

TEN COMMANDMENTS
Teaching-Learning Resources
BAPTIST LEADER

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Background Scripture: Deuteronomy 5
Key Passage: Deuteronomy 5:6–8, 11–21

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This is the first lesson in Unit II, “Laws to Live By,” in this thirteen-week series on the Book of Deuteronomy. The five lessons in this unit cover the lengthy second discourse of Moses in 4:24–26:19. The outline of Deuteronomy in the “Teaching-Learning Resources” for June 7 summarizes the content of this second speech, which contains the Ten Commandments, the greatest commandment, and fifty other pieces of legislation.

This study of the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 5:6–21) also follows the commandments in Exodus 20:1–17 and the twelve curses articulated at Mount Ebal and Gerizim (Deuteronomy 27:15–26). For those with energy—and a sense of creativity—a comparison of the Ten Commandments with the laws in what is known as the “Book of the Covenant” (Exodus 20:22–23:33), the “Holiness Code” (Leviticus 17:1–26:46) and the legal corpus in Exodus 34 will be very informative.

The revelation of the Ten Commandments at Sinai was a new covenant. However, the old covenant with Abraham was not interrupted or ended, for the Sinai covenant was intended to implement the older covenant.

Interpreting the Biblical Lesson

The First Commandment. Deuteronomy 5:6–7 (Exodus 20:2–3): “I am Yahweh your. . . . You shall have no other gods before me.”

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The prohibition against other gods is rooted in the name of Yahweh, which, unfortunately, fell into disuse. Born out of an effort to hallow the name of God, the substitution of the common noun LORD more than 6,800 times where the holy name of God occurs in the Old Testament ended with the meaning and pronunciation of the name becoming lost. There is now general agreement that the four “holy letters” *YHWH* were pronounced “Yahweh.”

This writer concurs with the view of W. F. Albright and his students that the name “Yahweh” is related to the Hebrew verb “to be, to become,” and must have been part of a longer title. As a verb, “Yahweh” meant “He caused to be/become”; the title “Yahweh God of Hosts” would have meant “God caused the hosts to be,” i.e., “God created the (heavenly) hosts.” As the name “Nathan” was the verb from the longer name “Jonathan,” meaning “Yahweh gave,” the verb “Yahweh” was from a longer name. But even in its shorter form, it carried with it the meaning of our English term “Creator.”

Given this meaning, the first part of the Commandment means “I, the Creator, am your God.” The God of Israel thus was identified as standing outside of creation, and as the Creator, God stood uniquely above all that had been created. This established Yahweh’s holiness, for God was wholly other than anything in creation. Since God was the Creator, nothing could be beside, let alone, before God. Were Israel to worship anything in creation along with Yahweh or equal to the Creator, such worship would reduce the Creator to a created status. Since human beings stood at the apex of the created order and Israel stood at the apex of the human family (Genesis 1:26, 28; Psalm 8:5), nothing in heaven or earth warranted Israel’s worship but Yahweh—and Yahweh only.

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Moreover, the covenant relationship, by definition, required complete loyalty. The prohibition against the worship of other gods recalls the words of the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (681–669 B.C.), who proclaimed himself “the king of the world” and prohibited his subjects from having any other earthly loyalty: “Keep this treaty; do not sin against this treaty. . . . Do not set over yourselves another king, another lord.”¹ Just as the treaty of Esarhaddon continued to stipulate that violation of the covenant through expressions of loyalty to other kings would result in violent curses, so the Book of the Covenant stipulated that the Israelite who sacrificed to any god other than Yahweh was to be put to death (Exodus 22:20). This obviously was not carried out, but the intent of the law indicates how seriously the First Commandment was taken during part of Israel’s history. (Note also Deuteronomy 13:6–10.)

The Second Commandment. Deuteronomy 5:8–10 (Exodus 20:4–6): You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything. . . .”

As noted in the lesson for June 28 on “Experiencing God’s Presence,” the prohibition against the use of idols or images in Israel was rooted in the method of Yahweh’s revelation. This is nicely summarized in Deuteronomy 4:12–16

“Then Yahweh spoke to you out of the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. . . . Therefore take good heed to yourselves. Since

1 . James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, Third Edition with Supplement (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969). p. 537.

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you saw no form on the day that Yahweh spoke . . . beware lest you act corruptly by making a graven image. . . .”

But the prohibition against images is also grounded in the nature of Yahweh as revealed by God’s name. Since God is the Creator, nothing in creation can function as an adequate symbolic representation. [page 42] The heavens declare the *glory* of God, as does the whole earth, which is full of God’s *glory*. Since, at best, heaven and earth in totality reflect divine *glory*, nothing made in miniature by human hands could truly represent God.

Furthermore, symbols had a way of displacing in importance the person or thing symbolized. This Commandment precluded the possibility of Yahweh’s subordination to a symbol. This Commandment was expanded to prohibit even the mention of the names of other gods (Exodus 23:13).

The affirmation in Deuteronomy 5:9 that Yahweh is a jealous God is not the reason for the prohibition. Yahweh was hardly jealous of that which did not exist, namely, the gods presumably represented by idols and images. But Yahweh was zealous that Israel be in touch with reality, the reality of the Creator. Idolatry would reflect Israel’s failure to appreciate and appropriate its covenant with the Creator.

The statement about God’s visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation was standard theology during most of Israel’s history (see Joshua 7:24–26; 2 Samuel 3:29–30; 12:10–14; 21:1–6). However, it must now be interpreted in the context of Ezekiel 18:2–3 and Deuteronomy 24:16. Ezekiel negated a faulty interpretation of God’s jealousy or zealousness and the proverb out of Israel’s past: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (Ezekiel 18:2*b*).

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Once and for all Ezekiel reported the word of Yahweh: “As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel” (v.3). Prior to Ezekiel, King Amaziah had implemented the law in Deuteronomy 24:16, “The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, nor shall the children be put to death for the fathers; every man shall be put to death for his own sin” (see 2 Kings 14:5–6).

The Third Commandment. Deuteronomy 5:11 (Exodus 20:7): “You shall not take the name of Yahweh your God in vain. . . .”

This Commandment eventuates in the substitution of the common noun LORD, or Jehovah, for the holy name spelled in Hebrew *YHWH* (Yahweh, “Creator”). Abstinence from using the name at all was the only sure way never to take the name in vain, and from about the first century B.C. the name of God was never used when talking to or about God. But it has always remained permissible to use the abbreviated forms of the name Yahweh in making personal names. When Yahweh was used as the initial part of a name, it was pronounced “Jo” or “Jeho” (as in Jonathan or Jehoshaphat); when it came on the end of a personal name, it was usually pronounced “yah” (or “-iah”) (as in Hallelu-yah or Isaiah).

The Israelites were obligated by the Law to swear by the name of Yahweh, as stated in Deuteronomy 6:13 and 10:20, texts that will be discussed in the next lesson. Here it must suffice to call attention to Genesis 21:23; 24:1–3; 31:49; they contain three accounts of people rightfully swearing oaths by the name of Yahweh. The prohibition was not against swearing or taking oaths but against deceitful or false oaths. According to Leviticus 24:10–16, using the name Yahweh in a curse was tantamount to blasphemy, and the penalty for

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blasphemy was death by stoning. It becomes clear that the name was to be used (reverently) but not abused, even as Jesus prayed “Hallowed be thy name.” It remains doubtful if the “silent treatment” is a proper way for Christians to “hallow” the name; but at the same time, vain, empty, and trite repetitions of God’s name or even “Hallelujah” (literally, “Praise ye, Yahweh”) are not much better.

The Fourth Commandment. Deuteronomy 5:12 (Exodus 20:8): “Observe the sabbath day, to keep it holy. . . .”

There is an interesting difference between the Commandment in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. In Exodus the observance of the sabbath is rooted in God’s rest after the creation of the world; but in Deuteronomy creation is not mentioned. There the sabbath rest is related to Israel’s remembrance “that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and Yahweh your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” It seems likely that Deuteronomy 5:12 was the oldest and more “ecumenical” tradition about the sabbath. All Israel shared in the creation, but since some of the tribes did not participate in the Egyptian sojourn and Exodus, not all of the twelve tribes could identify with the experience of bondage in Egypt. For this reason, perhaps, the tradition of sabbath rest was focused on God’s rest after creation. Christian teaching has favored the account in Exodus 20:8, which relates the sabbath to the rest after creation. (Few students in my seminary classes have ever heard of the explanation in Deuteronomy 5:12.) Christians cannot as readily identify with the sojourn and Exodus stories as they can with the creation account.

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According to Exodus 31:12–17 and 35:2, violation of the sabbath resulted in the death penalty. But in Exodus 23:12 and 34:21 no penalty is cited.

The Fifth Commandment. Deuteronomy 5:16 (Exodus 20:12): “Honor your father and your mother. . . .”

A curse was placed upon the child who dishonored his/her parents; and the rebellious disobedient son was to be stoned to death (Deuteronomy 27:16; 21:20–21; see also Proverbs 19:26). Likewise, striking one’s parents or cursing them also resulted in the death sentence (Exodus 21:15, 17; Leviticus 20:9). Parents were to be “feared,” i.e., held in awe as God was to be held in awe and wonder (Leviticus 19:3).

As wisdom and understanding were to be Israel’s witness to all peoples (Deuteronomy 4:6), knowledge of the law and precepts that make for such wisdom were to be learned from the parents. Proverbs 1:8 and 15:5 and Deuteronomy 4:9–10 illustrate this point. The appeal to this Commandment in Ephesians 6:2 demonstrates the importance of this Commandment for the Christian as well as the ancient Israelite.

The Sixth Commandment. Deuteronomy 5:17 (Exodus 20:13): “You shall not kill.”

It should be obvious from the earlier discussion on “holy war” theology and from the numerous references in this lesson to the death penalty that this Commandment does not deal with war or capital punishment. The laws in Exodus 21:12, 22, with reference to the different penalties imposed on a person who killed another (the death penalty) and on a person who caused a miscarriage (a fine) suggest that this verse was not addressed to the issue of abortion. This Commandment uses in Hebrew a word best translated “murder,”

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which includes the elements of premeditation and hate. The idea is clarified by the curse formula in Deuteronomy 27: 24–25, “Cursed be he who slays his neighbor in secret, . . . Cursed be he who takes a bribe to slay an innocent person.” The material dealing with “refuge” in case of manslaughter is summarized in Deuteronomy 19:3–10. But for the covert assassin, the premeditated murderer, there was no refuge. The text is explicit: “You shall not pity him but shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from Israel” (19:11–13). Honesty demands that we permit the text to speak for itself even if we disagree with what it says.

The Seventh Commandment. Deuteronomy 5:18 (Exodus 20:14): “Neither shall you commit adultery.”

It must suffice to note on this Commandment that “adultery” is well defined in other texts, although it is undefined in the Decalogue. Leviticus 18:6–23 and Deuteronomy 27: 20–23 spell out in detail the type of sexual offenses covered by this commandment. The major concern was immoral sexual relations with kinfolk and members of the covenant community. The penalty for adultery was death (Leviticus 20:10–22), although there were some “affairs” that could be covered by a fine. In Galatians 5:19–21, the commandment has been expanded to include the “works of the flesh,” which are identified as commercial and/or immodest, violent, and abusive sexual activity.

The Eighth Commandment. Deuteronomy 5:19 (Exodus 20:15): “Neither shall you steal.”

The original concern of this Commandment was probably kidnapping, in light of the fact that it is among laws requiring the death penalty. Stealing of property involved restitution

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and fines, but kidnapping was punished by death (Exodus 21:16 and Deuteronomy 24:7). The leniency of the Mosaic law with respect to the theft of property stands out in sharp contrast to the Code of Hammurabi, which called for the death penalty in most instances of theft.²

The Ninth Commandment. Deuteronomy 5:20 (Exodus 20:16): “Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbor.”

The giving of false testimony in court that was dealing with a capital offense carried with it the death penalty: “If a malicious witness arises against any man . . . you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. Your eye shall not pity; it shall be life for life (Deuteronomy 19:16–21). Character assassination was viewed as being as deadly serious as cold-blooded assassination: “You shall not go up and down as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand forth against the life [blood] of your neighbor . . .” (Leviticus 19:16). This Commandment is not concerned simply with lying but with malicious rumor and half-truths intent on destroying another person. The Code of Hammurabi also viewed such lying as a capital offense.³

The Tenth Commandment. Deuteronomy 5:21 (Exodus 20:17): “Neither shall you covet your neighbor’s wife; and you shall not desire your neighbor’s house. . . .”

The prohibition against “craving for” or “lusting after” another’s wife or property finds its literary parallel in the

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 166–167, lines 6–13, 21–24.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 166, line 3.

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“Hymn to the Sun-god” from the library of Ashurbanipal (668–627 B.C.): “A man who covets (literally, “lifts his eyes to”) his neighbor’s wife will die before his appointed day. . . Your weapon will strike him and there will be none to save him.”⁴ Although the death penalty is not so explicitly stated in the Tenth Commandment, it may have been implied. Jesus’ statement in Matthew 5:28–30 combines the language and motifs of both the biblical and Akkadian texts: “Every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart . . . it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.”

Applying the Lesson to Life

Were the Ten Commandments taken literally, with the full implementation of the explicitly or implicitly expressed death penalty, we could solve the overpopulation of the world, and most of us would not be here! But we are not free to isolate or absolutize the one or two Commandments that specify the sins of our adversaries and at the same time ignore the Commandments which are incompatible with our theology or lifestyle. Lest we end up self-righteously executing one another on “biblical authority” for violating any one of the Ten Commandments, we would do better to pray, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.” (See James 2:8–13.)

4. W. G. Lambett, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), p. 130, lines 88–91.