

SET IN STONE

A Study of
God's Commandments

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INTRODUCTION

Most would agree that the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai are among the most important of all of God's commandments. Prerequisite to these 10 commandments and contemporary with them are the two commandments considered to be the most important of all: loving God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. These two commandments of God are foundational and are the ones on which all of the laws and prophets are built. A clear understanding of these 12 commandments gives us a view of God's masterful plan for man's happiness and eventual salvation.

Yet for all the law and commandments could do, there's one thing they could not do: bring about a clear reconciliation between man and his Maker. So, throughout the Old Testament there are prophecies and predictions of the coming of a Messiah, who would usher in a new and perfect law—the law of grace and redemption. Jesus perfectly kept all of the Old Testament commandments and was the fulfillment of all of the prophecies concerning the Messiah. Though clearly misunderstood by the Jewish people, who expected an earthly kingdom, His kingdom has done exactly what it was promised to do—it brought peace, purpose, and salvation to all who would accept it, believe in Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of the world, and follow God's

Word as completely as humanly possible. His kingdom has been expanded throughout the world, through every generation, and is a testimony to the fulfillment of its timeless nature; namely that heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words will never pass away (Matthew 24:35). Just the study of the detailed fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning Jesus and how they were meticulously and flawlessly fulfilled is enough to produce faith in the heart of ardent skeptics.

Commandments were and are necessary. They give us a clear understanding of what God expects from us. Yet these commandments can never be perfectly kept and can never provide salvation. It is only through the ultimate sacrificial offering of God's own Son Jesus, who took our place and became our sin offering, that we have the hope of salvation. An understanding of such grace and mercy produces in every sincere Christian a desire to want to know and do the will of God—not out of compulsion or fear, but out of thanksgiving and love. As we study these 12 commandments one by one, we will come to understand their priority in God's mind and learn why they are important in the relationship of individual to individual and individual to God. May God's Spirit illuminate the many wonderful thoughts and motives contained in these 12 commandments and guide us in our study of His holy, inspired Word. ■



CHAPTER 1

The Greatest Commandment

First Things First

Keep it, take care of it, and do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Those were the three things God asked of Adam and Eve. That's quite simple, but they could not even keep three requirements. Throughout history God has always given us instructions on how to live. Instructions have been progressively added until we arrived at the perfect law of grace: the new covenant. There, Jesus fulfilled the laws of the Old Testament. As a result, He ushered in a new era where *motives* become equally important to *actions*. Both are important, but one is no more important than the other. Both are essential.

God's first commandments were disobeyed. Satan, the father of all liars, the originator of misinformation and disinformation, lied to Adam and Eve. Satan will take whatever God has said and make it say something else to lead us astray. We are warned that he is like a wolf in sheep's clothing (See Matthew 7:15). Whenever we find anyone trying to change God's Word, we know that person is motivated by satanic purposes, because they are changing the Word of God just as Satan did in the garden.

All of us are given requirements, commandments, and laws we must follow. None of us keep them very well; in fact, there is no one, except Jesus, who has ever perfectly kept the commandments. No one else has even come close. We begin sinning when we get

to the age at which we know right from wrong, and we choose to do wrong. We believe Satan's lie that things will be better, circumstances will be different, or that we'll have more fun or more pleasure if we do things our own way. We believe there will be no eternal consequences, and there will be no negative consequences even here on earth if we simply do what Satan asks instead of what God asks.

After Adam and Eve, God communicated through the patriarchs, the heads of families. He would have divine conversations with them, putting things in their minds through inspiration. The heads of the families became the recipients of God's word and will. God taught them, and they passed on those teachings from generation to generation. During the Mosaic dispensation, God spoke directly to Moses, giving him 10 commandments. These 10 commandments, along with God's two love commandments (love God and love your neighbor) are the basis for all the other laws found in the Old Testament.

Today, we are under the New Testament covenant. God's instructions are always plain and simple, and He still requires us to follow them. Second Timothy 3:16-17 teaches, "All Scripture is breathed [inspired] by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete [perfect], equipped for every good work." All the inspired Scriptures are profitable to us. If we take the Scriptures, read them, understand them, believe them, and follow them, our lives will be as complete as possible. The more we violate them, the more we listen to Satan, the more difficult our lives become. The challenge is to know what God's will is, His commandments, laws, and regulations, and then to apply them to our lives.

Commandments and laws are necessary for peace, happiness, purpose, understanding, success, and salvation. The Bible is God's instruction manual for those of us who live on this earth. God

tells us, "I created you in my image. I understand you, I know you better than you know yourself—this is how you are to behave. This is what you are to do." As we follow His commands, our lives will be better than they would ever be in any other way. As we fall prey to Satan and his lies and temptations, our lives become more entangled, more difficult, and more controversial. Our peace is shattered. Our purpose is confused. Only in understanding what God wants and expects from us will we find what we really need and ultimately what we are seeking. It is important that we study the Bible to understand it, and that we understand it to apply it.

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" Jesus answered, "The most important commandment is, 'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions (Mark 12:28-34).

Here we have Jesus defining the basis, foundation, and prerequisite for doing the will of God and for keeping all other commandments. This is the most important thing that we can possibly know or do.

There was some debate, however, about which commandment was the most important. Let's look at Matthew 22:34-40: "But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees,

they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?’

And he said to him, ‘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. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.’” The Pharisees and the Sadducees had been debating among themselves as to which one of the laws was greatest. As a result, they were trying to trick Jesus by pushing Him into a corner. It seems that they generally agreed that the third of the ten commandments was the most important, though I don’t fully understand why. The Pharisees, the legalistic sect of the Jews, the group that put on the best show of religion, confronted Jesus. None were better at debating the law, picking out the best laws, and getting around the laws they really did not like.

Then a Sadducee, part of the most liberal group among the Jews, arrived. The Sadducees did not believe in miracles, signs, wonders, or the resurrection. These two groups constantly opposed each other. Though we can’t be sure of the Sadducee’s motive, we can be confident it wasn’t any purer than that of the Pharisee. Some commentators feel that he was only trying to get an answer to his question. He certainly did.

There are between 603 and 658 laws in Judaism. Even in early second-century writings, the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees counted all these laws. Sometimes they even added to these laws. The number would vary from one generation to another because the priests would bind new laws upon the people. The number that I see most often in research is 613, although I suppose it would depend on how you counted and what you considered the important laws. The Sadducees did not consider all of the laws as did the Pharisees. The Pharisees kept certain laws that

the Sadducees did not feel it necessary to keep. This may be one reason there was a discrepancy. We do know that of these, 248 of the laws were “dos,” and 365 laws were “don’ts.” The Jewish people were judged by all of these laws.

The scribes were also lawyers, though they were not what we think of as lawyers today. The scribes of Jesus’ day were those who meticulously wrote down the laws and made copies of them for distribution. They were called lawyers because they spent their time writing down the laws and thus became experts on the law. But not a single Pharisee, Sadducee, or scribe could keep all the laws. They were all guilty of failing to live up to the law. If they broke even one law, they were guilty of breaking all of the law. If we violate one commandment or law of God, then we are guilty of violating all of the law. James 2:10 says, “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.” The point is, under the Old Testament there was no period of time during which they were free from breaking the law. True, they could offer their sacrifices, and they did, but their burnt offerings had become offensive to God because they were offering them knowing that they could not or would not change their behavior.

Jesus ushered in a new era, an era of grace. He said that love was the key to keeping God’s commandments. Love was the answer to finding a way to do God’s will. Love must be at the foundation of all our attempts to do His will. If only there were a pill we could take that enabled us to keep every commandment perfectly. The truth is, though, you can’t legislate or medicate love. True love, biblical love, agape love, comes from within, and it has to be genuine. It cannot be faked.

Love is not just the basis for keeping the commandments; it is the primary way we can keep God’s commandments. Behavior is important. Doing the right things is important. The Pharisees had this down to a science. They dotted every “i” and crossed every

“t.” They studied and debated the laws daily. There was never a moment when they weren’t thinking about, talking about, or debating the law. But they did not have the key ingredient for keeping the law, the motivation for keeping the law: love. They kept the law, but they often did so reluctantly or resentfully. They thought keeping the letter of the law was all that was needed. Jesus pointed out that love is the prerequisite to keeping the law. We must love to fully keep the law.

The Bible teaches that God is love. Love defines God. “For God so loved the world” that He gave the most precious thing He had—His only Son (see John 3:16). God’s love gives to us, benefits us, and is passed on to us. If we are God’s people and are not a loving people, we are missing the point of all of the relationships in which we are involved. We are missing the point of our relationship with God, and we are certainly missing the point of our relationship with one another. We should not exploit or take advantage of one another. Neither should we use, abuse, or benefit in a negative way from one another. Rather, we should love. If we love God first, and love others as we love ourselves, it would be less of a problem to keep God’s commandments.

Religion is not about hate. If you find a religion that is defined by hate, war, murder, resentment, bitterness, or division, you know that it is a false religion. Take Islam, for example. Radical Islam is not about peace; it’s about hatred, and all that comes out of hatred. On the other hand, love is the basis for every part of Christianity. That is not to say that every Christian lives up to that standard, but it is the standard God has set for us. Love is the motivation for every relationship—our relationship with God and our relationships with others. If we get the love established here, it will take care of the commandments. If we truly love God, we will do everything He asks us to do because we know God loves us, and He has never asked anything of us that is not best for us. Everything that God asks anyone to do is what is

best for that person. When we listen to Satan and go our own way, we get into trouble. We fail; we fall; we become unhappy, incomplete, and purposeless. But as long as we love God and love one another, our lives will be better. God loves us so much He gave His Son, the greatest gift He could give.

Love must be the reason for all our law keeping. Jesus looks at motives, not just at behavior. That is why He said, “I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). That’s motive. That’s saying that if you had the opportunity, you would sin. The law is not just that you don’t commit the act; it is that you resist the evil desire. We have to have our commandments defined, which God has done. We have to have the instruction manual clear and concise, which God has done. When we begin to apply it, we are at our best, and we are doing what God asks us to do. When our relationships with God and with others are right, it makes everything better.

Jesus gave us the key to all the commandments. In doing so, He is not coming up with anything new. In fact, He is going all the way back to the Book of Deuteronomy. This is not something that His listeners have not heard or were not aware, that they were to love the LORD their God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 teaches, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” Here, Jesus is repeating what God has given in the old law as being most important. First, love the

LORD your God with all of your mind, body, and soul. Jesus is only reminding them of what they already knew.

The Pharisees prided themselves on knowing everything there was to know about the law. They regularly prayed a prayer called the Shema, which is the prayer found in Deuteronomy 6:4, 5. Every good Jew, from the time of Deuteronomy up to the time of Jesus, repeated the Shema twice a day, once at sunrise and again at sundown. Jesus' words were nothing new to His listeners. The Pharisees would even write Scripture on pieces of parchment and put them in tiny leather boxes called phylacteries, which they would then attach to their hands or between their eyes to follow this command in Deuteronomy. They walked around with this Scripture on their bodies and would recite the prayer every day. Unfortunately, it was only a ritual, not a desire. They took it for granted, but didn't live it.

Others who don't exactly "live out" the rules include those who don't adhere to the directive in Matthew 23:5-7: "They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others."

Jesus describes the Pharisees as hypocrites, claiming one thing and doing another, not wanting to do what they are asking others to do. They are not demonstrating their love for God; in fact, they were accused of stealing from widows and taking advantage of people. Not only did they have the Shema; they also had the mezuzah. This was a long tube, often of leather but sometimes of glass or pottery. In that tube they would place a piece of parchment with Deuteronomy 6:4, 5 written on it. They would then nail the mezuzah to their doorpost. Every time they entered or left their house, they would touch it as a reminder of who they were and who they claimed to be.

Love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and

strength. Love God in every way you are capable of loving Him. They had heard this and been taught this all their lives. They had written it down, symbolizing and ritualizing it, but they just weren’t living it.

What does Jesus say? Love the LORD your God. There are two things there—love God, who should be your LORD. The word *lord* carries with it the connotation of a master with all power and authority and his subjects. Love your LORD, the LORD of your life, the one who defines who you are and tells you what you do, and how you do it, and why you do it. Love the LORD your God. That’s why as we get into the Ten Commandments we will find out that God is a jealous God. He doesn’t put up with other gods.

Then Jesus tells us to love God with all of your heart and all your emotions. Every emotion you have should be an expression of your love of God. We should love God with all our soul. The soul is the eternal part, the part that will live forever. Then He says, “with all of your mind.” That is our intellect, the part of us that thinks and processes. He concludes with “all of your strength.” That is our physical body.

Is there anything else left? Is there any other way we could love God other than the ways He has instructed us? He has covered it all. We should love God with our emotions, our eternal soul, our intellect, and our physical nature. Love God with every part of your being. Love Him first, last, and always.

Do you think you can learn to love? Anything God commands of us is something we can learn. If He commands us to love, that means we are capable of learning how to love. There are some people who have an extremely skewed concept of love. For them, love is selfish. We can read 1 Corinthians 13, which gives us an outstanding definition of love, but I think we know it well enough to know that love defined by God is what is necessary and essential. Once we love God, then everything else begins to fall into place just like a jigsaw puzzle. If we do not love God,

then nothing is in place. Everything is scattered if we do not love God. We are not complete, we do not have purpose, and we find it hard to have peace because we haven't learned how to love God and to serve Him as He has asked.

If we love God, we will not ignore Him, but people ignore God all the time. Even some Christians ignore God. They do not want to worship or study. They don't want to take the time to get involved. One of the most difficult things for us to accept is being ignored by people who are supposed to love us and people we are supposed to love. Certainly God does not want us to ignore Him. He wants us to love His people and be with them, studying His Word and doing His will.

If we love God, we will not curse Him. Today, it's astounding how many people curse God constantly. Every time I hear it, I cringe. It hurts me when people curse the God I love. Yet there are those who curse God multiple times every day. How can you love God and curse Him? How can you love God and use His name in vain? You can't. It's an indication of immaturity if we do that.

My father gave me permission to use one bad word, and I rarely ever use it. It isn't considered to be a bad one, but it was the only one he ever used. When I was a boy, he got frustrated working on the lawnmower and came out with that word. I said, "Dad, why are you using that word? You're a Christian!" He said, "I'll try not to do it." And he never did again. If we love God, we will not curse Him, use His name carelessly, or use bad language. He loves us more than anyone or anything else in the world. If we love Him, we won't blame Him. People blame God and curse Him for all the bad things that happen to them, but they should be blaming Satan. God is the one who is trying to help them. Why don't we curse the devil and blame him for all the bad things that happen to us? He is the one who caused them. If we love God, we won't blame Him when things go wrong.

If we love God, we won't doubt Him. It may take us a while to

work through our doubts, but we can do it. God said if we love Him, we won't rob Him, nor will we keep what He has asked of us from Him.

There are things that we will do if we love God. If we love God we will obey Him. That will be the desire of our heart. We will ask, "Father, what do You want me to do? How do You want me to live? How can I be better, happier, or have more peace or fulfillment? What is Your will in my life?" If that is our desire, then that is an indication of our love.

If we love God, we will praise and honor Him in worship as the only true and living God, the Creator and Sustainer of the world. He is the only one who is always there for us when we need Him. We worship Him in spirit and in truth, singing praises to Him, lifting up prayers, and remembering the sacrificial death of Jesus.

If we love God, we will respect Him. Respect is something that most people want. It hurts to be disrespected, especially when you have done everything possible to help someone.

The scribe did not ask what is the second greatest commandment, but Jesus always gives us more than we ask. The scribe asked for the greatest commandment. Jesus replied with the greatest and then the second greatest. In our next chapter, we will study the second greatest commandment. ■

CHAPTER 1 **Questions**

1. What is the earliest example of how Satan leads us away from God's commandments?
2. After Adam and Eve and the patriarchal dispensation, how did God reveal His will to man?
3. What are some of the benefits of keeping God's commandments?
4. What does the Bible teach is the most important of all commandments to be kept?

5. Discuss how this commandment is foundational to all other commandments, and how if we miss this one, it affects all of the others.
6. Who were the scribes, and where did they fit in to the legal system of Israel?
7. What was most lacking from the Pharisees' understanding of law keeping? How did this affect them?
8. Discuss Matthew 23:5-7. How are motives equally important to actions?
9. How do we demonstrate our love for God?
10. What are some of the things that we will not do if we truly love God?