

# WRITTEN IN STONE

The Ten Commandments  
and Today's Moral Crisis

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*Written in Stone*

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## PREFACE

He who knows how to distinguish Gospel from Law should thank God and know that he is a theologian.” This statement from Martin Luther always gives me pause because I’m not sure that I can make such a claim. Few things are more difficult to master than the biblical teaching about the law in its relationship to the gospel. Yet my prayer is that as you read this book you will gain clearer insight into both what God demands in his law and gives in his gospel.

Good teaching on the law and the gospel has never been more badly needed than it is today. We are living in lawless times, when disrespect for authority has led to widespread disdain for God’s commandments. People are behaving badly, even in church. Part of the problem is that most people don’t know what God requires. Even among Christians there is an appalling lack of familiarity with the perfect standard of God’s law, and of course the situation is worse in the culture at large. This ignorance undoubtedly contributes to the general lowering of moral standards in these post-Christian times, but it does as much damage to our theology. People who are ignorant of God’s law never see their need for the gospel. As John Bunyan explained it, “The man who does not know the nature of the law cannot know the nature of sin. And he who does not know the nature of sin cannot know the nature of the Savior.”

This book is about God’s law—specifically, the Ten Commandments—but it is also intended to help people understand the gospel. The law is what shows us our need for the saving work of Jesus Christ. Then,

once we come to Christ by believing in the gospel of his cross and empty tomb, it shows us how to live for his glory. In the pages that follow I have tried to be practical, showing what the Ten Commandments mean for daily life. By way of illustration, I have chosen a Bible story that shows what happens when each commandment gets broken. I have also tried to be Christ-centered, constantly explaining how the law of God relates to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Like most of the books I have written, this one began in the pulpit of Philadelphia's Tenth Presbyterian Church. I owe a great debt of gratitude to Tenth's session and congregation for their prayers, their encouragement, and in this case their many requests to publish this material in book form. By all accounts, the preaching of the Ten Commandments was a blessing to our church, and our sincere hope is that it will be a blessing to you as well.

Several more thank yous need to be offered. One goes to my friends at Crossway Books for helping this book find its way into print (I should perhaps mention that it comes from a larger expositional commentary on the whole book of Exodus, which Crossway plans to publish in its Preaching the Word series). Another thank you goes to my sister Nancy Taylor for her hard work in preparing the questions at the end of each chapter. I am also grateful to my friends Randall Grossman, Jonathan Rockey, and David Skeel for their improvements to my manuscript; to Pat Russell and Danny Bombaro for helping prepare the indexes; and to David Madder for first suggesting the title *Written in Stone*. But the biggest thanks go to my wife, Lisa, for her partnership in ministry, and especially for the way she organizes our household so that my writing is not a sacrifice for our children.

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# WRITTEN IN STONE

*And God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."*

EXODUS 20:1-2

In their book *The Day America Told the Truth*, James Patterson and Peter Kim lay down the law for postmodern times. They observe that today there is “absolutely no moral consensus at all. . . . Everyone is making up their own personal moral codes—their own Ten Commandments.” Patterson and Kim proceed to list what they call the “ten real commandments,” the rules that according to their surveys people actually live by. These rules include the following:

- I don’t see the point in observing the Sabbath;
- I will steal from those who won’t really miss it;
- I will lie when it suits me, so long as it doesn’t cause any real damage;
- I will cheat on my spouse—after all, given the chance, he or she will do the same;
- I will procrastinate at work and do absolutely nothing about one full day in every five.<sup>1</sup>

These new commandments are based on moral relativism, the belief that we are free to make up our own rules, based on our own personal preferences. The law is not something that comes from God, but some-

thing we come up with on our own. And our laws usually conflict with God's laws. It is not surprising that what Patterson and Kim call the "ten real commandments" generally violate the laws that God gave to Moses: remember the Sabbath, do all your work in six days, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, and so forth. We have become a law unto ourselves.

One would hope to find that the situation is somewhat better in the church. Surely God's own people honor the permanent, objective standard of God's law! Yet the church is full of worshipers who do not even know the Ten Commandments, let alone know how to keep them. This problem was documented in a recent report from The Princeton Religion Research Center. The headline read, "Religion Is Gaining Ground, but Morality Is Losing Ground," and the report showed how recent increases in church attendance and Bible reading have been offset by a simultaneous decline in morality.<sup>2</sup>

How is this possible? How can people be more interested in God and at the same time less willing to do what he says? The only explanation is that people do not know the God of the Bible, because if they did, they would recognize the absolute authority of his law. Respect for God always demands respect for his law. And whenever people have a low regard for God's law, as they do in our culture, it is ultimately because they have a low regard for God.

### THE LORD YOUR GOD

If the law comes from God, then the best place to begin understanding the law is with God himself. This is precisely where the book of Exodus begins its presentation of the Ten Commandments, also known as the Decalogue, meaning "ten words": "And God spoke all these words" (Exod. 20:1).

To get a sense of who God is, it helps to remember the setting. God was speaking to the Israelites as they were gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai. Exodus 19 described how God descended on the mountain in great power and glory, with thunder and lightning, fire and smoke. The Israelites were forbidden to come any closer, upon the pain of death. They had come into the presence of the awesome and Almighty God,

who lives in unapproachable holiness. Obviously, whatever such a God has to say demands our fullest and most careful attention. What we received from Mount Sinai was not simply the law of Moses, but the law of *God*, spoken in the revelation of his glory. As Isaiah was later to write, “The LORD was pleased, for his righteousness’ sake, to magnify his law and make it glorious” (Isa. 42:21).

Although God revealed his glory in the fire and smoke on the mountain, he made a fuller disclosure of his deity when he began to speak. He said, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exod. 20:2). This verse is sometimes called the preface or prologue to the Ten Commandments. In it God defends his authority as the lawgiver. What gives God the right to tell people what to do? In the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, “The preface to the ten commandments teaches us, That because God is the Lord, and our God, and Redeemer, therefore we are bound to keep all his commandments” (A. 44).

God is the Lord. Here he uses his special covenant name *Yahweh*. He is the great I AM, the sovereign and Almighty Lord. He is the supreme, self-existent, eternal, and unchangeable God, who bound himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with the unbreakable promise of his covenant. Furthermore, he is our very own God. “I am the LORD *your* God,” he says. Somewhat surprisingly, he uses the second person singular, thus indicating that he has a personal relationship with each and every one of his people.<sup>3</sup> That personal relationship is also a saving relationship, for as God goes on to say, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exod. 20:2b). This was a summary of everything that had happened so far in Exodus. God was reminding the Israelites that he was not only their Lord and their God, but also their Redeemer. And it was on this basis that he laid down his law for their lives. It was Israel’s unique privilege to receive the law straight from God.

What God said to Israel is essentially the same thing he says to every believer in Christ: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the Egypt of your sin, out of your slavery to Satan.” Through the saving work of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, God is our sovereign Lord

and very own Savior, and thus he has the right to claim legal authority over us. The law comes from God, who is our Savior and our Lord.

### GOD AND HIS LAW

If the law comes from God, then it must reflect his divine character. This is true of rules and regulations in general: They reveal something about the rule-maker. To give just one example, consider the extensive federal regulations that govern handicapped access to public buildings. What do these laws tell us about the society that made them? They tell us that Americans want to include the disabled in the ordinary events of public life.

The law always reveals the character of the lawgiver. This was especially true at Mount Sinai, where every one of the Ten Commandments was stamped with the being and attributes of Almighty God. So what does each law tell us about the God who gave it?

The *first* commandment is, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3). Obviously the God who gave this command is jealous; he will not share his glory with any other god. And rightly so, because he is the one and only true God. All the others are impostors. The first commandment announces the unique sovereignty of the God who alone is able to say, “I am the LORD, and there is no other” (Isa. 45:18b). It also indicates his omnipresence, because it tells us not to have any other gods “before him,” meaning “in his presence” (this point is developed in Chapter 4).

The *second* commandment is, “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” (Exod. 20:4). This commandment is about worshiping the right God in the right way. God refuses to be worshiped by means of images. This shows that he is spirit, that he does not have a physical form. The mention of the heavens and the earth also shows that he is the Creator. One problem with idols is that they confuse the Creator with his creation. The commandment goes on to speak of God’s mercy and justice: “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 the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exod. 20:5-6). The God who gave the law is a God who makes absolute moral distinctions. He punishes sinners while at the same time showing his love to generation after generation of the people he has chosen to save.

The *third* commandment is about honoring God’s name: “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” (Exod. 20:7). The threat attached to this commandment shows that God expects to be obeyed. Those who break his law will be charged with guilt. The commandment itself shows that God is honorable, and that therefore he deserves to be treated with respect. Even his name is holy.

The *fourth* commandment is, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God” (Exod. 20:8-10a). This commandment shows that God is sovereign over all the events of daily life. He is Lord every day of the week. It also makes an explicit connection between what is commanded and the one who commands it, between God and his law: “For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Exod. 20:11). We are commanded to work and rest because we serve a working, resting God.

The first four commandments govern our relationship to God; the last six concern our relationships with one another. But even these commandments rest on various divine attributes. The *fifth* commandment is about respecting authority: “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you” (Exod. 20:12). What stands behind this commandment is God’s own authority as our Father. This is also the first command with a promise—the promise of long life in a good land, which shows how generous God is to provide for his people.

The *sixth* commandment is, “You shall not murder” (Exod. 20:13). This reminds us that God is the Lord and giver of life. He forbids the taking of innocent life because he is a life-giving God. Furthermore, this

commandment preserves his sovereignty over life's end. He is Lord over death as well as life.

The *seventh* commandment is the one that everyone knows: "You shall not commit adultery" (Exod. 20:14). What does this tell us about God? It tells us that he is a God of purity and faithfulness, a God who expects covenants to be kept. It also tells us that he is a God of joy, because this command preserves sex for the fellowship of marriage.

The *eighth* commandment is, "You shall not steal" (Exod. 20:15). The God who gave this commandment is our Creator and Provider. To keep it is to recognize that ultimately everything belongs to him, and that therefore we do not have the right to take what he has given to someone else.

The *ninth* commandment is to tell the truth: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exod. 20:16). This commandment comes from the God of truth, who is true in all he is, says, and does. As the Scripture says, "The Glory of Israel will not lie" (1 Sam. 15:29a).

The *tenth* commandment is about contentment: "You shall not covet" (Exod. 20:17a). Covetousness comes from a desire to possess what God has not given us. Like the eighth commandment, keeping this commandment requires faith in God's providence. God commands us not to covet because he can be trusted to give us everything we truly need. He is our provider.

One further divine attribute is revealed by the Ten Commandments as a whole, and that attribute is love. When Jesus summarized God's law he said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matt. 22:37-38; cf. Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18; Rom. 13:9). In other words, the Ten Commandments can be reduced to two commandments: love God and love your neighbor. So they are all about love. We love God by worshiping him and using his name properly. We love our parents by honoring them. We love our spouses by being faithful to them. We love our neighbors by protecting their lives, respecting their property, and telling them the truth.

The God who gave these commandments is a God of love, who wants us to love him and to share his love with others. As Jesus said, “Whoever has my commands and keeps them, he it is who loves me” (John 14:21a; cf. 1 John 5:3a). If that is true, then we cannot separate God’s law from God’s love.

To summarize, the Ten Commandments display the character of God. They reveal his sovereignty, jealousy, justice, holiness, honor, faithfulness, providence, truthfulness, and love.

When we see how God has poured himself into his law, it becomes obvious that he could not have given us any other commandments than the ones he gave. The Ten Commandments express God’s will for our lives because they are based on his character. This helps answer an ancient dilemma, one that Plato posed in one of his famous dialogues: Does God command the law because the law is good, or is the law good because God commands it?<sup>4</sup> The answer is, both! The law, with all its goodness, springs from the goodness of God’s character. The law is good because God is good, and his goodness penetrates every aspect of his law.

#### IT WILL NEVER PASS AWAY

The fact that God’s law expresses God’s character has many implications. One is that when we break God’s law we are making a direct assault on God himself. To worship another god is to deny God’s sovereignty; to misuse his name is to deny his honor; to steal is to deny his providence; to lie is to deny his truthfulness; and so forth. Every violation of the law is an offense against God’s holy character.

Another implication of the relationship between our Lord and his law is that the law is perpetually binding, that it remains in force for all persons in all places and at all times. Sovereignty, justice, faithfulness, truthfulness, love—these are God’s eternal attributes. He would have to un-God himself to set them aside. We should expect, therefore, that the law that expresses his eternal attributes has eternal validity.

This perhaps explains why God set the Ten Commandments in stone, writing them out with his own finger (Exod. 31:18; 32:16). A. W. Pink comments:

Their uniqueness appears first in that this revelation of God at Sinai—which was to serve for all coming ages as the grand expression of His holiness and the summation of man’s duty—was attended with such awe-inspiring phenomena that the very manner of their publication plainly showed that God Himself assigned to the Decalogue peculiar importance. The Ten Commandments were uttered by God in an audible voice, with the fearful adjuncts of clouds and darkness, thunders and lightnings and the sound of a trumpet, and they were the only parts of Divine Revelation so spoken—none of the ceremonial or civil precepts were thus distinguished. Those Ten Words, and they alone, were written by the finger of God upon tables of stone, and they alone were deposited in the holy ark for safe keeping. Thus, in the unique honor conferred upon the Decalogue itself we may perceive its paramount importance in the Divine government.<sup>5</sup>

The Ten Commandments were written in stone because they would remain in effect for as long as time endured. When would it ever be permissible to worship another god, to misuse God’s name, to lie, murder, or steal? Never, because these things are contrary to God’s very nature.

One way to prove that God’s law is eternal is to show that it was in effect even before God wrote it down. Exodus 20 is sometimes described as “the giving of the law.” However, these laws had already been given! The commandments God gave to Moses at Mount Sinai were not new; in fact, they were as old as the human race. We know this from the stories of the Bible, in which God often rebuked and punished people for breaking these very laws.

There are clear examples of commandment-breaking earlier in Exodus. The ten plagues God visited on Pharaoh were a direct punishment for Egypt’s idolatry, which violated the first and second commandments (Num. 33:4). Moses’ own personal exodus was occasioned by his violation of the sixth commandment (Exod. 2:11-15). At the burning bush God taught his prophet to honor his name (Exod. 3:1-15), very much in keeping with the third commandment. God revealed the Sabbath principle of the fourth commandment by giving manna six days out of seven, and those who failed to follow the appropriate instructions suffered for their disobedience (Exod. 16). So at various

points the exodus presupposed the existence of God's law, even before the Israelites reached Mount Sinai.

We find the same principle at work in the book of Genesis, which contains many stories about people breaking God's law. Noah's son Ham was cursed for dishonoring his father (Gen. 9:18-28). Cain was condemned as a murderer (Gen. 4:10-12), the Sodomites as adulterers (Gen. 19:24-25), Rachel as a thief (Gen. 31:19-32), Abraham as a liar (Gen. 20), and Lot's wife as a covetous woman (Gen. 19). God had always dealt with people on the basis of his law. Certain commandments had been revealed to them, and if they were written nowhere else, they were written on the tablets of their hearts (see Rom. 2:14-15).

God's moral law went all the way back to the Garden of Eden, where (in addition to various other commands concerning sexuality, rest, and work), God told Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Theologians argue about whether or not our first parents also knew any of the Ten Commandments. The Bible simply doesn't say. But whether or not God revealed any of its specific commands, Adam and Eve were ruled by its basic principles: love for God and love for one another. They were obligated to honor one another, to preserve life, and to tell the truth—the kind of conduct later mandated on Mount Sinai. And in their first sin, Adam and Eve managed to violate nearly all ten of God's basic rules. Taking the forbidden fruit was a theft, stimulated by a covetous desire, based on a lie about God's character. Eating it was a way of having another god. It was also tantamount to murder because it led to the death of the entire human race. From the beginning our first parents were bound by the basic principles of what theologians call "the law of creation" or "the law of nature."

So to summarize, God's law was in effect in various ways long before the Israelites ever reached Mount Sinai. What, then, were the Ten Commandments? Think of them as a fresh copy. They were a republication, in summary form, of God's will for humanity. As Peter Enns comments, "The 'giving' of the law at Sinai is not the first time Israel hears of God's laws, but is the codification and explicit promulgation of those laws."<sup>6</sup> This makes perfect sense when we remember

that the Ten Commandments express the character of God, who does not change.

### THE LAW OF CHRIST

Is the law still binding today? This is a vital question. Do the Ten Commandments have any abiding relevance for Christians and the culture in which we live? Once we understand the relationship between our Lord and his law, this question is easy to answer: Yes, God's law is still binding today! His standard has not changed, any more than his character has changed. As ABC's Ted Koppel said in his now famous commencement address at Duke University, "What Moses brought down from Mount Sinai were not the Ten Suggestions . . . they are commandments. *Are*, not were."<sup>7</sup>

Some people deny that God's law is still in effect today. This denial is obviously made by many non-Christians, who act as a law unto themselves. But even many people in the church pay little attention to God's law. This is partly because of the lawlessness of our surrounding culture, but it also comes from the way some Christians read the Bible. After all, the New Testament makes a number of statements that seem to set aside the Old Testament law. For example, according to John, "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). Likewise, the apostle Paul wrote, "You are not under law but under grace" (Rom. 6:14), and "Now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian [the law]" (Gal. 3:25; cf. 5:18). These and similar statements would seem to suggest that God's law has been superseded. On the other hand, the New Testament also seems to claim that the law remains in effect. It claims that we are "under the law of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21), for example, or even that "It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void" (Luke 16:17).

This is not the place to give a full exposition of everything the Bible says about God's law. But it is vitally important to understand that one reason the New Testament talks about the law in several different ways is because there are several different kinds of law. Here we should at least make a distinction between three types of law: the

moral, the civil, and the ceremonial. These were all given in the Old Testament, sometimes interspersed. But in order to make sense of the law—and ultimately of the gospel—they must be carefully distinguished, as we see them through the clear lens of the person and work of Jesus Christ. “It is of the utmost importance,” writes Ernest Reisinger, “to discern the differences between the ceremonial law, which pertained to the worship of Israel and prefigured Christ; the civil or judicial laws, which detailed the duties to Israel as a nation (having their roots in the moral law, particularly in the second table); and the moral law, by which the Creator governs the moral conduct of *all* creatures for *all* times.”<sup>8</sup>

The *moral law* is summarized in the Ten Commandments. It is the righteous and eternal standard for our relationship with God and with others. The *civil law* consisted of the laws that governed Israel as a nation under God. These included guidelines for waging war, restrictions on land use, regulations for debt, and penalties for specific violations of Israel’s legal code. The *ceremonial law* consisted of regulations for celebrating various religious festivals (e.g., Exod. 23:14-19) and for worshipping God in his sanctuary (e.g., Exod. 25—30). It included laws for clean and unclean foods, instructions for ritual purity, guidelines for the conduct of priests, and especially instructions for offering sacrifices—the whole sacrificial system (see Leviticus). God gave detailed regulations that covered specifics like who was supposed to cut which animal’s throat, and how, and what was to be done with the blood.

The ceremonial law is no longer in effect; it has been abrogated. This is because all its regulations pointed forward to Jesus Christ. Concerning the Old Testament ceremonies, the Scripture says, “These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col. 2:17; cf. Heb. 10:1). This is most obviously true of the sacrifices. Now that Christ has offered himself as the once-and-for-all atonement for sin, no further sacrifice is needed. To continue to follow the old ceremonies would be to deny the sufficiency of his work on the cross. One of the errors of the theological perspective known as dispensationalism is to imagine that the old ceremonies and sacrifices will be reinstated in Israel.<sup>9</sup> But the sacrificial system has been superseded by Christ, and the

only two ceremonies still in effect—the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper—both look back to his cross.

The civil law has also expired, but for a slightly different reason: The church is not a state. We do have a king (namely, Christ), but his kingdom is spiritual. Therefore, although the civil laws of the Old Testament contain principles that are useful for governing nations today, God’s people are no longer bound by their specific regulations. The basic error of the theological perspective known as theonomy (or “Christian reconstruction”) is to imagine that civil laws from the time of Moses should still be enforced in America today. This is what some people mean when they talk about restoring a “Christian America.” But as Calvin recognized, this approach to politics is “perilous and seditious” because like the ceremonial law, the civil law has been superseded by Christ.<sup>10</sup> Today the people of God are governed instead by church discipline, which is based on the moral law, and which has spiritual rather than civil consequences.

The distinction between these three kinds of law—the moral, the civil, and the ceremonial—helps us understand what the New Testament teaches about God’s law. The ceremonial law and the civil law were types and figures pointing forward to the cross and kingdom of Christ. Now that he has come, they have been set aside, which is why the New Testament sometimes seems so dismissive of the law. As we have seen, what are now in effect are the sacraments and discipline of the church, which echo the ceremonial and the civil law respectively. The New Testament also completely rejects the idea that we can be justified by keeping the law. It is in this sense especially that we are no longer “under law” (Rom. 6:14; Gal. 5:18). Our salvation does not depend on our ability to keep the law. As we shall learn in the next chapter, we are unable to keep it, and therefore we cannot be declared righteous by it (Rom. 3:20). But since our natural inclination is to think that we *can* be saved by our own obedience, the Bible condemns any and every attempt to use the keeping of God’s law as a way of justifying ourselves.

What the New Testament never does, however, is to declare an end to God’s moral law as the standard for our lives. It is still, in the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith, “a perfect rule of righteous-



ness” (19.1), or as Calvin termed it, the “true and eternal rule of righteousness.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Ernest Reisinger describes the moral law as “the eternal standard of right moral conduct—a fixed, objective standard of righteousness.”<sup>12</sup> This makes sense when we remember the close relationship between the moral law and the character of the Lord who gave it. The moral law is as eternal as God is.

Furthermore, the character of God is also the character of his Son Jesus Christ. The Bible teaches, “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:3a). Jesus is one and the same as the God who revealed his law to Moses; the law expresses the character of the Son as well as of the Father. Therefore, to try and separate the God who gave the law from the God who has shown his grace in the gospel would practically be to divide the Trinity. The Son is every bit as sovereign, jealous, life-giving, faithful, truthful, and loving as the Father revealed himself to be in the Ten Commandments.

Given the close relationship between God and his law, and between the Father and the Son, it is not surprising that Jesus warned us, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (Matt. 5:17-18). Clearly Jesus was speaking about the moral law, at least in part, because he went on to say, “Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:19). The law of Moses is not simply the law of God; it is also the law of Christ.

## THE RIGHT WAY TO LIVE

Our focus throughout the rest of this book will be on God’s moral law. One way to prove that this law is still binding is to show how, in one way or another, all ten of the original commandments are repeated in the New Testament, either by Jesus himself or in the teaching of his apostles.

When the New Testament lists the sins that lead to condemnation,

or the acts of obedience that are pleasing to God, it sometimes follows the outline of the Ten Commandments (e.g. Matt. 15:19; 19:17-19; Rom. 7:8-10; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 1 Tim. 1:9-11; Rev. 21:8). But the commandments are also treated individually. The *first* commandment tells us to have no other gods. Jesus made essentially the same claim about himself: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6; cf. Acts 4:12). The *second* commandment forbids idolatry. John said, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21). The *third* commandment tells us to honor God's name, which is exactly the way Jesus taught us to pray: "Hallowed be your name" (Matt. 6:9). The *fourth* commandment is about working and resting. As believers in Jesus Christ we are told that whatever we do, we should work at it with all our hearts (Col. 3:23). We are also told that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath (Matt. 12:8), and that there remains "a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (Heb. 4:9).

The first four commands are about loving God, but what about loving our neighbor? In the *fifth* commandment we are bound to honor our parents. This command is repeated by the apostle Paul: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother'" (Eph. 6:1-2a). Next, without in any way changing the *sixth* commandment, Jesus clarified its true spiritual purpose when he said, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder' . . . But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" (Matt. 5:21-22a). Jesus did the same thing with the *seventh* commandment: "I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:28). As for the *eighth* commandment, the New Testament says, "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor" (Eph. 4:28a). And with regard to the *ninth* commandment, the Scripture says, "Do not lie to one other" (Col. 3:9a). Finally, the *tenth* commandment forbids coveting, which the apostle James condemns by saying, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" (James 4:3).

Is the law still binding today? Of course it is! As the Bible demonstrates all the way through, the Ten Commandments show us the right

way to live. They are based on the righteousness of God, which explains why even the New Testament has so many positive things to say about God's law. "Do we then overthrow the law?" asks the apostle Paul. "By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law" (Rom. 3:31). Later he goes on to describe the commandments as "holy and righteous and good" (Rom. 7:12) and to insist that he is "not . . . outside the law of God" but remains "under the law of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21).

So much for the law. But what about the gospel? We will attempt to give a fuller answer to this question in the coming chapters. But the answer basically goes like this: It is our breaking of the law that helps us see our need for the gospel. The more clearly we see what God's law requires, the more obvious it becomes that we cannot keep its commands, which is exactly why we need the gospel. We cannot be saved by our own keeping of the law because we do not keep it. But Jesus did! He kept the whole law on our behalf. Perfectly. More than that, in his death on the cross he suffered the penalty we deserve for our failure to keep God's law. Now everyone who believes in Jesus Christ will be saved by his keeping of the law and by his suffering of its curse.

As believers in Jesus Christ, do we still need to keep God's law? Yes. The moral law expresses God's perfect and righteous will for our lives. So Jesus commands us to keep it, not as a way of getting right with God, but as a way of pleasing the God who has made us right with him.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How many of the Ten Commandments can you list (without peeking!)?
2. What does the prologue "I am the LORD your God" tell us about God and his relationship with his people?
3. What do the first four commandments tell us about God's character?
4. Look at each of the Ten Commandments and discuss how each one relates to the law of loving God and our neighbor.
5. How do we know that God's laws are eternal—binding before and ever since he gave them?
6. Some Christians use the New Testament to argue that they no longer need to obey the Ten Commandments. Why are these arguments ineffective?

7. Can we be justified by the law? Why or why not?
8. What are the purposes of the law?
9. In what ways does Jesus fulfill the whole law of God?
10. “Whenever people have a low regard for God’s law . . . it is ultimately because they have a low regard for God.” What are some areas in your life where your actions and attitudes show a high regard for God and his law—specifically, the Ten Commandments? What are some areas that need some work?

# NOTES

## CHAPTER 1: WRITTEN IN STONE

1. James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth* (New York: Plume, 1992), 201.
2. "Religion Is Gaining Ground, but Morality Is Losing Ground," *Emerging Trends*, Vol. 23, No. 7 (September 2001), 1-2.
3. It is also possible to interpret the second person singular as a collective addressing the nation of Israel as a corporate person. But even if the entire nation is in view, the effect of the singular is to personalize the law.
4. The dilemma is posed in *Euthyphro*, where Plato has Socrates ask, "Do the gods love an act because it is pious, or is it pious because the gods love it?" See Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Socrates to Sartre: A History of Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), 38.
5. A. W. Pink, *The Ten Commandments* (Swengel, PA: Reiner, 1961), 5.
6. Peter Enns, *Exodus*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 371.
7. Ted Koppel, quoted in Cal Thomas, *Los Angeles Times* (1994).
8. Ernest C. Reisinger, *The Law and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997), 54.
9. Over against covenant theology, classic dispensational theology believes in the future restoration of Israel as a nation under God, complete with the rebuilding of the temple and the reestablishment of the Old Testament sacrificial system.
10. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics, 20-21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), IV.xx.14.
11. John Calvin, *John Calvin's Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, ed. and trans. Benjamin W. Farley (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), 24.
12. Reisinger, *The Law and the Gospel*, 69.

## CHAPTER 2: A MULTI-USE ITEM

1. These three illustrations come from Randall Grossman, who pastors Grace Bible Fellowship Church in Reading, Pennsylvania.
2. Jochem Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1996), 4.
3. Martin Luther, as recounted in Michael S. Horton, *The Law of Perfect Freedom* (Chicago: Moody, 1993), 263.
4. Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (1692; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 14.
5. J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (1879; repr. Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1979), 26.
6. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, quoted in R. C. Sproul, *The Soul's Quest for God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1992), 111-112.
7. *Stone v. Graham*, quoted by Ronald B. Flowers in *Liberty* (July/August 2000), 4.
8. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics, 20-21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), II.vii.6.
9. Augustine, in Calvin, *Institutes*, II.vii.9.
10. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians, 1535*, trans. and ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 26:327.
11. John Calvin, quoted in Ernest C. Reisinger, *The Law and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997), 28.
12. Charles Spurgeon, *Parables and Miracles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 3:413.
13. Baloo, *National Review* (October 11, 1999), 51.
14. Luther, *Galatians*, 26:309.
15. Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Exposition of Bible Doctrines, Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point*