

# The Commandments

THE STORY #5 - Pastor Gary Combs - March 1, 2026 - Exodus 20:1-21

**INTRO:** Good morning church! We're continuing our series called THE STORY: How the Bible Explains Everything. We're on a 12-week journey through the meta-narrative of Scripture. From creation to consummation, the Bible tells one great story of a good and holy God rescuing His broken world through Jesus.

So far, we've seen:

- The **Creation** – God made everything good and made humanity in His image to live under His loving rule. Yet, sin fractured our relationship with God, with one another, and with creation itself.
- The **Catastrophe** – Human wickedness multiplied until judgment came through the flood. Yet even in judgment, God showed mercy, rescuing a remnant through Noah and his family.
- The **Covenant** – God made a unilateral covenant with Abram, walking the Blood Path for both God and man and setting the stage for its fulfillment in Christ as the Seed of Abraham and His payment on the cross.
- The **Crossing** – God miraculously saved Israel from slavery in Egypt by His grace and power, leading them across the Red Sea on dry land and defeating Pharaoh's army.

Now today, in **The Commandments**, we see what comes after redemption. God saves His people first and then He speaks to them about how to live as His covenant people.

In today's message entitled THE COMMANDMENTS, we'll be looking at why God gave His law and what it reveals about His heart.

**Need:** Some of us view the Ten Commandments like a "ladder" that we have to climb to reach God. Yet as we labor to climb it, we either collapse in guilt or puff up in legalism. We need to realize that the Law isn't a ladder to earn God's love. It was given as a way of life for a redeemed people. If we misunderstand the purpose of the law, we will misunderstand God's character and our need for Christ.

**Trans:** So, let's look at the The Commandments, not as a cold legal contract, but as a covenant commitment between a Rescuer and His redeemed.

**BODY:** In Exodus 20, God declared the Ten Commandments to the Israelites at Mount Sinai to establish a holy covenant of laws for His people whom He had already graciously redeemed. We can discern the divine purposes behind the giving of God's law to His people. How can we discern the divine purposes behind the giving of God's law to His people? The text gives **three purposes** behind the giving of God's law to His people.

**Text:** Exodus 20:1-21 (ESV) <sup>1</sup> And God spoke all these words, saying, <sup>2</sup> "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. <sup>3</sup> "You shall have no other gods before me. <sup>4</sup> "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, <sup>6</sup> but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. <sup>7</sup> "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. <sup>8</sup> "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. <sup>12</sup> "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. <sup>13</sup> "You shall not murder. <sup>14</sup> "You shall not commit adultery. <sup>15</sup> "You shall not steal. <sup>16</sup> "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. <sup>17</sup> "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's." <sup>18</sup> Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off <sup>19</sup> and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." <sup>20</sup> Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin." <sup>21</sup> The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

## THREE PURPOSES FOR THE GIVING OF GOD'S LAW:

### 1. To remind us of His saving grace.

**EXP:** (1-2) Before God gives a single "Thou shalt not," He gives a "Who I am." He identifies Himself as the Lord who already brought them out of slavery. The Exodus (Grace) preceded Sinai (Law). Obedience is the response to rescue, not the requirement for it.

"God spoke all these words" (1) (דְּבָרִים, *dābārim*) - the "words." The Jews called them the "Ten Words," not commandments. These words are "more like the content of a national constitution than codified law" (Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus NAC*, 440). God the Deliverer now spoke the "words" of His covenant with His people aloud. As Moses later reminded them:

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Deuteronomy 5:22 (ESV) These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and he added no more. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me.

“**LORD your God**” (2; 5x) (יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, *yəhōvā 'ēlōhīm*) - Using His covenantal name, “Yahweh,” God uses the possessive for God. This is the first time in Scripture that God has called Himself their God. This is like the preamble to a marriage covenant or a Suzerain-Vassal Treaty. In this covenant, He describes “who He is” (Their Covenantal God and King) and “who they are” (His holy and chosen people).

“**Brought you out**” (2) (יָצָא, *yāṣā'*) - to bring out of; to lead out; to deliver. God is Deliverer!

“**House of slavery**” (2) - Out of Egypt (the world) and slavery (to sin).

**ARG:** **God’s grace and promise to Abraham preceded the Law by 430 years.**

Galatians 3:16-18 (NIV) <sup>16</sup> The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ. <sup>17</sup> What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. <sup>18</sup> For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on the promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.

**Salvation has never been about law-keeping. It has always been by God’s grace through faith. However, having received salvation, we have been “created in Christ Jesus for good works.”**

Ephesians 2:8-10 (ESV) <sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

"The Law does not come to a people who are seeking to find God, but to a people whom God has already found." — William Barclay

**ILL:** This chapter begins like a wedding vow: “Do you take this woman to be your wedded wife to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?”

You don't follow the "rules" of a marriage to get married; you follow them because you are married and you value the relationship. God declares Himself to be their God, their Husband and they, His wife.

**APP:** So to understand the purpose of the Law, we must first understand that God’s grace came first. The Law was never a "Plan B" for salvation because the "Plan A" of promise and grace was already in effect 430 years earlier to Abraham’s Seed, which is Christ. Skip verse 2, the Law becomes legalism. Start with verse 2, the Law becomes a response of gratitude.

## **2. To restrain us by His covenant love.**

**EXP:** (3-17) The Law acts as "guardrails" for the soul. The first tablet of five “words” help direct our relationship with God (Vertical); the second tablet of five instructs our relationship with others (Horizontal). They aren't meant to "steal our fun," but to keep us from “flying over the cliff” after sin and to keep us living within His covenantal, “steadfast love” (6). Indeed, you could say the first tablet might be summarized as “Love God” and the second tablet as “Love Neighbor.” Another way of looking at the Ten Words is to see them as a kind of Table of Contents for the other 603 laws (According to Jewish tradition there 613 total). These laws might be divided into three categories:

- **Moral** - Based on God’s character. The Ten Words (4th Commandment?) Universal and eternal. Binding.
- **Ceremonial** - Laws regarding sacrifices, purity, Temple. Fulfilled. In Jesus as the final, perfect sacrifice.
- **Civil** - Legal code of nation of Israel. Some say expired. It doesn’t apply to Christians.

**1:** “**No other gods before me**” (3) (אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים לֹא יִהְיֶה לְפָנַי, *al pānīm*) - over; above. Put God first.

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**2: “Not make for yourself a carved image” (4) (לִפְסֵל, *pesel*)** - an idol, carved (graven) image.

“Jealous God” (5) (אֱנָנִי, *qannā*) - jealous (only of God). Human jealousy is often insecure, self-centered, and reactive. God’s jealousy is covenantally righteous, flowing from His holiness, and protective of what is rightfully His: as in a Husband with His wife.

“Steadfast love” (6) (חֶסֶד, *hesed*) - favour, merciful, covenantal love. OT synonym for *agape*.

**3: “Not take the name ... in vain” (7) (אִשָּׁוּ, *šāv’*)** - vanity, emptiness of speech. This law is meant to protect the glory (weight) of God’s name. What kind’s of speech are forbidden? False speech invoking God (perjury, lying oaths), Trivial speech about God (flippancy), Manipulative speech in God’s name, Hypocritical living that empties His name of weight, ie. Calling yourself a Christian and living like the devil.

**4: “Remember the Sabbath” (8) (תָּבֻשָׁ, *šabāṯ*)** - Sabbath, rest. One of two stated in the positive. This “word” is unique among the 10. For it has both a ceremonial expression and a moral core. It’s ceremonial expression is seen as a “sign” for Israel:

Exodus 31:16-17 (ESV)...the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel.

Yet, as a sign the Sabbath is not commanded of believers for it was fulfilled in Christ.

Colossians 2:16-17 (ESV) <sup>16</sup> Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. <sup>17</sup> These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

Yet, it also has a moral core as it does guide us to restrain our workaholicism by resting 1 day out of 7, and to worship the Creator who created the world in 6 days and rested on the 7th.

**5: “Honor your father and your mother” (12) (כָּבֵד, *kābād*)** - heavy, weighty, honor, glory. 2nd of 2 in the positive. This command is a hinge in the 10. For it belongs to the 1st tablet as parents are God’s representatives, yet it also belongs to the 2nd tablet as they are also our fellow humans to love as neighbor.

**6: “Not murder” (13) (רָצַח, *rāṣaḥ*)** - to murder, slay, kill

**7: “Not commit adultery” (14) (רָצַח, *nā’āp*)** - commit adultery, that break wedlock; idolatrous worship (fig.)

**8: “Not steal” (15) (גָּנַב, *gānab*)** - steal, get by stealth

**9: “Not bear false witness” (16) (שָׁקַר, *šeqer* ‘ēd)** - lie, deception, falsehood; false witness.

**10: “Not covet your neighbor’s ...” (17) (חָמַד, *ḥāmad*)** - to desire, covet, take pleasure in, delight in.

**ARG:** Jesus said the whole law can be summarized as: “Love God, love your neighbor.”

Matthew 22:37-40 (ESV) <sup>37</sup> And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. <sup>38</sup> This is the great and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

**The apostle Paul says that it is now the love of Christ that “controls” us.**

2 Corinthians 5:14-15 (ESV) <sup>14</sup> For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; <sup>15</sup> and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

**ILL:** A fence around a playground on a cliffside. The fence isn't there to stop the children from playing; it's there to ensure they can play without falling to their deaths. The Law is God's "fence" around human flourishing.

**APP:** God’s commands are an expression of His covenant love. When we reject His design, we harm ourselves and others. True freedom is found inside God’s covenant love.

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## 3. To reveal to us our need for a Holy Advocate.

**EXP:** (18-21) The thunder and lightning at Sinai were terrifying because they revealed God's unapproachable holiness. The people realized they couldn't keep the Law perfectly, so they begged for an advocate. Moses went into the darkness for them, just as Jesus would later enter the darkness of death for us.

"Thunder ... lightning ... sound of the trumpet ... mountain smoking" (18) (שׁוֹפָר, *šōpār*) - shofar, trumpet. The thunder, trumpet, smoke, and fire: Signal the arrival of the Great King. Sinai becomes the template for divine appearance. Later prophets reuse this imagery (see Joel 2 and Nahum 1).

"People were afraid" (18) (נִוָּע, *nûa*) - to quiver, totter, shake, reel, stagger, wander, move

"Do not let God speak to us" (19) - same "word" as verse 1. Moses you go talk to God for us!

"Lest we die" (19) (מוֹת, *mût*) - to die (as penalty), be put to death; to die, perish (of a nation)

"God has come to test you" (20) (נִסָּה, *nāsâ*) - to test, try, prove, tempt, assay, put to the proof or test

"The fear of him" (20) (יִרְאָה, *yir'â*) - fear, terror; awesome. Fear (of God), respect, reverence.

"That you may not sin" (20) (חָטָא, *hātâ*) - to sin, miss, miss the way, go wrong, incur guilt;

"People stood far off" (21) (רָחֹק, *rāḥôq*) - remote, far, distant

"Moses drew near" (21) (שָׁגַח, *nāgāš*) - to draw near, approach. Moses moves in closer to God.

**ARG:** In Christ, we are called to be holy as He is, but He is our Advocate when we fail:

1 John 2:1 (ESV) My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

**The law was our guardian, but now**

Galatians 3:24 (ESV) So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.

**ILL:** A diagnostic scan doesn't heal you; it reveals what's wrong so you'll seek a surgeon. James compares the Law of God to a "mirror." He says that the one who looks in the "perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres and is a doer who acts will be blessed" (James 1:25).

**APP:** Don't let your failures drive you away from God; let them drive you to Christ. When you feel the "thunder" of a guilty conscience, remember you have an Advocate who has already satisfied the Law's demands.

**CONCLUSION:** Why did God give His law?

1. To remind us of His saving grace.
2. To restrain us by His covenant love.
3. To reveal to us our need for a Holy Advocate.

In THE STORY, Sinai is not the goal. It points forward. Because the law written on stone was never meant to be the final chapter. The writer of Hebrews tells us:

Hebrews 10:16 (ESV) This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds.

At Sinai, the law was written on tablets of stone. At Calvary and Pentecost, through Christ and His Spirit, the law is written on human hearts.

Jesus is the greater Moses who did not stand far off — He drew near. He fulfilled the law we could not keep. He bore the penalty we deserved. And now, through His Spirit, He empowers us to walk in loving obedience from the inside out. The commandments do not save us — Christ does. But the Christ who saves us also transforms us.

That is where THE STORY leads, not just to rules on stone, but to hearts made new in Jesus. Let's pray.