

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW



Getting Acquainted

For centuries the Ten Commandments have been foundational for Christian discipleship. In the medieval church lay Christians were routinely taught the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments (also known as the Decalogue, meaning "ten words"). In the Reformation these emphases continued, as seen in various Protestant catechisms. The Large and Small Catechisms of Martin Luther, the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms, and the Heidelberg Catechism all include lengthy sections on the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments. In fact, use of the Decalogue for discipleship can be traced all the way back to Moses (Deut. 6:6–7).

One reason the Ten Commandments are important for discipleship is that they teach practical lessons on love. And love is our greatest calling as Christians (1 John 3:23). Jesus explained that the sum of the Law¹ is to love God and to love one's neighbor (Matt. 22:34–40). The Law was not given to earn God's favor. No one is saved by the deeds of the Law (Rom. 3:20). But, having been redeemed² by God's mercies, we find in the Decalogue ten snapshots of what it looks like to renounce sin and live lives of godly love.

Placing It in the Larger Story

The Decalogue appears twice in the Bible. It appears first in Exodus 20:2–17. The people of Israel had just arrived at Mount Sinai after being freed from

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW

slavery in Egypt. They would spend nearly a year at Sinai, where God would give them numerous sets of laws. But God began by speaking the Ten Commandments, which he uniquely declared in his own voice (Ex. 20:22; Deut. 5:4) and then wrote on tablets by his own writing (Ex. 31:18; Deut. 5:22). Their placement at the beginning of the Sinai laws and their proclamation in God's own voice and writing indicate the importance of these commandments.

A second presentation of the Decalogue is found in Deuteronomy 5:6–21. Forty years after Sinai, a new generation had grown up and had arrived on the border between Moab and the Promised Land. There, Moses retaught the entire Sinai law to prepare the new generation for settlement in the land. Again he began with the Ten Commandments. The Decalogue's importance, and its usefulness as an overview of God's law, is indicated by its introductory role for both the Sinai and the Moab presentations of the law.

Key Verse

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex. 20:2; Deut. 5:6).

Date and Historical Background

The Decalogue is the only portion of Scripture declared to the nation of Israel without prophetic mediation; instead it comes in God's own voice and in his own writing. This occurred in the third month after Israel left Egypt (Ex. 19:1). The year date of the exodus³ is uncertain, but it is generally believed to have occurred in either the fourteenth or the twelfth century BC (on the date of the exodus, see *The ESV Study Bible*, page 33). Moses was the people's leader at that time, and he is identified as the one who wrote the account for the benefit of later generations (Deut. 31:24–26).

Outline

Scripture states that the number of commandments is ten (Ex. 34:28; Deut. 4:13), but there are at least fourteen imperatives in the passage. Some imperative statements must therefore be combined. Most of the commandments are easy to distinguish, but traditions differ at a few points on how to enumerate them. This study will follow the mainstream Protestant numbering of the Ten Commandments, outlined below. Interested students can search online for Jewish, Roman Catholic, and other traditional enumerations of the Decalogue for comparison.

- I. Preface/No Other Gods (Ex. 20:2–3; Deut. 5:6–7)
- II. No Images (Ex. 20:4–6; Deut. 5:8–10)
- III. Do Not Take God’s Name in Vain (Ex. 20:7; Deut. 5:11)
- IV. Remember/Observe the Sabbath Day (Ex. 20:8–11; Deut. 5:12–15)
 - V. Honor Father and Mother (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16)
- VI. Do Not Murder (Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:17)
- VII. Do Not Commit Adultery (Ex. 20:14; Deut. 5:18)
- VIII. Do Not Steal (Ex. 20:15; Deut. 5:19)
 - IX. Do Not Bear False Witness (Ex. 20:16; Deut. 5:20)
 - X. Do Not Covet (Ex. 20:17; Deut. 5:21)

The Scriptures further state that the Decalogue was written on two tablets (Ex. 34:28; Deut. 4:13). This is traditionally believed to indicate its division into two parts: commandments on loving God (typically viewed as the first four commandments) and loving other people (the final six), with the fifth commandment serving as a hinge between the two parts.

As You Get Started

Have you ever heard a sermon series, attended a Sunday school course, or read a book that helped you understand the Decalogue? What insights from past studies of the Decalogue already shape your view of them?

Which of the Ten Commandments do you feel you understand least well? Develop two or three specific questions about the Decalogue that you would like to see answered in the coming weeks, and write them below.

WEEK 1: OVERVIEW

It is ambitious to summarize all human morality in just ten commands. The Decalogue is not necessarily exhaustive, but it is expansive. Are there areas of morality or ethics that seem unaddressed by the Decalogue? List them here and see whether, in the course of this study, you find that they do fit.

Different theological traditions have different understandings of how the Old Testament law applies to the New Testament church. But nearly all Christians recognize the continuing value of the Ten Commandments for discipleship. How does your church understand the relevance of the Decalogue for Christians today?

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Have you ever memorized the Ten Commandments? Consider (re)memorizing the commandments, one each week, in connection with this study. If you are doing this study as a group, you can provide mutual accountability by reciting the commandments learned so far at each gathering. Pray for the Holy Spirit to help you grow in your love for God and for others as you study his law of love, the Ten Commandments.

Definitions

¹ **Law** – When spelled with an initial capital letter, “Law” refers to the first five books of the Bible (also called the “Pentateuch”). The Law contains numerous commands of God to his people, including the Ten Commandments and instructions regarding worship, sacrifice, and life in Israel. The NT often uses “the law” (lower case) to refer to the entire body of precepts set forth in the books of the Law.

² **Redemption** – In the context of the Bible, the act of buying back someone who had become enslaved or something that had been lost to someone else. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus purchased redemption for all believers (Col. 1:13–14).

² **Exodus, the** – The departure of the people of Israel from Egypt and their journey to Mount Sinai under Moses’ leadership (Exodus 1–19; Numbers 33). The exodus demonstrated God’s power and providence for his people, who had been enslaved by the Egyptians. The annual festival of Passover commemorates God’s final plague upon the Egyptians, resulting in their release from Egypt.