

# Introduction to the Ten Commandments

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## What about the numbers?

We are very used to referring to the various commandments by their numbers. So, what is the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment? You might be surprised to know that what I as a Lutheran pastor say it is would probably differ to what a Baptist pastor would say it is. You may be even more surprised to discover that the Bible does not designate which commandment is the 4<sup>th</sup> one.

The following is the 10 Commandments from Exodus 20:1-17 from the NIV translation – but all formatting, verse numbers, etc have been removed:

And God spoke all these words: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour. You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour."<sup>1</sup>

- Notice that they are not numbered! We will look at why we call these the 10 commandments shortly.
- Jews, Catholics, Lutherans, Protestants all number the 10 commandments a little differently. You can see a nice table of this on Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ten\\_Commandments](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ten_Commandments)
- Most Bible Translations use formatting to group the commandments, thus giving one particular take on the numbering an authoritative feel that the original text does not give. Go see how your Bible displays the passage above.

Here is the above again, with the start of every command highlighted:

And God spoke all these words: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. **You shall** have no other gods before me. **You shall not** make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. **You shall not** bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. **You**

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<sup>1</sup> [The New International Version](#) (Ex 20:1–17). (2011). Zondervan.

shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour. You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour."<sup>2</sup>

There are more than 10, and since there were not originally numbered, it is understandable that the grouping into 10 may end up with differences.

Following Luther's Small Catechism, we number the 10 commandments as follows:

1. You shall have no other gods.
2. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
3. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.
4. Honour your father and mother, that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.
5. You shall not murder.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall not steal.
8. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.
9. You shall not covet your neighbour's house.
10. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, workers, animals, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

It is quite common for books and posters about the 10 Commandments to use the numbering used by Calvin and the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. Our Lutheran Confessions (in particular Luther's Small and Large Catechisms) follow the numbering that is closer to that of the Catholic Church. Going back to the very first paragraph: I would say that the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment is "*Honour your father and mother...*" whereas many others would say "*Remember the Sabbath...*".

## They are Repeated

The 10 Commandments are repeated in Deuteronomy 5:6-21, and once again from the NIV Translation but without formatting etc:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labour and do all your

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<sup>2</sup> [The New International Version](#) (Ex 20:1–17). (2011). Zondervan.

work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day. Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbour's house or land, his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.<sup>3</sup>

## Why "ten" commandments?

We have seen the lack of numbering in the two listings of the 10 Commandments, however they are also not named the "10 Commandments" in their immediate context. Remember that the "Headings" in your Bible are useful additions – but they are not part of the original Biblical text.

Scripture refers to them as the "Ten Words" (though often translated "Ten Commandments") three times: Exodus 34:28, Deuteronomy 4:13 and Deuteronomy 10:4.

## Purpose of the 10 Commandments

As we read the passage from Exodus 20 above, does God say that if the Israelites follow the 10 Commandments (and other laws given) then he will notice them and rescue them? No! He has already rescued them – he has already done mighty deeds and has declared quite publicly that He is their God and they are his chosen people. The Commandments are given to show how the people should respond – instructions on how they should love God and love their neighbour.

As Christians, we also have been rescued. Our Lord Jesus Christ, through his life, death and resurrection, has rescued us from the power of sin, death and the devil. While we were dead in our sins, Christ died for us (cf Rom 5:8, Eph 2:5). As we come to grips with all that the Father has done for us through the Son and by the power of the Spirit, we respond with love for God and love for our neighbour. We also see that Jesus taught that all the Old Testament is summed up in "Love God" and "Love your neighbour" (Matt 22:37-40).

Notice that in the introduction to the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), the expert in the law says something very similar to what we see Jesus says above. This was not something new. Go and have a look at Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18 😊

As we come to the 10 Commandments, we will be looking at them afresh in the light of Jesus' teaching and in the revelation of the Cross. In particular, we need to remain focussed on all that Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7). Let us investigate how we as His people should live.

## Two Tables

The Commandments are often divided into two tables or two tablets – the first shows us how to "Love God", and the second shows us how to "Love our neighbour". For us Lutherans, we have 3 commandments in the first table, and 7 in the second.

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<sup>3</sup> [The New International Version](#) (Dt 5:6–21). (2011). Zondervan.

Scripture does tell us that Moses received the 10 Commandments on two stone tablets (Exod 32:15-16):

<sup>15</sup> Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. <sup>16</sup> The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets. <sup>4</sup>

But we are not told which commandments were written on which tablets. Some scholars think that following other ancient covenants that the same thing was written on each tablet. Though we group the commandments into two tables, we are not claiming that this grouping is how God presented them, rather that this is a useful approach. We also tend to overlook that this passage states that they were inscribed on the front AND the back 😊

## Mirrors are useful

As Christians, we know we should love God and love our neighbour, but if you are like me, then you have difficulty in doing this. Too often I listen to my sinful self and not to the Holy Spirit within me – and often I don't even realise I am doing that. This is where a mirror comes in. The commandments (and all of God's Law) are a good way of examining ourselves. If we don't measure up, then we need to turn back to Jesus – come back to the foot of the cross, confess our sin and receive the forgiveness that is always available. We can see the areas in our lives that we need to pray about, and ask God to help us with.

In the first of his 95 Theses, Luther wrote about Christians needing to have a life of daily repentance. God's Law shines a light on our sin, which sends us running to God's Gospel.

## References / Further Reading

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<sup>4</sup> [The New International Version](#) (Ex 32:15–16). (2011). Zondervan.