

LECTURE 2: THE MORAL LAW AND THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

The moral law codified in the Mosaic covenant

Given formally in the Ten Commandments

“This law, after his [Adam’s]fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables; the first four commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six our duty to man.” (WCF 19:2)

Ten Commandments given, Exod 20:2-17; Deut 5:6-21

Two tables of the law, possibly reflecting division of commandments into two parts: toward God and toward man, Exod 31:18; 34:1; Deut 4:13; 5:22. If divided by length in the Hebrew text, the Preface through #3, and #4 through #10. Another possibility is that the two tablets are two copies (for God and for Israel; see Meredith Kline, *Treaty of the Great King*, p. 19).

Exactly Ten Commandments, Exod 34:28; Deut 4:13; 10:4

These Ten Commandments codify the moral law of God (WCF 19:2, WLC 98, WSC 41; see exposition below).

The form of these commandments is fairly unique in the ancient Near East. Nearly all other ancient Near Eastern law codes employ exclusively casuistic law forms (“if someone does something, then this is the penalty”). But the Ten Commandments are in the apodictic form (“you shall/shall not do something”). There are very few other examples of apodictic law in the ANE.

A rare example of ANE apodictic law: Code of Hammurapi #36, “In no case is the field, orchard, or house belonging to a soldier, a commissary, or a feudatory salable.”

Sprinkled throughout the Mosaic law

In addition to the Ten Commandments themselves, portions of the moral law are repeated and expanded in the rest of the Mosaic legislation.

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Example of the “book of the covenant” (Exod 20:23 - ch. 23); note 22:22, 28; 23:1-2, 12, 24.

Summarized in the two great commandments

1st great commandment: Deut 6:5, Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

2nd great commandment: Lev 19:18, Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

Recognized throughout the OT as superior to the ceremonial law

Examples:

Isaiah 1:10-17,

Hear the word of the LORD,
you rulers of Sodom;

listen to the law of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!

“The multitude of your sacrifices —
what are they to me?” says the LORD.

“I have more than enough of burnt offerings,
of rams and the fat of fattened animals;

I have no pleasure
in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.

When you come to appear before me,
who has asked this of you,
this trampling of my courts?

Stop bringing meaningless offerings!

Your incense is detestable to me.

New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations —

I cannot bear your evil assemblies.

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Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts

my soul hates.

They have become a burden to me;

I am weary of bearing them.

When you spread out your hands in prayer,

I will hide my eyes from you;

even if you offer many prayers,

I will not listen.

Your hands are full of blood;

wash and make yourselves clean.

Take your evil deeds

out of my sight!

Stop doing wrong,

learn to do right!

Seek justice,

encourage the oppressed.

Defend the cause of the fatherless,

plead the case of the widow.

Amos 5:21-24,

"I hate, I despise your religious feasts;

I cannot stand your assemblies.

Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,

I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,

I will have no regard for them.

Away with the noise of your songs!

I will not listen to the music of your harps.

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But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Compare 1 Cor 7:19, "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts."

The moral law reaffirmed in the NT

Reaffirmed by Christ

The two great commandments, Matt 22:36-40; Luke 10:26-28

The Ten Commandments, Matt 19:16-19 = Luke 18:18-20 (reaffirms Coms. #5-9)

Reaffirmed by Paul

Ten Commandments reaffirmed in Rom 2:21-23 (Coms. #1-2, 7-8); and Rom 13:8-10 (Coms. #6-8, 10, and "any other")

The moral law still in force

It is applicable to Christians, as well as all other people (WCF 19:5, WLC 95-97; cf. verses cited below).

Christ did not abolish the moral law; rather, as Matt 5 shows, he strengthened our understanding of it by instilling in us God's original purpose and interpretation. Verses which apparently contrast law and grace (as John 1:17) in no way abrogate the law; they simply turn us to the grace of God in Christ for our salvation.

Many claim that the moral law, as interpreted in Scripture itself in various situations, is culturally conditioned to such an extent that we can define right and wrong in a way "more advanced" than that found in the Bible, even in the NT. For an excellent refutation of this viewpoint, see Wayne Grudem, "Should We Move Beyond the New Testament to a Better Ethic?" *JETS* 47:2 (June 2004) 299-346 (a detailed review of William J. Webb, *Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*).

Uses of the moral law

The Westminster standards list several uses of the moral law (WCF 19:6, WLC 97):

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1. It shows us God's will for conduct, Ps 119:4-6; Rom 7:12; Gal 5:14.
2. It shows us our sin and pollution, Rom 3:20; 7:7.
3. It convicts us of sin, makes us more humble, Rom 7:9, 14, 24.
4. It shows us the perfection of Christ, and our need for him, Rom 8:3-4; Gal 3:24.
5. Its threats show us God's hatred for sin, and warn us against sin, Ezra 9:13-14; Ps 119:101, 104, 128; Heb 10:26-31.
6. Its promises show us God's love of obedience, and inspire us to live righteously, Ps 19:11; Eph 6:2-3; Heb 12:1.

It should be noted that many of these verses refer to the Mosaic law in general, which contains civil and ceremonial laws as well as the moral law. Yet the import of these verses emphasizes the moral aspects of the law, and clearly reveals the principles spelled out in the Westminster standards.

The moral law must be our guide in life, even though we live under God's grace (Heb 12:28-29). The moral law is harmonious with the gospel:

WCF 19:7, "Neither are the forementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the gospel, but do sweetly comply with it; the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely and cheerfully, which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done."

It is clear that we are not saved by keeping the law (Gal 2:16); but, if we are saved, then we will desire to keep the moral law of God. This change in attitude toward the law is the essence of the promise of the new covenant, as it relates to the heart (note esp. Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:26-27; and Heb 8:10, 13).

Jer 31:33, "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."

Ezek 36:26-27, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

Heb 8:10, 13, This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. . . . By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.

Identity of the Ten Commandments

It is clear from Scripture that there were Ten Commandments, written on two tables (see above). These Ten Commandments were written by God himself, emphasizing their great importance (Exod 31:18; 32:15-16; 34:28). Jesus also accepted the division into the two parts (cf. Matt 22:36-40).

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The text of the commandments is given to us in two places; the only question is the manner in which the ten are to be divided and identified.

Reformed and early Jewish numbering

Reformed Protestant churches have followed the numbering system practiced by the Jews in the time of Christ (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 3:5:5 [pp. 70-71]; Philo, who reverses #6 and #7, as the LXX does).

Duty to God: 1) No other gods
2) No images or idols in worship
3) Name of God
4) Sabbath day

Duty to man: 5) Honor parents
6) No murder
7) No adultery
8) No stealing
9) No false witness
10) No coveting

Later Jewish numbering

The Jews after the time of Christ taught in the Talmud that the word “commandment,” דְבָרָא *dabar*, be translated as “word,” the literal meaning. Then they said that the introduction to the commandments in Exod 20:2 was the first “word.” The next two commandments were combined into one, thus making the ten.

Duty to God: 1) Identity of God
2) No other gods or images
3) Etc., as in Reformed version

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For a modern practical treatment of the commandments from the Orthodox Jewish perspective, see Laura Schlessinger (“Dr. Laura” on the radio) and Rabbai Stewart Vogel, *The Ten Commandments: The Significance of God’s Laws in Everyday Life* (1998).

Roman Catholic and Lutheran numbering

Saint Augustine (ca. A.D. 400) suggested that the first two commandments be combined, as the Jews were then doing. But he made up for the ten by dividing the tenth commandment into two parts. Augustine followed the order in Deuteronomy and made the ninth commandment, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife,” and the tenth commandment against coveting his property. The church of that time was encouraging the use of images in churches, and therefore accepted this arrangement, since it linked images to the worship of the other gods, not to the true God. However, unlike the Lutherans (who follow Augustine), the Roman Catholics have adopted the order of Exodus, making the ninth commandment “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house.”

Duty to God: 1) No other gods or images

2) Name of God

3) Sabbath day

Duty to man: 4) Honor parents

5) No murder

6) No adultery

7) No stealing

8) No false witness

9) No coveting house (Lutherans: wife)

10) No coveting wife or property (Lutherans: property)

Evaluation of numbering systems

The Reformed system seems the best for these two reasons:

1. It was the system used by the Jews in the time of Jesus, and therefore probably by Jesus himself.
2. It is the most logical division. The commands regarding coveting apparently belong to one commandment, as they speak of the same sin, only in different manifestations; plus, the different order in Exodus and Deuteronomy indicates that the items coveted are considered as a group. The second commandment, regarding the manner of worship of the true God, is quite

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different in content from the first, which is concerned with the object of worship being the true God, as opposed to false gods (see, e.g., the golden calf incident, Exod 32:5, 8). Therefore, the first two commandments should not be combined into one.