

ISRAEL'S CORE COMMANDMENTS

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The List of Commandments

1. *Do not serve any God but the LORD.
2. *Do not make graven images or bow down to them*
3. *Do not use the LORD as a byword.
4. *Remember to set aside the Sabbath day for resting.
5. *Honor your father and mother.
6. *Do not commit murder.
7. *Do not commit adultery.
8. *Do not steal.*
9. *Do not lie.*
10. *Do not covet.*

The Structure and Content of the Laws

1. The Ten Commandments are a civil code in an interpersonal setting, the core statements of a national constitution for a theocratic entity—a political nation ruled by God. Exodus **20:6** speaks of God's showing lovingkindness to those who love him. Even the Sabbath commandment has an interpersonal intent, "*The seventh day is a 'Sabbath [rest] to the LORD your God.'*" As Jesus said, "*The Sabbath was made for mankind*" (Mark **2:27**). The listing in Deuteronomy **5** soon leads into the Shema, "*Hear, O Israel . . . Love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, and mind*" (**6:4**). The interpersonal informs the civil; the legal overlays the interpersonal in a way that does not vitiate that more basic reality.

2. Relationship to the LORD sets the framework for the rest of the commandments as they refer to his relationship to national Israel and to relationships between its citizens.

3. The importance of these injunctions is illustrated by their originally being inscribed on stone by "*the finger of God*" himself—both the first and second copies (Exodus **31:18**; **32:15-16**; **34:1, 28**; Deuteronomy **9:10**; **10:2-4**; **4:13**). Disobeying six of the ten was a capital crime—as asterisked above, punishable by stoning (Deuteronomy **22:24**), burning (Leviticus **20:14**), or the sword (Exodus **32:27**). Slander of a wife's honor is severely punished by lashes and fines (Deuteronomy **22:18-19**).

4. Exodus and Deuteronomy list the commandments in the same order. The partial lists in the New Testament do not reproduce that order (Matthew **19:18-19** = Luke **18:20**; Romans **13:8-10**; cp. James **2:11**).

5. Commandments 1-9 are overt, hence actionable by judges, but commandment 10 focuses inward on psychological concerns actionable by the LORD. The inner and the outer naturally combine because “*out of the heart flow the issues of life*” (Proverbs 4:23), and the outer trains the inner in the habits of righteous living.

6. Commandments 1-5 are vertical, 6-9 are horizontal, and 10 looks inward. The vertical precedes the horizontal, and respecting parents (5) splices between 1-4 and 6-10.

7. The commandments mix religious (1-3), patriotic (4), and moral elements since Israel was a theocracy. When the New Testament speaks of annulling the Law, it is speaking at the code level, which is replaced by a new code, so to speak the “law” of Christ (Colossians 2:14, “*nailed to the cross*”; Galatians 2-4). The new code/covenant re-incorporates most of these foundational principles. An individual civil item like Sabbath observance (Colossians 2:16) falls away because in the Christian era God’s people no longer constitute a political entity; the Sabbath was a sign between the LORD and that political entity (Exodus 31:12, 16-17) and was a memorial of the founding of that nation under Moses (Deuteronomy 5:15).

Religious ceremonial observances (beyond the Decalogue) have likewise dropped out because they were shadows of the grace and reality that Christ fulfilled (John 1:17; Hebrews 8:5; 10:1).

That leaves the basic features of divine worship and service as well as moral conduct that by nature do not change with time or place, being rooted in reality—the real nature of God, mankind, and the interpersonal relationships between them. So, the Law, of which the Ten Commandments were the core, prepared for the final personal revelation in the Messiah (Galatians 3:24-25). The core elements remain except for Sabbath observance because the other nine are inherently interpersonal.

8. Commandment 10 “bats clean-up”; it covers what 1-9 does not address specifically. Paul uses it to indicate the high level of righteousness the Law calls for (Romans 7:7-12). The last is the most invasive and pervasive of the ten. It was the commandment that the rich young ruler could not fully carry out though he thought he had kept the laws from his youth up: “*he was very rich*” (Luke 18:23 = Matthew 19:23 = Mark 10:22). Not coveting eliminates all forms and degrees of self-centeredness. The first and tenth commandments serve as bookends: the first sets the framework; the tenth sets the depth.

9. Eight commandments are worded primarily in the negative. That may reflect the general relationship between state (Israel) and church (personal relationships). National law (state) restrains and restricts evil from the worst downward in negative application while religion (church) works from the bottom up in positive formulation of attitude and motive. It stresses what people should do rather than nothing or instead, “*How does the love of God exist in people with means who see their brother in need and show no compassion?*” (1 John 3:17); it eliminates sins of omission and establishes a positive standard with no limits.

Furthermore, some negatives in these directives imply corresponding positives. To forbid lying implies telling the truth. The prohibition against coveting forestalls stealing. Not coveting even connects with respecting God above self-interests. Satan's temptation in the Garden was for us to decide right and wrong for ourselves (Genesis 3:4-7, 22). Paul calls coveting idolatry, having oneself as a kind of highest frame of reference (Colossians 3:5).

10. Governing a whole nation long-term by ten brief laws may seem surprising. The original copies covered two sides of just two stone tablets that Moses could carry down from Mount Sinai and up the mountain (Exodus 32:15; 34:4) and put in the ark of the covenant (Exodus 40:20; Deuteronomy 10:5). But that minimal legislation covers the essential bases. By implication they enjoin what is like them in kind, attitude, and motive; what are extensions of them, what are aspects of the situation each involves, and what are other degrees of these prohibitions. Using the LORD's name in vain includes blasphemy (Leviticus 24:10-16). From the law against murder Jesus inferred prohibition against anger and verbal abuse (Matthew 5:21-26)). He said that the law against adultery implied not nursing lust or using divorce to avoid adultery (Matthew 5:27-33). "*Honor your father and mother*" implies taking care of them when they cannot take care of themselves. Jesus used that principle as a corrective on the "Corban" practice, which allowed offspring to give assets to the temple instead of using them to care for parents (Mark 7:10-13). He presented his teaching as "*fulfilling the Law and the prophets*" (Matthew 5:17-20).

The even briefer summary of core directives, not included in the Decalogue, is covered by the First and Second Great Commandments: "*Love God*" (Matthew 22:36-38 < Deuteronomy 6:5) and "*Love your neighbor as yourself*" (Matthew 22:39; cp. 7:12; Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8 < Leviticus 19:18).

11. God issued the Decalogue after he had authenticated himself to the Jewish people by unleashing ten plagues on the Egyptians, by protecting the Israelites from those plagues, by delivering the Jews from bondage, by destroying Egypt's army in the Red Sea, by providing his people with water, manna, and quail in a wilderness that could not support a wandering nation of perhaps 2,000,000 people and their livestock. At the front of his covenant, he identifies himself as the LORD who gave all those benefits, and in the process demonstrated his supremacy over Egypt's gods and over nature itself. After issuing the commandments, the text records stupendous displays of thunder, lightning, trumpet sounds, thick darkness, and smoke rising from the mountain (Exodus 20:18-21). First, the LORD gave Israel reasons to trust him; then he called on them to respect and obey him and to live together according to these core commandments.