

The Law of Liberty

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Exodus 19:16-20; 20:1-20 NIV

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him. The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up . . .

And God spoke all these words:

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. "You shall have no other gods before me.

"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.

"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.



"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

"Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

"You shall not murder.

"You shall not commit adultery.

"You shall not steal.

"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet

your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."

Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning."

Jesus, after his resurrection, explained to his disciples what the Scriptures said concerning himself. The Scriptures he was referring to were, of course, the Scriptures of the Hebrew Bible, which were the only Scriptures they had at that point. What we call the Old Testament was the Bible of the earliest Christians. The New Testament was to come later, as Christians told and retold the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and worked out what those things meant for them and for the plan God had for the history of the world. So at the beginning the church's Bible was the Hebrew Bible, which the apostles — on their mission to the Greek-speaking world — eventually used in a Greek translation we today call the Septuagint.

Appearing to his disciples after the resurrection, Jesus told them, "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). In explaining this, Jesus was referring to the three major sections of the Hebrew Bible, which are called *torah*, *nevi'im* and *ketuvim*: Law, Prophets, and Writings; with the Psalms (the largest book of the third section) standing for all the Writings.

As you can see, the order of our English Bible is different from that of the Hebrew. Our Bibles begin with the Law, or Pentateuch — the first five books. Then they have what are sometimes called books of history, beginning with Joshua and running through Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. The next section of the English Old Testament is sometimes called the poetic books, beginning with Job and the Psalms and running through the Song of Solomon. Finally, the English Old Testament ends with the prophetic books, beginning with the "major prophets" like Isaiah and concluding with the twelve "minor prophets," ending with Malachi.

But the Hebrew Bible, as Jesus described it, has a different order. The Law comes first, of course; but the word *torah* in Hebrew really means "teaching" or "instruction," not what we call "law" today. So the Torah contains not only the laws of Moses, but also the narrative of world history beginning with the creation, the flood, and the tower of Babel. We then read about the lives of the Hebrew patriarchs — Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — and how the Israelites were delivered from slavery in Egypt in that great event called the Exodus. After that they were given the Law on Mount Sinai, which Moses preaches to them a second in the Book of Deuteronomy (a name which means "second law").

The second section of the Hebrew Bible is called the Prophets, and it includes not only what we call the "prophets" in our English Bible but also many of those books of "history," from Joshua through 2 Kings. Those books are called the "Former Prophets," because they tell of men like Samuel, Elijah and Elisha who were prophets but didn't write books of prophecy. Then the Hebrew Bible proceeds to the writings of the "Latter Prophets," the same three "major prophets" we're familiar with — Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel — and ending with the "Book of the Twelve," Hosea through Malachi.

Finally, at the end of the Hebrew Bible, comes a collection of books called simply the Writings — everything that didn't get put into the Law and the Prophets. The collection begins with the largest book, the Psalms, which is why Jesus can mention the Psalms as standing for the whole collection when he refers to "the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then come the other books we sometimes call the "poetic books" in our Bibles, though not in the same order. And some books

that are in the "history" or "prophets" sections of our English Bibles are in this third part of the Hebrew Bible instead, such as Daniel, Lamentations, Ezra, Nehemiah. In fact, the last books of the Hebrew Bible are the two books of Chronicles.

Why did I take you through this literary journey? In order to set the stage for what I'd like to present during the next few weeks. Jesus spoke of the Scriptures as these three divisions of the Hebrew Bible: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. For three of the Sundays leading up to Pentecost, May 24, I'd like to teach from a passage in each of these three sections. Today we'll focus on a passage from the Law, or Torah. Next Sunday, God willing, we'll look at a passage from the Prophets. The Sunday after that, May 10, we'll interrupt the sequence, because that will be both Mother's Day and the Sunday before Ascension, when we'll talk about Jesus' ascension to the Father. Then we'll resume the sequence the following Sunday with a passage from the Writings, which will then bring us to Pentecost and the celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the church.



ENGLISH	HEBREW
Law	Law (<i>Torah</i>)
History	Prophets (<i>Nevi'im</i>)
Poetic	• Former
Prophecy	• Latter
	Writings (<i>Ketuvim</i>)

Today, then, our topic is from the Law, the Torah or five books of Moses. And out of this section I've picked a passage that's familiar to all of us, one of the Bible's key passages that many Christians know by heart. You realize I'm speaking of what we call the Ten Commandments, the beginning of the Law the Lord gave Moses on Mount Sinai. In the Hebrew Bible they're not called the "ten commandments," but the "ten words" — or, to use the Greek term, the Decalogue. And today I'm calling these words the "Law of Liberty," for reasons I will explain as we proceed.

Did you know there are actually four sets of the Ten Commandments in the Bible? The passage we read from Exodus 20 is the first set, and then Moses repeats these same commandments (with some changes to one of them) in Deuteronomy, chapter 5, just before the Israelites are to cross the Jordan into the promised land of Canaan. In between, there are two more sets. In Exodus 23 Moses gives a list of ten commandments about the Sabbath, the three annual festivals, and other practices. Then, in Exodus 34 after Moses has encountered the Israelites' disobedience in worshiping the golden calf, the Lord gives him a similar set of commandments about festivals and sacrifices. Scholars call these two sets the "ritual Decalogue," because these commandments have to do with worship and ceremony. But what we usually call the Ten Commandments are the sets from Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, and they have to do with how we worship the Lord and also with how we deal with other people.

Nevertheless, when we ask what the Ten Commandments are, let's remember that they're the "ten words." They're not simply laws, as a government might pass a law today, but they're teaching or instruction in how to live in a way that's pleasing to God. And they have a worship function. How do we know this? Just ask yourself: Why are there *ten commandments* — not eleven, say, or nine? Well, *what do you have ten of?* You know the answer! There are ten commandments because you can count them off on your fingers! That means they're intended to be recited from memory, just as Moses says: "But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it" (Deuteronomy 30:14). Psalm 50, a Psalm of Asaph, gives us another hint about this:



But to the wicked, God says: "What right have you to recite my laws or take my covenant on your lips? You hate my instruction and cast my words behind you. When you see a thief, you join with him; you throw in your lot with adulterers. You use your mouth for evil and harness your tongue to deceit. You speak continually against your brother and slander your own mother's son. These things you have done and I kept silent; you thought I was altogether like you. But I will rebuke you and accuse you to your face" (Psalm 50:16-20).

These words reflect the dishonoring of several of the precepts we find in the Ten Commandments. "Why are you reciting my covenant laws," God is asking, "when you have no intention to keep them?" Evidently it was the practice of the Israelites to recite the commandments in worship, because that was how they visualized God appearing to them: in his spoken Word, especially, the opening words of their covenant with the Lord. That's not a bad idea for us today, and in fact the Holy Communion service of some churches includes the reciting of the Ten Commandments. God comes to us as we speak forth his Word.

But let's turn now to the content of the Ten Commandments, or Ten Words. As you can see, the first four have to do with our devotion to the Lord, while the last six relate to how we deal with other people. Naturally, these two aspects can't be separated. How God's people relate to each other, and even to those who haven't yet come into the family of God, depends on how faithful they are to the Lord himself. So in giving these laws to the people of Israel, the Lord has in mind not just how each individual is to serve him but also what kind of life his people will share together.

The Law given through Moses was supposed to be the pattern that would govern how the people of Israel would live in the land of promise, and how they would carry out their mission. That mission was to be the calling given to their father Abraham when the Lord made a covenant with him: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis

12:2-3). This covenant, this purpose of the Law, is reaffirmed in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, so that the apostle Paul can write to the Galatians: "He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit" (Galatians 3:14). The real purpose of the Law isn't so we can earn God's favor by keeping it; the real purpose is so that you and I can be the kind of people who will bring God's blessing to others and help them to come into the life of God's new creation.

Four Commandments about the Lord:

- Worship and serve Him only.
- Don't make images of Him .
- Don't use His Name casually.
- Observe His special day.

Six commandments about people:

- Honor parents.
- Don't murder.
- Don't steal.
- Keep marital fidelity.
- Don't give false testimony.
- Don't covet what others have.

So the first commandment is the basic one: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." Being loyal to the Lord alone is our loving response to what he has done for us in setting us free — which is one reason we can call the Ten Commandments the "Law of Liberty." As James, the brother of Jesus, wrote in his letter, "He who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing" (James 1:25). The people of Israel should have been grateful to God, and obedient to him, because he had set them free from the oppressive conditions of their Egyptian slavery. In the same way, you and I want to be obedient servants of the Lord

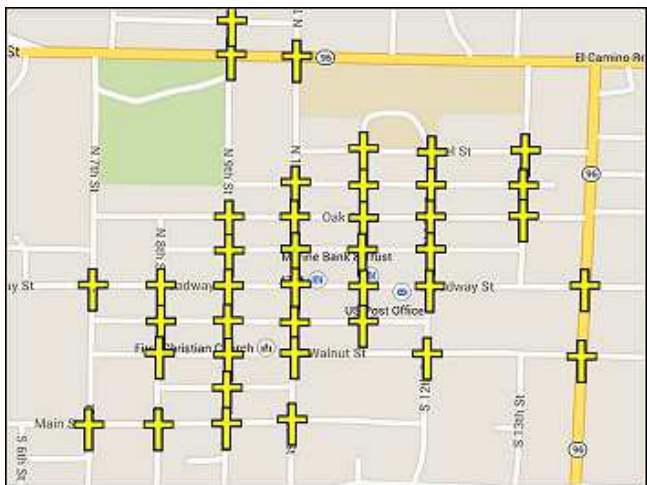
because of what he has done for us in the resurrection of Jesus, and the Gospel. He has delivered us from a false understanding of what life is all about, and given us the truth about our purpose — to be God's new creation in Christ — so that we're not pulled down into the sorry and pointless way of life in which so many people this world over are trapped.

So all the commandments really follow from that first one, to worship and serve the Lord only. It's because God has delivered us, given us liberty, that we're careful not to put anything else in his place, or worship something else thinking it's God. We don't use the name of the Lord lightly, but treat his name with all seriousness and respect. And we set aside a special day to gather with other worshipers to give God praise, and listen to his Word.

And then, because we're servants of this God who has had mercy on us, we treat other people with honesty and respect. We take care of our parents, who gave us life. We don't act in murderous anger against our fellow human beings, or violate the covenant we've made with our marriage partner. We don't take from others what doesn't belong to us, or spread false accusations against people we deal with. And we don't manipulate or trick other people into giving us something they don't want to give, or doing something they don't want to do. That's the biblical meaning of coveting. To covet doesn't mean that we want something we shouldn't have — we can all be guilty of that from time to time. Coveting means we maneuver another person into a position where they feel forced to give us what we want.

All of this sounds perfectly reasonable to us, doesn't it? But some people view these Ten Commandments as a threat. In recent years the Ten Commandments have been in the news because atheists are doing their best to remove them from any public place where they've been put up, such as courthouses or parks. There's a concerted atheist campaign, as you know, to remove all Christian symbols or statements from any public setting, and that campaign is reaching a ridiculous extreme. The next thing you know, they'll be after Google Maps or Rand McNally to remove any cross streets from city maps, or crossroads from county maps. After all, when two roads cross at right angles someone looking down from an airplane might get the impression that the city is endorsing Christianity by putting crosses everywhere. And I'm sure the atheists will want to ban graph paper, too, because of all the intersecting lines.





What's odd about this atheist "crusade" — or, actually, anti-crusade — against the Ten Commandments is that they aren't a Christian text at all. In fact, the Commandments aren't even a biblical innovation. What the Lord gave Moses on Mount Sinai wasn't really that novel. As I said, these commandments are in the form of ten words because that makes them easy to recite in worship. But the specific laws themselves — are they really so specifically Christian, or Jewish, that no one else would care to live by them?

Think about that for a moment. Could *any* culture, or *any* society, survive if it didn't have the Ten Commandments in some form? Imagine a civilization, for example, that didn't have a rule about stealing from other

people, or just killing other people indiscriminately. Try this experiment with your atheist friend. When he or she isn't looking, take their wallet or their purse. When they discover what you've done, they'll confront you. "You stole my wallet! Give it back!" And you answer, "But 'Thou shalt not steal' is part of the Ten Commandments, and that's a Christian rule. You don't believe in Christianity, do you? So what's the big deal about your wallet?"

You see, the Commandments aren't really biblical law at all. They're what's called "natural law," principles that apply to any culture or civilization. And the society that disregards them is headed for chaos and disintegration. Could any civilization last if it mistreated its elderly, or encouraged people to lie about others? The family is basic to human society; could any culture last very long if began to treat marriage as though it had no meaning — a good question we might be asking ourselves today in the United States. Perhaps the Ten Commandments are just common sense, and they'll endure as the necessary basis for a healthy culture whether or not somebody wants to pull them down and hide them from public view.



Well, then, what about the first two commandments: "You shall have no other gods beside me, and you shall not bow down to any idol of your own making." Aren't those *religious* commandments? The truth is, everyone has a religion of some kind. Theologian Paul Tillich defined religion as "ultimate concern," and he said that everyone has something that concerns them ultimately, even if it's the concern to avoid having any ultimate concern. Even atheism, then, is really a religion, the concern to avoid being religious. Or a person's religion might be that very unscientific philosophy that's called "evolution." Or it might be the determination to enforce what's "politically correct." Or a person might be religiously committed to impressing and pleasing other people, leading to dysfunctional family patterns such as the alcoholic husband and his enabling wife.



Most commonly, by ignoring those first two commandments people just *make themselves, and their own preferences, into their gods*. Without those commandments, we would just worship another holy trinity: "Me, Myself, and I." That's happening today in our culture; people insist on being their own authority and nobody else can tell them what to do. We're all infected with this idea, as the marketers know when they invent slogans like "Have it *your* way" or "Be all *you* can be."

The apostle Paul has an interesting comment in Romans 7:7. Discussing the Law, he summarizes the entire set of commandments in the tenth Commandment: "You shall not

covet.” Coveting, as I mentioned, is putting your own selfish desires ahead of everything else, and manipulating other people into conforming to what you want. But that’s exactly the same thing as the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.” The Ten Commandments, in other words, come around full circle. Putting God first, others second, and yourself last is what straightens out all of life, and that’s what the Ten Commandments are driving at. Jesus summarized it when he quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all



your mind, and with all your strength,” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:29-31). These aren’t specifically Christian principles. No civilization could survive if every member of society consistently put himself first, without regard for the needs of others.

Finally, what about the criticism we sometimes hear that the Ten Commandments are so negative? — “Thou shalt not, thou shalt not, thou shalt not . . .” Think about this: suppose the Ten Commandments were all positive: “You *must* to do this, you *have to* do that” — and the “have tos” could go on *ad infinitum*. Would you be happy with that set of commandments, and would you be free? By stating a few things in the negative — by restricting

behavior in certain critical areas — the Ten Commandments *leave us free* in all other areas. If nothing is forbidden, then everything is required. And we would go nuts trying to do everything — which is the trap many people find themselves in. But when we know a few things that we mustn’t do, then we have the liberty to plan our lives in other respects. The Ten Commandments are, truly, the Law of Liberty.

A famous philosopher once said, “Freedom is the recognition of necessity.” That is, when we know what kind of behavior is really necessary in life, then we have the freedom to act without worrying about all the unnecessary, harmful or trivial things we might be tempted to do. Our atheist friends are quite wrong; the Ten Commandments aren’t specifically Christian, but belong to any stable civilization. They aren’t true because they’re in the Bible; *they’re in the Bible because they’re true.*

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