

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
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God's Covenant with Israel

Exodus 20:1-11

Key verses: "I am the Lord your God.... You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2-3)

Journalist Ted Koppel hosted the TV news show *Nightline*. He made headlines when he said: "What Moses brought down from Mount Sinai were not ten suggestions."

The Ten Commandments are still relevant for us today. As Christians, we must think carefully about the ways Jesus and the New Testament writers sometimes amplified and clarified what it means to follow these commandments. Yet, Jesus himself said: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17).

The New Testament teaches that we are no longer under *law* but under *grace*. This truth, however, does not abolish the Ten Commandments. It means that our efforts to live a good life cannot save us. Only faith in God's saving grace through Jesus Christ can save us.

Still today, God's moral law as revealed in the Ten Commandments and completed in the life and teachings of Jesus are to be our guidelines for living in a way that pleases God. This law is not the basis of our salvation or our sanctification. But God fills us with His Holy Spirit so that we can have the power to live in ways that please God and glorify Him. The Ten Commandments are God's guidelines for right living, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The first four of the Ten Commandments form the foundation of God's plan for living in right relationship with Him and with others.

1. "You shall have no other gods before me" (v. 3). Every person has some kind of a god. Anything or anyone to which a person gives his ultimate devotion, service, and energy is the god of that person's life. Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, said: "Whatever your heart clings to, whatever your heart relies upon, that is properly your God."

The first commandment targets the basic cause of so many of humanity's problems—God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is not truly first in our lives. Instead, we have tried to assign God to a corner of our hearts. Other things, then, effectively replace God.

The first commandment says that we must put God first. A newspaper ad consisted of an entire page that appeared to be totally blank, nothing but white space. But when one looked more closely, in the lower right-hand corner of the page, these tiny-print words could be read: “Is this where you are putting God?”

2. “You shall not make for yourself an idol” (v. 4). Idol worship was rampant in the ancient world. The ancient Egyptians worshipped some 20,000 insects and animals. Later, the ancient Romans made important decisions by consulting the entrails of sheep and the flight of birds. Plutarch believed that the souls of people were made out of the moon and would return to it.

It is no wonder that God commanded His people not to worship idols. But few people worship insects and animals in America today. How could we possibly violate the second commandment?

Again, the *principle* of idolatry has great relevance today. Saint Augustine said: “Idolatry is worshipping anything that ought to be used or using anything that ought to be worshipped.” For many in Western culture today, money and material possessions are our idols. Someone said, “If you have something you can’t live without, you don’t own it; it owns you.”

3. “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God” (v. 7). Many of us grew up thinking of this third commandment as a prohibition against using God’s name as a curse word. Actually, there is more to it than that, but profanity is a good place to start. When a person uses God’s name as a curse word, it shows a profound lack of respect for God. Someone wrote on the wall of an airport restroom: “Damn is not God’s last name!”

Profanity is a violation of the third commandment. But remember also that, for the Hebrew, one’s *name* stood for one’s character. So, we break the third commandment whenever we show disrespect for God or whenever we make trivial what is sacred.

As we examine our lives—our actions, motives, habits, and attitudes—can God sign His holy name to our lives? Do our lives honor God and the things of God? If so, we are keeping the third commandment.

4. “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy” (v. 8). In Jesus’ day, the principle of a sabbath day for rest, worship, and renewal needed to be rescued from legalistic excess. For example, some of the extreme rabbinical guidelines taught: Because no work should be done on the sabbath, a person must be completely still. He must not ride horseback. If his ox fell into the ditch, he could pull the ox out. But if the person fell into the ditch, he must stay there! If a flea bit a person on the sabbath, he must not scratch but rather let the flea bite in peace, for to try to catch the flea would be hunting on the sabbath.

To correct the legalism of his day, Jesus said: “The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27). In other words, God established the principle

of sabbath as a gift that is meant to bless us. The sabbath, which Christians normally observe on Sundays, is a gracious gift designed to renew and restore us in body and soul. To keep the sabbath regularly—as a day of rest and worship—refreshes our bodies, renews our souls, realigns our values, and restores our love for the Lord.

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