

# Laws to Live By

*From Sinai to Canaan*

## Study 1

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### Warmup



Think of a game, and identify one rule that is essential to that game. Can you think of a game without any rules? How might things “progress” in such a game? Can you think of any employment arrangement without rules? Can you think of any relationship without rules? Can you think of anything in life without rules?

### Introduction

When the Israelites were released from their long slavery in Egypt, they made their way toward the Promised Land. At the Red Sea, God removed the military powers of Egypt that threatened them from behind. Then he led them to Mt Sinai to enter into a formal covenant\* with them. That’s where we pick them up in Exodus 20 – about 3 months into their journey.

\*A covenant is where our ‘warmup’ discussion becomes relevant. A covenant is a set of rules that give definition, integrity, clarity, and freedom to a relationship. It makes clear what’s expected of the persons who are party to the relationship, and it binds them to it.

### *Read Exodus 20:1-21*

<sup>1</sup> And God spoke all these words: <sup>2</sup> “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

<sup>3</sup> “You shall have no other gods before me.

<sup>4</sup> “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, <sup>6</sup> but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

<sup>7</sup> “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

<sup>8</sup> “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labour and do all your work, <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

<sup>12</sup> “Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

<sup>13</sup> “You shall not murder.

<sup>14</sup> “You shall not commit adultery.

<sup>15</sup> “You shall not steal.

<sup>16</sup> “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

<sup>17</sup> “You shall not covet your neighbour’s house. You shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.”

<sup>18</sup> When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance <sup>19</sup> and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.” <sup>20</sup> Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.”

<sup>21</sup> The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

## First Impressions

Before you read the list below, make a list of your own first impressions of Exodus 20.

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(1) The first commandment formally begins at verse 3, and verses 1 & 2 form the preface.

(2) The commandments, apart from 4 & 5, are framed negatively.

(3) The commandments were delivered with a thunder and lightning that frightened the Israelites. Further, they were delivered ‘first hand’ from the mouth of God, and written by his finger on the stone tablets. (Deuteronomy 5 makes this clear.)

(4) Some of the commandments are very expected, like ‘Do not murder’. But some are unexpected, like ‘Do not covet’.

(5) There are 4 commandments that have respect to God, and six that have concern for our human relationships.

(6) Some commandments have many details (eg 4 & 10), while some are very brief.

(7) The commandments are noticeably “other-centred”.

(8) The content of the commandments is fair and reasonable, not impossible and unrealistic; eg Do not daydream.

## Question 1

The preface to the Ten Commandments, that is verses 1 & 2, is important, for it sets up the right order of law and grace. What do you think is the significance of law following grace, and not vice versa? Were the commandments ever given so that people might have a way to merit the approval of God?

## Question 2

It is fair and reverent to assume that there is a logical sequence to the commandments. Would you have chosen the first commandment as the first of the ten? In a 'shopping-centre survey', what would you expect most people to choose as the number one commandment? Discuss the import of this first commandment being upward in its direction.



## Question 3

Theologians have described the first three commandments in this way: The first prescribes the God we choose. The second prescribes the way we are to think of Him. The third prescribes the way we are talk about Him. Another way of saying this is: The first commands us to love the Lord, the second commands us to think of the Lord in the right way, and third commands us to speak of the Lord with truth and respect. Can you think of a way that we may keep the first but break the second? (Hint: Consider how we are sometimes tempted to think of God in times of suffering.) Can you think of a way that we may keep the first and the second, but break the third?

## Question 4

The fourth commandment is a good example of how we should think of the commandments as gifts and not burdens. For instance, Jesus spent his Sabbaths doing three things: First, participating in corporate worship; second, doing works of mercy; and third enjoying some refreshment and rest. What then does this commandment teach us about the spirit of the commandments? (ie Are they given to enable us or to enslave us?)

## Question 5

The fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth commandments have presuppositions. That is, they are built upon various premises. eg The eighth commandment presupposes a right to own and control private property, and therefore a Christian worldview does not entertain the philosophy of the State owning and controlling all property. Think through the presuppositions and implications surrounding the fifth, sixth, and seventh commandments.

## Question 6

The word 'jealous' in the second commandment sometimes troubles new Christians, but only because the word is frequently used in a negative way. Can you think of some contexts where the word can be used positively? Rather than expressing any insecurity on the part of God, discuss how the word actually communicates God's strong protective love and care in keeping us from being abused and misused.

## Question 7

What are we to make of these commandments being delivered with such forcefulness, and in a negative framework? For example, in the context of thunder and lightning and fire and smoke, and audibly with the voice of God, and then written on stone tablets with the finger of God. How might these observations counsel us in those situations when we are tempted to make up rules for ourselves, or bend the rules to our own advantage? (Reflect on our first parent's mistake in the Garden of Eden.)

## Question 8

What is the significance of the Apostle Paul teaching the fifth commandment to the Gentile Ephesian church? (Ephesians 6:1-4)

(Some have wondered if Jesus abolished the Ten Commandments when he gave his Sermon on the Mount. For instance, Jesus said: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:27,28).

What Jesus is doing is not abolishing the commandments, but clarifying them, and emphasizing to his hearers that the commandments apply to the heart. The phrase, 'But I tell you' does not mean that Jesus is heading in a different direction, but in a deeper direction.)

## Question 9

One cannot read the Ten Commandments without feeling some sense of personal failing, either by way of omission or commission. What should we do when we feel this sense of shortcoming or transgression? In what two ways are we to be thankful that we have a Saviour?

## Question 10

Both Old and New Testaments propose that the commandments are in essence, articles of love – love for God and love for neighbour. Choose one commandment from the first four (with reference to God), and one from the second six (with reference to neighbour), and demonstrate how love is at the heart of the Law.

## Conclusion

The Ten Commandments were delivered to the Israelites twice during their journey. The first was in this Exodus passage, from the mouth of God, in the first year following their release from Egypt and in preparation for their entry to Canaan. The second is recorded in the Book of Deuteronomy, from the mouth of Moses, in their fortieth year, to the children of those who first heard them, and prior to their crossing the Jordan into Canaan. God had not changed his laws, or his character, or his mind; and that is a comforting thought.

