

The Ten Commandments

Bible Text: Exodus 20

Lesson Focus: The Ten Commandments are a gift from God intended to help us live with one another.

Big Question: Are the Ten Commandments around just to trip us up and make us feel bad?

Key Words:

GUIDELINES: standards or principles that provide direction and support.

GIFT: something voluntarily passed to someone without compensation.

THRESHOLD: an entrance or beginning point.

READ

Next to Psalm 23, the Ten Commandments are probably the most familiar scripture in our culture. Their context is the Exodus. The chapters between the two events give Moses time to preach a bit to the people and gather further examples that he will need for rhetorical persuasion later. In chapter 19 the entire community experiences a theophany; they do not like it. The whole mountain seems to burn as thunder booms and lightning flashes; it is terribly frightening. The people are more comfortable with Moses serving as a mediator between them and God. Moses does assume this role again, but first God gives the people the Decalogue or “10 Words.” The experience nearly scares them to death.

The law given in the Ten Commandments and in later laws, too, is a gift many Christians overlook. Our Jewish friends and neighbors have a deep understanding of this, but we too often lack the depth to see the law in its fullness.. The context of the Commandments is very important. They are given as a gift of structure, boundaries, rules for living as a *free people*. But they aren't just guidelines for a civilized humanity. They don't *effect* a relationship with God but rather *reflect* an already-established relationship with God. Israel's election depended on God's grace, and that does not change with the giving of the Ten Commandments or any of the laws that follow. In the laws given in the remaining chapters and books of scripture, God is giving them (and thereby us) a framework for their redeemed and precious lives so that they (and we) do not squander the incredible gift that has been given.

The Commandments deal with the most practical issues of community life and life dependent on God. Most are stated prohibitively. The first four address Israel's relationship to Yahweh, and the remaining six deal with their relationships with one another. Most of life is lived in the ordinary. It is not every day that waters are

parted and we cross over to safety. Most of the time, we are wandering around in the wilderness, trying (and, truthfully, *not* trying at times) to love God and neighbor. The Commandments are a reminder of whose and who we are. In addition, they draw a sketch of the kind of people God intends us to be.

Sometimes the more familiar something is, the less we really know about it. The Ten Commandments are featured on bookmarks, wall plaques, T-shirts, and courtroom doors. Taken out of context, they are far too easy to misinterpret. Their brevity makes their meaning seem simple. People quote them in simplistic ways and make the evening news. They are anything but simple, however. Many theologians throughout the ages have expanded and expounded on them. Given their ubiquity in our culture, we would do well to spend some time with them. They are more than universal law, and they certainly deserve more from us than fancy lettering on a T-shirt or legal battles over where they should be displayed.

Are the Ten Commandments around just to trip us up and make us feel bad? What do you think?

OPEN THE BIBLE

Read Proverbs 2:1-6. For the writer of Proverbs, true wisdom begins in understanding God's commandments. As the students read these verses, have them circle the words *commandments* and *wisdom*. What is the relationship between true wisdom and God's commandments? Where do we find the commandments of God?

Read Exodus 20:1-11. The Commandments can be divided into two groups. The first three deal with how we are to respond to God, and the final seven address how we are to interact with one another. These are guidelines for how God's people can live faithful lives. If we focus on the word *not*, we can quickly become legalistic and lose sight of what the commandments are really saying.

Lutheran Study Bible page 153: Read the Lutheran Perspectives sidebar "What is the purpose of the Ten Commandments?" This is a great explanation of how we are to understand the Ten Commandments in a Lutheran way today. The focus for Luther is always on Christ, not the law. But when we realize what Christ has done for us, we naturally want to live a Christian life of service to God and our neighbor.

Read Exodus 20:12-17. While the first three commandments deal with how we are to live toward God, the final seven deal with how we are to live toward one another. **How do you think the commandments provide us with a guideline for**

living a Christian life?

Read Exodus 20:18-26. The giving of the law to Moses is presented in a very dramatic way. The scene of Moses on the mountain is one of the most dramatic stories in the Bible

1. The Ten Commandments can be found in . . .
 - a. Exodus 20.
 - b. Joshua 24.
 - c. Mark 11.
 - d. Exodus 10.

2. Moses went up to pray to God on . . .
 - a. Mount McKinley.
 - b. Mount Sinai.
 - c. the Mount of Olives.
 - d. Mount Olympus.

3. The people wouldn't go near the mountain because . . .
 - a. snow made the road impassable.
 - b. they were afraid of the thunder, flames, and smoke.
 - c. they thought the mountain was cursed.
 - d. the road was flooded out.

4. How many commandments are about our relationship to God?
 - a. 2
 - b. 3
 - c. 4
 - d. 10

5. How many commandments are about our relationship to our neighbor?
 - a. 5
 - b. 6
 - c. 7
 - d. 10

6. Luther believed that . . .
 - a. if we keep the Commandments exactly, we will go to heaven.
 - b. the Ten Commandments give us the basics for faithful living in relationship to God and our neighbors.
 - c. the Ten Commandments should be expanded to 100.
 - d. both a and b.

7. God gave the Ten Commandments to . . .
 - a. Adam.
 - b. Aaron.

STUDENT BOOK CONNECTION

Here We Stand Student Book page 188: Read through “How to Tell the Difference between the Law and the Gospel.” This discussion of law and gospel is critical for understanding the Ten Commandments in a Lutheran context. Explore how you experience the two in your own lives. The “Be Aware” section on page 190 may be the most helpful section for understanding how law and gospel work together in our lives and in our world.

Questions Prepare written responses to the questions listed below.

- If you could change one rule in your family, what would it be? If you could add one rule, what would it be? What rules are the most difficult for you to deal with?
- If someone said to you, “The Ten Commandments are impossible to fulfill, so why did God give them anyway?” what would you say?
- What are some rules in your family? These may include no television or phones during dinner time, bed times, chores, etc. As you think about the various rules in your families, are there some common themes? For example, health, safety, respect. Do they think some of the rules are silly or arbitrary? Do some make sense?
- How can rules make relationships work better?
When people live together, rules and expectations make things run more smoothly. God gave the Ten Commandments to Israel so they could live with one another. How do rules make things easier in your home and school life. What would life be like if there were no rules or if everyone ignored them?
- Where do you really appreciate having rules? Are there areas in your lives that would be chaotic if no rules were in place? How can rules sometimes make things work better?