

**The Ten Commandments**  
**Deuteronomy 5**  
**Week 2**

**Opening**

***For leaders of virtual or hybrid groups:***

*Be sure to hop onto the video call a bit early so group members aren't anxiously, awkwardly waiting. Remember you are the host, so just as if you were welcoming folks into your home, use these first few moments to welcome each participant by name. It means a lot to acknowledge everyone on the call and confirm you can see and hear them. If there are new folks joining your group, be sure to introduce them as well.*

Ask if anyone would like to open in prayer. They can pray on their own or use the prayer printed below. It also might be a good idea to reach out to a group member prior to your meeting and ask them ahead of time if they'd be willing to open in prayer. That's a great way to encourage participation without putting anyone on the spot.

*Gracious God, as we come together to place our lives in front of your Holy Word, we pray that you would give us wisdom and understanding. May we approach this sacred text with humility, curiosity, expectancy and love. Be among us and in our conversation through the power of your Holy Spirit. We pray in the name of the one to whom this whole story points, Jesus the Christ, amen.*

Depending on time constraints you may want to take a bit of extra time to check in with folks and see how they're doing. You could also wait and do this at the end of the session before closing in prayer.

**Check-in question**

*Each week, give an opportunity for folks to either respond to the check-in question below or, if they'd rather, share something that came up for them as they were reading the other texts assigned for the Big Read this week.*

What was the worst discipline you received while growing up? What had you done to warrant it? Did it change your behavior? How?

**Background**

The Ten Commandments are the heart of biblical law. This law is not only a collection of rules, but also a story. If one jumps straight to the rules without understanding the story in which the rules are embedded, then one is likely to misunderstand the rules themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Let's begin by recognizing the great significance of the Ten Commandments according to Scripture. Repetition, placement, highlighting, divine authorship all serve to tell the community of faith that here is the foundational word for your life as God's people.

1. Unlike any other body of instruction in the Old Testaments, the 10 Commandments are given TWICE, once in the narrative of the events at Sinai (Exodus 20) and again when Moses recalls those events as the people prepare to go into the land (Deut. 5).
2. The Commandments are given by the Lord DIRECTLY to the people ("face to face" Deut. 5:4) and this is the only time such direct speech to the whole people takes place. The rest of the statutes and ordinances are given to Moses to be taught to the people, differentiating them from the Commandments.
3. The Commandments are written by the FINGER of God on STONE, to make clear their source and endurance.
4. They are placed in the ark of the covenant, the Lord's dwelling place in the midst of the people (Deut. 10:5), while the other instructions are written on a scroll and put beside the ark, not in it (Deut. 31:24-26).

While virtually all religious groups discern in this chapter then commandments, there are different judgments about how they should be numbered. The numbering traditional in the Reformed Churches is followed here<sup>2</sup>:

*Prologue (v. 6)*

*First: against polytheism (v. 7)*

*Second: against image worship (vv. 8-10)*

*Third: against misuse of God's name (v.11)*

*Fourth: sabbath observance (v. 12-15)*

*Fifth: honor of parents (v. 16)*

*Sixth: against murder (v. 17)*

*Seventh: against adultery (v. 18)*

*Eighth: against stealing (v. 19)*

*Ninth: against false witness (v. 20)*

*Tenth: against covetousness (v. 21)*

### ***The Prologue (verse 6)***

**"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."**

1. Establishes relationship as the context in which the Commandments are to be lived out. "I am the Lord, YOUR God", the phrase "YOUR God" is reiterated so much in

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<sup>1</sup> Mann, Thomas W. *Westminster Bible Companion: Deuteronomy*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Miller, Patrick D. *Interpretation: Deuteronomy*. John Knox Press, 1990.

the Commandments that it almost becomes a part of the name and is clearly a part of the identity of God.

2. Obligation arises out of covenantal relationship.
3. The ethic of the Commandments is not a general ethic. Worship by this community is not a general requirement. It is in RESPONSE to the One who has saved the community from bondage. The ethic of the Commandments is as much an ethic of gratitude and response as it is an ethic of obligation and duty.<sup>3</sup>

***First Commandment: No Other Gods (5:7)***

The first commandment flows directly out of the prologue and is the most important word of the Lord to the people. The one who has saved them now stakes a claim on their exclusive loyalty. There can be for this people no other final claim on their allegiance. This commandment is positively stated in the Shem (“to hear”) of Deut. 6:4-5.

***Second Commandment: The Jealous God (5:8-10)***

This commandment is linked integrally with the prohibition of the worship of any other god. Saying that the Lord is a jealous God makes a covenantal claim about God and expresses a positive word about the proper and inherent exclusiveness that belongs to the nature of the relationship between God and God’s people.

***Third Commandment: Reverencing the Name of God (5:11)***

While any image of God is improper and thus forbidden, the NAME of God is not. Therefore, it is one way the community of faith can apprehend God and invoke God’s presence and power. Here, the name of God represents the presence of the reality of God. Misuse of God’s name is not confined to profanity or cursing alone, but in any situation wherein the divine name is used without seriousness violates this command. As several biblical passages indicate, swearing by God’s name is not wrong (Lev. 19:11-12; Deut. 6:13 and 10:20). Indeed, it is specifically commanded. Misuse of the name happens if one swears by God’s name and THEN LIES. The commandment, therefore, has to do with telling the truth.

***Fourth Commandment: Keeping the Sabbath (5:12-15)***

This is the commandment that differs most from the Exodus version of the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments). It is at the center of the Deuteronomic Decalogue.

***Fifth Commandment: Honor Parents (5:16)***

The command is addressed to persons of any age whose parents are living. It was not primarily directed to children, to tell them how to treat their parents, but to ADULTS; how they are to treat their older or elderly parents. The verb “honor” (*kabbed*) is the exact opposite of “curse”. It means to treat weightily and to regard someone as being of great worth.

***Sixth Commandment: Protection of Life (5:17)***

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<sup>3</sup> Miller, Patrick D. *The Ten Commandments*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

The Ancient Hebrews believed that not all killing is murder. One might, for example, kill his slave. One was bound to kill in revenge for the murder of one's kin, whether the crime had been intentional or accidental. Yet these seeming exceptions stemmed from the same recognition as the commandment itself – murder is not a private affair, for it weakens the whole society to which the victim belonged.<sup>4</sup>

***Seventh Commandment: Against Adultery (5:18)***

The clear and specific force of this commandment is to guard the sanctity of the marriage relationship, and it recognizes that the sexual relationship of wife and husband is the center of intimacy and commitment, which must be carefully guarded if the marriage is to be carefully guarded. In the Old Testament, this commandment meant that the wife was prohibited from sexual intercourse with any other male and the husband from sexual intercourse with any other MARRIED woman. A man could have intercourse with a concubine or prostitute without coming under the sanction of this commandment. This reflects both the patriarchal structure of Israelite society and probably also the desire to guard the question of the paternity of the offspring of marriage.<sup>5</sup>

***Eighth Commandment: Against Stealing (5:19)***

As Israel advanced from the nomadic to the agricultural and urban stages, property became more and more a social concern. The most serious aspect of stealing is not the consequent deprivation of property but the denial of the personal dignity of the victim. That denial happens even when the victim is unaware of the crime. After all stealing comes in many forms, some direct (mugging), some indirect (embezzlement). Both forms are condemned here.

***Ninth Commandment: Against False Witness (5:20)***

This commandment is set as a safeguard of the judicial process or, more precisely, as a protection of the individual Israelite from being wrongly treated in the law court. The 9<sup>th</sup> commandment is closely related to the 3<sup>rd</sup>. Whereas the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment has to do with truth-telling vis-à-vis God; the 9<sup>th</sup> commandment has in mind the same concern vis-à-vis the well-being of one's Israelite brother or sister.<sup>6</sup>

***Tenth Commandment: Against Coveting (5:21)***

As it moves into the sphere of attitudes and inner desires and their capacity to lead to harmful acts, this final commandment opens up the realm of mind and heart as subjects for moral direction and ethical reflection. Not simply what one does but what one thinks and feels often has moral effects. Coveting is a desire that is out of proportion to one's need. Unfortunately, we live in a culture where craving is a virtue and is encouraged as the major stimulus for economic well-being. In a sense, a commercial economy depends on craving. It wants us to "shop 'til we drop". While the Ten Commandments tell us not to crave our neighbors' possessions, advertisers bombard us with thousands of images of people whose possessions we

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<sup>4</sup> *The Interpreter's Bible*. Abingdon Press, 1953.

<sup>5</sup> Mann, Thomas W. *Westminster Bible Companion: Deuteronomy*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1995

<sup>6</sup> Miller, Patrick D. *Interpretation: Deuteronomy*. John Knox Press, 1990.

must have. As a popular proverb puts it, “Enough is what most of us would be glad to have if we didn’t see others with more.”

### ***Jesus and the 10 Commandments***

As a devout Jew, Jesus was familiar with the Hebrew Bible and among the early Christians there was profound interest in how his teaching related to the traditional teaching in Israel, which his enemies had accused him of flouting. This interest came especially from Jewish Christians, whose concerns and needs were of major significance to the author of Matthew’s Gospel. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 and 6), far from dispensing with the Ten Commandments of Israel, Jesus insisted on their continuing relevance and their fulfilment, and he even took pains to show their deeper significance and application for his followers (Mt 5:17-48). Moreover, all of the synoptic gospels make a point of recording the conversation between Jesus and the rich young man who wanted to know how to gain eternal life, when Jesus said, simply, ‘keep the commandments’ (Mk10:17-22; Mt 19:16-30; Lk 18:18-30). According to Mark, Jesus instanced those forbidding murder, adultery, theft, false witness, defrauding, and the command enjoining care for one’s parents; but he added that one thing the young man was lacking was to ‘follow’ Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

## **Read Deuteronomy 5**

\*Make it a point over the course of this series to read from a few different translations. Encourage those who may be reading from a different translation to share any differences they see.

### **Initial Reactions**

1. What from this story confuses, inspires, or resonates with you? What questions or curiosities do you have about this passage?
2. What does this story tell us about God? What does this story tell us about humanity?
3. Were there any images, stories or insights that stuck out to you from Sunday’s sermon?

### **Going Deeper**

1. In the Jewish and Christian faiths, a paradox exists related to freedom and dependence. Liberated from slavery in Egypt, the children of Israel are now bound to their God in covenant to worship and serve as directed in the Torah. The Apostle Paul reflects a similar paradox in Romans 6:22: “You have been freed from sin and enslaved to God.” In living by and observing the Ten Commandments, people of faith follow a path to true freedom and transformation. How do you understand “freedom” in terms of the liberation that God gives, and the continuing “dependence” that humans have on God?
2. What does it mean that God is holy? What are the implications of God’s holiness as we seek Him?

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<sup>7</sup> Mahoney, Jack. *Jesus and the Ten Commandments*. [https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20120710\\_1.htm](https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20120710_1.htm).

3. In your experience, what are the most prevalent idols (substitutes that displace God) in today's world? What are common physical representations of God that may be confused with God? Can you think of any intellectual constructs or belief systems or mental images that displace God? What images of God are most helpful to you? What images of God are least helpful to you?
4. A typical rendering of the third commandment is "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." What have you been taught (or what have you thought) this commandment meant?
5. Most people today can congratulate themselves for not transgressing the sixth commandment! However, the intent of the commandments is not merely to limit our liability but to embrace fully our responsibility for others. So, placing this commandment in a positive frame, what have we done to promote and protect and make full and meaningful the lives of others?
6. The Old Testament and Jesus summarized the Ten Commandments into two: love God and love neighbor. The Apostle Paul said that the entire law was fulfilled by love (Romans 13:8-10). How would love provide an effective fulfillment of each of the Ten Commandments?
7. How did Israel go from "Everything the Lord has said we will do," to building a false god in scarcely over a month? Why is it so easy to become forgetful of God's mercies?

### **So What Questions**

We recall that the Ten Commandments were given to rebuild a community disrupted by slavery and oppression and dehumanization. The two Tables of the Law pinpoint the focus of reconstruction: relationship with God and relationship with the neighbor. The commandments restored dignity and significance to the lives of those previously disregarded and provided a template for how life could be lived peacefully and justly with others. The Christian Church found the commandments to be equally valuable as it understood that human sinfulness took many forms that effectively enslaved people and destroyed their lives.

- 1. How is it that people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century need that same deliverance and transformation today?**
- 2. Of these commandments, which do you think is the most challenging for us as a society? You as an individual?**

### **Closing**

Check in if you haven't already done so and ask for any prayer requests. Encourage group members to write down these requests and follow up as necessary. Close with prayer.