

Ten Words for Covenant People

Exodus 20:1–22

Turn to Deuteronomy 4 please. This is a sermon about the Ten Commandments. I once saw a bookmark that listed the ten commandments. The longer commands were abbreviated, and I think it had five on one side and the other five on the back.

The Ten Commandments get treated like that sometimes, as if these ten rules floated down from God for the general good of humanity. But, people, that's not how they come to us. Most of this sermon is not on the actual commands, but on the setting, and how Israel got them.

1 The Ten Commands and the Voice of Yahweh – Exod. 19:16–19; Deut. 4:11–13; 5:22–27

Yahweh rescued Israel from Egypt with no obligation on Israel at all. He rescued Israel because of promises he had made to their forefathers. After he rescued Israel, we read in Exodus 19 how Yahweh offered covenant to Israel. Yahweh said, "If you will obey me and be faithful to me, you will be my treasured possession, my kingdom of priests and my holy nation." Israel said, "Yes, we will obey you."

Then there were two days of preparation, and on the third day God came to the top of Mt Sinai and revealed his glory and majesty to Israel. What the Israelites actually experienced was thunder and lightning, a thick cloud over the mountain, a very loud trumpet. The people trembled. Yahweh descended on the mountain in fire. The whole mountain trembled violently.

All that occurs to give Israel a real taste of what Yahweh is like. While that continues, God spoke the ten commandments to Israel. The ten commands are as much a part of Yahweh revealing himself to Israel as the thunder and lightning and smoke and fire and loud trumpet blast. The rest of this is God showing himself to his people, and so are the ten commandments.

Deuteronomy tells us what Moses said to Israel at the end of the 40 years in the wilderness, just before Joshua led them into Canaan. We have the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and in Deuteronomy 5. So 40 years later, Moses tells them again what happened at the mountain in Exodus. Moses introduces the Ten Commandments like this (Deut. 4:11–13):

You came near (says Moses) and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire to the very heavens, with black clouds and deep darkness. Then Yahweh spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice. He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Words, which he commanded you to follow, and then wrote them on two stone tablets.

Then Moses tells them what happened after God had finished speaking the Ten Commands (Deuteronomy 5:22–27): *These are the words Yahweh proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly there on the mountain from out of the fire, the cloud and the deep darkness; and he added nothing more. Then he wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me.*

When you heard the voice out of the darkness, while the mountain was ablaze with fire, all the leaders of your tribes and your elders came to me. And you said, “Yahweh our God has shown us his glory and his majesty, and we have heard his voice from the fire. Today we have seen that a person can live even if God speaks with them. But now, why should we die? This great fire will consume us, and we will die if we hear the voice of Yahweh our God any longer. For what mortal has ever heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and survived? Go near and listen to all that Yahweh our God says. Then tell us whatever the Lord our God tells you. We will listen and obey.”

The voice of God giving the ten commands was even more frightening than the rest of what happened on the mountain. Israelites were surprised that after they had listened to this voice, they were still alive. They doubted that they would live if it happened again. They never wanted to hear that voice again. They wanted God to tell Moses, and they would listen to Moses.

Here's the thing: the Ten Commandments are bound up with the thunder and lightning that happened with Yahweh came down, they are bound up with the smoke and the fire that blazed up to the heavens. While all that is going on, a loud Voice overwhelms the rest, and says, “*I am Yahweh your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*” And the commands follow that.

It does not occur to us that seeing Yahweh’s glory and majesty and hearing his Voice would be life-threatening. But those Israelites knew very well that it was life-threatening. And folks, God has not changed at all. That’s why flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Our God is the same God, he just doesn’t use his outside Voice except that once. Marilyn’s summary.

This is different than God handing out a bookmark to each Israelite, isn’t it? Israel received the Ten Commandments as a part of Yahweh revealing himself in a way the Israelites would never forget. There was thunder and lightning and smoke and fire and that indescribable Voice.

2 “I am Yahweh your God”: To Whom does God Give the Ten Words? – Exod. 20:2

Here is the opening line of the Commandments, the first line that God spoke to the Israelites in his loud Voice: *I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.* In both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, that identical line introduces the Ten Commandments, and they should never be separated from that opening.

I am Yahweh your God. Whose God? The Israelites, who had just agreed to covenant with Yahweh. God gave the commandments to people entering close relationship with him. The Ten Commandments belong in a close relationship with the God who saves us. The Ten Commandments are for people who can say, “Yahweh is our God. He rescued us from the authority of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of his Son.”

The Ten Commandments summarize the covenant between God and his people. What does God do for us? “I am Yahweh your God, you rescued you from the authority of darkness.” What do we do for God? “You shall have no other gods before me.” With the opening line, the Ten Commandments summarize Israel’s covenant.

There is no biblical reason to hold the world's people to the Ten Commandments. They cannot say, "You are Yahweh our God, who rescued us," so the commandments are not for them. The prophets sometimes spoke against the pagan nations, but never because they broke the Ten Commandments. God never judged Gentiles because they were idolaters or adulterers. God was hard on Israel for those things, but only Israel.

Paul writes, "*What business is it of ours to judge those outside the church? Are we not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside*" (1 Cor 5:12–13). Let's not waste our breath condemning what we see outside the church. God teaches his ways to his people.

3 Never "the Ten Commands," always "the Ten Words" – Exod. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4

In Hebrew, these are never called "the Ten Commandments," they are always called "the Ten Words." These are the Ten Words. It changes the emphasis a little bit to call them the Ten Words. The emphasis not so much, "these are the rules we should obey." It becomes, "Yahweh has spoken to us." Israelites heard these ten from God, and they called them the Ten Words. For the rest of this message, I will call them the Ten Words.

4 Which Ten Exactly? The Numbering Problem

We know there are ten words, because Exodus and Deuteronomy say there are ten, but which ten? The beginning and the end are not clear. In Exodus 20:3–6, we actually have three commands: "You shall have no other gods before me," "You shall not make for yourself an image," and "You shall not bow down to them or worship them." Strictly speaking, that should be three commands: no other gods; no images; no bowing down or worship. But in the ancient world, these three were inseparable. Other gods meant images and bowing to them.

The last command, the coveting command, actually has two commands: "You shall not covet your neighbour's house," and "You shall not covet your neighbour's wife or anything else of your neighbour's." Is that one coveting command or two? Strictly speaking, two. If we count all of these separately, we have twelve commands, and we know that's wrong. It must add up to ten.

The easiest way to solve this would be to make all the idolatry commands just one command, and both coveting commands just one command, but then it only totals nine. The Jews wrestled with this, and ended up making the opening line the first "word." The first "word" is "*I am Yahweh your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*" That is the first of the Ten Words.

This is a good solution because dividing up the idolatry command into two or three is awkward. It's just different sides of one command: no other gods. Dividing the two coveting commands is awkward as well. It should just be one, "do not covet."

The other reason to make the opening line the first "word" is that then the ten are not just ten *commandments*, they are a *covenant*. Deuteronomy 4:3 says, "*He declared to you his **covenant**, the Ten Words.*" God's part is that he rescues us, that's the first "word" of the ten; and the other nine lay out our part, how the ones Yahweh rescued will serve him. The ten are a covenant.

Let's summarize what we've seen so far. The Ten Words are joined to the thunder and lightning and smoke and fire that happened on Mount Sinai when God came down. The Ten Words are all part of Yahweh showing them his glory and majesty. God's indescribable and terrifying Voice is itself a part of Yahweh revealing himself.

This our God, too. In Revelation 1 John has a vision of Christ, and in the vision Christ's voice is like the sound of rushing waters. I have stood near the bottom of a large waterfall, and it is so loud that you cannot make yourself heard even to the person right beside you. Our Lord in his glory also has this kind of outside Voice.

The other thing to remember is that the ten words are part of a warm personal relationship with Yahweh. "You will be my one treasure," God has already said to them. That's where the Ten Words belong. They are his words to his treasure.

Now I'll take a brief look at each of the Ten Words.

First Word: *I am Yahweh your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*

This tells us who receives all Ten Words. It also tells us that the Ten Words begin with what Yahweh has done for us.

Second Word: *You shall have no other gods in my Presence.*

This flows from the first Word. *I am Yahweh your God. Therefore you shall have no other gods in my Presence.* God is going to dwell in Israel, so no gods in his presence means no other gods in Israel.

You shall have no other gods in my Presence. You shall not make for yourself any image in any shape. You shall not bow down or worship them.

Humans are created, male and female, in the image and likeness of God. The earth already has billions of images of God, living men and living women. Look in the mirror. For humans to make some other image, call that "God," and worship it, is bizarre. And it is very offensive to our God.

Idolatry means worshipping a different god. We can be devoted to other things, but the Bible does not call them idols unless we actually bow down and worship. There is one exception. Greed, says Paul, is the one other thing that is idolatrous. Always wanting more. Never enough. You cannot serve God and Mammon, says Jesus.

One other thing worth mentioning: the word "you," right through this, is singular. God speaks to each Israelite individually. *I am Yahweh **your** God* (put your name in there), *who brought **you** up out of Egypt* (put your name in there). ***You** shall have no other gods in my presence* (put your name in there). And so on. The whole nation is before Yahweh at the bottom of the mountain, but God's words are to each Israelite individually.

Third Word: *You shall not misuse the name of Yahweh your God.*

We misuse the name a few different ways. We can use God's name to express surprise or pain. Let's not do that. I often hear people say, "O my God!" Don't say "O my God" unless you are talking to God or about him.

Another way to misuse his name is to say that we are God's people, and then act in a way that brings shame to God. God gets mocked for his people's actions. Let's always revere the name.

Fourth Word: *Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.*

The emphasis in this command is not that we need to rest. The centre of the call is to keep the Sabbath holy by not working. It is not about feeling tired, it is about reverence for God. God rested on the seventh day, so Israelites rested on the seventh day, out of reverence for God.

Biblically, Israel's Sabbath has little to do with our Sunday. This fourth word is the only one of the ten that the New Testament never mentions. It was for Israel. Romans 14:5 says *One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind.* Colossians 2:16 says – *Don't let anyone judge you... with regard to a Sabbath day.*

Somewhere along the line, Christians moved the Jewish Sabbath laws to the Lord's Day, the first day of the week. In New Testament times, Christians worshipped on the first day because it was the day that the Lord Jesus rose from the dead. But in New Testament times it was an ordinary working day for everyone, including believers.

I'm glad that our society still slows down on Sunday. I think it is a very good thing. But the Sabbath is not for Christians, and the Bible does not move the Sabbath laws to Sunday. It is difference between Israel's covenant and our new covenant.

Fifth Word: *Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land Yahweh your God is giving you.*

When we are young, honouring father and mother means obey them. Do what they say. When our parents are old, it means care for them, make sure they have what they need. It always means honour and respect. But not just obedience and not just care. Always honour and respect.

The other thing to note is that for children, the parents are the head of the home, not the father. All these commands to children put father and mother together. Usually "father" is mentioned first, though in Leviticus 19 Moses says, *"Each of you must respect your mother and father."* For the children, the parents together are the head of the home.

Sixth Word: *You shall not murder.*

That's pretty straight forward.

Seventh Word: *You shall not commit adultery.*

The most serious sexual sin is to be married and then be sexually unfaithful to your wife or husband. God's own people, from Moses to today, have failed in this so often. No adultery.

In the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5, six times Jesus says, "You have heard it said, but I say to you." Two of those six are about marriage faithfulness. Two out of six. Jesus intended that the Sermon on the Mount would guide our marriages. This also tells us that marriage difficulties are an old, old story. Nothing new there. Yahweh says, "be faithful to your spouse."

Eighth Word: *You shall not steal.*

From the start, God acknowledged personal property. God likes it when people share with each other. Some think it would be best if there was no personal property at all. That is not God's way. People own things, and the rest of God's people will always respect that. Let's never take what's not ours. Even in Acts 2, where it says they had all things in common, what they actually did was share all they had, sometimes giving it away. Don't steal.

Ninth Word: *You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.*

False testimony is narrower than "do not lie," although in other places the Bible say "do not lie." Never accuse someone of doing wrong that they did not do, especially in a court setting. Never lie about what someone has done.

Tenth Word: *You shall not covet your neighbor'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.*

Yahweh's last covenant word takes the covenant to our inner life, our thoughts and desires. I had a student once who had been taught that the Old Testament was about our external actions and words, and only in New Testament does God care about our minds and hearts. That is so not true, and a good example is here: You shall not covet.

We are attracted to good things, and we desire them. We are also attracted to bad things, and we desire them, too. Being attracted to something wrong, feeling a pull toward it, is not sin. It is temptation. Good people are sometimes pulled to dark and evil things, sometimes very strongly. We cannot control what attracts us. That's temptation. Doing the dark thing is sin, so don't do it. Wanting to do it is not sin.

Coveting means that in our mind and heart, we go past just desire and attraction. Coveting means in our mind we possess it, in our mind we take to ourselves the thing we long for, and we linger there. That's coveting, and Yahweh says you and I shall not covet. Let's turn our minds away from what is not ours. Coveting tells God he's not providing for us. We shall not covet.

Summary – Three Things to Remember

First, The Ten Words came to Israel as a part of the thunder and lightning meeting with God. There was smoke and fire and the mountain trembled. Then, on top of all that, they heard Yahweh's loud voice speak these words.

Second, grab that opening line: *I am Yahweh your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.* In new covenant terms, *I am Yahweh your God, who rescued you from the authority of darkness and brought you into the kingdom of my Son.*

This opening line tells us who the Ten Words are for, and it tells us that these words are our covenant response to God. The Words are at the core of close relationship with Yahweh.

Third, remember that the “you” is singular, right through this. God says this to each individual. *I am Yahweh **you** God.* Put your name in there. Amen.

PRAYER: I tried to pray after writing out this message, and I could not speak to that Voice. Let's respond with Yahweh's own words.

*The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.
The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever.
The decrees of the Lord are firm, and all of them are righteous.
They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb.
By them your servant is warned; in keeping them is great reward (Ps 19).
May we love what you command, and desire what you promise. Amen.*

BENEDICTION: May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep: may that God of peace equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what pleases him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.