

# Contents

Acknowledgments	9
Introduction: <i>Has Any People Heard the Voice of God . . . and Survived?</i>	11
1. The First Commandment: <i>No Other God, No Other Voice</i>	29
2. The Second Commandment: <i>The God Who Is Heard and Not Seen</i>	45
3. The Third Commandment: <i>Honoring the God We Know by Name</i>	63
4. The Fourth Commandment: <i>Resting Secure in the God Who Saves Us</i>	77
5. The Fifth Commandment: <i>Honoring Our Parents, Cherishing a Patrimony</i>	95
6. The Sixth Commandment: <i>The Sanctity of Life and the Violence of Sin</i>	111
7. The Seventh Commandment: <i>Why Adultery is about Much More Than Sex</i>	129
8. The Eighth Commandment: <i>Dealing with the Inner Embezzler</i>	147
9. The Ninth Commandment: <i>The Truth, The Whole Truth, and Nothing But the Truth</i>	163
10. The Tenth Commandment: <i>Why Covetousness Kills Contentment</i>	181
Notes	197



# 1

## **No Other God, No Other Voice**

Why should we turn to the Old Testament? Why should we focus on the Ten Commandments? Romans 15:4 answers the question: “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” These things written in former days were written for the instruction of the church, that through the Scriptures we might have hope.

To live in this day is to live in an antinomian age, an age that is “against all law.” Western society is addicted to minimal law and maximum flexibility. So, when we look at this text and visualize this people standing before this mountain, and when we think about what took place here in the life of Israel as they heard the Lord God deliver His own commands and heard Moses teach them concerning these commands—all this seems so distant and far off.

## THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND MODERN SOCIETY

This mountain, known as Sinai, also as Horeb, seems almost covered by the clouds of the past, even as the mountain itself was on this day covered in smoke and in fire and thunder. The God whom most persons acknowledge insofar as they acknowledge *any* God is not in the main a divine legislator. He is not a lawgiver, not someone they fear lest they break His command. The God who spoke is now dismissed by the millions, by the “enlightened” ones, by the intellectual elite, as a sky god of ancient and now overcome superstition. Antinomian to the core, modern society resists the very notion of a binding authority. After all, who can tell *us* what we must and must not do? Who can tell us how we are to live? Who can tell us whom we are to serve?

And then you turn on the television or look at the newspaper or listen to the Supreme Court and hear controversies over the Ten Commandments. Should they or should they not be posted in public places? The U.S. Supreme Court seems itself to be double-minded on the issue, ruling recently that the posting of the Decalogue in Kentucky was illicit, whereas in Texas it was lawful. Same words, different placement, different context, different ruling, no obvious logic. I will defend the constitutionality of posting the Ten Commandments in a public place. But I find it rather perplexing that many of those who seem most ardently committed to the posting of the Ten Commandments can neither recite them nor honestly affirm that they have taught them to their own children.

So, we first must admit that in our day the Ten Commandments seem to serve something of a symbolic role. We know how many there are, we’re just not sure what they are. The amazing thing is that the God who is, has spoken. What people, what nation has heard the voice of the Lord speaking from the fire and yet survived? This nation has. This nation Israel heard the Word of the Lord, received these Ten Words, and survived.

## THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND THE CHRISTIAN

How are we as Christians to understand the Ten Commandments? What is our relationship to this text? What binding authority do these words have upon us? Is there continuity or discontinuity? How are we to understand the operation of the Mosaic covenant in distinction to the covenant of Christ? Is this thus binding upon us, or is it nonbinding? We know what these words meant for Israel, but what do they mean for the church?

Jonathan Edwards acknowledged the difficulty. He said this: "There is perhaps no part of divinity intended with so much intricacy and wherein orthodox divines do so much differ as stating the precise agreement and difference between the two dispositions of Moses and Christ."<sup>1</sup> I want to acknowledge this perplexity, but I want to suggest that the issue is actually less difficult than it may appear. Those who would most ardently stress continuity have to recognize a difference between Israel under the law and the church under the covenant of grace. Those who would most ardently argue for discontinuity have to acknowledge that the law of Christ recapitulates and fulfills and extends the law of Moses, in a different way, in a different context, with a different sense of binding address. Yet in the New Testament, nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated. There is no way fully to resolve this issue.

## THE LAW AND GRACE: BEYOND SACRIFICE

It is very important that we understand the distinction between law and grace. But in understanding this distinction, we do not celebrate a lawless grace any more than looking to the Old Testament we should see a graceless law. There is grace in the law. Israel, in hearing the Word of the Lord and receiving these words, received grace! And if we do not understand that, we slander both the Old Testament and the God who spoke to Israel at Horeb.

Just imagine for a moment the grace that is in the law. First, the grace present in the law is in the revelation of what God requires of

His people. How? It is a specific knowledge and not confusion. As Israel entered the land of promise, it would be surrounded by people who were grotesquely confused about what God would demand of His people. The confusion was rampant. Is God primarily a God of power who demands a worship that would exercise that kind of power? Is He like

Baal? Is He a male deity of fertility and of power whose voice is understood

to speak in the thunder?

Does the one true and living God demand

human blood to appease Him, as the

prophets of Baal believed, slicing

open their bodies

till blood ran down

into the dirt (1 Kings

18:26–29)?

Canaanite followers of the

Asherah and Ashteroth, female fertility

deities, surrounded Israel. Primarily one deity in different forms with different idols, the worship of these deities was laced with sexual and orgiastic confusion. Such perversity explains why God warned Israel to stay away from what happened under the sacred groves of evergreen trees where ritualized prostitution to these idols took place. Is that what Israel was to do?

Perhaps the most frightening religious confusion among the nations surrounding Israel was the worship of the god Molech, a god defined in terms of a holiness and anger that required innocent humans to be sacrificed for human guilt. Thus, infants and children up to about the age of two were sacrificed, burned alive on the altar of a lifeless idol. A few years ago, in extending the runway at the Damascus Airport, workers found a pit of burned infant bones, dating back to the time of the Canaanites. These were little skeletons of babies up to about age two, their bodies broken and burned to Molech.<sup>2</sup>

*The* god Molech's holiness required children up to age two be sacrificed.

We see then that Israel received such grace at Sinai—grace from the loving and holy God who said, “*This* is what I require of My people. *This* is who I am, and *this* is what My people will look like. Don’t slice your bodies. Don’t pervert your souls. Don’t sacrifice your children. Pay heed to these commandments.”

*The* loving and holy  
God gave grace, saying,  
“Don’t sacrifice your children.  
Heed these commandments.”

In the restraining power of the law there is grace. We should live every day thankful that God has given this law, written into the cosmos itself and also in His spoken Word (specifically the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible). We should be unspeakably thankful for the restraining power of the Law upon the human heart.

### THE LAW AND GRACE: THE LAW’S REQUIREMENT FULFILLED IN JESUS

The church also has to look at the written Law as grace in a very different sense, and that is in a pattern of expectation and fulfillment. The Law kills us—it indicts us. As the apostle Paul says, “I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet’” (Romans 7:7). But now we know, and knowing this, we must be saved. Who can do this but Jesus Christ? Yes, the Law hurts—even kills—but the Law points to Christ.

There is also grace in the Law, and in the keeping of it. As the Lord God told His people, “For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off” (Deuteronomy 30:11). And, as the message is written into the warp and the woof of the Old Testament, keeping this law leads to prosperity, to longevity, and to happiness.

In looking at this law and looking at the gospel, we understand that there are two different covenants, but one redeeming God, who is constant. We are told that the Law was made necessary by sin. Before the fall, Adam and Eve needed no Ten Commandments. There, the law was perfectly written on the heart and perfectly understood. Before the fall, there was no need for the restraining and teaching powers of the law. But after the fall, we desperately need legislation—written laws that can be known.

Even before the Lord gave *these Ten Words*, there was law. We read about Old Testament patriarchs—men like Abraham and Enoch—men who pleased God. But they didn't please God simply by thinking themselves to be pleasing to God. Rather, they pleased God because their lives comported with that which God commanded. They were not perfect, but they were shaped by a law they understood. As Paul writes in Romans 1, it is a law to which we are all accountable.

Back at the mountain, through the prophet Moses, we confront this grace and revelation of the speaking God who gives these Ten Words. What drama there is—smoke, mountain, lightning, cloud, noise. We cannot sever this text from its canonical context. We dare not take it out of its placement in covenantal history nor out of the narrative in which it is placed. These are not just ten abstract commandments. These are ten words of grace and law addressed to God's elect nation, Israel. We have to read the Ten Commandments remembering the smoke upon the mountain that was shaking. We have to remember even the fear of Israel that resulted from knowing that God had spoken to them at all, much less in the form of these specific words. God revealed Himself in the most personal terms.

But then, we contrast this with the radically new covenant, the new law of Christ, and the new heart through the work of Christ. This is the law perfectly fulfilled in Christ and in His accomplished work. We are now no longer under the law of Moses. But that does not mean that we are no longer taught by the Law.

The apostle John wrote, "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ"(John 1:17). Christ too

was a legislator, declaring His own very clear legislation in the Sermon on the Mount. You are familiar with the formula, “You have heard it said . . . , but I say to you.” In those words is fulfillment.

Jesus does not lessen the force of the Law; He heightens it, taking it from mere exteriority into interiority. Murder is rooted in anger, and adultery is rooted in lust. As Christians, we speak of being under the law of Christ, under the new covenant, under the law that is given by Christ and to Christ’s people.

### THE LAW’S ROLE AS TEACHER

So, how are Christ’s people to understand the Old Testament law? The Reformers famously debated whether there are two or three uses of the Law. First, both Luther and Calvin accepted the pedagogical use of the Law—it teaches us our sin. We come to know that we have sinned against a holy God, a fact we desperately need to know. Second, the Law has a civil or political use. The divine law underlies and undergirds all political law. It is a law that is revealed in nature, although our sinfulness prevents us from perfectly perceiving it in nature. This law is written in the conscience, but as Paul says in Romans 2, our fallen conscience is an inadequate moral instrument.

Those first two uses of the Law were well understood, but it is the third use—the didactic use of the Law—that became an issue of debate between the followers of Luther and Calvin. The didactic use of the Law asks the question—does the Law *now* teach us? That is, does the Law now teach Christians? Are we to look to the Old Testament in order to see a pattern for godliness, which is to be replicated in us? And the answer has to be, in some form, yes. Calvin clearly affirmed this third use of the Law, and Luther denied it. But as any reading of Luther—his works, sermons, and even his catechisms will indicate, he denied it but he still practiced it. In teaching his children, he taught them the Ten Commandments. In preaching, he preached the Ten Commandments. So, whether or not you want to refer to it as the didactic use of the Law, we know that this law still speaks to us in a pattern that is to encourage us, even as Paul said in Romans 15:4.



In Christ, we who have been the recipients of this new covenant are able to fulfill the Law in a way that Israel was not. That is not because of who we are; it is because of who Christ is. It is not because of our faithfulness, it is because of Christ's faithfulness. So we read the Old Testament law, and the covenant of Moses, and the Ten Commandments all as a word given to God's elect and chosen nation Israel, even as they prepared to enter the Land of Promise.

But the Law is also for our good. It is not that we have no law, for we are under the law of Christ. The last thing we need is an antinomian church in the midst of an antinomian age. We look back to read these texts in order that the Holy Spirit would apply these words to our heart. We hear the binding address of these words, even as we turn to the New Testament to discern how to apply these things in our own times and in our own lives. On the other hand, the church has often been seduced by legalism and moralism.

We must not confuse the gospel with any idea that the law can save us, or that our mission is to see lost persons trust in their moralism.

*The* God who reveals  
this law reveals Himself. . . .  
First person intimacy. First  
person authority.

Exodus 20:1 reminds us, "And God spoke all these words." The divine origin and authorship of the Ten Commandments is paramount. This is not Israel's legis-

lation. The Ten Commandments are not the product of human creativity or a legislative assembly. There is no conference committee at Horeb and Sinai. There is no filibuster, and there is no bill-signing ceremony in the Rose Garden. This is God speaking to His people. There is no negotiation here. This is divine address—"And God spoke all these words."

It is so odd to modern and postmodern minds that we claim a di-

vine sanction for law. The prevailing secular mind-set says that law is simply a product of human experience codified in legislative form. It is just how we learned to live with each other. There is no absolute or transcendent *ought*. There merely is a phenomenological *is*.

But Israel knows something very different. Because God spoke these words, these are not just ten words, these are *the* Ten Words. Broadcaster Ted Koppel, speaking at Duke University's commencement ceremony several years ago, reminded the students that the Ten Commandments are *not* God's "ten ethical suggestions."<sup>3</sup> This is law. It is command.

And the God who reveals this law also reveals Himself: "I am the Lord your God." First person intimacy. First person authority. He uses the revealed name "I AM." This is a personal and saving Word, identified by the God who situates His own law in His redeeming purpose. Look carefully at the text. "I am the Lord your God." Which God? Who is this God? "Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Exodus 20:2)."

We must see Christ here as well. We see into the future the Christ who will lead His people out of bondage. Not out of bondage to Pharaoh, but out of bondage to sin. God's constant redeeming purpose is reflected here even in the giving of the law. This is the God who brought Israel out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and thus the first command, "You shall have no other gods before me."

## THE FIRST COMMANDMENT ASSERTS MONOTHEISM

What does all this mean? First, it means there is one God and only one God. This command begins with the assertion of theism, and not just theism—monotheism. God automatically and necessarily reveals Himself over against the false gods of that day and age, and any other.

A quick survey of modern theology reveals the false gods of our day, not just within the various paganisms, world religions, and forms of blindness, but even inside what is considered the world of Christian theology. All these false gods fall far short of the biblical witness. There is the well-intended deity of American popular culture and the

lighter-than-air, dehydrated, just-add-water god of popular imagination. As one author says, this is the “break glass in case of emergency deity.”<sup>4</sup> The god of modern theology is finite in so many ways. He is not omnipotent, he is just more powerful than we are. He is not omniscient; he just knows everything that currently may be known—more knowledge than we have. By stark contrast, the infinite God of the Bible is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, self-existent, self-revealing, self-defining, sovereign, and holy. Indeed, the list truly is itself infinite.

John Calvin wrote well when he said that there is a *semenas divinitas*, a seed of divinity, within the human being. This interior knowledge forms part of our conscience and our constitution, being ourselves made in the image of God. It cries out for some object of worship, for we will worship some deity. The only question is—what or *whom* will we worship? In his book *Idols for Destruction*, Herbert Schlossberg says this: “Western society in turning away from the Christian faith has turned to other things.”<sup>5</sup> He points out this fact that is often missed—this is not a turning from, it is a turning *to*! This process is commonly called *secularization*, but that only covers the negative aspect. The word connotes the turning away from the worship of God while ignoring the fact that some other deity has taken His place. It is inevitably so.

A.W. Tozer expressed so powerfully this truth when he said, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”<sup>6</sup> Several years ago in Britain researchers went door to door asking persons about their belief in God. One of their questions: “Do you believe in a God who intervenes in human history, who changes the course of affairs, who performs miracles, etc.?” When published, their study took as its title the response of one man who was seen as rather typical of those who responded. He answered, “No, I don’t believe in *that* God, I just believe in the *ordinary* God.”

How many of our friends and neighbors believe in just “the ordinary God”? In listening to evangelicalism, would anyone believe that we worship anything other than an *ordinary* God?

## THE FIRST COMMANDMENT CALLS FOR ULTIMATE ALLEGIANCE

Second, the First Commandment tells us this loving God demands ultimate allegiance—nothing less will do. God’s existence defines all reality. If God exists, then everything is now different. As James Orr made clear over a century ago, “This explains the radical antagonism between the two worldviews, one believing in God and one not. Two different starting points for all thought, two different realities—on the one hand silence, on the other hand speech; on the one hand, nihilism, on the other hand, theism, and those in the end are the only two great alternatives.”<sup>7</sup>

How do we understand this basic issue today? What is our Canaan? What is our context? Well, look around. We live in the land of idolaters.

Homiletically, it is a challenge to talk about this without being trite, because we at least have to give the tip of the hat to the idolaters of old who knew what they were doing more than the idolaters of late. In the ancient world, at least we knew *who* someone was talking about when they spoke of Baal or Asherah or Moab or Dagon or Zeus or Wotan or Thor or Artemis. They are mostly gone now, but in their place are other idols. There are the idols of religious pluralism around us and the idols of those who don’t think themselves religious at all. The idols of self abound; as Oscar Wilde said, “To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance.” It is a lifelong romance for just about all of humanity. Those who worship not the one true and living God, eventually worship themselves.

In her book *Smoke on the Mountain*, Joy Davidman, the wife of C. S. Lewis, wrote, “He who is not continually fizzing like champagne with sexual excitement is condemned as a failure in life.” She said, “The modern idols are the idols of sex, the state, science, and society.” Though speaking a half-century ago, she was right. Sex, the state, science, and society—these are idols of our day. If we are not fizzing like champagne with sexual excitement, if we’re not bowing down to the state, if we’re not celebrating science and scientism, if we’re not

finding ultimate meaning in human society, we are written off as simply out of step. Francis Bacon, in his famous aphorism in the *Nova Organum*, said there are four classes of idols: the idols of the tribe, the idols of the cave, the idols of the marketplace, and the idols of the theater. And each is still with us today.

### THE FIRST COMMANDMENT COMMANDS EXCLUSIVITY

Third, the loving God demands exclusivity. Here we face the “mono” in monotheism. Some would have you believe that monotheism is just too much to demand. Looking to the experience of Israel, some try to explain that Israel was not even sure about monotheism. Folks like William Barkley try to describe the evolution of Israel’s faith from polytheism (many gods) to henotheism (a hierarchy of gods) to monotheism (one god). I love the response of Philip Ryken, who says, very simply, “God has always been a monotheist.”<sup>8</sup> In 1 Corinthians 8:4–6, Paul puts monotheism in the Christian context of exclusivity as he says:

Therefore as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

The idol is a nothing, but it is a dangerous nothing.

Monotheism is controversial in the church today, as is the whole idea of exclusivity. There are those who call themselves evangelicals who flirt with various universalisms and inclusivisms. They do so as a way of getting around the awkwardness, the angularity, and the political incorrectness of this exclusivity—the exclusivity not only of Yahweh, but also of Christ as Redeemer.

One God. As we read in the New Testament, there is one Medi-

ator between God and man. "I am the way. . . . No one comes to the Father except through me," Jesus said (John 14:6). Peter declared, "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Exclusivity is inherent in monotheism, and that is what scares some people.

Gore Vidal, one of the leading lights of the literary left, attacks the very idea of monotheism with his notion of "sky gods." He says the following:

Now to the root of the matter. The great unmentionable evil at the center of our culture is monotheism. From a barbaric Bronze Age text known as the Old Testament three anti-human religions have evolved, Judaism, Christianity, Islam. They are sky god religions. They are literally patriarchal. God is the omnipotent father, hence the loathing of women for 2000 years in those countries affected by the sky god and its earthly male delegates. The sky god is a jealous god, of course. He requires total obedience from everyone on earth, as he is in place not just for one tribe but for all creation. Those who would reject him must be converted or killed for their own good. Ultimately, totalitarianism is the only sort of politics that can truly serve the sky god's purpose. Any movement of a liberal nature endangers his authority and that of his delegates on earth. One god, one king, one pope, one master in the factory, one father-leader in the family home.<sup>9</sup>

If we do not understand the antipathy toward the very notion of monotheism, we will not understand a significant part of what it means to bear the scandal of the gospel in this generation. Human beings are worshipers. We will worship either the one true and living God, or we will worship an idol of our own devising or our own adoption. We will worship the idol of the tribe or the cave or the marketplace, the theater, or the idol of the self.

"You shall have no other gods before me." This is not a reference to a hierarchy or an issue of preeminence as though God is saying, "I must be the highest of all gods. You must have none other before me."

That is not what this text means at all. Rather, God says in effect, “You dare not bring even the acknowledgment of any other so-called god into my face.” No acknowledgment of any other god. This truly is *monotheism*. To understand the very heart of this is to understand, as Calvin wrote his exposition of this text in *The Institutes*, the intended scene. This is like a shameless woman who brings in an adulterer before her husband’s very eyes only to vex his mind the more. That is as idolatry in God’s eyes.

Luther, explaining what a god is, and thus what an idol is, in contrast explained, in his *Larger Catechism*:

What is a God? Answer: A God is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a God is nothing else than to trust and believe Him with our whole heart. As I have often said, the trust and faith of the heart alone makes both god and idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true God. On the other hand, if your trust is false and wrong, then you have not the true God.

We have to read this first commandment along with that word that was given to Israel through Moses in Deuteronomy, the *Shema*: “Hear,

O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

You shall love the Lord your God

with all your heart and with

all your soul and with all

your might. And these

words that I com-

mand you today

shall be on your

heart” (Deuteron-

omy 6:4–6). And as

our Savior said: “You

shall love the Lord your

God with all your heart and

with all your soul and with all

*Who* is it in that we truly trust? In answering that question, we find who our God is.

your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:3–4).

What is it in the end? Who is it in the end that we truly trust and truly adore? For in answering that question, we find who our God is.

For Christian believers, monotheism is fundamental, but not yet complete. In Christ we come to know that the one true God reveals Himself supremely in Christ. The incarnate Christ adds to the scandal of monotheism when He told His disciples, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). There is only one God . . . only one Savior . . . only one gospel.

Our understanding of monotheism is fulfilled in Christ. Christianity is not a *mere* monotheism, but a Trinitarian monotheism. In Christ we truly come to know what it means to fulfill the first commandment.

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.” And brothers and sisters, we must not. These words, written to Israel of old, are for us, in order that we might be instructed. They are for our instruction that through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.