



BEYOND THE SURFACE

Ten Ways the Ten Commandments
go further than you think

Introduction

Why do we need to study the Ten Commandments?

1. They are unique. God uniquely announced them with His voice and then directly wrote them on two tablets of stone. These tablets of stone were afterwards commanded to be kept in the ark (Deuteronomy 10: 2, 5) and to be learned (Deuteronomy 5:1). They were to be written on the posts of the doors and diligently impressed on their children (Deuteronomy 6:7-10). Great emphasis is given to explaining these commandments by the prophets and apostles. The Saviour also does this in His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).

2. They are useful. Everyone who wants to know what is pleasing and displeasing to God will find them useful. By them we may know what sin is, how to avoid it and how to be stirred up to repentance when we have fallen into it. The knowledge of sin comes through the law (Romans 7:7). This is why it is summed up in so few words, to be more easily brought into and kept within our memories and hearts. This is why they are commended in the Word of God (Deuteronomy 5:1).

3. They are not understood. The Ten Commandments are so comprehensive that we will come short of their great scope without effort and diligence (Psalm 119:96). There is great ignorance among many about the meaning of this vital part of Scripture. Many people do not even know that they are breaking the commandments. The result of this is little conviction of sin, little repentance for sin and much presumptuous confidence in self-righteousness.

Ignorance of the spiritual nature of the Ten Commandments makes many people neglect the main aspects of holiness, and instead proudly rest on self-righteousness

and despise Christ the Mediator. We can see this from the example of Paul (Romans 7:9). Our Lord expounded the Ten Commandments so that sinners would see the necessity of a Mediator who is the end of the law for righteousness to all that believe (Romans 10:4). It is not only the godless; those who are most careful to observe religious formalities and be upright in their lives, also stumble in this.

We need to know: (1) what kind of duties are required in every commandment, and (2) the sins which contradict each commandment. This should give us some direction and help in duty, and some spur to repentance, or at least conviction. By it we may therefore be led to Christ Jesus, who is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believes (Romans 10:4). This was, after all, the principal purpose of this law as it was given to Israel.

This booklet sets out ten biblical principles for understanding and applying the Ten Commandments properly. Without this we do not understand how to live according to and make use of the gospel. Gospel obedience involves conviction of sin, carefulness in practice, constant exercise of repentance and daily fresh dependence on the blood of Christ. All this is undermined by failure to understand the commandments correctly.

This booklet is updated from the writings by James Durham (1622-1658). Renowned for eminent godliness and humility, he was also able to resolve complex questions and issues. You will find additional help, together with direction to Bible verses that support these points in *Westminster Larger Catechism* Question 99.

They are spiritual and holy

1. They are holy just and good

Since 'the law is holy, just, and good' (Romans 7:12), the least inclination against it or discontentment with it, is sin.

2. They are spiritual

The law is also 'spiritual' (Romans 7:14). It does not merely require outward obedience to certain duties or outward abstinence from certain sinful acts. Since the law has a spiritual meaning, it calls for spiritual obedience.

- The law requires spiritual duties, such as faith, fear, love to God and others. It also requires right dispositions as well as right affections and outward actions. This is why Paul, when he wants to prove the spirituality of the law, gives the example of lust as something forbidden by the law (Romans 7:7).
- The law reaches to the spirit and the very innermost parts of the heart, affections and thoughts, as well as to the outward man. The love it requires is love with all the soul, heart and mind. Heart idolatry, heart murder, and heart adultery is condemned in the law, as well as outward idolatry, murder, adultery and so on.
- The law requires us to obey God in a spiritual way, for a spiritual purpose and from a spiritual principle. This is the opposite of the unspiritual inclinations of the unrenewed heart. In this sense we are commanded to walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16).

3. They are all broken when we break one

The connection that links the commandments together is so close that if the authority of God is slighted in one, it is slighted in all (James 2:10, 1 John 4:20).

4. They are to be obeyed according to God's purpose

We should have special regard to God's specific or general purpose in giving these commands. God's overall purpose is that we should have perfect and absolute holiness, even as He is holy (2 Corinthians 7:1; 1 Peter 1:15-16; Matthew 5:48). Whatever He requires, He requires that it be absolutely perfect in its kind. For example, our love to Him must be with the whole heart. Our love to others must be as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:36-40). Our chastity and purity must all be absolute (see 1 Timothy 1:5).

Any exposition of the Ten Commandments which does not identify this as their purpose is without doubt defective. We can only understand the right meaning of every commandment by observing this rule. Each commandment has its own unique purpose in relation to the duties it requires and the sins it condemns. Our Lord Jesus Christ gives the best exposition of the commandments. He includes the smallest kinds of uncleanness under the seventh commandment. This shows it forbids all things contrary to perfect and complete purity (Matthew 5:27-28).

**“God wants His people to be holy,
shining in holiness, unspotted, and
without scandal”**

The right time

9. They are to be obeyed at the right time

What God requires has the same force and authority as what He forbids. Yet while we must never at any time do what He forbids, we are not able to do what He requires in every situation and at all times.

Thus, the third commandment requires us to use the Lord's name and ordinances in a holy and reverent manner in prayer, reading and hearing sermons etc. Similarly, in the fourth commandment we are required to sanctify the sabbath by using ordinances.

This means that these duties are always in themselves duties e.g. to pray, hear sermons, etc. (Deuteronomy 4:8-9). Yet we are not to be, and should not be, always exercised in these duties at all times. This is because we must also abound in other duties of necessity and mercy e.g. we must eat and sleep. When we sleep, we cannot exercise love nor hear sermons. These

commandments also forbid us from profaning the Lord's name in His ordinances and other ways. This must not be done at any time (Job 13:7-8).

We are not always obliged to carry out duties and graces, but we are obliged to be spiritually disposed for doing them. This makes us ready to do them at the appropriate time, when they are called for. But in sinful things both the disposition and action are sinful.

10. They are not contradictory

The commandments are to be expounded in such a way that none of them may contradict another. There is nothing commanded in one that is forbidden in another, or vice versa. One duty does not compete with another or thrust another out. When two duties coincide, then one of them ceases to be a duty for that time, as is explained in the distinction above (Matthew 12:7).

“we are obliged
to be spiritually
disposed for
doing [duties]
...at the
appropriate
time”



REFORMATION SCOTLAND

Foundations from our Past for our Future

www.reformationscotland.org