

DEUTERONOMY 5:1-21

Moses convened all Israel, and said to them: Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently. ²The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. ³Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. ⁴The Lord spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire. ⁵(At that time I was standing between the Lord and you to declare to you the words of the Lord; for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain.) And he said:

⁶I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ⁷you shall have no other gods before me.

⁸You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁹You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, ¹⁰but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

¹¹You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

¹²Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. ¹³For six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁴But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. ¹⁵Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

¹⁶Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

¹⁷You shall not murder.

¹⁸Neither shall you commit adultery.

¹⁹Neither shall you steal.

²⁰Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbor.

²¹Neither shall you covet your neighbor's wife.

Neither shall you desire your neighbor's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Matthew 5:17-18, 21-28

'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets;

I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

(v.21) **'You have heard that it was said** to those of ancient times, "*You shall not murder*"; and "*whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.*" (6thC)

But I say to you that

if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool", you will be liable to the hell of fire.

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

'You have heard that it was said, "*You shall not commit adultery.*" (7thC)

But I say to you that

everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

INTRODUCTION, pp. 1-12

The Significance of the Commandments

There are few biblical texts that have played as large a role in church and public life as the Ten Commandments. From their setting in Scripture to the contemporary debate about their public display, the Commandments have seemed to embody God's will for human life as fully as any particular body of teaching or Scripture. Martin Luther famously said: "This much is certain: those who know the Ten Commandments perfectly know the entire Scriptures and in all affairs and circumstances are able to counsel, help, comfort, judge, and make decisions in both spiritual and temporal matters" (Large Catechism, in Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 382). The Commandments—also known as the Decalogue ("the Ten Words"; see discussion of the Prologue, below)—probably rank with the Twenty-third Psalm and the Lord's Prayer as the best-known and most memorized texts from the Bible.

From early in the church's history, the Commandments have had a place in the confessions of the church and its catechetical processes. The catechetical tradition seems to have begun with Augustine but continued and grew through the centuries. The Commandments have been taught in many if not most of the catechisms of the Catholic Church as well as in the Lutheran and Reformed catechisms and those of other denominations. Focus on the Commandments, however, has not been confined to strictly catechetical genres. Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin, for examples, all recognized the significance of the Decalogue and took it up in various contexts such as the *Summa theologiae* (Thomas), *Treatise on Good Works* (Luther), and the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Calvin) as well as in commentaries and sermons.

The Commandments have had their play as well in larger contexts. From the church fathers onward, they have been associated with or seen as a kind of natural law. Among the Reformers, both Calvin and Luther perceived the Decalogue as having "summarized and sharpened natural law for special purposes" (Dowey, "Law in Luther and Calvin," 149). Central to those purposes are both the accusation of the conscience—the theological use of the law—and the provision of a civil order by restraining transgressions—the civil use of the law. For both Luther and Calvin, the Decalogue especially shows the law moving beyond these functions and serving as a kind of universal, eternal law to provide instruction for the life of faith, though for Luther it was important that such instruction be understood as doctrine and not law (Miller, "Commandments in Reformed Perspective").

The equation of the Commandments with some kind of natural law or moral law available to humankind, even if perceived as part of the divine law, has led to a focus on them beyond their function within the community of faith, whether Jewish or Christian. They thus have been seen as instructive in ways that have influenced the civil and political order. So Alfred the Great prefaced his code of Saxon law with the Ten Commandments, and Thomas Hobbes found in the Decalogue grounding for his understanding of sovereignty. It is widely recognized that the Commandments have had "a significant impact on the development of the secular legal codes of the Western World" (Carter, *Culture of Disbelief*, 208). The specific impact of the Decalogue on American constitutionalism is a subject of debate (Green, "Fount of Everything Just and Right?"), but it is clear that it has had and continues to have a formative and normative role in much discussion of judicial and political matters in the United States.

In contemporary American life, the Commandments have become a kind of cultural code, as evidenced by the wide interest in their public display in public settings. As such, they have become a symbol and an icon as much as a text for learning, interpretation, and moral and religious guidance. The Commandments have long been on display, but that has characteristically been on the *The Significance of the Commandments* walls and windows of churches, as was required, for example, by the Anglican Canons of

1604. The movement of the Commandments into the more public sphere and into judicial and political contexts comes at a time when there appears to be less focus and emphasis on them in church life, as reflected in the decline of catechetical instruction on the one hand and the dominance of preaching by the lectionary on the other. The large place the Commandments have in the tradition, however, joins with the broader public discussion to provide an opportunity for more careful attention to the Commandments and their meaning and significance for our life with God and with each other.

That attention should start with the recognition that, whatever the ebb and flow of interest in the Commandments, the heavy focus on them in the history of Christianity is not misplaced. The way they are communicated in Scripture tells us that these Commandments matter very much and are the basic guidelines for our life. Among the scriptural indicators of their weight and importance are the following:

- Unlike any other body of instruction in the Old Testament, the Ten Commandments are given *twice*, once in the narrative of the events at Sinai (Exod. 20) and again when Moses recalls those events as the people prepare to go into the land (Deut. 5).
- The Commandments are given by the Lord *directly* to the people (“face to face,” Deut. 5:4), and this is the only time such direct speech to the whole people takes place. The rest of the statutes and ordinances are given to Moses to be taught to the people, differentiating them from the Commandments.
- They are the *first* piece of legal material and *separated* from the statutes and ordinances that follow in the rest of Exodus and Deuteronomy as well as in Leviticus and Numbers. Those statutes and ordinances function as interpretative specification of the Commandments (see below).
- The Commandments are written by the *finger of God* on *stone*, to make clear their source and endurance (Exod. 31:18; Deut. 4:13; 5:22; 9:10).
- They are placed in the ark of the covenant, the Lord’s dwelling place in the midst of the people (Deut. 10:5), while the other legislation/instruction is written on a scroll and put beside the ark not in it (Deut. 31:24–26). All these features of the Commandments and their place in the biblical story suggest that here indeed is something of primary importance. Repetition, placement, highlighting, divine authorship— all serve to tell the community of faith that here is the foundational word for your life as God’s people. All you need to know is given to you in these Ten Words. They may be summed up succinctly (as in the Great Commandment) and elaborated in great detail (as in the legal codes; see below), but they are a sufficient guide for one’s life with God and neighbor.

How to Think about the Commandments

Since the Ten Commandments have such a central role in the teaching of Scripture and the church as well as in the public sphere, they merit serious attention. In the pages that follow, several assumptions guide the treatment of the Commandments presented therein:

1. *There is a continuing tension between the universality and the particularity of the Commandments* and their simplicity and complexity. There are clearly ways in which they require modes of conduct or prohibit certain actions that are universally required or prohibited. Some of the Commandments, especially the second table—the Commandments dealing with the neighbor—are present in various ancient Near Eastern legal codes and widely assumed as normative in all societies. The fact that this is largely true of the second table, however, is indicative of the particularity of the Commandments, manifest especially in the first table, dealing with the relationship between Israel and its God. “The Commandments depend from the start on a particular story and communal memory of that story as the ground for obedience” (Miller, “Is There a Place for the Ten Commandments?” 1). One of the oft-neglected but implicit assumptions of the Decalogue is that it is a whole and one cannot take part of it without the whole. Especially one cannot claim authority for the second table apart from the first.

The tension between the simplicity and complexity of the Commandments is just as important. The Commandments’ simplicity—ten short rules—is one of the primary characteristics that have nourished their learning and keeping. They are easily learned and remembered and kept in mind. Indeed, the rubric “Ten Commandments” has come to apply to almost any set of simple rules for subjects from business to golf. Nothing should diminish that aspect of the Commandments. At the same time, what is often missed is that these simple rules affect all sorts of circumstances in human life. An account of that complexity is necessary for proper attention to them in our lives. The presence of much longer and quite particular legal statutes following the Commandments and clearly having to do with matters handled briefly in the Commandments makes that clear. The catechisms that take up the Commandments regularly have the students learn not only the commandment but also what it means.

2. *The Commandments, therefore, need to be interpreted.* The story itself makes that clear as Moses is sent to get the rest of the teaching from the Lord (Exod. 20:18–20; Deut. 5:22–33). The issue is not the obscurity of the Commandments but their breadth and the need to fill out the particulars of what all this way of acting means. What follows the Commandments in Scripture is an extended process of interpreting the Commandments, often in an explicit way as they are related to other statutes and ordinances in the legal texts of the Torah or Pentateuch. Frequently there are obvious connections between the subject matter of particular statutes and a commandment, as for example, in the statutes of Exodus 22:1–15, which deal at some points specifically with stealing but throughout with issues of property and its endangerment (see chap. 7, below). The connections between the Decalogue in Deuteronomy and the statutes of the Deuteronomistic Code in Deuteronomy 12–26 are especially close. As Stephen Kaufman has put it, the statutes and ordinances of the Code are brought together “in a highly structured composition whose major topical units are arranged according to the laws of the Decalogue” (“Structure,” 108–9). The very specific and varied legal cases and statutes of the Code are thus in sequence according to the Commandments of Deuteronomy 5. They are not the same as the statutes in the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20:22–23:33) because they represent different times and circumstances, yet the Commandments, which are essentially the same in both Exodus and Deuteronomy, provide a perduring and essentially unchanging foundation of basic principles.

This understanding of the relation of the statutes and ordinances to the Ten Commandments has been recognized from earliest times. One can see it in the Jewish tradition in Philo of Alexandria, who claimed that the “Decalogue encompasses the whole of the Torah, for all of the [laws] simply elaborate in detail what the Ten Commandments say in compressed form” (Amir, “Decalogue according to Philo,” 126). In the Christian tradition, Aquinas argued that “all the precepts of the Law are so many parts of those of the

decalogue” (*Summa theologiae*, vol. 29). Martin Luther began each chapter of his Deuteronomy commentary by identifying which commandment that chapter develops, and Calvin developed most of his *Harmony of the Pentateuch* largely around the Commandments.

3. The Commandments are thus the starting point of a rich trajectory of meaning and effects, principles and actions, that tell the community of faith how to live its life in relation to God and neighbor. To comprehend and act upon the instruction of the Commandments fully involves a look at the trajectory they create. It begins with the Commandments and continues through Scripture and the church’s teaching and history on down to the present. This is in marked contrast to what is often a misunderstanding of the simplicity of the Commandments, reflected, for example, in a comment in an issue of *Newsweek*: “The Ten Commandments are generally cut and dried, but—let’s face it—other religious rules and customs can be hard to grasp” (Sheahen, “Beliefwatch Thou Shalt”). A more accurate picture of the way the Commandments function is as follows:

Rather than being rigid, fixed, archaic, and obvious, the Commandments open up a moral and theological arc or movement that began long ago and is still going on. They are dynamic, open in meaning and effect, and uncovering many dimensions subtle and obvious of the moral life for the community that lives in covenant with the Lord of Israel who is known to us in Jesus Christ. . . .

The result of perceiving, tracing, and appropriating such a trajectory or arc of moral understanding flowing out of the Commandments is, in effect, a “thick description” of the morality or ethics of the Commandments. (Miller, “Metaphors for the Moral,” 39)

One can compare the relation between the Commandments and the various statutes and ordinances that follow them in the books of the Torah or Pentateuch with the relation of the United States Constitution to the extensive cases or case laws that have developed out of the Constitution in seeking to work out its implications in particular situations. The Commandments serve as a kind of constitution for the covenanted community; they stand in relation to all further direction for life, more specific and contextual, in the Mosaic teaching, roughly as the Constitution stands in relation to the later legal and judicial issues and cases that have come up in the history of this nation. Here story is also important, for many persons know and hold to the Constitution as much because of their knowledge of the story of its creation and preservation as for their knowledge of the details of the Constitution itself.

In this book, the focus is on the way in which the whole of Scripture—New Testament as well as Old—opens up the meaning of the Commandments and informs us how to live and act—and think—in the light of them. Particular attention is given to the legal codes that are presented as a continuation of the teaching of the Commandments, yet prophets, sages, and psalmists come into view as well. Not least of all, one must listen to the stories of Scripture as they tell about the meaning of the Commandments in the life of the people of God. Specific cases and illustrative stories help us understand what the Commandments mean, how they work out in specific concrete situations, what actions are involved or excluded, what effects come from obedience or disobedience.

4. All the Commandments, either explicitly or implicitly, have both a positive and a negative meaning. They tell us what we are not to do and what we are to do. Though the Commandments are largely prohibitive in form, it is important that two of the Commandments—Sabbath observance and honoring parents—are in positive form. In the case of the Sabbath Commandment, we have it in both positive form—“Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy”—and negative—“You shall not do any work.” Calvin has argued that this assumption is one of the critical interpretive principles in understanding the Commandments. In his view “a sober interpretation goes beyond the words,” and the best rule is “attention . . . is directed to the reason of the commandment” (*Institutes* 2.8.8). This means an interpretive process is necessary for finding out the fullness of the Commandment.

Thus in each commandment we must investigate what it is concerned with; then we must seek out its purpose, until we find what the Lawgiver testifies there to be pleasing or displeasing to himself.

Finally, from this same thing we must derive an argument on the other side, in this manner: if this

pleases God, the opposite displeases him; if this displeases, the opposite pleases him; if he commands this, he forbids the opposite; if he forbids this, he enjoins the opposite. (*Institutes* 2.8.8).

Calvin then goes on to be more explicit and illustrative:

For by the virtue contrary to the vice, men [e.g., Aquinas] usually mean abstinence from that vice. We say that the virtue goes beyond this to contrary duties and deeds. Therefore in this commandment, “You shall not kill,” men’s common sense will see only that we must abstain from wronging anyone or desiring to do so. Besides this, it contains, I say, the requirement that we give our neighbor’s life all the help we can. To prove that I am not speaking unjustly: God forbids us to hurt or harm a brother unjustly because he wills that the brother’s life be dear and precious to us. So at the same time he requires those duties of love which can apply to its preservation. And thus we see how the purpose of the commandment always discloses to us whatever it there enjoins or forbids us to do.

While Luther does not seem to articulate this point so much as an interpretive principle, he does operate in much the same manner in his comment on the Commandments. Thus the commandment against false witness means not only “No one shall use the tongue to harm a neighbor.” It also means: “Rather we should use our tongue to speak only the best about all people, to cover the sins and infirmities of our neighbors, to justify their actions, and to cloak and veil them with our own honor” (Large Catechism, in Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 424). One may see Calvin’s point about uncovering both what each commandment enjoins and what it prohibits illustrated well in the Westminster Larger Catechism, where there are three questions about each commandment: What is the commandment? What are the duties required in the commandment? and What are the sins forbidden in the commandment?

5. *There are different ways of numbering the Commandments, followed by different traditions.* Each of these ways has some justification on the basis of the text of the Commandments, and each numeration presents a particular angle on the Commandments as a whole, what is emphasized, and how they are related to each other. The different numerations, their rationales and their implications, are discussed in the chapters that follow, especially in the first and last, and along the way some attention is given to the ordering and sequence of the Commandments, variations in the order, and what that may tell us. In this book, the numbering associated with the Reformed tradition is followed. The prohibition of other gods and the prohibition of making images are the First and Second Commandments, and the two sentences about coveting at the end are read as a single commandment, the Tenth Commandment. The fact that the chapter numbers of the book do not agree with this numbering—the First and Second Commandments and the Prologue are treated in a single chapter—is an implicit indication that other ways of associating the Commandments are acknowledged and given credence.

6. *While in some sense each commandment takes up a particular topic, there is also much overlap and interplay between the commandments.* The variations in numbering reflect that overlap, since they have to do in part with whether a particular sentence is a separate commandment or an aspect of another commandment. Whatever numbering is followed, one must still take account of the resonances and connections between or among the individual commandments.

The Place of the Commandments in the Christian Life

Reflection on the Commandments inevitably raises the question of the role they play in the life of individual Christians and the church. In some ways that is the subject of the whole book that follows, but a particular facet of that is the matter of what place the Ten Commandments as a whole have in our life. What do we do with them? Where do they belong? Several answers may be given to those questions.

The Commandments cannot play a role in the lives of Christians unless they are learned and taken to heart. That means then that the long-standing association of the Commandments with the teaching and

catechetical traditions of the church needs to be maintained. They can play no role if they are not first memorized and learned, so that they are held in the mind and memory of individuals from an early age onward. Here is where the brevity and simplicity of the Commandments—at least most of them—is a clue to what we are to do with them. Take them to heart and learn them so that they are implanted in the mind and available for guidance. This may happen through learning one of the catechisms, but that is not the only avenue. Catechisms are less in vogue, so the church needs to find places for learning the Commandments in the educational events that it carries on, whether in church school classes or in confirmation classes. Also the family, which was the original context in which the Commandments were learned and appropriated, is still a locus for learning the Commandments. Memorization of biblical texts is a disappearing practice, but there are some texts, such as the Lord's Prayer and the Twenty-third Psalm, that are still assumed to be held in the minds of most Christians. If one attends to the central place of the Commandments in Scripture and the place they have had in the church's teaching, then they also belong to the enterprise of memorizing and holding texts in one's mind and heart.

Teaching the Commandments, however, involves more than simply memorizing them, which is the point of the chapters that follow. They need to be interpreted and discussed so that the community learns what they mean and what is expected of us if we are to live by these foundational principles. If the Commandments are as important as seems to be suggested by the tradition and the culture, they should have a place in the teaching and preaching of the church. Recovery of the Commandments as a subject of preaching is especially important because the gradual rise of the lectionary as a guide to the subject matter of contemporary preaching has meant a significant decrease of sermons on series of biblical texts, such as the Commandments or the Lord's Prayer or the Apostles' Creed. Such series have not disappeared, however, and they need to be reclaimed, especially for the Commandments, precisely because the congregation assumes their normative place but often does not know what all that means. The simplicity of the Commandments, which makes them available for learning and comprehending in their essence, needs to be supplemented by opening up their complexity and fullness, illustrating and developing ways they touch base with contemporary issues.

What place do the Commandments have in the liturgy? Historically, they have been a part of the service in Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed worship from the beginning, but that is rarely the case now. In Protestant and Catholic liturgy, the Commandments have largely disappeared. As Reinhard Hütter observes, "It is a matter of fact that in mainline liturgies across the board ecumenically, the Ten Commandments have ceased to be a regular component of Christian worship on the Lord's day" ("The Ten Commandments as a Mirror of Sin(s)," 55). If, however, the Commandments belong with the Lord's Prayer and the Creed as the central texts of the church's tradition, something suggested by the attention they receive in the catechetical and confessional history of the church, then it is desirable that they be before the congregation in order that the people may learn and remember them, being reminded each Sunday of God's way for God's people. The Commandments also have a function in the movement of the liturgy, though that can vary depending upon their location in the sequence and order of the service. In the Lutheran context, the Commandments were usually read as preparation for the confession of sin, thus serving one of the functions of the law: to convict us of our sins so as to open our hearts to confession and God's forgiveness. Similarly, up to the modern era the Anglican Book of Common Prayer has called for the repetition of the Commandments by the priest while the people would respond to each commandment with "Lord, have mercy."

While the Reformed tradition did not worry too much at first about where the Commandments belonged in the liturgy, because they were understood to function primarily catechetically, Calvin and other Reformed leaders came to have the Commandments sung or read after the confession of sin and the words of absolution, as a guide to living according to God's instruction.

While consistent with the general view of the law in the respective traditions, these different placings of the Commandments were not and should not be regarded as fixed. Reformed worshippers have also read or

said the Commandments before the confession of sin as a way of the people acknowledging their failure to live by God's commands. Nor should one assume only one place for the Commandments. It certainly would be appropriate in the Reformed tradition, for example, to have a recitation of the Commandments following the preaching of the Word, reminding the congregation of how one is to live after hearing and receiving the gospel. The issue finally is not so much the necessity to fix a single place for reading or saying the Commandments as it is the matter of whether they shall have any place in the regular worship of the people of God.

Finally, what then about the physical location of the Commandments? That may not be a large question, but it is worth consideration both because the physical location of the Commandments has been a matter of serious concern from their initial promulgation in Scripture, when Moses was instructed to place the tablets with the Commandments in the ark of the covenant and because the physical placement of the Commandments has come to be a large political and judicial issue in American life. The decline of the use of the Commandments in catechesis and worship suggests that we may need to think afresh about how to post the Commandments so that they do not disappear from our common life. We may need to write them on the walls and build stone monuments with the Commandments inscribed on them so that they are regularly seen and read and not forgotten. The best place for doing that, however, is where Christians receive and learn them in the context of the life of faith, in the sacred spaces of church and synagogue, where parents and children learn together how to serve the Lord our God and how the Commandments can help us with critical issues of faith and morals. Perhaps we should go back to the early Anglican tradition in this country, following the Canons of 1604, according to which the Ten Commandments were to be "set up on the East end of every Church and Chapel, where the people may best see and read the same." No pattern of church architecture can be exclusive any more, but there may be new ways of "posting" the Commandments visibly in the sanctuaries or classrooms of the church" (Miller, "Is There a Place for the Ten Commandments?").