

The Ten Commandments in the 21st Century - 1

Where the Ten Commandments Came From

In countries with a Christian tradition, most people have heard of the Ten Commandments, even if they cannot recite all of them. Most people who have heard of them would also agree that they are a good thing. But not many people could tell you where they come from, or how we should think about them in the 21st Century. In this series, David Pearce examines the Ten Commandments and how they apply to Christians today. We begin by finding out when they came into existence.

The Creation of a Nation

In the book of Genesis we read many chapters about Abraham. God promised him a big family, like the stars in the sky for number. Four hundred years later, this promise had come true. There were thousands of Israelites – all of them descended from Abraham. However, life was not good for them, as they were slaves in Egypt. God had told Abraham this would happen, but that one day they would return to the land where Abraham lived, the land of Canaan.



Around 2500 BC, God sent ten plagues which struck the land of Egypt, damaging every aspect of Egyptian life, and Pharaoh was eventually persuaded to let the Israelites go. They left Egypt with Moses as their leader, and after crossing the Red Sea, they came to Mount Sinai in the desert. It was the beginning of their life as an independent nation.

A Nation Needs Laws

All nations need laws to make life safe and comfortable. For example, if I decide in the UK that today I will drive on the right side of the road instead of the left, before long there will be a nasty accident. We have to have rules that everybody must keep, or there will be chaos. If I decide that my neighbour has a better car than mine, and go out with a big knife and kill him so that I can take his car, that will also lead to trouble. His wife's family might grab a gun and come and shoot me to avenge his blood, and soon there will be civil war. We have to have laws to stop bad people doing evil things, and to protect the vulnerable members of society.

When the people of Israel stood at the foot of Mount Sinai, the only laws they knew were those of Egypt, where the worship of idols was widespread. They needed new laws of their own. Even back in the time of Abraham, there had been rules which came from God, and Abraham taught them to his family (see Genesis 26:5, 18:19). Now they needed to be made permanent,

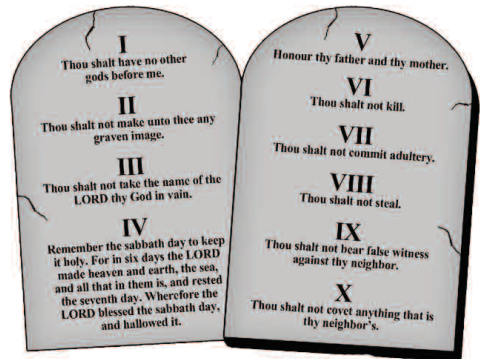
and new laws added which would suit the Israelites' new life as a farming community, settled in their own properties, rather than nomads living in tents with sheep and goats.

So, God called Moses up to the top of Mount Sinai, to receive the new laws. We call them the Law of Moses, but really it is the Law of God given through Moses. There were hundreds of commandments; some were about everyday life, such as who you could or could not marry, what to do if you found a lost item, and what to do if someone had a contagious disease; some were about taxes, to pay for the priests, who administered the laws. There were also religious laws about sacrifices to God, and holy days, and worship.

All national laws need to state what will happen if someone breaks a law – the penalty if he is found guilty. So did the Law of Moses – it laid down penalties for criminals who broke the law – burglars, murderers and adulterers. These rules cover many pages in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. So, what are the Ten Commandments? Really, they are a brief summary of the whole body of laws, reduced to ten lines.

A God-Given Summary

Why did God need a summary of His laws? God was prepared to be Israel's God, and look after them, and bring them to the Land of Promise, but first they must solemnly agree to keep His laws. So Moses made the people wash and put on clean clothes, and assemble before the mountain. On top of it, the presence of God was shown by clouds, fire and earthquake. They were going to enter into an agreement with God, which is called a covenant.



Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5-6).

Now there followed the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:1-17. These words were a summary of the covenant. In the following chapters, Moses recited all the words of the law and wrote them down (see Exodus 24:3-4). Moses made a sacrifice and sprinkled the blood on the altar and on the people; from that day onwards, they were God's special people.

But suppose 100 years went by, and all those people were dead. How would anyone in Israel know they were bound to God by a covenant? The answer is, the Ten Commandments, the summary of the Law, were written down on tablets of stone which were kept inside the Ark of the Covenant (see Deuteronomy 10:3-5). There they provided a permanent reminder of the covenant that had been made. A copy of the written law as recited here by Moses in Deuteronomy was also kept alongside the Ark of the Covenant (see Deuteronomy 31:26).

We have a similar system in modern cultures. If we make a solemn agreement, say a marriage, or the purchase of an apartment, which is an agreement between two people, there is a written contract, signed by the two parties, which is kept in a public registry office so that if there is a query in the future, the document can be produced and the names of the witnesses produced.

It is interesting that ancient Hebrew is very compact when written down, because there are no vowels, only consonants, so a minimum of space was required – two tablets of stone written on two sides were plenty to fit in the Ten Commandments.

Do They Apply Today?

As we have seen, the Ten Commandments were an essential part of the Law of Moses, which was the national law of the Jewish people. But to Christians, rather than Jews, does the Law of Moses apply today?

This question was asked early in the history of the church. The Apostle Paul had baptised many Gentiles (non-Jews), and some of the Jewish believers insisted these Gentile Christians must be made to keep the Law of Moses. So, a special meeting of the believers in Jerusalem was held to decide this question. The main finding was that Gentiles did NOT need to obey the whole Law of Moses.

For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well (Acts 15:28-29).



So can we forget about the Ten Commandments? The answer is no; they are still important commands for a Christian. Nine of them can be found directly in the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles in the New Testament.

What Jesus said was that keeping the Ten Commandments is not enough. If we want to be saved, we must do even better. As disciples, it is not good enough to say we have never committed a serious crime. We have to be positively good towards other people. We have to show love, even to our enemies.

There are lots of valuable lessons we can find as we study the Ten Commandments, and see how the New Testament applies them to Christians.

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