

Exod. 20:1–17

Ps. 19

1 Cor. 1:18–25

John 2:13–22

The Gift of the Ten Laws

Goal for the Session

Heeding God’s gift of the Ten Commandments, adults will practice ways to live in right relationship with God and with one another.

■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

Focus on Exodus 20:1–17

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” W. Sibley Towner

The Decalogue comes to us almost as a kind of legal credo, fundamental to what individual Israelites understood was expected of them as people of God. *The first table of the law (vv. 1–11)*. The pericope begins with four commandments aimed at establishing a right relationship between God and the elect people. Like all the commandments, these are addressed to an individual Israelite in the second person singular, though of course they are intended to regulate community life. *The second table of the law (vv. 12–20)*. The remaining verses of the Decalogue offer categorical imperatives that regulate relationships within the elect people of God.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” George W. Stroup

It is important to remember that the Ten Commandments presuppose Israel’s history and its understanding of covenantal life before God, because, especially in Christian circles, the Ten Commandments have all too often been reduced to moral principles. Although Christians differ on precisely how the Ten Commandments are numbered, all agree that the commandments are in the form of two tables, of which one has to do with how people are to live before God and the second with how they are to live with one another. That the commandments are given in two tables has great significance for Jewish and Christian life. The two tables differ, but they are also inseparable. Hence it would be a profound mistake to emphasize one and ignore the other, to reduce the commandments to either ethics or theology. Because the two tables should not be understood apart from one another, so too theology and ethics are inseparable.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Craig Kocher

As the Ten Commandments were given to the people of Israel as a gift to shape their love of God and one another, the journey of Lent comes as a gift to mold the witness of the church. It is an opportunity to confess the ways we have squandered God’s gifts, to renew the vibrancy and faithfulness of our worship, and to increase our love of neighbors near and far. Like the Commandments, Lent is not about religious moralism. Rather, Lent is a journey of deepening holiness shaping lives in the image of Christ to praise God and live in friendship with one another.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Barbara Brown Taylor

If nothing else, stories and traditions like these remind Christian interpreters of the Ten Teachings that these teachings have been around a long time. They are never our possession, any more than the God who uttered them is. Instead, we stand among a people counted as God’s peculiar possession, set apart by holy speech and practice for the mending of God’s holy world.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Exodus 20:1–17

Focus on Your Teaching

Our lives are circumscribed by laws, rules, and regulations. Most adults understand the necessity of laws that benefit the safety of the community, such as observing speed limits, though we may still occasionally break those laws. We may grudgingly acquiesce to other laws that we know benefit the community, such as paying our income taxes. When it comes to laws that define our lives together as a Christian community, we may be less clear about their function. This session is an opportunity for adults to consider the practical implication of the Ten Commandments.

YOU WILL NEED

- six candles
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for March 14, 2021

For Responding

- option 1: ten prepared newspaper sheets, Resource Sheet 2, markers, tape
- option 2: paper, pens
- option 3: for each mobile: one 4" x 18" poster board strip; two 3" x 6" strips, two large tablet shapes, yarn or string, scissors, one or more hole punches, markers

The Ten Commandments are sometimes referred to as the Ten Words, because they are the foundational words for life as God's people. The word *Decalogue* comes from a Latin word meaning ten words.

Holy God, guide my planning and my teaching, that I may open doors to understanding. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, arrange six candles on a table in the shape of a cross. For option 1 in Responding, prepare separate sheets of newspaper, each with one commandment. For option 3, prepare materials for mobiles. For the closing, post the following on a piece of newspaper: "Lord, have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law."

Welcome participants and introduce any newcomers.

Ask participants to line up along a continuum, with one side of the room representing strong agreement with the statement, "I am in favor of displaying the Ten Commandments in public places," and the other representing strong disagreement. Invite volunteers to explain their position. Ask:

✠ What is the value in posting the commandments on the courthouse lawn or in the statehouse? What might be an alternative?

Explain that the debate over posting the commandments causes many to overlook the deeper ways these commandments should function. Today's session will focus on the purpose and function of these rules in our faith tradition.

Light all six candles representing the weeks of Lent, a time of reflection and repentance in preparation for Easter. Remind participants that you are lighting all six candles representing the six weeks of Lent, and then extinguishing an additional candle every week until all six are dark. Today is the third Sunday in Lent.

Sit in silence for a few moments, then extinguish three candles. Read Psalm 19:7–8, part of today's lectionary psalm.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

O God, open our minds to new insights as we explore your Word. Guide our reflections as we move further into Lent. Amen.

EXPLORING

Invite participants to close their eyes and listen for any new insights that emerge as you read the focus scripture aloud. After reading each commandment, pause for a few moments so that adults can reflect silently. Afterward, invite participants to respond to the following:

- ✪ Something that surprised me . . .
- ✪ Something new that I had never thought of before . . .
- ✪ I have questions about . . .

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Exodus 20:1–17). Invite adults to read silently the “What?” and the “Where” excerpts. Ask them to name some salient points from the excerpts. Discuss:

- ✪ The “Where?” excerpt notes that the two tables are inseparable, that it is a mistake to reduce the commandments to either ethics or theology. What does this mean?
- ✪ What are the implications for how the Ten Words guide and shape our lives as Christians?

If you choose more than one activity in a session that calls for forming pairs or small groups, mix it up so that adults are not always working with the same persons.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (The Two Tables of the Ten Words). Form two groups. Assign to one group the commentary about the first table, and to the second the commentary about the second table. Ask them to read the commentary and then to rewrite each commandment using language that clarifies its meaning. Have groups present their commandments, explaining what they learned about the meaning of each.

To transition to Responding, invite someone to read aloud the “So What?” excerpt. Ask the whole group to reflect on how the gift of the Ten Commandments molds the witness of the church.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session.

- 1. Choose a Practice** By exploring the deeper implications of the Ten Commandments, adults can identify specific practices to guide them in living in right relationship with God and with one another. Invite adults to review Resource Sheet 2. Form small groups or pairs and assign one commandment to each group. Ask groups to create a list of possible practices to deepen their commitment to the commandment’s intent. Post the lists around your space, and invite adults to move around, reading, making additions, and recording questions. Ask adults to commit to doing at least one of the suggested practices.

**EASY
PREP**

2. **Create New Analogies** Thinking of analogies for how the commandments function provides adults with new ways to understand them and live them more fully. Tell the group that one analogy for how the commandments work is that they are like boundary lines on a football field, outlining basic expectations for how people should act and serving to protect the community from running out of bounds and falling into ways of living that will destroy it. Distribute paper and pens and challenge adults to come up with other analogies to describe how the commandments function, and discuss these together. Ask adults to reflect on where in their own lives there is work to be done in order to live more fully in relationship with God and neighbor. Encourage them to refer to this analogy as they engage in daily times of devotion and reflection.

3. **Create a Mobile** Creating a mobile in which attention must be focused on balancing the parts provides a visual reminder of how the two tables of the commandments—and the practices of loving God and neighbor—are integrally related. Provide adults with the prepared poster board pieces and other materials. Have them print “The Ten Commandments” on the mobile header. On the two shorter pieces, they should print “Love God” and “Love Neighbor.” On each of the two tablets, they should print the appropriate commandments of the two tables. Assemble the mobiles, balancing them so they hang straight. Display where congregants can see them.

CLOSING

As is the practice in some congregations during Lent, invite adults to stand as you read the commandments from the Bible. After each one, the group repeats the posted response.

Pray the following:

Holy God, we give thanks for the gift of the Ten Words. Open us to new understandings of what it means to love you and our neighbor. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for March 14, 2021, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

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The Two Tables of the Ten Words



The First Table

The first four commandments are aimed at establishing a right relationship between God and the people.

The First Commandment does not deny the reality of the gods worshiped by others. From the people of YHWH, though, it demands total allegiance.

The Second Commandment condemns the making of idols. God is a “jealous God,” hostile to efforts to get God “in a box,” that is, localized, concretized, easy to manipulate.

The Third Commandment moves to forestall manipulation of God by magical or other vain use of the divine name.

The Fourth Commandment presents Sabbath not as a day of worship, but rather as a day of cessation blessed by God.

The Second Table

The remaining verses of the Decalogue regulate relationships among the people of God.

The Fifth Commandment to honor father and mother is the only one of the ten to which is attached a promise. This law not only elevates the status of women (by placing the mother on the same level as the father), but also promotes the uninterrupted flow of tradition between generations.

The Sixth Commandment is aimed at that form of killing deemed socially unacceptable, homicide. Warfare, capital punishment, or revenge killing were not included here, so long as restraining rules were followed. Jesus later radicalized this commandment by stressing the intentionality of an individual.

At stake in the **Seventh Commandment** are family integrity and the legitimacy of children. Some forms of sexual activity outside of marriage were not understood to be forbidden by this commandment (polygamous relationships with concubines and slaves). Jesus’ radicalization of this commandment rightly stresses intentionality and sees lust as the root cause of adultery.

The Eighth Commandment protects private property. This law was not understood to preclude social safety net provisions, such as the right of the poor to glean in the corners of fields.

The Ninth Commandment is a bulwark not only against trivial lying but especially against perjury in court.

The Tenth Commandment addresses the private and inner moral condition that also threatens community interest. The verb “to covet” includes an element of enactment. To look upon a neighbor’s house or spouse with deep desire is to move into rehearsal and to take steps for action. Inordinate desire or lust are what are prohibited, not mere ambition or fantasy.

—Adapted from W. Sibley Towner, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 74, 77, 79.