

Praise for *The Ten Commandments*

Peter Leithart is one of the most careful and patient, but also imaginative, readers of the biblical text that I know. This meditation on the Ten Words will richly reward every Christian reader's attention.

Alan Jacobs
Baylor University,
author of *How to Think*

We hear a lot about freedom these days, but we see around us and in ourselves a terrible enslavement to human weakness, vice, political ideology, and Mammon. Peter Leithart mines the riches of the biblical tradition to show us the way to true freedom.

R. R. Reno
editor of *First Things*

Specific but not moralistic, Scripture-laden but not biblicistic, visionary but not brash—Peter Leithart's *The Ten Commandments* commands the reader's attention. Here is a treatment that looks to Jesus as the heart and soul of the Ten Words.

Hans Boersma
Nashotah House Theological Seminary,
author of *Scripture as Real Presence*

This little gem of a book is the best introduction to the Ten Commandments I have yet come across. I learned something new on almost every page. A picture may speak a thousand words, but God's "Ten Words" speak a thousand pictures of the new creation that Israel and the church are to become. Leithart makes a compelling case that God gave the Ten Commandments not to curtail or frustrate human freedom but to shape it and enable it to flourish. Every serious Christian needs to heed these Ten Words because, as Leithart explains, they're all about Jesus, God's one Word made flesh.

Kevin J. Vanhoozer
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School,
author of *Biblical Authority after Babel*

The Ten Commandments seem like an ancient relic, but Leithart shows their modern relevance. They reveal who God is and who his people are to be. Leithart shows that the Commandments are addressed to God's son. Jesus is God's faithful Son, and in Jesus we are God's faithful children. The Ten Commandments reveal Jesus. As Leithart says, "Is the Decalogue for us? We might as well ask, Is Jesus for us?"

Patrick Schreiner
Western Seminary
author of *The Kingdom of God*



THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

A Guide to the Perfect Law of Liberty

PETER J. LEITHART


LEXHAM PRESS

CHRISTIAN ESSENTIALS





The Ten Commandments: A Guide to the Perfect Law of Liberty
Christian Essentials

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CHRISTIAN ESSENTIALS



SERIES PREFACE



he Christian Essentials series passes down tradition that matters.

The church has often spoken paradoxically about growth in Christian faith: to grow means to stay at the beginning. The great Reformer Martin Luther exemplified this. “Although I’m indeed an old doctor,” he said, “I never move on from the childish doctrine of the Ten Commandments and the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. I still daily learn and pray them with my little Hans and my little Lena.” He had just as much to learn about the Lord as his children.

The ancient church was founded on basic biblical teachings and practices like the Ten Commandments, baptism, the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Supper, the Lord’s Prayer, and corporate worship. These basics of the Christian life have sustained and nurtured every generation of the faithful—from the apostles

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to today. They apply equally to old and young, men and women, pastors and church members. “In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith” (Gal 3:26).

We need the wisdom of the communion of saints. They broaden our perspective beyond our current culture and time. “Every age has its own outlook,” C. S. Lewis wrote. “It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes.” By focusing on what’s current, we rob ourselves of the insights and questions of those who have gone before us. On the other hand, by reading our forebears in faith, we engage ideas that otherwise might never occur to us.

The books in the Christian Essentials series open up the meaning of the foundations of our faith. These basics are unfolded afresh for today in conversation with the great tradition—grounded in and strengthened by Scripture—for the continuing growth of all the children of God.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4–9)

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AND GOD SPAKE ALL THESE WORDS, SAYING,

I am **THE LORD THY GOD**, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I **THE LORD THY GOD** am a jealous God.

Thou shalt not take the name of **THE LORD THY GOD** in vain; for **THE LORD** will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.
Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work:
But the seventh day is the sabbath of **THE LORD THY GOD**.

Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days
may be long upon the land which **THE LORD THY GOD**
giveth thee.

Thou shalt not kill.

Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Thou shalt not steal.

Thou shalt not bear false witness against
thy neighbor.


Thou shalt not covet.





INTRODUCTION

Father to Son

od spoke the Ten Commandments to Israel at Sinai. Are they for *us*? Are they for us *Christians* who are not Jews, or should Christians live by a “New Testament ethic”? Are they for us Germans or Japanese or Nigerians or Peruvians or Americans? Are they only for Israel or for the nations?

The church has always taken the Decalogue, with modifications, as God’s word to Christians.¹ New Testament writers quote it, church fathers appeal to it, Thomas Aquinas comments on it, Reformation catechisms and confessions teach it, prayer books incorporate it into our worship, and church architects carve it on our walls. Christian rulers like Alfred the Great made the Decalogue the basis of civil law.

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Has the church been right? Or is this an unfortunate old covenant residue that needs to be purged from the church?

Read in canonical context, the Decalogue presents itself as a Christian text. To see how, we need to examine the text carefully.

Scripture doesn't use the phrase "Ten Commandments." Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 record Yahweh's "Ten Words" (Exod 34:28; Deut 4:13). These texts contain imperatives, but, like the rest of Torah, they include declarations, warnings, promises. That multiplicity of speech acts is better captured by the phrase "Ten Words" or "Decalogue," which I use throughout this book.

Israel has been in the wilderness for three months when they arrive at Sinai (Exod 19:1). Behind them are the ruins of Egypt, blighted by plagues. They've passed through the sea, received manna and water, grumbled and rebelled. Now the God who revealed his Name to Moses at Sinai (Exod 3:1-12) unveils himself to Israel.

God speaks on the third *day* of the month (Exod 19:16). Yahweh² descends with a trumpet blast that summons Israel to assembly. From a fiery cloud, he speaks the Ten Words.

He's spoken ten words before. Ten times Genesis 1 repeats, "And God spoke." At Sinai, God again speaks ten words that, if guarded and obeyed, will form Israel into a new creation. These ten new-creative words present the form of new creation.³

Yahweh has spoken on the third day before too. On the original third day, in the seventh of ten creation words, Yahweh

called the land to bring forth grass with seed and trees with fruit (Gen 1:11). Speaking from Sinai, he reminds Israel that he brought them from the land of Egypt (Exod 20:2). Israel later commemorates Sinai at Pentecost, a feast of firstfruits. At Sinai, Israel is the firstfruits, a people of grain and fruit, the first to rise from the land. God speaks so that the vine brought from Egypt (Ps 80; Isa 5) will become fruitful. He speaks in anticipation of *Jesus'* third day, when the risen Lord becomes firstborn from the dead.⁴

The speaker identifies himself as “Yahweh,” who is “*thy* God.” At the burning bush (Exod 3), he calls himself “I am who I am.” The Hebrew verbs can be translated with any tense: “I will be who I will be; I am who I will be; I will be who I was.”⁵ The context clarifies. Yahweh sees Israel’s affliction and hears their cries. He comes to deliver from slavery. “Yahweh” is the God who will be everything Israel needs and do everything Israel needs done. Everything he is, Yahweh is *for Israel*. “Yahweh” is *Israel’s* God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who makes and keeps promises to his people. He is Yahweh “*thy* God.”

To whom is Yahweh speaking? The answer isn’t as simple as it seems. When Israel arrives at Sinai, Yahweh designates Moses as his spokesman. After the Ten Words, Moses ascends into the cloud to receive the Lord’s word (20:21–22). But Moses is at the foot of Sinai when God speaks the Ten Words (19:25; 20:1). After six speeches to Moses (19:3, 9, 10, 20, 21, 24), God speaks a seventh time to all Israel (cf. 20:18). The Ten Words alone are unmediated, spoken to firstfruits sprung up from Egypt.

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But there's a grammatical puzzle. Yahweh speaks to all Israel, but the verbs are in the masculine singular of the second person. The KJV gets it right: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me"; "Thou shalt not kill"; "Thou shalt not steal."⁶ It sounds as if God is speaking to an individual man: "You, man, I brought you out of slavery. You, man, don't worship idols, kill, steal, commit adultery, or covet."

Perhaps the grammar indicates that *every* individual must obey. Perhaps God addresses Israelite *men* in particular. Men labor and rule a house, so they have authority to give rest on the Sabbath. Israelite *men* are forbidden to desire their neighbor's wife.

I think something else is going on. We may ask, *Who* was delivered from the house of bondage? Israel, of course, but Israel as *son* of Yahweh (see Exod 4:23). Yahweh's "family" tie to Israel provides a legal basis for his demand to Pharaoh: "Israel is *my* son. You have no right to enslave my son. Let my son go." When Pharaoh refuses, Yahweh cuts off negotiations and takes up the role of a kinsman redeemer, rescuing his son with a mighty hand and outstretched arm. Yahweh's justice is precise: Pharaoh seized Yahweh's firstborn; at Passover, Yahweh takes Pharaoh's.

God gave his first command to Adam, his first son.⁷ At Sinai, he speaks to his son, the new Adam. The Ten Words are imperatives, but not merely imperatives. When Father Yahweh speaks to son Israel, he discloses his likes and dislikes. The Ten Words are "a personal declaration"⁸ that reveals *Yahweh's* character.

Like Proverbs, they're a Father-son talk. The ten new-creative words are designed to form Israel into an image of his Father.

The Decalogue is about Israel's mission. When Israel obeys the Ten Words, his common life becomes a living, filial icon of the heavenly Father among the nations of earth. Hearing the voice from Sinai, Israel takes up Adam's vocation of imitating and imaging his Father.

Many complain about the negativity of the Ten Words. There are two positive commandments—remember the Sabbath day, honor your father and mother. Mostly, it's one “Don't” after another.⁹ God says he brought Israel from slavery, but it may seem he just imposed a different slavery.

According to Scripture, Torah is the “perfect law of liberty” (Jas 1:25; 2:12). A community dominated by disrespect for parents, workaholicism, violence, envy, theft, and lies isn't free. Besides, *absolute* freedom is impossible. In the world God made, the world that actually exists, things aren't free to do or be anything they please. They're free when they become what they are. An acorn is free to become an oak, not an elephant. The Ten Words guide Israel to grow up to be what he is, the son who rules in his Father's house (see Gal 4:1–7).

Israel cannot listen to the Lord's voice. He asks Yahweh to speak through Moses (Exod 20:18–21). At Sinai, the son's heart is too hardened to hear his Father. But Israel isn't left hopeless. Yahweh *will* have a son who conforms to the Ten Words. The Father *does* have such a Son, the eternal Son who became Israel to be and do what Israel failed to be and do.

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The Ten Words are a character portrait of Jesus, *the Son of God*.¹⁰ The Ten Words lay out the path of *imitatio Dei* because they lay the path of the *imitatio Christi*. As Israel kept the commandments, Augustine wrote, “the life of that people foretold and foreshadowed Christ.”¹¹ As Irenaeus said, *Christ* fulfills the law that he spoke from Sinai.¹² The law exposes our sin, restrains the unruly, provides a guide to life. But Jesus is the heart and soul of the Decalogue. The first use of the law is the christological.

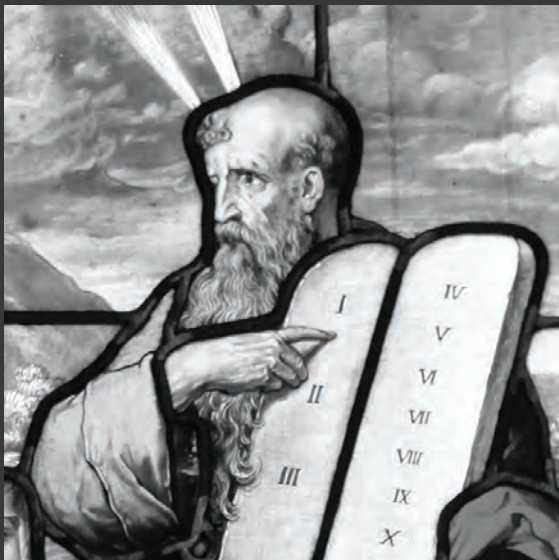
Many centuries after Sinai, God returned in the third month, in rushing wind and fire, to pour out his Spirit. At that completed Pentecost, the Spirit began to write “not on stone but on the heart” (see 2 Cor 3:3).¹³ He forms a new Israel, a company of sons who share Jesus’ Spirit of sonship. By that Spirit, the Father fulfills his ten new-creative words *in us*.

Is the Decalogue for us? We might as well ask, Is *Jesus* for us?



AND GOD SPAKE ALL THESE WORDS





TWO TABLES



e know there are *Ten Words*. Yahweh wrote them with his finger on two tablets of stone (Exod 31:18; 34:1). But the church has never agreed on how to count to ten.

The Bible doesn't give a decisive answer. There are *twelve* negative imperatives in Exodus 20:1–17,¹⁴ and one of the ten (“Honor thy father and mother”) doesn't include any negatives. To make ten, Augustine combined the prohibition of images with the prohibition of idolatry and argued there were two commandments against coveting.¹⁵ Origen separated the prohibition of false gods from the command against images and counted only one command against coveting.¹⁶ Roman Catholics and Lutherans follow Augustine; Reformed churches follow Origen (see pages 14–15). I follow the Reformed numbering, with an Orthodox modification: Yahweh's declaration “I

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am Yahweh your God” is part of the First Word, not a “preface” (as in *Westminster Larger Catechism*, q. 101).¹⁷

To make matters more confusing, we’re never told what was on each of the two stone tablets. Following Augustine, Caesarius of Arles said the first tablet contained three commandments; the second, seven.¹⁸ Origen and others divided the commandments into four and six. Perhaps all Ten Words were on *both* tablets, a double witness to Yahweh’s covenant with Israel.¹⁹

We can sort through some of these debates by paying close attention to the text of Exodus 20. Whatever the two tablets contained, *literarily* the Ten Words aren’t divided as 3 + 7 or 4 + 6, but in half, 5 + 5.²⁰

Each of the first five has an explanation attached to it. Exodus 20:2 grounds the first word (v. 3): *Because* Yahweh brought Israel from Egypt, Israel should have no other gods. The next four also contain explanations: Don’t bow to images, because God is jealous; don’t bear the name lightly, because Yahweh punishes; keep Sabbath, because Yahweh kept Sabbath; honor father and mother to prolong your days. By contrast, none of commandments 6–10 is explained.

“Yahweh” appears eight times in the first five words (Exod 20:2–12) but isn’t named at all in commandments 6–10. The style of the second half is dramatically different. In Hebrew, the first five commandments contain 145 words; the second five use only 26.²¹ In Hebrew, the sixth, seventh, and eighth have only two words each: Not kill, not adultery, not steal.

Why would the Lord speak the Ten Words in two sets of five?²²

Five is a military number (Exod 13:18, “martial array” is literally “fively”), and the Ten Words are given to Yahweh’s “hosts” on their way to conquer Canaan. We have five fingers on each hand; the Ten Words are a two-handed summation of Torah. 5 + 5 patterns appear elsewhere in Scripture.²³ In the inner sanctuary of the temple was the ark of the covenant, Yahweh’s throne, which contained the two tablets with their 5 + 5 words. In the Holy Place were ten lampstands arranged in two rows of five (1 Kgs 7:49) and ten tables of showbread in two rows of five (2 Chr 4:8). Outside in the courtyard, ten water stands in two rows of five formed a gauntlet, a water passage, leading to the temple door (1 Kgs 7:27–37).

The temple architecturally symbolizes the movement of the word from Yahweh’s throne, through his house, out into the world. Cherubim guardians flank the ark, each with four faces: ox, lion, eagle, and man. Two cherubim match the two tablets, calling attention to the cherubic character of the law. Like the cherubim, the Ten Words guard the throne. Each cherub face reveals a facet of the law. The Torah is a threshing ox, providing bread. It’s a ferocious lion that tears us, and God’s enemies, to pieces. Torah offers soaring vistas like an eagle in flight and makes us truly, cherubically, human. Torah is good, but not safe. In the liturgy, you come within range of this cherubic word, a fiery sword that divides and consumes to make you a living sacrifice (cf. Heb 4:12–13).