Kevin DeYoung

THE 10 COMMANDMENTS

What They Mean, Why They Matter, and Why We Should Obey Them

FOUNDATIONAL TOOLS FOR OUR FAITH
“Seasoned by personal wit, shaped by years of pastoral ministry, and highly skilled in interpreting God’s Word, Kevin DeYoung is the right person to write this book. DeYoung fleshes out the Ten Commandments in a way that helps us see the wisdom of our Creator and Redeemer in directing us on our pilgrim way. I highly recommend this book!”

**Michael Horton,** J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California; Host, *White Horse Inn*; author, *Core Christianity*
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What They Mean, Why They Matter, and Why We Should Obey Them

Kevin DeYoung
To Roy and Barbara Bebee
Wonderful in-laws, loving grandparents, faithful Christians
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The Good News of Law

And God spoke all these words, saying, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

Exodus 20:1–2

Exodus 20:1–2 introduces one of the most famous sections in the Bible—indeed, one of the most important pieces of religious literature in the whole world—the Ten Commandments. Oddly enough, they are never actually called the Ten Commandments. The Hebrew expression, which occurs three times in the Old Testament (Ex. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4), literally means “ten words.” This is why Exodus 20 is often referred to as the Decalogue, deka being the Greek word for “ten” and logos meaning “word.” These are the Ten Words that God gave the Israelites at Mount Sinai—and, I’ll argue, the Ten Words that God wants all of us to follow.

Whatever we call them, the Ten Commandments are certainly commands—more than that for sure, but not less. The problem people have is not with what they’re called but with what they contain. Studying the Ten Commandments reveals
the very heart of human rebellion: we don’t like God telling us what we can and cannot do.

**The Noncommandment Commandments**

A few years ago there was an article on the CNN website entitled, “Behold, Atheists’ New Ten Commandments.” The story explains how Lex Bayer, an executive at AirBnB, and John Figdor, a humanist chaplain at Stanford University, tried to crowdsource ten “non-commandments.” They solicited input from around the world and offered ten thousand dollars to the winning would-be Moseses. After receiving more than 2,800 submissions, they appointed a panel of thirteen judges to select the ten winners. Here’s what they came up with, the ten noncommandments of our age:

1. Be open-minded and be willing to alter your beliefs with new evidence.
2. Strive to understand what is most likely to be true, not to believe what you wish to be true.
3. The scientific method is the most reliable way of understanding the natural world.
4. Every person has the right to control of [sic] their body.
5. God is not necessary to be a good person or to live a full and meaningful life.
6. Be mindful of the consequences of all your actions and recognize that you must take responsibility for them.
7. Treat others as you would want them to treat you, and can reasonably expect them to want to be treated. Think about their perspective.
8. We have the responsibility to consider others, including future generations.
9. There is no one right way to live.
10. Leave the world a better place than you found it.
That sounds about right—not with respect to God’s law, but in terms of how many people think of their moral obligations. These ten noncommandments perfectly capture the default moral code at the front end of the twenty-first century.

Nevertheless, I would hope, perhaps naively, that after a few moments of reflection, we would see that these new commandments are filled with some stunning contradictions. They say you don’t need God to be a good person or to know how to live (#5), and yet the seventh noncommandment is a summary of the Golden Rule, which came from Jesus (Matt. 7:12). They talk about the scientific method (#3), without an awareness that Francis Bacon’s method of inductive observation gained popularity in North America in large measure because of Presbyterian and Reformed theologians who saw Bacon’s approach as a good way to make observations about God’s created world.

More to the point, these noncommandments are logically indefensible. They’re presumably called “noncommandments” so as not to sound so commandment-ish. Yet they’re all commands! They all carry the force of a moral ought. We live in a paradoxical age where many will say, “Right and wrong is what you decide for yourself;” and yet these same people will rebuke others for violating any number of assumed commands. As a culture, we may be quite free and liberal when it comes to sex, but we can be absolutely fundamentalist when it comes to the moral claims of the sexual revolution. The old swear words may not scandalize us any longer, but now there are other words—offensive slurs and insults—that will quickly put someone out of polite company. We are still a society with a moral code.

And then there’s the second to last of these noncommandments. How does this ought square with the other nine in the list? How can we be told to leave the planet a better place and think of others and exercise control over our bodies if there really is “no
one right way to live”? Which is it: do as we say or do as you please? It can’t be both.

I know the contest was a publicity stunt for a book Bayer and Figdor wrote on being atheistic humanists, but the authors seem to genuinely believe it’s a fine idea to develop your moral code by taking the temperature of those around you. Elsewhere in the CNN article we read:

Bayer said humans are hardwired for compassion, and the scientific method and wisdom of crowds—or the tribes that gather online each day—will weed out bad ideas. In other words, this is an open-ended, and hopefully progressive, process, he said.

I don’t know what Internet they’re looking at, but I have not found “online” to be a place that’s entirely trustworthy for weeding out bad ideas. Remember, Bayer and Figdor had to appoint a committee of thirteen judges to pick out the best non-commandments. They realized instinctively that we might not come up with a great moral code just by asking people what they think.

In fact, going to the Internet to find your way in the world is often one of the worst ideas. Not too long ago I came across a story about the British government’s attempt to name a $287 million polar research vessel. In an effort to generate publicity for the new vessel, the government decided to name the royal research ship by way of an Internet vote. The agency in charge of the contest suggested to British citizens that they look at names such as Ernest Shackleton (the famous explorer), Endeavor, or Falcon. But the people’s overwhelming, runaway choice for this state-of-the-art research vessel—the clear winner of the Internet vote—was (are you ready for it?): “Boaty McBoatface.” You’ve got to love the British sense of humor, but that wasn’t exactly the name officials were
hoping for. In the end, the agency decided not to go with the clear winner of the contest and instead picked the fourth-place entry, naming the boat after Sir David Attenborough. The wisdom of crowds isn’t always wise.

And that goes for commandments as well as for boats. The Bible says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10). The way to find moral instruction is not by listening to your gut but by listening to God. If we want to know right from wrong, if we want to know how to live the good life, if we want to know how to live in a way that blesses our friends and neighbors, we’d be wise to do things God’s way, which means paying careful attention to the Ten Commandments.

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Before we look at the commandments themselves, we need to lay some important groundwork. In particular, there are two questions that need to be answered:

1. Why should we study the Ten Commandments?
2. Why should we obey the Ten Commandments?

Let me give you five answers to each question. Think of it as ten words before the Ten Words.

**Why Should We Study the Ten Commandments?**

The answer to this first question used to be self-evident. Everyone just knew—whether Christian or not—that the Ten Commandments are important. But now, even inside the church, there can be a deep disinterest, or even a dis-ease, about spending a lot of time on the Bible’s moral code. We need to be convinced all over again that the Ten Commandments matter and deserve our careful attention. Here are five reasons why.
Reason 1: General Ignorance

First, most people are simply ignorant of the Ten Commandments. Fewer and fewer churches read the Ten Commandments in worship. Children are not made to memorize the Decalogue anymore. It would probably be embarrassing for both children and adults if we randomly picked people on a Sunday morning to come up front and recite the Ten Commandments.

And if ignorance is a danger in the church, it’s almost a certainty outside the church. A recent survey found that only 14 percent of Americans could name the Ten Commandments. By comparison, a quarter of all Americans can name the seven ingredients in a Big Mac, nearly three out of four can name all three stooges, and more than one in three know all six kids from the Brady Bunch, a television show that was cancelled before I was born! More of us know that a Big Mac has two all-beef patties than know that “You shall not murder” is one of the Ten Commandments.

It’s no exaggeration to say that these Ten Words handed down at Mount Sinai have been the most influential law code ever given. That’s why you’ll find Moses or the Ten Commandments (admittedly, among other symbols and other lawgivers) in at least three different architectural embellishments in the United States Supreme Court building. “Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’” (Deut. 4:6). That has proven to be true. The commandments given to the nation of Israel, as recorded in the Scriptures, have become known all throughout the world. Whether we think they’re right or not, simply out of an interest in world history—especially Western history—we should not be ignorant of them.
Reason 2: Historical Instruction

The church has historically put the Ten Commandments at the center of its teaching ministry, especially for children and new believers. For centuries, catechetical instruction was based on three things: the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. In other words, when people asked, “How do we do discipleship? How do we teach our kids about the Bible? What do new Christians need to know about Christianity?” their answers always included an emphasis on the Ten Commandments. In the Heidelberg Catechism, for example, eleven of the fifty-two Lord’s Days focus on the Ten Commandments. The same is true in forty-two of the 107 questions in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, in more than half of the Lutheran Large Catechism, and in 120 out of 750 pages of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Across various traditions, there has been a historic emphasis on the Ten Commandments.

Reason 3: Centrality to Mosaic Ethics

The Ten Commandments are central to the ethics of the Mosaic covenant. We see this right from the prologue. There’s an important change in Exodus at the beginning of chapter 20. The Lord is no longer telling Moses to go down and relay a message to the people. That’s how the Lord operated in chapter 19, but now in chapter 20 God is speaking “all these words” (v. 1) directly to the Israelites. That’s why, at the end of the Ten Commandments, the people cry out to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die” (Ex. 20:19). They were too terrified to have God speak to them without a mediator, which says something about the stunning display of God’s power in chapters 19 and 20 and underlines the importance of the Decalogue.

Moreover, the language in verse 2 is a deliberate echo of God’s call to Abraham. Look at the similarities:
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I am the **Lord** who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans. (Gen. 15:7)

I am the **Lord** your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. (Ex. 20:2)

At these great epochal moments in redemptive history—first with Abraham, and now with Moses and the people of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai—God says, in effect, “I am the Lord who brought you out of this strange land to be your God and to give you this special word.”

Some people—including a number of good Old Testament scholars—will say, “Well, look, there are all sorts of commandments. The Ten Commandments are succinct, and they’ve played an important role in the history of the church, but they’re simply the introduction to the Mosaic law. There are hundreds of statutes in the Pentateuch, and the Bible never says these ten are in a class all by themselves.” While it’s true that the Bible doesn’t say to print the Ten Commandments in boldface, we shouldn’t undersell their special stature in ancient Israel. They came from God as he spoke to the people face-to-face (Deut. 5:1–5), and they came from Mount Sinai amidst fire, cloud, thick darkness, and a loud voice (Deut. 5:22–27). Exodus 20 marks a literal and spiritual high point in the life of Israel. It’s no wonder the tablets of the law, along with the manna and Aaron’s staff, were placed inside the ark of the covenant (Heb. 9:4).

There are going to be many more laws in the Old Testament. But these first ten are foundational for the rest. The Ten Commandments are like the constitution for Israel, and what follows are the regulatory statutes. The giving of the law changes sharply from chapter 20 to chapters 21 and 22. The Ten Commandments are clear, definite, absolute standards of right and wrong. Once you get to chapter 21, we shift to application. You can see the distinctive language leading off each paragraph in chapters 21 and 22: words such as “when,” “whoever,” and “if.” This is the case law
meant to apply the constitutional provisions carved in stone on Mount Sinai. From the very outset of Israel’s formal existence as a nation, the Ten Commandments had a special place in establishing the rules for their life together.

**Reason 4: Centrality to New Testament Ethics**

The Ten Commandments are also central to the ethics of the New Testament. Think of Mark 10:17, for example. This is where the rich young ruler comes to Jesus and asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus says to him, “You know the commandments.” Then he lists the second table of the law, the commandments that relate to our neighbors: “Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother” (v. 19). Jesus isn’t laying out a path for earning eternal life. We know from the rest of the story that Jesus is setting the young man up for a fall, because the one command he obviously hasn’t obeyed is the one command Jesus skips—Do not covet (vv. 20–22). But it is noteworthy that when Jesus has to give a convenient summary of our neighborly duties, he goes straight to the Ten Commandments.

We see something similar in Romans 13. When the apostle Paul wants to give a summary of what it means to be a Christian living in obedience to God, he looks to the Ten Commandments:

> Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Rom. 13:8–9)

Paul says, much like Jesus did, that the Ten Commandments are the way for God’s people to love one another. When we love,
we fulfill the commandments, and when we obey the commandments, we are fulfilling the law of love.

Paul does something similar in 1 Timothy 1. After establishing that the law is good if one uses it lawfully (v. 8), Paul proceeds in verses 9 and 10 to rattle through the second table of the law, referring to the wicked “who strike their fathers and mothers” (a violation of the fifth commandment), and “murderers” (a violation of the sixth commandment), and the sexually immoral and men who practice homosexuality (violations of the seventh commandment), and “enslavers” (a violation of the eighth commandment), and liars and perjurers (violations of the ninth commandment). Again, when Paul needs a recognizable way to summarize ethical instruction for the people of God, he goes back to the Ten Commandments.

By Jewish tradition, there are 613 laws in the Pentateuch. They all matter because they all teach us something about love for God and neighbor. But the 613 can be summarized by the Ten Commandments, which can in turn be summarized by two: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself (see Matt. 22:37–40). Jesus certainly transforms the Ten Commandments, as we will see, but he never meant to abolish them (Matt. 5:17).

As we go through these studies, we will find that the law drives us to our knees, shows us our sin, and leads us to the cross. We need forgiveness. None of us keeps these commands perfectly. At the same time, however, for those who have been forgiven and know Christ, we see in both the Old and New Testaments that the Ten Commandments are foundational for living an obedient life pleasing to God.

**Reason 5: The Law Is Good**

Finally, we ought to study the Decalogue because the commandments are good. How strange, we think, that the psalmist should
say that his delight is in the law of the Lord (Ps. 1:2). We can understand delighting in God’s love or his grace or his promises, but in his law? Who loves commandments? Well, the psalmist does. He understands that God lays down his law for our good, not for our groaning. The good news of law, C. S. Lewis once remarked, is like the good news of arriving on solid ground after a shortcut gone awry through the mud, muck, and mire. After fumbling about in the squishy, stinky mess, you’re relieved to finally hit something solid, something you can trust, something you can count on.

Have you ever thought about how much better life would be if everyone kept the Ten Commandments? We may grumble about rules and regulations, but think of what an amazing place the world would be if these ten rules were obeyed. If everyone kept the Ten Commandments, we wouldn’t need copyright laws, patent laws, or intellectual property rights. We wouldn’t need locks on our doors or fraud protection. We wouldn’t have to spend money on weapons and defense systems. We wouldn’t need courts, contracts, or prisons. Can you imagine what life would be like if people obeyed the Ten Commandments? The law is not an ugly thing; it is good and righteous and holy (Rom. 7:12).

**Five Reasons to Obey the Ten Commandments**

The Ten Commandments are not to be ignored. It’s important that we study and understand them. But, of course, it’s more important that we obey them. God isn’t impressed by an intellectually careful analysis that puts the Decalogue at the center of Christian discipleship. He expects disciples to actually follow these commands.

But for the right reasons. Working hard to obey the Ten Commandments from the wrong motivation and for the wrong end is a surefire way to live out our relationship with God in the wrong way. God gave the commandments that they might be obeyed—not
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to earn salvation but because of who we are, who God is in himself, who he is to us, where we are, and what he has done.

**Reason 1: Who We Are**

Don’t miss the obvious: Exodus 19 comes before Exodus 20. God has already identified the Israelites as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). They are a people set apart. The same is true of us. As Christians, we too are a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9). We must be prepared to stand alone, to look different, and to have rules the world doesn’t understand. Of course, we aren’t always the holy people we should be, but that’s what he has called us to be. That’s who we are. We are God’s people, set apart to live according to God’s ways.

**Reason 2: Who God Is in Himself**

The opening verses in Exodus 20 are not just filler before the commandments start rolling. They establish who God is and why we should obey him. In verse 2 God reveals himself again as “the Lord,” that is, as Yahweh their covenant-keeping God. This is the God who spoke to Moses in the burning bush. This is the God who said, “I am who I am” (Ex. 3:14). This is the sovereign, self-existent, self-sufficient, almighty creator God. This is the God of the plagues and the Red Sea and the manna in the wilderness. This is not a God to be trifled with. If there is a God, and if he is anything like the God who is revealed to us in the Scriptures, then it would be extremely presumptuous, foolish, and (by all accounts) dangerous for us to crowdsource our own ethical code.

The law is an expression of the Lawgiver’s heart and character. We must think about that before we say, “I don’t care for laws,” or before we bristle at the thought of do’s and don’ts. The commandments not only show us what God wants; they show us what God is like. They say something about his honor, his worth, and his
majesty. They tell us what matters to God. We can’t disdain the law without disrespecting the Lawgiver.

**Reason 3: Who God Is to Us**

The God of the Ten Commandments is revealed not just as the Lord, but as the “**Lord your God**” (Ex. 20:2). We are his treasured possession (Ex. 19:5; 1 Pet. 2:9). This God of absolute power is not a capricious tyrant, not some cranky deity who wields raw and unbridled authority without any regard for his creatures. He is a personal God, and in Christ he always is for us (Rom. 8:31). It would be frightening to the point of death if God thundered from the heavens, “I am the Lord!” But the divine self-disclosure doesn’t stop there. He goes on to add, “. . . your God.” He is on our side. He is our Father. He gives us commands for our good.

**Reason 4: Where We Are**

The biblical definition of freedom is not “doing whatever you want.” Freedom is enjoying the benefits of doing what we should. We too often think of the Ten Commandments as constraining us—as if God’s ways will keep us in servitude and from realizing our dreams and reaching our potential. We forget that God means to give us abundant life (John 10:10) and true freedom (John 8:32). His laws, 1 John 5:3 tells us, are not burdensome.

You think it’s burdensome to have Ten Commandments? Do you know how many laws there are in the United States? It’s a trick question, because no one knows! There are twenty thousand laws on the books regulating gun ownership alone. In 2010 an estimated forty thousand new laws were added at various levels throughout the country. The United States Code, which is just one accounting of federal laws and does not include regulatory statutes, has more than fifty volumes. In 2008 a House committee asked the Congressional Research Service to calculate the
number of criminal offenses in federal law. They responded, five
years later, that they lacked the manpower and resources to an-
swer such a question.5

God is not trying to crush us with red tape and regulations. The
Ten Commandments are not prison bars, but traffic laws. Maybe
there are some anarchists out there who think, “The world would
be a better place without any traffic laws.” A few of us drive as if
that were so! But even if you get impatient when you’re at a red
light, try to zoom through the yellow, and turn left on a very stale
pink—overall, aren’t you glad that there is some semblance of law
and order? People stop and go. People slow down when driving by
schools. They stop for school buses. You wouldn’t be able to drive
your car to the grocery store without laws. When you drive on a
switchback on a mountain pass, do you curse the guardrails that
keep you from plunging to an untimely death? No, someone put
them there at great expense, and for our good, that we may travel
about freely and safely.

The Ten Commandments are not instructions on how to get
out of Egypt. They are rules for a free people to stay free.

**Reason 5: What He Has Done**

Note once again that the law comes after gospel—after the good
news of deliverance. God did not come to the people as slaves
and say, “I have Ten Commandments. I want you to get these
right. I’m going to come back in five years, and if you’ve gotten
your life cleaned up, I’ll set you free from Egypt.” That’s how
some people view Christianity: God has rules, and if I follow
the rules, God will love me and save me. That’s not what hap-
pened in the story of the exodus. The Israelites were an op-
pressed people, and God said, “I hear your cry. I will save you
because I love you. And when you are saved, free, and forgiven,
I’m going to give you a new way to live.”
We need to hear it again: salvation is not the *reward* for obedience; salvation is the *reason* for obedience. Jesus does not say, “If you obey my commandments, I will love you.” Instead, he first washes the feet of the disciples and then says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). All of our doing is only because of what he has first done for us.
ARE THE 10 COMMANDMENTS STILL RELEVANT TODAY?

Do they still apply? Which ones? What do they mean in light of God’s mercy revealed in Jesus?

Highlighting the timelessness and goodness of God’s commands, pastor Kevin DeYoung delivers critical truth about the 10 Commandments as he makes clear what they are, why we should know them, and how to apply them. This book will help you understand, obey, and delight in God’s law—commandments that expose our sinfulness and reveal the glories of God’s grace to us in Christ.

“Seasoned by personal wit, shaped by years of pastoral ministry, and highly skilled in interpreting God’s Word, DeYoung is the right person to write this book. He fleshes out the 10 Commandments in a way that helps us see the wisdom of our Creator and Redeemer in directing us on our pilgrim way. I highly recommend this book!”

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