

## THE TOP TEN AND NUMBER ONE

Exodus 19:16–20:21

On certain television stations today there seems to be an obsession with the top 100 of everything, and in particular the top ten, whether it's popular music or films, or even just moments from films.

After the exodus from Egypt, when God led his people out of slavery, he gave them laws designed to govern and preserve their freedom. There were hundreds of them and some of them are tied to their own particular time and culture. For example, I doubt if any of you will find yourself on the wrong side of the law by boiling a young goat in its mother's milk. However, God had his top ten, the ten commandments, and it has long been recognised that although there are culture-specific references in them they have an importance which transcends their original time and culture. We find nearly all of them quoted in the New Testament.

The first thing to get clear is that the commandments are not given to us as a way of salvation. When Paul wrote to the Christians at Galatia he said, 'A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ,' and again, 'By observing the law no one will be justified' (Galatians 2:16). So if we're not saved by keeping the ten commandments what significance do they have for us today?

### **THEY TELL US SOMETHING ABOUT GOD.**

1. The LORD alone is worthy of our worship. That is why he says, 'You shall have no other gods before me.'
2. The LORD's essential being cannot and must not be represented by any material form. That is why he says, 'You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything.'
3. The LORD is worthy of honour, respect and reverence at all times. That is why he says, 'You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God.'
4. The LORD has set apart one day in seven to be observed in his honour. That is why he says, 'Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.'
5. The LORD is a God of love. That is why he says, 'Honour your father and your mother.'
6. The LORD is the giver and sustainer of life. That is why he says, 'You shall not murder.'
7. The LORD is a God of faithfulness. That is why he says, 'You shall not commit adultery.'
8. The LORD is a God of justice. That is why he says, 'You shall not steal.'
9. The LORD is a God of truth. That is why he says, 'You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.'
10. The LORD is able to satisfy the needs of everyone who depends on him. That is why he says, 'You shall not covet.'

The Ten Commandments are important because they were given by God and they reveal what he is like. He is the only God who rightfully deserves that title. He is spirit and must be worshipped in spirit. His majesty and glory are too great to be treated lightly. He deserves to be held in honour and given a special place in our lives. He is a God of love. He is the giver of life. He is faithful and just, true and dependable.

## THEY TELL US SOMETHING ABOUT OURSELVES

If the Ten Commandments lift us up to the heights to see the beauty of God's holiness they also plunge us down into the depths to see the extent of our sinfulness. If they speak to us of the glory of God they also remind us in no uncertain terms that 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23).

The predominant words in the top ten commandments are 'You shall not...' Since the fall human beings are not morally neutral. We have a bias towards sin. How many times do you have to tell a child, 'Don't.' Paul says that God gave us the law to show us what sin is. In Romans chapter 7 verse 7 he says, 'I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet."' God's commands shine like a light into our darkness and identify our shortcomings.

1. We have created other gods to worship. We have written the creator out of his creation and replaced him with the god of evolution, the god of science, the god of money, the god of celebrity.
2. We may no longer bow down to images of wood and stone. Our idolatry is more sophisticated than that. But the New Testament reminds us that greed is a form of idolatry. When we put ourselves and our own interests first in our lives we are guilty of breaking the second commandment.
3. We have failed to honour God's name. How many times do you hear the name of God and of Jesus Christ taken in vain in the average day, and people don't even realise what they're saying or doing.
4. The idea of one day in seven devoted to God is alien to us. Even as Christians we struggle with the concept.
5. Family values have been eroded. In our supposedly sophisticated society the family unit has broken down. Kids are out of control because parents are out of control.
6. The media records on a daily basis a catalogue of murders, crimes of passion, so called honour killings. It is, of course, a sin which horrifies us. It is the ultimate in man's inhumanity to man. The reason why life is so special is that we are made in God's image and we belong to him. It is not ours to take life. In case we should feel that this command, at least, doesn't condemn us, let me remind you of Jesus' words in Matthew chapter 5. 'You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment." But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment' (verses 21, 22).
7. Adultery is specifically unfaithfulness to your marriage partner. Again, Jesus took the issue a stage further in Matthew chapter 5. 'You have heard that it was said, "Do not commit adultery." But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart' (verses 27, 28).
8. 'You shall not steal.' There are all sorts of ways in which this command can be broken: unfair wages, crippling interest on debts, bribery, as well as petty pilfering.
9. The ninth command is not simply about telling the truth in general, but about telling the truth in a court of law. 'You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.' This is the place where telling the truth counts most because telling lies can cost most. It is a command that protects the justice system. This command forbids lying at the highest level and by implication forbids lying at any level.

10. The tenth command, 'You shall not covet,' is radically different from the eighth command, 'You shall not steal.' It shows us that the ten commandments are more than a code of laws to govern human society. After all, who could police covetousness? What we have here are the laws of a higher court than any on earth, the laws of a judge more just and powerful than any human magistrate. These are the laws of God and they govern not just our behaviour but our thoughts and motives. God searches the heart. It is a radical command that goes right to the roots of human sinfulness. It reminds us that God is not just looking at outward appearances but sees the inward reality.

The ten commandments tell us something about ourselves. They remind us that we are sinners, that there is sin in our hearts, in our homes, in our cities, in our society, in our world.

### **THEY TELL US SOMETHING ABOUT OUR SAVIOUR**

They tell us something about Jesus. Jesus knew the commands, He was able to summarise the commands. He kept the commands. His whole life from conception to crucifixion was a pattern of righteousness. He said, 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them' (Matthew 5:17).

His whole life was an act of true worship, no idolatry, no blasphemy, no infidelity. He honoured father and mother. He never lost his temper. He never gave in to lust. He was completely honest, completely truthful, completely content.

The ten commandments remind us of the life that was given for us on the cross. 2 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 21: 'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.'

### **THEY TELL US SOMETHING ABOUT OUR PRIORITIES**

There's a pattern in the ten commandments. The first four are specifically about our relationship with God, about loving God and giving him the honour due to his name. The next six are about our relationship with our fellow human beings, about loving our neighbours and doing the right thing by them. Interspersed with these commands which relate to people there are commands relating to possessions. We have to think about both people and possessions, but the first priority is people.

Ultimately, God is telling us that he is most important. After that people are most important. And after that, we can think about things. In our consumer society, so often we get it the wrong way round. Things become all important – money, houses, investments, property, possessions; and people become secondary. As for God – he is scarcely given a thought. And the result of this back-to-front thinking? More happiness? More compassion? More harmony? No. We need to get back to God's plan for our lives, seen so clearly in his commandments.

So far we've followed the traditional Christian approach to the commandments, starting from number one and finishing with number 10. But in these closing moments let's do it the contemporary way, the way we're more used to these days.

Counting down from ten to seven. No coveting, no lying, no stealing, no adultery. Our attitude to our possessions is important, and in particular, our attitude to the things which don't belong to us. Don't covet. Don't steal. Straight away the focus is not so much on me but on others. People matter more than things. Don't bear false witness against your neighbour. Don't commit adultery. Do the right thing by anyone and everyone, but in particular to the one who is closest to your heart.

Six and five: the heart of the commandments, God's concern for life and for love, the value of life and the importance of love.

Command number four, a command about the way we use our time and the priorities which that reflects.

And so to the top three. Third, respect for the name of God. Second, integrity in the worship of God.

And finally, number one. 'You shall have no other gods before me.' God is number one and we must make him number one in our lives.

Just one final thought. The Bible makes it clear that the ten commandments summarise the righteousness of Christ, the life that was given for us on the cross. They also summarise the life of the Spirit, the life that is given to us by the risen Christ.

In Ephesians chapter 3 we read a fantastic prayer which underlines this truth. 'I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge —that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God' (verses 16–19).

The Holy Spirit is given to those who believe in Christ and his ministry is to turn those commands into promises, to turn the command, 'You shall have no other gods before me' into the promise, '*you shall* have no other gods before me'. The law of the Spirit of life will set you free from the law of sin and death. The top ten will get you excited and God *will* be your number one.