

Conversations on
Exod. 20:1–17

Discuss this passage in light of the commentary below.

Idea! Search YouTube for “Exodus 20:1–17” and watch a video together that brings the Ten Commandments to life in a creative way. How might you see the Ten Commandments differently after viewing the video?

WHAT is important to know?

The setting in Exodus places the Decalogue (meaning the “Ten Words”) at the beginning of the lengthy covenant passage known as the Sinai pericope (Exodus 20:1–Numbers 10:10). Its position in the text bespeaks its primary importance. This is categorical law, setting forward the principles essential for the viability of a community. It 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 Decalogue begins with four commandments aimed at establishing a right relationship between God and the elect people. The remaining verses regulate relationships between persons. (*W. Sibley Towner*)

- ✧ How is our relationship to God defined in vv. 1–2?
- ✧ What significance do you give to the order of the law?
- ✧ How might these laws set “forward the principles essential for the viability of a community”?
- ✧ What is significant about the differences between the first four commandments and the remaining verses?

WHERE is God in these words?

One of the central convictions of Jewish and Christian faith is that human life is to be lived before God and that such life has an order and structure, constituted by God’s commandments. It is important to remember that the Ten Commandments presuppose Israel’s history and its understanding of covenantal life before God. They guide us as we journey in our life before God and our life with our neighbors. They do not show us what we must do or how we must live in order to receive God’s covenantal grace. They light our way and show us how we should live as people who have already been freely given God’s grace in Jesus Christ. (*George W. Stroup*)

- ✧ What does this passage tell us about God’s character? What does it tell us about human nature?
- ✧ What do the Ten Commandments have to do with the history of Israel, especially with the covenant between God and the people?

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

The Commandments come as a gift from God to the people of Israel to structure their common life, and to shape individual lives that are worthy of the God who has rescued them and with whom they are in covenant. To be bound in covenant with God is to be set free to live as God’s people. There is an internal logic to the Commandments that is both compelling and beautiful: The way we attend to God shapes the way we attend to our neighbor. In other words, faithful worship of God leads to proper love of neighbor. (*Craig Kocher*)

- ✧ In what specific ways is the internal logic of the Commandments both compelling and beautiful?
- ✧ Who is the judge when a commandment is broken? What is the community’s role when a commandment is broken?
- ✧ How does your congregation’s attention to God—through worship and the following of the law—shape your attention to neighbors?

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

These practices are not kindly suggestions. They express the purposeful will of God for God’s people. Those who ignore the divine teachings do so at their own peril—not because God is standing over them with a hammer, but because the teachings describe the way of life. To ignore them is to wander into the ways of death instead. The Ten Teachings also constitute a kind of trust exercise about the nature of reality; they challenge all other readings of reality. *Trust me, God says. Those other teachings are not good for you. The life you think they bring you is not real life.* (*Barbara Brown Taylor*)

- ✧ In what ways are the Ten Teachings “a kind of trust exercise about the nature of reality”?
- ✧ Without prescribed punishments, what is the motivation to follow God’s law?
- ✧ Why should (or should not) courthouses post this biblical passage on government property?

Thank God for the gift of God’s law in our lives.