New Covenant. <u>Note:</u> The first day of the week was the day that the church assembled together for worship, not the Sabbath Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2
5	Honour your father and your mother	Colossians 3:20 “ <i>Children, obey your parents in all things ...</i> ” Also Romans 1:28-32.
6	You shall not murder	Revelation 21:8 “ <i>...murderers .. shall have their part in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone..</i> ”
7	You shall not commit adultery	1 Corinthians 6:9 “ <i>... nor adulterers... will inherit the kingdom of God.</i> ”
8	You shall not steal	Ephesians 4:28 “ <i>Let him who stole steal no longer ...</i> ”
9	You shall not bear false witness....	Ephesians 4:25 “ <i>Therefore, putting away lying</i> ” Also Revelation 21:8.
10	You shall not covet.....	Ephesians 5:5 “ <i>... nor covetous man ... has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God..</i> ” Also 1 Corinthians 6:10.

¹⁰ I have listed only some of the verses that demonstrate these same teachings in the New Testament. All of the verses quoted are in teachings and epistles written after the death of Christ so as to ensure that they are seen in the context of the New Covenant (**Hebrews 9:15-17**).