

## The Ten Commandments in Contemporary Life

What place could the Ten Commandments have in contemporary life? Are they at all relevant or applicable for us today? If so, how, if not, why not? The Ten Commandments undoubtedly have a hallowed place in the tradition and culture of Western civilisation. In many of the major Confessions and Catechisms of the church, we read expositions of the Ten Commandments as summaries of Christian living. We often hear claims to the effect that our system of law is based on the Ten Commandments. While there certainly has been considerable influence on the Western legal tradition from the Ten Commandments, and other portions of Biblical law, that is in fact a rather extravagant claim to make, which often merely results in some kind of sanctity being ascribed to our often flawed and inadequate legislation. The situation is far more complex than that, and it could be demonstrated that a significantly greater influence on our legislation comes from the Roman legal tradition via the Codes drawn up by the emperors Justinian and Theodosius, to say nothing of the Western liberal tradition of more recent times. Any legacy from Biblical law in our current legislation is but a pale reflection of what the Scriptures contain.

The Ten Commandments have been revered unwisely, but just as often reviled, not because they are fundamentally flawed or unjust, but because the wickedness of our human hearts rejects any restrictions placed upon complete fulfillment of their wants and desires. The complaints of the sinner against impediments to their crimes should have no impact on us, as we are not entitled to alter the Commandments to conform to our preferences and lusts. Thus we may not attempt to revise them, as has been attempted by one British clergyman. Listen to some of his alterations:

*Thou shalt venerate thy neighbour and thy human-scale neighbourhood above all other forms and degrees of human association.*

*Thou shalt enjoy the gift of sex I have given thee as thou wilt, but thou shalt not procreate excessively.*

*Thou shalt not steal from thy neighbour.*

Note the spurious attempt to gain acceptance of such radical, late-twentieth century notions by dressing them up in old-fashioned language, to imply some venerability to thoroughly contemporary ideas, ideas which would have been impossible to espouse at the time when such language was in common use. But note also how far they are from the Biblical text: thou shalt not steal from thy neighbour - everyone else is fair game, particularly if they are large corporations. Can you imagine the questions Jesus would have faced over this one: who then is my neighbour? Obviously in this perverted and self-centred approach, certainly not anyone who has anything that you want for yourself. What about sex? *Thou shalt enjoy the gift of sex as thou wilt*, in other words, give way to all your carnal desires and have no respect for the bond of marriage or decency or self-control. But note the contemporary no-no: not mindless, casual, promiscuous and unfaithful sexual expression, but excessive procreation. Don't mess up our fun by bringing too many people into this world; after all, we might just have to share what we have and what we want with too many others. Note too the restriction of concern for others to your immediate family and neighbours: these are to be venerated above all other forms and degrees of human association. What kind of national loyalty or integrity can we expect from such a man? Certainly his interests are given over to unrestrained self-gratification, without concern for anyone beyond his wider neighbourhood.

Or we could consider the opinions of Tariana Turia, who has suggested that the Treaty of Waitangi is more important to New Zealanders than the Ten Commandments. She expressed the view that the Ten Commandments came from another time and another culture, and are largely irrelevant to us here today. But the Treaty of Waitangi, well that's another story. This has been granted a status and veneration beyond its true value as a constitutional agreement, and has been ascribed religious and covenantal status out of all proportion. I don't want to argue about the status of the Treaty, simply to point out how our arbitrary and self-centred opinions easily replace of the Ten Commandments, which are quietly pushed into the background while our own preferences take centre stage. The Ten Commandments can be revered, revised and reviled, and thus we completely destroy their true worth.

No matter what we think of them, they form an indelible part of our heritage, and we cannot ignore them. But it is equally difficult for us to know how we should

understand them. They are after all part of the legal code of the people of Israel, an ancient text from another time, another place, another culture, another society. We now live in an island nation, about as far away from the land of Israel as it is possible to get, thousands of years later, in a technological society, with a totally different social and legal structure. We are governed differently, we live our lives differently, we relate to those around us differently. What relevance then can this ancient code have for us?

One of the main problems with deciding how to understand Ten Commandments and their relevance to us today, is that we also frequently misunderstand the Ten Commandments in their original context. We often treat the Ten Commandments as if they form a moral code that can stand on its own. People claim to be good Christians, and even non-Christians claim to be good people, because they live by the Ten Commandments. We hear calls for the Ten Commandments to be taught again in schools, to be used to give moral instruction to children.

But is it really possible for us to treat the Ten Commandments in this way? I would argue that we cannot, not because they are outdated or irrelevant or inapplicable, but because to do so violates the nature of the Ten Commandments themselves. They are not given to us as a moral code that somehow stands on its own, independent of the rest of Scripture. The Ten Commandments are Covenantal in character, and outside of the covenant relationship they have no meaning or moral suasion. At most they can provide some moral guidelines, or at least some of them can. But what force can the first few commandments have for someone who does not wish to acknowledge and worship God?

We are not able to keep the law of God as though it were simply a moral code, that stands independently of our relationship to the one who gave that code. The Ten Commandments first of all, stand as the beginning of the Law of God given to the people of Israel at Sinai. They do not stand on their own, and they do not form a moral code. They form the introduction to the Covenant God made with his people whom he has redeemed from slavery in Egypt. That is why the commandments begin not with a “Thou shalt not” but with a statement of relationship: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” Thus the Ten Commandments are not intended for all people, as a general moral code, but as

the bond between the Living God and the people he has called out for his own. There is nothing that indicates to us that the Ten Commandments were given to humankind as a whole, that Israel was merely the recipient and had the task of passing them on to others. No, these Commandments were meant for Israel, and thus it was Israel to whom they were given. They are not a particular expression of universal moral principles, which have their counterparts in other religions. There certainly are similarities, such as the prohibition of killing. But what does that mean in context? Is it simply a universal, commonly held principle applicable to all times and places regardless of whether or not we are Christians? No it is not. Not that killing is justifiable, but because this is not the intent of that commandment. It does not stand on its own: You shall not kill. It stands as an intrinsic part of the whole. Why are we forbidden to kill? Because God who redeems us, who created us in his image, calls us to respect each other and our relationship with him by respecting the lives of others, with whom we are also in relationship. That is its meaning, not a simple blanket condemnation of killing. Taken out of context, treated as an independent, isolated moral imperative, all we can say is: Do not kill. The appropriate response to that is, obviously, who says so, and why shouldn't I? And what can we say to that, then? Having amputated the law from its context, we cannot then try to smuggle the context back in later on in an attempt to shore up a crumbling moral imperative. We must treat the text as a whole as it demands to be treated.

The Commandments do not stand on their own, even for Israel. They are the beginning of the laws of God given to them through Moses. They are, if you like, a convenient summary of what was to follow, chapter headings perhaps, or even a preview, a trailer for the main feature. They give us the flavour, the main thrust, the broad outlines, the details of which are fleshed out in the remainder of the laws given in Exodus, and repeated in Deuteronomy, the book whose name is literally, the Second Law. The Ten Commandments, then, given to Israel, formed the basis of the covenant law which God gave them. What else did that covenant entail? It required the sacrifice of animals as reparation for the sins of the people. It required a temple, in which the ark of the covenant was placed, and where God was present with his people in a way unprecedented in human history. It required a nation of God's people, in a land dedicated to God, called to serve him as priests in the world, set apart from the

nations round about who worshipped idols and committed acts of unspeakable cruelty and immorality.

This covenant relationship is, then, unlike our relationship with God. True, we too have a covenant relationship with God, but that covenant is based not on the election of one nation above all others, to have a relationship with God that was not possible for those not part of that nation (or who were willing to identify themselves with that nation, such as Ruth and Rahab). Our covenant is based on the work of Christ, the incarnate Son of God, who took human flesh on himself and suffered and died for our redemption. We celebrate the new covenant in his blood, in the communion service where we partake of his flesh and blood in spiritual form. We no longer travel to a temple to sacrifice animals, because the perfect sacrifice has already been made. We no longer have to undergo circumcision to become a member of the nation of Israel, because now all people of whatever ethnic origin are accepted as part of the community of faith.

The essence of the law is given in the Ten Commandments, and the law which governed Israel was summarised there. But we find no indication that as a secular nation we are today called to keep these Ten Commandments in that form. We find absolutely no indication that we are to exhort others to obey the Ten Commandments as a moral code. And certainly there is no way in which the Ten Commandments can have any relevance at all for those who refuse to acknowledge God. After all, how can we comply with the command to discard all idols and worship God alone, if we are not prepared to worship God at all? How can we keep the Sabbath day holy, as a commemoration of the creative act of God in bringing all things into being in the beginning, if we are not prepared to see the world in which we live as God's handiwork, entrusted to our care as his stewards, and answerable to him for what we make of it? The Commandments make no sense to us, no sense at all, except as a covenant agreement between God and his people. If we reject that God, then there is little point in complying, even in outward form, with the commands he gave as the basis of the law for those who are his covenant partners.

We Christians are not called to keep these commandments today in the form in which they were given to Israel, not because they are no longer relevant, but because they have been republished under a different cover, reissued in updated form, brought to

completion in Christ. Now we are called to follow a New Commandment, to love one another as Christ has loved us. We are to live by the summary of the law that he gave us: to love God totally and completely, and to love others likewise. Does this then mean that we can ignore the Ten Commandments? By no means, because these are the laws that Christ has summarised for us, which we are obliged to keep. How can we keep the law according to the summary, if we neglect that which it summarises? We are not to ignore, or reject, or revise the Ten Commandments, but we are instead to understand them in a new light. We are not merely to refrain from adultery: we are to refrain even from enjoying the thought of adultery. We are not merely to refrain from murder: we are to refrain from hatred and resentment, and from harbouring murderous thoughts about another. We are not merely to refrain from coveting what another has; we are to offer others what we have ourselves to meet their need. Thus it is not easier to live under the Gospel, it is harder, for the law was limited in its effects, while the Gospel requires us to show love to everyone, and not just any kind of love, but the kind of love that Christ showed for us, calling us to lay down our lives for others.

Now that Christ has come to redeem us from the curse of sin and death, now that the law is being written in our hearts by the indwelling Holy Spirit, now that we have been made new and given new life, the Ten Commandments stand not as an accuser, a burden, a terror to us, pointing out our frailty and rebellion, but as a guide, a direction, a focus for us who love God and wish to honour and obey him. The Ten Commandments give us the content of our love, just as love now is the character of the law. That does not mean we can change the law to suit ourselves, or replace its content with subjective, personal preferences or legitimated desires. The law stands as a guide to the content of love.

But the main problem I have with those who wish to claim the Ten Commandments as an enduring moral code for all people, for all time, is that the commandments are thereby removed from the covenant, the relationship between God and his people. They are separated from the community of faith, and made into a set of rules, a code for proper conduct, a set of instructions for decent citizens to follow. This is to destroy the integrity, character and focus of the Ten Commandments, and to remove them from the sphere of faith! The Ten Commandments are given not to those who would learn how to be moral, or those who want to be good citizens, but they are given

solely to those who **believe**. And by ignoring this, what we in fact end up doing is destroying the gospel. We are called by God to have faith; to place our trust in our Creator, who took human flesh so as to die for our redemption. We are called to place ourselves in his care, to rely on his grace, and to be secure in his love. To call those who do not believe to obey the Ten Commandments is not only to expect them to live as though they believed, when they patently do not, but it is to deny them the message of the Gospel which they desperately need to hear.

We are to call those who do not believe, not to obey the Ten Commandments, as a moral code that stands on its own, but to call them to believe! We are saved by grace, and we receive that grace not by fulfilling works of the law, not by being good, moral, upright citizens, but by faith. After all, even if we comply with all the moral codes in the world, even if we are the most charitable, loving, upright, decent, clean-living people there are, if we do not have faith, we are still abandoned by God to our own devices. For the essence of faith is not that we do our utmost to please God, as if there is anything we can accomplish that will reconcile ourselves to him, but faith is to place our trust in God, accepting his way of salvation, his means of reconciliation, his path to renewed fellowship together. And God has declared that for that to happen, we must place our trust in Christ, have faith in him, and rely on the grace of God for forgiveness and cleansing from sin. The essence of faith is to seek salvation God's way. To declare instead that we will seek to be acceptable to God through keeping a moral code, through loving our neighbours, through living as decent, upright citizens who don't cheat on our taxes, is not to accept God's way, but perversely to insist on our own. God wishes to save us, and by his grace he has made a way for that to happen. That way is the way of faith in Christ, and that and that alone will he accept. We cannot demand that God accept us on our own terms, on other terms, on some other basis. We have no claim whatsoever on God, for after all, it is we who have gone astray. It is we who have sinned and incurred the penalty of everlasting death. It is we who have rebelled and sought to overthrow our rightful Lord. God did not have to do anything at all to save us, but through his unending love and goodness he has done so. It is God's grace and his grace alone that enables us to be saved, and to reject that grace by seeking instead to save ourselves by moral living, even by keeping the Ten Commandments which God himself has given, is to reject God's way in favour of our own. That is not the way of salvation, it is continuing, perverse rebellion cloaked

in the guise of religion and morality. It is false religion, it is artificial morality, it is the way of death, for God has declared that only those who have faith in Christ can be saved. We cannot insist that God allow us to be saved in some other way. We cannot demand that our own tawdry efforts at right living be accepted as sufficient to reconcile us to a holy God. We are in no place to demand anything of anyone, let alone God!

Thus the need of the day is not to impose the Ten Commandments as a moral code on ourselves, on others, on the nation as a whole. The need is to proclaim the loving offer of God in Christ, that by grace through faith we can be saved, and not only ourselves, but all those who will listen and turn away from their rebellion. We must preach Christ, not the law; faith, not works; grace, not human effort. Unless and until we do this, unless and until there is a renewal of faith in the people of this nation, any moralising and preaching the Ten Commandments will avail nothing. It cannot save us, it will not save us, because what is missing is the heart of the issue: we have not placed our faith in God, but in idols; we have not loved him alone, but the things that we have made for ourselves. The Ten Commandments contain within themselves the seed of renewal, if we could but see, for they are given to us as a call to faith, and to trust in God alone. If we treat them as a moral code, which we can follow in order to find salvation, we have misread them completely, and we have blinded ourselves to the truth.

Read again the story of the giving of the Ten Commandments to Israel and ponder on their response: they did not celebrate a moral code that would lead them into upright living; they trembled with fear at the Word of the Lord. Would that we too would see that the Ten Commandments are a fearsome thing, and reveal to us our own wickedness and rebellion. But we should not fear, because God has provided for our forgiveness in Christ, and we can be saved, because in his grace God is ever ready to accept those who come to him through faith in him. May God grant us that grace, and may we have faith in him and be saved.