

“Commandments and Covenant”

Exodus 19: 3-7, 20: 1-17

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We've all heard the King James translation of the Ten Commandments, “Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not murder. Thou shalt not commit adultery” so often, that for many of us they've lost a bit of their power. These “Thou shalt nots” were spoken by YHWH, the one true God, amongst trumpet blasts and thick clouds, on top of a very tall mountain, to one Biblical hero, Moses, thousands of years ago. They sound intended for an ancient and unsophisticated crowd. We don't respond to “Thou shalt not.” We sophisticated folks want to know the WHY behind the commandment.

How are they relevant to us in 2026? Let's see what the commandments would say in today's language, to today's people.

Let's begin with WHY we should listen in the first place. In the ancient desert and in modern day Dunwoody, many different, specific gods are worshiped. Why should we listen to the God from Moses' burning bush? Why YHWH?

Ancient Egyptians worshiped more than 1500 different gods. In their world, different gods controlled different parts of life: there is a god of chaos, of wisdom, craftsmanship, joy, resurrection, fertility, and power just to list a few. These newly freed people left Egypt in a hurry, carrying precious little, but surely they tucked a few small Egyptian gods into their bags. And yet NONE of those gods, says YHWH, did the hard work of releasing these children of Abraham from their Egyptian captors. So, YHWH says, *it is to me and only me, that you should turn your eyes.*

What gods do we worship today? We have gods of youth, of wealth, of power. The god of yellow traffic lights. Of popularity and skill. The gods of alcohol and empty pleasure. The god of being right. Each of these gods demand something

from us to grant us our wishes. We endure painful procedures for our outer appearance to match what society tells us is beautiful. We poison our bodies for a quick good time and relief from the stresses in life. We sacrifice friendships to claim victory in a political debate or gain the power of popularity with some of our peers. Indeed, we sacrifice some of ourselves every time we worship these gods.

Our one true God, YHWH, doesn't demand a piece of us. YHWH says one thing: follow these commandments. Not for GOD! God doesn't need any favors from us. God isn't holding God's breath, thinking *my existence will be better if these humans behave*. God asks us to follow these commandments FOR US. For our own good. To keep our hearts, our bodies, and our neighbors safe.

And WHY does God select these people, this small band of Israelites, as God's "chosen people?" Why do they get all the glory? Why are they special? And as their descendants, why are WE special?

We are not chosen **for** glory. We are chosen **to** serve. To be God's people, to follow God's commandments, is to enjoy a freedom, a sense of security, a belovedness not known any other way. We are not enslaved to the rules. Instead, we are set free by them. Free from worshiping all those other gods. And as we act from that chosen stance, we are called to show all people on earth how glorious it is to worship our one and only God and to follow God's commandments for us. We are not chosen FOR. We are chosen TO.

Now we know the WHY. So let's return to these commandments in our modern day language and setting. God says, "Do these things and life will be good."

Commandment one: Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Don't get confused, don't wring your hands with indecision, don't be distracted by flashy things with no substance. Relax. Worship only God.

Commandment two: Thou shalt not make any graven images and bow down to them. Save your energy for joy. Focus on your family, nature, meaningful work.

If you create idols, you'll toil countless hours to get the money to buy "the thing", whatever that thing is that might make your life amazing. If you make beauty your idol, you'll never find the exterior perfection the beauty gods demand and you'll be unhappy in your own skin. If you worship status, you'll discover those affiliations are ephemeral: the exclusive club or political movement or the cool kids will turn on you in a heartbeat.

Commandment three: Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. This goes far beyond using God's name to swear. This means don't persecute people in God's name. Don't pretend you know God's mind and speak on God's behalf. Don't tell others they are *less than* in God's eyes. WE do not own God's name and WE may not use God's name to our advantage in any way. Ever.

Commandment four: Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Don't work yourself or anyone else into a state of despair. If your work brings you joy, do it, but remember to set aside intentional time to rest. To recharge. To reboot. To breathe deeply. To move your shoulders down from your ears, to unclench your jaw and your hands. To be still. Our lives must have purpose, but also must be balanced. Hit the off button and turn off the violence and the harsh rhetoric, and breathe. Just breathe.

Commandment five: Honor your father and mother. Older people may not be as good at pickup basketball, but boy, have they been through a thing or two. They have wisdom, and if you'll hush up and listen, they might share it with you. In a world that worships youth, be bold enough to honor your elders. Appreciate them. Learn from them. Enjoy them.

Commandment six: Thou shalt not murder. Don't kill people. It doesn't matter if the killing is face to face, or choosing to ignore a humanitarian crisis, or if it's revenge for horrible things. God is clear here. Don't kill people. And don't eviscerate another person's spirit with your cruel comments. Don't talk about them behind their back, or undermine their well-being. We, God's chosen people, bring reconciliation, joy, and life to the equation, not death.

Commandment seven: Thou shalt not commit adultery. Respect your neighbors' relationships. Just because you want something -- or someone -- doesn't mean you should pursue it. God's people have integrity. We make the choices that honor God, our neighbors, and ourselves. Impulsive choices only bring about hurt and complicity and deep, far-reaching sadness. Desire does not get to rule your heart and mind. God should rule your heart and mind because God has your best interests at heart.

Commandment eight: Thou shalt not steal. Dr. Ryan Bonfiglio¹ clarified this one during our Session retreat in August. He quoted Leviticus 23: 22: *When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap all the way to the edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the foreign resident. I am the LORD your God.*" And then Ryan added "You shall not steal." Stealing isn't only breaking into a house and taking someone's valuables. Stealing means taking an unfair profit, keeping all your toys for yourself, and ignoring that request for help when you could offer it. Where is the freedom in living life with a mentality of scarcity? What's the point in having "all the things" if you don't share those things, happily, willingly, with others?

Commandment nine: Thou shalt not bear false witness against your neighbor. Don't lie. Be honest. Admit your mistakes, don't weave some tale to get yourself out of a pickle. It's human to fall short. It's honorable to be vulnerable, to admit when you don't have it all together. If you don't know the answer, don't pretend you do. If you can't take on something else, just say no. Embrace radical honesty, the kind that protects your peace and the peace of others.

And finally, *"Thou shall not covet your neighbor's house, your neighbor's spouse, their Mercedes, that Gucci purse, or their new shiny golf clubs. Don't covet your neighbor's kid's college acceptance, their latest vacation, their cigar collection. Those things belong to your neighbors and believe it or not, you don't even know if all those things make them happy. Things that are shiny on the outside are often dull just under the surface. Here is a truth: every*

human experiences disappointment, boredom, true sadness, and no amount of any “thing” can change that. This tenth commandment is not to protect God or to protect your neighbors. This commandment is to protect your own heart.ⁱⁱ Because time spent wanting all the things is filled with angst and longing and devoid of any type of peace. God says here, “Be kind to yourself. Find what you need and be content with it. The end.”

If you’ve messed any of these up, and we ALL have messed these up, ask forgiveness. Accept God’s amazing mercy, and be better going forward. Following these ten commandments brings transformation: between people and more importantly WITHIN people. God knows we are human, we are flawed. And yet God claims us anyway as God’s OWN people, chosen to be a light on a hill, chosen to model the forgiveness, mercy, generosity, and joy that we find in following Jesus the Christ.

How lovely to have a God who cares about us, and *through* us tends to all people of the earth. I pray we will mature beyond our rebellious years into a people who recognize these commandments are not a burden but a generous, loving gift to us.

This week, maybe just take one commandment and focus on following it this week. For me...I’m going to try to not to kill anyone’s spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Dr. Ryan P. Bonfiglio is an Assistant Professor in the Practice of Old Testament at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology, where he also serves as Executive Director of The Candler Foundry. He presented to the Saint Luke’s Presbyterian Session and Diaconate August 15, 2026.

ⁱⁱ This general concept is from the podcast *Bibleworm*, episode 405, *Living the Ten Commandments*, [Episode 405 Living the Ten Commandments \(Exodus 19:1-8 and 21:1-21\) | BibleWorm](#), accessed September, 2026.