

Prayer

Jesus Christ, we find our peace in You. In You, we may know the victory of the Cross, the love of the Father, the care of the Christian community, the empowerment of the Spirit, and the wisdom of Your Word. May we never find ourselves doubting Your extraordinary power to bring peace to our souls in these ways. Thanks You Jesus, for You are the Son of the Living God. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Come before the Lord to ask Him whether there is any part of your life that harbours sin, and if so, confess it.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Christian speakers.** *Pray for any forthcoming Christian events to which you are going, and pray for those who will be speaking*
- *Pray for the software industry, those who work in it, and its effects on society*
- *Give thanks to God for those who have nurtured you in faith*

Meditation

This is the power God has given us in Christ;

The power of love, to restore the spirit,
The power of what is good, to help others,
The power of integrity, to sustain what is right,
The power of hope, to shine a beacon in the world,
The power of honesty, to keep hold of what is pure,
The power of self-control, to discipline the soul,
The power of boldness, to preach the Gospel,
The power of faith, to aspire to greater things,
The power of gentleness, to care for the lost.

The power of God is given to be used; receive it!

Bible passage - Exodus 20:13-17

¹³ You shall not murder.

¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵ You shall not steal.

¹⁶ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

¹⁷ You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

Bible Study

Review

The Ten Commandments are an amazing revelation of God because they put together two basic truths. Firstly, the truth about God, and secondly, the truth about what is right and wrong in the world He made. It stands to reason that God knows best about how His world will work for the people He has made and placed

within it, and the Ten Commandments set this out powerfully and comprehensively. We have already studied the first five commands, beginning with an explanation of God's nature and laws explaining how we should respect His holiness. The fifth law concerns family relationships, and this, together with the laws we study today, completes the moral picture of God's instructions about how life works.

Some suggest that the Commandments may be remembered by thinking of the first four as about God and the rest about social relationships, but this is far too simplistic. After the first commandment, all of them describe appropriate human behaviour, and all of them reflect the truth about God. As a whole, they are not a set of suggestions or opinions, precisely because they reflect the very character of God. Unless we spot this, we will not understand what the Ten Commandments mean.

The Command against murder (20:13) protects the sanctity of life. God alone has the right to give life or take it away, and He graciously allows us to be partners in this, especially in procreation. The command to '*not murder*' forbids us from taking life; we must not take to ourselves the power to decide the eternal destiny of another person. The Hebrew word for murder used here refers to premeditated and unjustified killing, and it implies violence, because the taking of life by whatever means is intrinsically violent.

The Command against adultery (20:14) is another basic social law, for sex outside of marriage is not simply an affront to a husband or wife, it is an affront to the very 'image of God' found in their togetherness. At creation, God blessed monogamy as a reflection of His own 'image' on earth; He did not impose it on people but He blessed it. We will then be blessed if we respect the physical, sexual and spiritual union of one man and one woman (Gen 1:27, 2:24, Matt 19:5,6).

The Command against stealing (20:15) is essential for social order. Stealing is an abuse of life, because possessions are important for all people. It is a violent expression of power and arrogance, and it is a form of idolatry placing self above God and others. Some think this Commandment simply forbids the consequences of Commandment 10 (forbidding covetousness). However, this is too simplistic, because the reasons for stealing are extensive and complex.

The Command against bearing false witness (20:16) is very important, because it goes to the heart of integrity and truth within a community. To bear false witness is to attempt to deviate from what is right and just; moreover, God abhors this not just because it corrupts human relationships, but because it affects testimony about God. If lies and untruth are perceived to be tolerated, how can people believe what it says about God?

The last Commandment against covetousness covers much (20:17), and it is an important moral and social law, because all kinds of evils in society are driven by inappropriate desires. The Hebrew word for 'covet' is a variation of the word for 'desire', and desire, like most human emotions, can be used for good or ill. Some desires are good and right, but covetousness is an example of an emotion turned bad, and it leads people to act in a manner contrary to the good of all people.

Undoubtedly, history shows the Ten Commandments to be a good basis for society. However, we cannot separate the moral bits from what it says about God. If we think of the Commandments as a part of the Law and unrelated to the redeeming love of God, we misunderstand them. The Commandments describe a relationship of God with His people, and they set out the moral laws by which people best live in community. They are an unsurpassed expression of moral and spiritual 'righteousness'.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Murder (20:13) – but why is there so much death in the Bible?
- Adultery (20:14) – but why is there so much adultery in the Bible?
- Stealing (20:15) – but why do people steal when God is all-sufficient?
- False witness (20:16) – but why is testimony so important?
- Covetousness (20:17) – is this the real problem?

Notes on the text and translation

V13 'you shall not murder' *The Hebrew word for murder 'ratsach' is rare and only found here, in Deuteronomy 5:17 and Psalm 62:4. It means premeditated violent killing of a personal enemy. 'Murder' is a good translation. It does not cover killing in acts of revenge or war, for example, as is evident in other laws in the first five books of the Bible.*

V16 'you shall not bear false witness against your fellow citizen.' *You will think of this command as forbidding the bearing of false witness against a neighbour. However, the Hebrew word means 'friend, fellow companion or citizen'. I have chosen the expression 'fellow citizen' because it expresses the*

general nature of the command, and means that no one can get away with thinking that it refers only to people you know.

V17 *'you shall not covet ...'* The Hebrew word for covet ('hamad') means 'desire, take pleasure in', and it can have the sense of lustful desire, selfishness or idolatrous pleasure. It is the same Hebrew word as used by Isaiah in his famous prophecy: 'he had no form or semblance ... that we should desire Him'. (Is 53:2)

Going Deeper

Murder (20:13) – but why is there so much death in the Bible?

Whilst most people easily accept the law 'you shall not murder', they find it hard to understand that the definition of killing is highly limited (see notes above) and that the first five books of the Bible (the 'Torah') contains laws that allow the killing of people under other circumstances. Examples of what is allowed are revenge (Ex 21:13f.), and the slaughter of those who worship other gods (Deut 13:9); in addition, God Himself acts in vengeance against those who do evil against Him and His people (Lev 26:25, Deut 32:35f.). Each of these issues presents us with real difficulties, and we will deal with each of them in the course of these studies. However, if you research legal codes found in other ancient empires and nations, the evidence suggests that the laws found outside Israel are almost always far more repellent to us than what we find in the Old Testament. So, in comparison to these other legal codes, the Old Testament is extraordinarily liberal and lenient, and its laws provide a significant check against the excesses of human evil. We may not like what the Old Testament says, but its principles of applying limits to acts of revenge and judicial restriction to killing are far closer to modern law than anything else available at the time.

It is interesting, however, that Jesus taught about murder in his 'Sermon of the Mount' where He says:

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' 22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. (Matthew 5:21-22)

He therefore teaches that although the ban against murder is entirely correct in the eyes of God, what He looks for within people is the motive for such deeds. Internal attitudes drive a person to extremes such as violence, and Jesus illustrates this by picking out anger as one of the motives for the heinous crime of murder. Of course, this is not the only motive, but the idea that God 'sees the heart' is central to His teaching in the Sermon, because this exposes all wrongdoing before Almighty God. Indeed, Jesus' teaching is the source of the English phrase 'going to the heart of the matter'.

Adultery (20:14) – but why is there so much adultery in the Bible?

We might think that the ban on adultery in the Ten Commandments is straightforward, but it is not. Why is it that despite this instruction, we read of men having sex with prostitutes as if it was permitted, a sin which surely goes against the spirit, if not the letter of this law? Also, successive Kings of Israel and Judah had many wives (see 1 Kings 11), and polygamy was accepted at certain points in the history of Israel (Jacob himself had two wives and two concubines). Then, other laws about sex (see Leviticus 20) appear to place the man's interests before that of the woman, and the laws are generally not very protective of marriage, especially when Moses 'permits' divorce by written notice (Deut 24:1f.). There is one thing we should bear in mind, however, despite all these problems. The command against adultery protects marriage fidelity and the family, and ensures that the heritage laws based on family lines are not open to misinterpretation. In a world long before DNA testing, it removed the likelihood of disputes about inheritance.

Jesus taught about adultery in the Sermon on the Mount just as He did about murder, making a similar point about the need to understand the motives behind such activity. His exposure of the sin of lust does not so much replace the seventh of the Ten Commandments, but expose how God sees what happens in side people, and why adultery is the very real problem that it is, throughout the world and throughout society. Jesus' comments add to the ban against adultery to make it clear to us that a wide range of sexual deviance based on personal pursuit of sexual experience (lust) is anathema to God and destructive of society:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:27-28)

Stealing (20:15) – but why do people steal when God is all-sufficient?

The ban on stealing is a basic law that protects communities, and has been recognised as such for a long time. Stealing does not simply offend against principles of ownership and responsibility within society, it is a challenge to all forms of social stability (e.g. Ex 22:1f.). Jacob's family was torn apart when Joseph was

'stolen' from his father (by his brothers – see Gen 37:23f.), and this reminds us that slavery is a form of theft of people. In modern times as well as ancient times, theft creates hunger, poverty, social collapse and deprivation, particularly when perpetrated by the rich against the poor. It is vital that we see stealing as a sin that is not something like an ancient form of 'shoplifting' for the Old Testament perceives very well that the most heinous of acts of stealing happens when the rich use their power to prevent the labourer from receiving wages on time, for example (Lev 19:11,13).

Jesus picks up this theme of stealing in his parables, told later against religious leaders who robbed the poor of their religious inheritance. Indeed, he called the Temple a 'den of thieves' (Matt 21:13), and told a parable about a wicked servant who accepted forgiveness for his own debt but exacted the last penny from those who owed him small amounts (Matt 18:23f.).

False witness (20:16) – but why is testimony so important?

False testimony clearly lies at the heart of every form of corruption in society, whether religious, social, or legal. It destroys confidence within any group of people, especially God's people, the church (as we have already seen). In the Old Testament, safeguards are provided against the giving of false testimony by the general law that says evidence must be given by at least two observers (Numbers 35:30, Deuteronomy 6:2, 19:15). There is also a law that says the 'hands of the witnesses shall be the first raised against the person to execute the death penalty.' (Deut 17:7), and this brings 'blood guilt' on the heads of anyone who might make a false accusation (especially leading to a death penalty) against someone else.

One other aspect of false witness is highlighted in Leviticus 19:16, which says, 'You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbour.' The whole idea of this law is that false witness, or 'slandering' can become a way of life for some people, rather like gossiping. This can be highly destructive within any society, especially God's people, the church..

In common with His teaching concerning other aspects of the Ten Commandments, Jesus taught that the origins of behaviour such as giving false witness or slandering lay within. The problem with the people of Israel in His own day was that they thought that 'purity' was about keeping ritual law, and so when Jesus was challenged by the Pharisees about this, His reply was all embracing:

For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." (Mark 7:21-23)

Covetousness (20:17) – is this the real problem?

The law against covetousness is put strongly here in Exodus. Firstly, it describes the desire for someone else's house, their property, and then it is stated again but this time as a desire for the wider feature of wealth and inheritance in ancient society, the neighbour's wife (and family), servants, livestock and general property. There is a certain psychology of greed at work in the way this is presented to us. It may be said that a society is defined by the things for which people desire or crave, and the ability to limit that craving is an essential element in a society that has moral fibre. Some may feel this is more true today than it ever was, but the things people craved in the past were different than what they want today, and so much has changed over the years; but the principle remains the same, and the tenth Commandment remains a good test of people within any society.

It is interesting that when Jesus spoke to a rich young man who asked him what he must do 'to have eternal life' (Matt 19:16f.), Jesus quoted the fifth to the ninth Commandment (Matt 19:18). His omission of the first four may be explained by the fact that they were possibly regarded as being about one's relationship with God rather than others, but Jesus' omission of the Tenth Commandment, 'You shall not covet' is a surprise. The rich young man was able to say that he had kept the commands Jesus had quoted, but when Jesus challenged him to give away his wealth, he was unable to take the step, and went away saddened. It is uncertain of course, but it appears that Jesus' challenge to the rich young man was precisely about whether he was covetous in his heart towards his wealth; and indeed, he could not do without it. His desire to keep wealth was greater than his desire to follow Jesus. Just like His challenges about the other Commandments, Jesus went to the heart of the problem. The covetousness that damages a relationship with God is a desire for the things of this world that is greater than a desire for God.

Application

The Ten Commandments may seem easy for some. The Commandments against murder, adultery, stealing, false witness and covetousness appear straightforward to many, and hardly worth learning. Surely, most will say, such things are the logical and sensible results of a good society!

Surely, the evidence of history is that this is true, but we assume these standards at our peril. Too often, the true Godliness that lies underneath these laws, as clearly exposed and taught by Jesus, has been eaten away by everything from wealth to power (and also, as implied within the tenth Commandment, 'sex'). The loss of attitudes and standards that maintain such things within society often happens unawares and hidden, for the devil like to work quietly to undermine the godliness implanted within society by good people in times past. We must be vigilant for anything that eats away at these things in our world.

The major issue for God's people must surely be the teaching of Jesus that builds on these commandments and reveals the truth of rotten and evil human attitudes and behaviour; these things are the anger, lust, covetousness and envy that can inflict even the Christian soul. We cannot project these issues things onto society and say that the church is free of them. For as both Jesus and Paul taught so clearly in the New Testament (for Jesus' teaching see above, for Paul, see, for example, Galatians 5:16-21), these are the reasons why even God's people need to confess their sins and seek the forgiveness of God, as well as seek to repair the damage they do within society.

It therefore seems right that we should remember Ten Commandments and use them as a basis and a reminder of the deeper things that cause trouble and stress in our own lives and within society. By remembering them alongside the teaching of Jesus, we must learn to keep within these rules and use them as a check on our own occasionally unworthy attitudes and behaviour. If we are blind to this, we are blind indeed.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In your group, discuss these commandments and how they affect you society, as you see it.
2. In your group, discuss these commandments and whether they affect the church in any way.
3. How does covetousness affect the life of people inside and outside of the Christian community, and how may it be overcome?

Topics covered by this text

- *God's laws for social responsibility*
- *The importance of responsibility towards the neighbour*

Personal comments by author

In the last twenty years or so, I reckon that I have heard more discussions about the Ten Commandments which ask whether they are relevant, than sermons advocating them as God's Word. This tells me that too many people are unwilling to embrace them because they either feel that they will be compromised themselves if they accept them, or that they fear that no one can measure up to them. It was precisely Jesus' teaching that no one could measure up to them, and His mission was to get people to find eternal life through following Him, but He did not let people 'off the hook' from aspiring to higher standards than the Ten Commandments!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Pick one or two of these commandments that touch you close to some area of your life, and perhaps make you feel uncomfortable. Read the study over again and pray about why you feel uncomfortable with this commandment. The Lord will show you why, and what to do with this matter.*
- *Pray that the church of God will take hold of the Ten Commandments once again and use them as a tool and a means of evangelism in the world once again.*

Final Prayer

Help me, Lord Jesus, to open my heart so that I may appreciate my brothers and sisters in Christ wherever they may be, and in whatever circumstances they live. May I always be prepared to learn from them more of the workings of the Body of Christ, and be encouraged by their worship of the true and Living God. AMEN