

The Scope of The Ten Commandments

Deuteronomy 5:16–21

by Felton Spraggins

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

“You shall have no other gods before Me. . . .”
(5:6–21).

An important or unique event in history always extends its influence over the lives of men and women for centuries. Such an influence has been felt by the people of the United States since 1776, at which time its independence was established by the colonial fathers.

Two events from biblical history had a profound effect upon Israel for centuries. These two events are interrelated, each affecting the other. The first was Israel’s deliverance from Egypt. The Exodus was the most inspiring and motivating event in Israel’s history. Israel repeatedly rejoiced with the words, “The Lord brought us from Egypt” (6:21). That historic event marked the fountainhead of Israel’s existence and guaranteed her future.

The second was the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. It marked an occurrence in the history of Israel that dominated their lives for centuries to come, either for good in obeying that law or for evil in disobeying it.

HAS A GREAT MOTIVE BEHIND IT

In the preface to the Commandments we have the motive for obedience and the enduring foundation for genuine worship and service: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (5:6).

God’s gracious and mighty acts in the Exodus were the backdrop for the Ten Commandments, the civil and ceremonial law. That mighty

act of deliverance authenticated God’s offer to make a covenant with Israel as her sovereign ruler. Because He had already acted in lovingkindness on behalf of Israel, He had a right to offer the covenant and to give the Ten Commandments.

B. Davie Napier wrote of this great motivating factor, “It was I who brought you from the closed to the open, from the bitter to the sweet, from the shackled to the free, from the lost to the saved. I am the Lord *your* God, who wrought this for *you*. Know me. Acknowledge me. Remember me.”¹

GIVEN TO THE REDEEMED

Two factors are found in verse 6 that are critical to a proper understanding of the Ten Commandments. The same factors also have a profound effect on His children today.

First, they were given to a people who were already redeemed to enable them to have fellowship with Jehovah. God is not saying to His people, “When you love Me, I will redeem you out of Egypt.” He is saying, “I have brought you out of bondage, now therefore listen to Me.” They had followed His plan in their deliverance out of Egypt, and they could find the continuance of that life in the acceptance of God’s will for their lives.

The Ten Commandments did not produce salvation, but followed it. The Israelites had already been rescued. The Decalogue, therefore, is not a means of salvation; rather, it represented a way of life gratefully followed by those who have already been delivered.

As Christians, we follow God’s will for our lives because of the redemption we have in Christ.

We love Him because He first loved us and gave His Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:10). Paul wrote of our deliverance from sin:

For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life (Romans 5:6–10).

It was Christ who brought us from bondage to freedom (John 8:32), from the wrath of God to the peace of God (Romans 5:1), and from being an enemy of God to being His beloved (Romans 1:7). As a result of our redemption in Christ, we should ever follow Paul's advice: "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship" (Romans 12:1).

MANDATORY BECAUSE DIVINE

Second, the Decalogue was to be obeyed not because it appeared ethically sound, or because it proved helpful in the living of a moral life; it was to be obeyed because it was God's command. Israel's obedience to the covenant required that she keep the law. Israel had an unconditional obligation to do the will of God. Like Israel, we can accept or reject the covenant we have through Christ; but we, like they, cannot negotiate the terms.

PROVIDED THE BASIS

The Ten Commandments form a basis around which God's laws and instructions to the nation of Israel revolved. Essentially, the Ten Commandments assert that God's people have two great areas of obligation: to God (religion) and to their fellowman (morality). The careful observance of both is essential to wholesome living as God would have it in His kingdom. The violation of any one of them was a violation of one's relationship with Jehovah Himself (James 2:10).

It was, therefore, the obligation of Israel to respect the integrity both of God and of their

fellow believers. The first four commandments (5:6–15) stress the sovereign rights of God, whose identity, nature, name, and day are to be fully acknowledged.

You shall have no other gods before Me.
You shall not make for yourself a graven image.
You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.

The following six commandments (5:16–21) have to do with obligations to parents, and the life, personal property, and reputation of one's neighbors.

Honor your father and mother.
You shall not murder.
You shall not commit adultery.
You shall not steal.
You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
You shall not covet.

Obedience to the first four is evidence of our love toward God, while obedience to commandments five through ten is evidence of our love for our fellowman. As we obey God and keep Him special in our thought and speech, the greater will be our respect for moral code. The Decalogue was a pattern for religious living for the people of Israel as they entered the land that flowed with milk and honey.

SUMMARIZED IN TWO

A city editor once ordered a freshman reporter to sum up the Ten Commandments in the fewest possible words. The reporter wrote this as a summary: "Don't!" It was clever, but neither true nor good.

It has been suggested that Micah reduced the Ten Commandments to three statements (Micah 6:8), Isaiah to two (Isaiah 56:1), and Habakkuk to one (Habakkuk 2:4). When Jesus was questioned regarding the first and greatest commandment, He summarized them as follows:

"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 foremost commandment. The second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:37–40).

Jesus summarized the law by pointing to man's duty to love God and to love his fellow-

man. His reference to loving God with all the heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37) is simply the Hebrew way of expressing that we must love God with the totality of our persons. The second was like unto it, namely, to love one's neighbor as oneself. He declared that on these two principles hinged the law and the prophets (Matthew 22:34-40).

By understanding these two principles, to love God properly and to love one's neighbor correctly, we are prepared to appreciate the Ten Commandments and through them understand and appreciate the rest of the law and the prophets. With these two principles in mind, it becomes easy to realize what is stated in Romans 13:8-10 regarding love being the fulfillment of the law:

Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, "You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love therefore is the fulfillment of the law.

The two principles of loving God as we ought and loving our fellowman correctly have been characteristic of God's dealings with mankind under former dispensations, as well as the Christian dispensation. Paul's citing of this principle in Romans 13 does not imply that we are under Moses' law, but only that there are truths, or principles, of God characteristic of both systems.

A proper understanding of the Ten Commandments will help in our comprehension of God's great truths, which will make the necessity of our obedience to Him more meaningful. We have no greater need than to love Him and our fellowman properly. Let us, therefore, study the Ten Commandments with these two guiding principles, which the Lord provided for us in Matthew 22.

William Barclay wrote regarding the Decalogue: "The reverence and respect which are the basis of the Ten Commandments can never pass away; they are the permanent stuff of man's relationship to God and His fellow men."²

NOT SEPARATE FROM THE LAW

Are the Ten Commandments actually a part of the law, or were they separate from the law? Individuals today teach that two separate laws were given at Mount Sinai. The first, written on stones and deposited in the ark of the covenant, related to moral duties only. The other, given to Moses privately and deposited in a receptacle by the side of the ark, related only to the ceremonial duties. It is stated that the Ten Commandments are, therefore, not a part of the covenant, or law, of Moses.

However, the Bible knows only one law, which is clearly seen in these passages:

"So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, that is, the ten commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone" (Deuteronomy 4:13).

But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.

What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet" (Romans 7:6, 7).

"For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death'" (Mark 7:10).

CONCLUSION

For Christians, the gospel is the most precious reality in the world. The tables of stone on which the Ten Commandments were written were placed in the ark of the covenant, beneath the mercy seat. The precious gospel of Jesus Christ is to be placed in our hearts, as Moses placed the tables of stone in the sacred ark. And it is significant that, as the Ten Commandments rested beneath the mercy seat, so the gospel of Christ, bringing the assurance of God's forgiving love, extends to the human heart the mercy it most needs.

Endnotes

¹Frank S. Mead, ed., *Tarbell's Teacher's Guide, 1972-73* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1972), 292.

²William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, The Daily Study Bible Series* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1956), 128.