

The God Who Demands

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[0 : 00] We're back this afternoon looking at Exodus, continuing our series called The God Who Saves. I'm grateful to David for preaching two Sundays whilst I was on holiday and taking us through our series in Revelation, the early chapters, the letters to the churches, and also for Ben Traynor preaching last week from John.

But back to Exodus, and today we're looking at the Ten Commandments. We're going to look at the whole chapter, which might seem a lot, but if you want to look at each commandment individually, actually, I was thinking back on two years ago in the summer, David and I did a series on the Ten Commandments, and so there's a whole sermon on each of the separate commandments, which you can go back and look to, so we're, in a sense, going over them too quickly this afternoon.

But Ten Commandments, well, plenty of people today, I'm sure, would ask, what is the point of the Ten Commandments? Do they still have a continuing relevance for our lives? Because I guess many people, when it comes to Christianity, tend to think that Christianity is about rules, it's about laws, it's about commandments, and quite frankly, we're better off without them.

We just need to be free to do what we want to do. And so some people think that Christianity really is a big restrictor of our freedom as people, and not just that it restricts us, many think that Christianity is actually dangerous because of what it demands of us.

Even further, that it is evil because of what it asks of us. And that is what puts many people off Christianity. It is a big barrier. And maybe you're here this afternoon, you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, and you wonder why God gives us all of these rules.

[1 : 42] But interestingly, Christianity is not the only place where you get laws or rules or commandments, because they're everywhere in our world today. We are a society that is full of ethics and rules, morals, about doing certain things.

And even if they're not written down like they are for us in the Bible and the commandments, it is assumed that our world's rules and laws must be obeyed, and they must be obeyed with a fundamentalist zeal.

Because there are plenty woke commandments out there that thou shalt not disobey. And if you do disobey, then you will be harangued and hounded by the Twitter mob, and you will be cancelled.

I don't know if it's still called Twitter. Maybe it's called X, thanks to Elon Musk. Anyway, everybody, it seems, in our culture, thinks that they have the authority to say what is right and what is wrong.

Everybody likes to take the moral high ground. Everybody likes to virtue signal and claim that they're right, that their perspective is the one that everybody else should follow.

[2 : 52] And yet, of course, there is no shared moral or ethical code that everybody agrees with. There isn't one. There's little consensus about what's right and wrong, what's good and bad, what is acceptable and unacceptable, whether it's in what you say or in what you do, or even these days in what you think.

And so we live in a world full of confusion, not just about what to believe, but a world full of confusion about how to live your life. And so the issue is, not do we need a moral and ethical framework with which to live by.

Our culture, our society clearly tells us we do need such a framework. But the issue is, what is the best moral and ethical framework to live by?

What is going to best enable human flourishing? For me, for my family, for the society. And so that's why we can't write off God's commandments, assuming that they are irrelevant.

Just look at the world around us. If we disobey God's commands, we actually pay a very high price. And so if we're to flourish as human beings, then it makes sense to listen to what our creator tells us about how to live.

[4 : 12] Because when we look and when we study and when we consider what he says, we'll discover that what he says is far better for our lives, for our society, than all the alternative voices that are preaching at us 24-7 today.

And so we're going to look at the Ten Commandments under three headings this afternoon. First, where they come from. Second, what they are. And third, why they matter. Where they come from, what they are, and why they matter.

First of all, where they come from. Well, they come from God. And that's the first thing we need to grasp. A basic and simple thing, but we can overlook it. These are not man-made rules, like all the others that you hear today, that people think you should stick to.

No, we read in verse 1, and God spoke all these words. And so the context here is from Exodus chapter 19, where God descended on Mount Sinai with this awesome presence in thunder, lightning, clouds, smoke, fire, and earthquake.

And so, in appearing in such a way before his people, God was demanding their full attention. Because what he was going to say to his people was so important, so significant.

[5 : 31] They couldn't miss it. And so, we refer to them today as the Ten Commandments, but they're never actually called the Ten Commandments in the Bible. Here, they're called words.

And then elsewhere, they're referred to as the Ten Words. And that's why Exodus chapter 20 is often referred to as the Decalogue, coming from the two Greek words, deka for ten, and logos meaning word.

And so, these are the ten words that God spoke to the Israelites. Mount Sinai. They come with the authority of God, and they also reveal the will of God.

And so, there is no other set of commands that is so comprehensive for life than these. Because these are not just a bunch of rules that somehow dropped from the sky.

They're a reflection of God himself. They come from the God who saves. And that's what verse 2 reminds us. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

[6 : 39] So, God is the Lord, meaning he rules over everything. But he's also saying that he is their God, the God of Israel. So, he's the God who's entered into a special covenant relationship with his people.

And that's why we need to see the context of these commandments. Because God speaks of how he saved his people from their slavery in Egypt. And that's Exodus chapters 1 to 19.

And it's only when we get to Exodus chapter 20, that God then gives his law. And so, you don't need an A in higher maths to know that 20 comes after 1 to 19.

It's quite simple. Pure, simple numbers. And so, what we're meant to get here is that God saves his people by grace before he gives them his law.

Or, God delivers his people by grace before he makes demands of them by giving them instructions on how to live. So, God didn't give his commandments so Israel would become his people because they already were his people.

[7 : 52] God didn't say, well, I'll save you if you can prove to me how good you are. If you're good, if you obey what I say, then I'll rescue you from Egypt. No, instead, it was, I have already set you free.

Now, obey my words so that you can stay free. So, their obedience wasn't how they earned God's salvation. It was a response to God's salvation that was already theirs by grace.

Grace comes before law. So, obedience was not how they entered into their covenant relationship with God. But, if they were to enjoy the blessings of that covenant relationship, they had to obey what God said.

And, it really is the same for Christians today. And, it's worth stating this because so many get it wrong, even so many professing Christians. Some think that if you keep all God's commandments, if you try and do all that God says, and you work hard, and you do your best, then, God will save you.

But, God's salvation is never obey in order to be saved. It is always, when you are saved, then you'll want to obey.

[9 : 10] The grace of the gospel comes first, and then, the law. And, that is the pattern for how God's people are to live all the way through the Bible, whether it's Old Testament or New Testament.

Obedience to God is always a response to God's grace, which he has first given to us. Because, what God did for Israel, is what he has done for every believer in Jesus.

Just like he saved the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt, so he saves his people from our slavery to sin and death. And then he calls us to obey.

Remember Jesus' words, if you love me, you will keep my commandments. So, our obedience to God's law in the Ten Commandments is never an attempt to earn our salvation.

salvation, but it is a loving response to the salvation we've already received by grace. And so, the way the Bible tells us how we relate to God is actually the opposite of what we instinctively think as human beings.

[10 : 14] Because, every other religion that you'll find will say to you, if you want salvation, then you've got to do all these things, you've got to obey all these commands, you've got to follow all these rules, and if you're good enough, and if you've done enough, then, well, maybe you'll be accepted, maybe you'll be in.

And I think there's even a secular form of this. But if you want to be accepted in polite society, thou shalt do this, thou shalt say this, thou shalt not think that, and thou shalt do this.

Obedying you're in, you're a good, virtuous, worthy citizen, but if you fail, then you're cancelled, you're right, no hope for you. And so as we come to the Ten Commandments, we must remember that they come from the God who has already saved his people.

And they reflect the way God wants his people to live. So it means that we are not left to decide for ourselves how we live our lives in this world. We don't have to figure out what is right and what is wrong.

We don't have to follow the latest popular opinions that people say about how to live life. No, God has spoken, which means if God has spoken, then his words are absolute and they are never obsolete.

[11 : 33] They have always and they will always apply to all people in all places at all times. And that's why we can't disregard, dodge, or dilute anything that God says to us because he knows what's best for us.

And we need to get that whether we would call ourselves a Christian believer or not. And so never think that what God demands from you and me is bad.

That it restricts our freedom or that it spoils our fun. When I was younger, I won a goldfish at a carnival in Aberdeen. My friend, Mark, he also won a goldfish.

And I don't know if they still do this these days, give goldfish away in plastic bags with a bit of water at a fair or a carnival. But they did in those days. And if you were lucky, your goldfish might last two days.

Mine lasted three. Mark's lasted one. And so I thought, great. But the point is when you try and take your goldfish out of your plastic bag, which is extremely difficult, and you go home to your mum and she says, well, there's no bowl to put this thing in.

[12 : 38] Where is it supposed to go? You discover that the life of your goldfish is very short indeed. And so the point is, just think of a fish. A fish is designed for water, isn't it?

Not for land. And so since a fish absorbs oxygen from water instead of the air, it is only free if it's restricted to water. There is no freedom for a fish out of water.

There is only death. Its life isn't enhanced in this different kind of environment with a different set of rules. It is only destroyed.

And so can you see true freedom is not the lack of restrictions for our lives. True freedom is actually submitting to the right restrictions for our lives, the best ones.

And that's what we've got here in the Ten Commandments because God as our creator knows what is best for our lives and so how we should live. And actually, as you read through the Ten Commandments and you look at them, you have got to admit that the world would be a far better place if we were all able to keep them.

[13 : 48] Can you imagine Annie's Land or Glasgow if everybody obeyed all the Ten Commandments all of the time? It would be fantastic. Nobody would break into churches.

Nobody would steal your parking space. Nobody would take anything from you. It would be amazing. So, life would be good.

If we give God the respect he deserves, life is good. If we obey his commandments for our families, life would be good in our families. If we obeyed his commandments not to steal, not to commit adultery, not to lie or be greedy or murder, life would be great in society.

And so, the Ten Commandments are saying to us if we push back against what God says, we don't make life better for ourselves. We only make life worse.

And so, that's where they come from. They come from God. Secondly, what are they? Well, they're commands. They're commandments. The first four about our relationship with God and then the next six about our relationships with people.

[14 : 52] So, let's look briefly at each. The first commandment there in verse 3 is you shall have no other gods before me. Now, this is a demand for exclusive loyalty to God.

The Lord we're told will not tolerate other gods. Now, God first spoke these words to the Israelites who'd been in Egypt, a culture that was full of other gods that were worshipped.

And yet, the one true God, the Lord, demanded his people be devoted to him alone. But before we think this has got nothing to do with us now, we also are commanded to give our exclusive loyalty, the devotion of our hearts to the one true and living God.

Because the commandment says there are other gods that we can put our trust in instead of the one true God. There are other gods that in our hearts can come before him.

And these gods are anything that competes with our loyalty for God. For example, Jesus described money as being another god, saying you cannot serve both God and money.

[15 : 59] because whenever we give something, in fact anything, a higher priority in our lives than God, it functions as a god.

The reality is that anything or any person, including myself, can become another god. So the challenge is, well, does God come first in my life?

Then the second commandment in verse 4 to 6 is, you shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on earth beneath or in the waters below.

So God forbids people making images of him because images or idols that are meant to represent God aren't God. They demean and they diminish him.

An image, whatever it is, will never adequately represent God. Rembrandt is my favourite artist. On holiday, I saw one of his self-portraits, which I think is probably what he's most famous for.

[17 : 03] They're great pictures and he's got so many of them, I don't know how many, about 50 self-portraits of himself at different stages in his life. And they're great images, the best pictures I think you could get of a human being, and yet they're only an image.

So even when Rembrandt was alive, they weren't as good as having the real Rembrandt next to them because they could never fully represent him.

And even now we're a stage removed because he's dead. They fail to represent the true person. And so can you see what this commandment is saying about God? Images of him just will never do him justice.

And before we think that this doesn't apply to us because the second commandment is obviously talking about these metal images of gold, silver, bronze, or wood, stone, it does apply because we can also have mental, not metal, but mental images of God that are wrong.

So the kind of phrases like, well, I like to think God is like this, or I like to imagine God this way. If they're different from how God has revealed himself to us, then they're wrong.

[18 : 17] God is to be worshipped on who he really is, on his terms, not ours. The third commandment, verse 7, is you shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.

Now in the ancient world, name was tightly tied to a person's character and their identity, and of course names matter today because they're important to us.

That's why we think carefully about the names we give to our children, because they identify us and our children. And so to misuse God's name, obviously is to dishonor him.

His name is to be revered, and so this commandment forbids using God's name in inappropriate ways. And so for Israel it was using God's name in false worship, or by taking false oaths, or by speaking blasphemy.

This was all a serious offense. And it's still the same today for us. Any misuse of God's name is a violation of the third commandment. Jesus taught us to pray, didn't he, to God by saying, hallowed be your name.

[19 : 21] Then fourth, the fourth commandment, verse 8 to 11, is remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. This commandment is rooted in God's work in creation.

We read in verse 11, for 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.

And then God also established the Sabbath for his people when he gave Israel the manna in the desert and they were told to collect at six days, not on the seventh day, because God wants his people to stop, work, and worship him on that day.

And so commandments one to four are about our relationship with God, and then next, commandments five to ten are about our relationships with people, starting with our parents.

So the fifth commandment, verse 12, is honor your father and mother. The word honor here is a great word, and it means heavy or weighty.

[20 : 28] And so to honor parents is to give them the appropriate weight to their position. In other words, we must not treat them lightly or think of them as being insignificant ever, but respect them in every way for all of our lives.

And this commandment continues to be crucial for our lives, but also for our society, because this is the only commandment that comes with a promise, which is honor your father and mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

The land there is Canaan, and so God is promising long life to his people, if they're faithful to their covenant with him. Ultimately, it's saying that life works best, that families work best, when we obey God's commands, because when we don't, well, what happens?

Well, we experience all the kind of social problems that plague our society today. And so whether you call yourself a Christian or not, the fifth commandment is a prime example of how our lives, and how our families, and how our society flourish best when we obey God.

That's fifth commandment, and then sixth, we'll go a bit quicker. Sixth commandment is you shall not murder, verse 13. It's a reminder that God is the giver of all human life, and so life is sacred because every person has been made in the image of God.

[21 : 59] And so taking human life, innocent human life, is prohibited, whether young or old, born or unborn, handicapped or able-bodied, all are made in the image of God.

Which means this commandment has a really contemporary application to the controversial issues of our day, such as abortion, euthanasia, assisted dying, and suicide.

And not only this, when Jesus spoke of this commandment, he took it further and deeper to say that it not only prohibits physical murder or killing, but he said the problem is deep in the heart.

Anger from the heart is what results in murder. And so according to Jesus, well, it's not just murder that God forbids, it's getting angry with others too. And so who of us has never been angry?

Then seventh, the seventh commandment in verse 14 is you shall not commit adultery. This commandment, like the one before, is negative. But in order to understand it, we need to know God's positive design for marriage.

[23 : 09] And it comes from creation. So God created man and woman to complement each other. And God gave sex to unite a man and a woman within the lifelong commitment of marriage.

And so we get God's definition of marriage in Genesis chapter 2, where he says this is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife and they become one flesh.

In other words, God's saying marriage is to be an exclusive and permanent relationship between one man and one woman. And so adultery is forbidden because it undermines this most intimate of human relationships.

Not only that, human marriage was designed to be a window onto the marriage between God and his people, which we find in the Old Testament and in the New.

And like the Sixth Commandment, the Seventh Commandment is also taken further by Jesus because adultery is not just an external act.

[24 : 12] Jesus deepens the application of this commandment too when he says anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. So it's not just physical adultery that God forbids, but lust in her hearts because what God desires from his people is sexual purity.

Then the Eighth Commandment, verse 15, you shall not steal. It relates to all forms of theft. It's about property and possessions where it's wrong to take what belongs to somebody else.

Then the Ninth Commandment, verse 16, you shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. Of course, it means do not lie, but it's also interesting because it has a public as well as a personal application to it because it's the commandment that speaks of your neighbor and it's the first commandment to do so.

So it says bearing false witness is wrong. So it indicates a court setting, a legal setting, it has to do with the justice system because in those days there was no forensic science, no DNA testing, nobody could pitch up with a smartphone, record it, something and place it on social media, there was none of that.

And so the justice system only worked if you had credible witnesses. There also would be no justice. It was bad for society if you could not trust those who were bearing witness.

[25 : 42] So there's a public aspect, but there's a personal aspect because every kind of false testimony is prohibited, which means twisting our words, which means gossip, it means slander, it means unjust condemnation, it means lying, it means deceit, because speaking the truth is what God requires of us.

And then the tenth commandment, verse 17, you shall not covet. Now this commandment, unlike the rest, is focused on the inside rather than just outward action.

It has to do with the heart, because coveting of course refers to that inner desire, inner hearts, to want what other people have. And so we're not content with what God has given us.

And so God gives his people, the Israelites, the ten commandments to establish a way of life that he demands from his people. And these ten words are so concise, and yet they are so broad in their application that there's actually no aspect of life that is left out.

and that is why they're always relevant. And so when Jesus was asked which is the greatest commandment, he said, love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

[27 : 03] This is the first and greatest commandment, and the second is like it, love your neighbor as yourself. And then he went on to say all the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments.

So Jesus wasn't doing away with the commandments, Jesus was summarizing them. And so how do we love God with all that we are? Well we look to the first four commandments.

How do we love our neighbor? Well we look to the following six commandments. So where do they come from? God. What are they? Their commands.

And then thirdly, why do they matter? Well they matter because they're central for life. So the ten commandments come from God. Genesis, sorry, Exodus 31 tells us that they were written in stone by God's own finger.

Jesus reaffirmed the importance of the commandments and so they require our obedience. And yet this moral obligation is impossible to meet.

[28 : 07] Because I'm not going to ask for a show of hands when I say who of us has managed to keep all ten commandments. commandments. Because the reality is none of us have kept all ten commandments.

Israel failed and so do we. But God gave them as part of his law. Why? Well, firstly, to show us our sin.

Now John Calvin, who was the reformer from Geneva, he described the law as being like a mirror that shows us the spots in our face. Now, I looked at the mirror this morning and I could see spots in my face and the mirror is a revealer of what you're really like.

You can't hide yourself from what you see. And if we're honest and we measure ourselves against God's commandments, then in reality they show us what we're really like.

Spots, warts, and all. Each commandment, as we read it, exposes the extent of our sin, both in our hearts and in our living.

[29 : 18] And so God's law condemns us. That's the bad news. We fail to keep it. We can't keep it. But the good news is, secondly, God gave us these commandments.

He gave us his law to lead us to Christ, to show up our sin, first of all, but to lead us to Jesus. Because Jesus fully and perfectly kept all God's law.

Jesus kept every single commandment in his heart and in his life. Jesus alone supremely loved God and loved his neighbor.

And so Jesus succeeded where we have all failed. And he did it for us. He lived the perfect life that we can never live. A life without sin in full obedience to God's commandments.

And Jesus died the death we deserve to die. Death for our sin against God because we failed to keep God's commandments. And so if the law is like a mirror that shows up the spots on our face, it is also what sends us to Jesus for cleansing, to be made clean, to be forgiven.

[30 : 32] Because when Jesus died on the cross, he was condemned not for his failure to obey God, but for our failure to obey God and keep his commandments.

And so unless we turn away from our sin and put our faith in Jesus, then we can never be accepted by God. It's through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross that his righteousness, his perfect obedience is transferred to us.

It's swapped over to us. If you like, his righteousness is put into our account, full credit, and our sin and failure was put on him at the cross.

And so the Ten Commandments, they convict us of our sin and they lead us to Christ. That's why God gave his law to us. But for the Christian, then they also show us the way to live.

So just as the Israelites had to obey God's commandments in response to God's grace and setting them free from slavery in Egypt, so God's people must obey God's commandments in response to God's grace and setting us free from our slavery to sin and death.

[31 : 42] And when we've experienced God's grace, then we will have joy in living God's way. And when we experience God's grace, we know that God forgives us when we fail.

And we do. Because when Jesus died, he took away our sin. And so when this gospel of grace penetrates our hearts, God's commandments become not just our duty, but our delight.

And we obey them not to earn our salvation, but because of the salvation that is already ours. And this is how Israel had to bear witness to God amongst the nations.

They were to be a holy nation because they followed and served a holy God. they were to be a holy nation that was set apart from all the other nations, set apart for God.

And the same is true of Christians today. We have been set free to live for God as his holy people. And so the mission of the church in the world is to bear witness to God.

[32 : 51] Not just with our lips, but with our lives as well. Because when we are in Christ, God gives us his holy spirit to transform our hearts and to transform our behavior and to enable us to love God and love others.

And that is the only way to true freedom and true flourishing as a person and in a family and in society. ability to love can be likely to be■■■ to loving will light you willyards feature sins■■yor ■■■ keeps diam through crises Ga arms■■■■eliflowsvenue