

# Gospel Pictures: The Nature of the Ten Commandments

*For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. – Romans 8:3*

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What are the Ten Commandments like? What was their purpose and why were they given? Are they a worthy investment of our time and energy in order to get them posted in public places? In some settings where a “Christian” influence is prominent, a preoccupation with the Ten Commandments sometimes surfaces. With noble intentions, we might find ourselves rolling up our sleeves to do battle over posting the Ten Commandments in schools or court houses. But should a believer’s conscience be bound by the Ten Commandments? Are the Ten Commandments helpful or harmful to the life of the church? If we pause to look more carefully at what Scripture tells us about the Ten Commandments, and if we can divorce ourselves from any preconceived ideas that we have about the Ten Commandments and just allow Scripture to say what it says about the them, I believe we’ll find that, instead of eagerly embracing them, we will find ourselves running quickly away from them because they are harmful to the life of the church. Let’s begin.

## The Ten Commandments Have Several Names in Scripture

The Ten Commandments go by various names in Scripture. They are called:

- The Tablets of Stone (*Exodus 24:12*)
- The Two Tablets of the Testimony (*Exodus 32:15*)
- The Tablets (*Exodus 32:16*)
- The Words of the Covenant (*Exodus 34:28*)
- The Ten Commandments (*Exodus 34:28*)
- The Tablets of the Covenant (*Deuteronomy 9:9*)
- The Letter (*2 Corinthians 3:6*)
- The Ministry that Brought Death (*2 Corinthians 3:7*)
- The Ministry that Condemns Men (*2 Corinthians 3:9*)

## The Ten Commandments Are Inseparable from the Old Covenant

The names assigned to the Ten Commandments are significant. Names like *the two tablets of the testimony* (*Exodus 32:15*), *the words of the covenant* (*Exodus 34:28*), and *the tablets of the Covenant* (*Deuteronomy 9:9*), are indicative of the Ten Commandments’ unbreakable tie to the Old Covenant. As *the words of the covenant*, the Ten Commandments represent the entire Old Covenant. They are the summary statement or the representative statement of the Old Covenant and are inseparable from it. The Old Covenant owns them – they are the *words of the covenant*. The Ten Commandments summarize the Old Covenant. If we want to know what the Old Covenant was like, the Ten Commandments give us a high-level introduction. They are the representative words of the Old Covenant.

## The Ten Commandments Were Historically Time-Bound

The Ten Commandments were given to the Old Covenant nation of Israel on Mount Sinai in Exodus chapter 20. There is no record of their existence prior to that time. The Ten Commandments had their historical beginning on Mount Sinai as recorded in the book of

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Exodus. Prior to Mount Sinai, there is no record in Scripture of any codified, written law, forcing us to the conclusion that Exodus 19<sup>ff</sup> is the first recorded instance in Scripture of a written law. We are hard pressed to find a place in Scripture that tells us that the Ten Commandments existed prior to the inauguration of the Old Covenant on Mount Sinai. Perhaps oral tradition was passed down from generation to generation, since several Old Testament personalities like Abel, Noah, and Abraham knew how to sacrifice, but Scripture does not hint at the notion that the Ten Commandments existed in any form prior to Exodus 20. To argue that they did exist prior to Mount Sinai, is an argument from silence. The Ten Commandments had their historical beginning on Mount Sinai as recorded in the book of Exodus.

Just as they had an historical beginning, the Ten Commandments also had an historical end. They met their demise with the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the New Covenant, which coincided with the passing of the Old Covenant. The writer of the book of Hebrews reminds us that, “In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.” (Hebrews 8:13). He then continues,

Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness.... *By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing (which is symbolic for the present age).* According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body *imposed until the time of reformation. But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God....* Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. *For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.* Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. *But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. (Hebrews 9:1, 8-14, 23-26, Emphasis Mine)*

The writer of Hebrews is reminding us that the regulations contained within the law of the Old Covenant were temporary in nature. They were imposed “until the time of reformation” and the reformation spoken of in this context is the appearing of Christ to offer himself as a true sacrifice

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for sin. The NIV says these laws applied until the time of the “new order.” The law was only a shadow of things to come in the “time of reformation” or the time of the “new order” with the advent of the New Covenant in Christ. Once Christ came, the need for the picture vanished. The law was a mere shadow, pointing to this age of fulfillment (Hebrews 10:1). Since the Ten Commandments are inextricably tied to the Old Covenant, its passing means that the Law with its commands has also passed. Let’s examine that further.

## The Ten Commandments and the Church

We’re not finished with our discussion about the Ten Commandments being historically time-bound, but I want to add another element to what I’m saying, so I am continuing our dialog under this new heading to bring the church into our conversation. When talking about the possible perpetuity (or lack thereof) of the Ten Commandments, the church must be added to the equation because that is what Scripture does with the discussion. The New Testament is very clear in its analysis of the Ten Commandments. First, it calls the Ten Commandments a “ministry of death” (2 Corinthians 3:7) and a “ministry of condemnation” (2 Corinthians 3:9). This is worth exploring further:

And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, *who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory. (2 Corinthians 3:3-11, Emphasis Mine)*

Paul is contrasting and comparing the work of the Spirit in a person’s life with the work of the Ten Commandments and law-keeping. He is doing this in part, because his Apostleship is under attack and he is reminding the Corinthians that they are proof of the authenticity of his Apostleship because of the Spirit’s work in their lives. They are “living letters” of the proof of Paul’s Apostleship because the Holy Spirit is at work transforming their lives. That is something that the Ten Commandments cannot do because contrary to the life-giving work of the Spirit, the Ten Commandments are a “letter that kills,” a “ministry of death,” and a “ministry of condemnation.” They are characterized this way because they are tied to a law and a covenant

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that condemned those under it for failure to obey it perfectly.<sup>1</sup> In other words, they are works-based and no one can find acceptance with God by works or law-keeping (Galatians 3:10). On the contrary, God’s law brought to bear on an unbelieving heart has a condemning effect because it stirs up more sin and turns its recipients into their own law-breakers (Romans 5:20) and became an annual reminder of sin (Hebrews 10:3). The law with its commandments was never intended to impart life. It was weak and useless to do so (Romans 8:3, Hebrews 7:18-19, 8:7). Because it is works-based, Paul labels the Ten Commandments as a ministry of death and condemnation.

Second, Paul tells the Ephesians that the Law of Moses and its accompanying Ten Commandments were harmful to the formation of the church and even opposed to it because they stood in the way of bringing Jew and Gentile together.

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. *For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.* And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. (*Ephesians 2:11-18, Emphasis Mine*)

Did you follow Paul’s reasoning? He is saying that before Jew and Gentile could be made into one new man (the church), the Law of Moses, along with its commandments, had to be taken out of the way. It was hostile to the church and stood opposed to its formation. So much so, that it took the cross of Christ and his atoning death to “kill the hostility” that existed. The Law and its commandments were the enemies of the church and Christ abolished them by his death on the cross. He took them out of the way and cancelled their authority and ability to condemn those in Christ (Colossians 2:14). The Ten Commandments were historically time-bound and have no place in the life of the church today.

## Our Preoccupation with the Ten Commandments

Christ’s death on the cross took the Ten Commandments out of the equation in the life of the church, but for some reason, we seem to try hard to get them back. There is what I believe to be,

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<sup>1</sup> The Old Covenant was a legal, works covenant that demanded perfect obedience. Please see [The Old Covenant and the Law of Moses](#) for a more detailed explanation.

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an unhealthy preoccupation in some segments of the church and Christianity today with the Ten Commandments. In Covenant Theology circles, this preoccupation surfaces when the Ten Commandments are re-packaged as the “unchanging moral law”<sup>2</sup> and assumed to apply to every era from Adam and Eve through today. This is noted for us clearly in the *Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF)*:

1. God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which He bound him and all his posterity, to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience, promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it, and endued him with power and ability to keep it.

2. *This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables: the first four commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man.*

3. Besides this law, *commonly called moral*, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, His graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly, holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the new testament.

5. *The moral law doth for ever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that, not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it. Neither doth Christ, in the Gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation. (WCF, Chapter 19:1-3, 5, Emphasis Mine)*

In this portion of the *WCF*, our Covenant Theology (*CT*) friends tell us that the Ten Commandments were first delivered to Adam under the guise of a covenant of works long before Moses received them on tablets of stone on Mount Sinai. When they were delivered to Moses and the Israelites on Sinai, ceremonial pieces were added to the Law. Those same ceremonial pieces that were added under Moses were then subtracted in the New Testament and are no longer binding. But the Ten Commandments (*CT*'s “moral law” of paragraph 5 of the *WCF* above) continue to be binding law on the conscience of the believer to this day. In other words, according to our *CT* friends, the Ten Commandments are relevant law for the church today.

I believe this is a dangerous flirtation with the Ten Commandments since Paul calls them a ministry of death and a ministry that condemns people. We've also seen that the Ten Commandments have no place in the life of the church as the Ten Commandments because they

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<sup>2</sup> For a more complete discussion of the uses of the phrase “moral law”, see my paper entitled, [Rethinking Our Use of 'Moral Law'](http://www.thegospelinreallife.com) at my website ([www.thegospelinreallife.com](http://www.thegospelinreallife.com))

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were hostile to the successful formation of the church in the first place. They were enemies of the church in terms of bringing Jew and Gentile together in one new man and they are weak and useless to transform a life. The only place that the Ten Commandments are “commonly called moral” is in the *WCF*. They are not called the unchanging moral law of God anywhere in Scripture. The theological system of Covenant Theology requires that they be called that and that the Ten Commandments be imposed on the conscience of a believer in this New Covenant era. I believe such a preoccupation with the Ten Commandments is a harmful one in the life of the church.

## Are the Ten Commandments the Basis of the Mosaic Law?

As pointed out above, the *WCF* insists that the Ten Commandments, under the name of God’s unchanging moral law, are the basis of all law since the time of Adam and Eve. For our *CT* friends, the Ten Commandments are both the pinnacle and the foundation of all of God’s law in every era. But as we have briefly shown, this elevates the Ten Commandments to an unhealthy status that can’t be supported by Scripture. The Ten Commandments are not foundational to the Mosaic Law, but they merely represent it. The Mosaic Law is founded on its priests, not on the Ten Commandments.

*If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law. He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. (Hebrews 7:11-16 Emphasis Mine)*

The Law was unable to function without the Levitical priests. This means that one can safely say that the ceremonial aspects of the law are at its core, not the moral aspects. If one were to pull the rug of the Levitical priests out from under the Mosaic Law, the entire Law would come crashing down, and that is what God has done. Our great High Priest Jesus is a priest not from the Levitical line, but in the order of Melchizedek. The regulation of the Mosaic Law that made the Levites priests was weak and useless because there was no forgiveness of sin involved and those priests died (Hebrews 7:18). Jesus’ priesthood is based not on ancestry, like the weak Levitical priests who were only a picture of what was coming, but his was based on God’s promise and God’s oath and the power of an indestructible life (Hebrews 7:18-28). This change in the priesthood necessitates a change in the Law. The Law was not founded on the Ten Commandments, but on the Levitical priests. To elevate the Ten Commandments to such a position is unbiblical. The Ten Commandments do not bind the conscience of everyone since the time of Adam as the *WCF* would have us believe, but as we have seen, are historically time-bound and temporary for a specific purpose.

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## **Conclusion**

Our preoccupation with the Ten Commandments is an unhealthy one. The Ten Commandments as a unit were inseparable from the Old Covenant. They were the terms of that covenant and that covenant only (Exodus 34:28). They opposed the bringing together of Jew and Gentile into one new man, the church. The cross work of Christ takes the Mosaic Law, with its regulations, out of the way so that both those who were near (the Old Covenant Jews) and those who were far away (Gentiles) might experience the forgiveness of sin and become one new man, the church, where there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, but they are one in Christ (Ephesians 2:11-18). The Law opposed the church by keeping Jew and Gentile apart. But this does not mean that the believer today is not without law. The law that the believer is under today is not the Mosaic Law or the Ten Commandments. The law of the New Covenant era is the Law of Christ (1 Corinthians 9:19-21).