

Exodus 20:1-2 Who said we should keep the Ten Commandments?

Introduction

When I entered High School as an eleven-year-old pupil in 1977 we were issued with a little red book that sadly I no longer possess. It was a short volume of the list of rules and regulations to be observed while a member of that school community. All aspects of school life in a fair amount of detail were covered. How were these regulations received by the new pupils? In public not a word was uttered, but in private conversations were often along the lines of 'how many of the rules have you broken so far?' This mindset is far from unique to my peers; in fact it is a universal one. All of us are sinners, in thought, words and actions over the course of our lives, different only in the degree of the violation of God's guidelines for our lives. It is, though, often only when 'the law' is explicitly presented to us that we have a conscious desire to break it. Paul discusses this fact in Romans 7:1-13. He declared: *What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, Do not covet (Romans 7:7).* How many of us as children or later as adults only wanted to do something because our parents, or another adult told us we couldn't do that activity. 'Who said ...?' is the natural rebellious tendency of the human heart? Is it an opinion I can safely ignore if I choose, without consequences? Or is it a command given by someone I need to obey. Our country's legal system was founded on the basis of the Ten Commandments, God's moral law. Although politicians have delighted in adding many thousands of laws to the statute book over the years, they have never improved on the standards God has laid down for us in the Bible. However, since the 1960s, a decade of conscious public rebellion against Christian values, British society has tried to fashion new rules to guide our collective behaviour. This era that overturned traditional moral boundaries has produced, for example, a society where four out of ten marriages end in divorce; an even higher percentage of children are born to unmarried couples and more than that, the total number of abortions in Britain since the Abortion Act was passed in 1967 is now well over seven million. There is now one abortion for every four live births in Britain and one out of every three women by the age of 45 will have had an abortion [cmfblog.org.uk 25 May 2011]; together with seriously high levels of sexually transmitted diseases, figures that would be greatly reduced were God's guidelines for human society obeyed.

Yet how serious is our country about fixing the moral mess in which we find ourselves? In November 1993 two ten-year-old boys Jon Venables and Robert Thompson abducted and murdered three-year old James Bulger in a horrific killing that shocked the nation. It was not an accident, they knew exactly what they were doing; it was planned and carried out without remorse or regret. The tapes of their interviews with the police are amongst the most chilling ever released to the public and shown in documentaries about the case. Conservative Prime Minister John Major, in the light of this tragedy launched his back to basics campaign as he sought to give a moral lead to the country. However, he failed to state what the 'basics' were or the authority that undergirded them. The press had a field-day with 'exclusives' on the private lives of Government ministers and the campaign quickly collapsed. It was not the criticisms of other parties that caused its failure, they said very little acutely aware of similar problems on their own benches. When outstanding head-teacher Philip Lawrence was murdered in 1995 by a fifteen-year-old knife-wielding gang member, Learco Chindamo, a member of parliament was reported as saying that we need 'something like the Ten Commandments' to get our country back on track [Brian Edwards, *Ten Commandments for today*, p. 10]. To add to the moral confusion, when Chindamo was released from prison in 2007, he could not be deported to his country of birth (Italy) according the adjudicating Commission, who ruled that: 'Chindamo had a right to a "family life" under the terms of the Human Rights Act of 1998'. Did the Lawrence family not have such a right? [various internet sources]. More

recently in May 2009 the Daily Telegraph's exposure of the MP's expenses scandal during the time of the last Labour Government revealed rottenness at the heart of the political system; profiteering from expenses claims was not unknown across the parties in the Edinburgh parliament either. In the light of these and many other examples, it is with good reason that we turn to what God has to say about the way we should live.

1. Who spoke these words? (Exodus 20:1) *And God spoke all these words*

The Distinctiveness of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament laws

In the law codes of the ancient world, right at the beginning the name of the author is clearly stated. They also explained why this person had the authority to expect the recipients of that law to obey them. Here in the midst of a variety of other forms of laws given to the Jewish people was this distinctive and short set of rules not written down on parchment, like the other laws by a human scribe; instead God gave them to Moses. Exodus 32: 15-16 states: *Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back.¹⁶ The tablets were the work of God; **the writing was the writing of God**, engraved on the tablets. With respect to other laws, Exodus 24:3-4 records: *When Moses went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws, they responded with one voice, Everything the Lord has said we will do.⁴ **Moses then wrote down** everything the Lord had said. The Ten Commandments were concerned in the Old Testament with an external expression of conformity to God's law in word and deed. However, Jeremiah 31:31-34 indicates a forthcoming change in God's relationship with His people: ³¹*The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, declares the Lord.³³ This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. **I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.** I will be their God, and they will be my people.³⁴ No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.* This is the passage Paul has in mind when he wrote the following words in II Corinthians 3:3: *You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, **not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.*****

In the general rules and regulations for the Israelite people the covenant name of Yahweh is used, in that context indicating that they were only binding on the particular ethnic people to whom they were given. However, here in the moral law, binding on all peoples of whatever race or class the universal majestic name for God, Elohim, is used, indicating His sovereignty over the whole of creation and with the right to command their and our allegiance to His cause. Here the distinctive difference in this law-giving to any other: (a) God spoke all these words (Exodus 20:1). At times we hear a family member or a friend, or a fellow Christian offer some words of advice that we may hesitate to accept. In such circumstances we may rationalise our hesitation by saying 'it's just their opinion'. Here we cannot say 'it's Moses' opinion' because God spoke the words to His servant for His glory and for our good. (b) God spoke these words with authority When God speaks we must listen with reverence and respect; (c) God's Word must be digested we must also remember what He has said (Psalm 119:11 *I have hidden Your Word in my heart that I might not sin against You.* (d) God's Word must be obeyed When God speaks we must then accept and obey it. If we trust Him He will direct our paths. Proverbs 3:5-6: *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; ⁶ in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.* (e) We must take pleasure in obeying God This is a further step demonstrated by the author of Psalm 119. He wrote in Psalm 119:97: *Oh how I love Your law! I meditate on it all day*

long. If we trust Him He will direct our paths. (f) We must share God's Word not just among our peers, but from one generation to the next. Deuteronomy 6:6-7: *Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.* As Christian parents or grandparents do you read God's Word with the children under your influence? Do you regularly pray with or for them? Family circumstances and geography dictate the frequency of direct input, but there is no limit on our prayer ministries.

2. What is His relationship with us? (Exodus 20:2a) *I am the Lord Your God*

In the original context as we know it was to the Israelite nation that the Ten Commandments were given, as they alone were the designated as the Old Testament people of God. God was also including within the boundaries of His people the non-Jewish people who owned His name and who had submitted to the rite of circumcision (men only!) and the other regulations binding on the Jewish people of that day. The use of the covenant name Yahweh in verse two, together with the name of God (Elohim), the God of all the peoples, the Creator and Sovereign over all His creation, ties this law code with those regulations that both followed and preceded it in the respective chapters of the book of Exodus. A clear distinction needs to be made between the different types of Old Testament laws. (a) **Ceremonial Law** This covers all the ceremonies, sacrifices, festivals and priests that loom so large in the book of Leviticus, for example. Every aspect of these ways to approach God was intended to point forward to Christ, the perfect sacrifice who once for all time would offer Himself in our place to provide for our salvation. Jesus was both priest and sacrifice reconciling us to God and God to us. Praise God we don't have to offer bulls and sheep and goats as sacrifices each week to pay for our sins –Jesus has paid our debt in full! Militant atheists love to pull out obscure verses in the Pentateuch to ask Christians if they are practising such laws. The answer time and again we can give is no, because Jesus took my place and brought me into fellowship with God, so I have no need to practice such rituals. In March 1996 a remarkable event took place in the United States of America. A religious denomination that claimed to be Christian, the Worldwide Church of God, known in the United Kingdom through its free magazine, *The Plain Truth*, throughout the fifty years of its existence had sought to obey the Old Testament laws to the letter, under its charismatic leader Herbert Armstrong. However, after much soul-searching, new leader Joseph Tkach Jr wrote in the March/ April 1996 issue of *Plain Truth* that he and others had been wrong to follow exclusively the Old Covenant and instead asked their church members to accept the New Covenant and all that means in Jesus. They lost more than half their ministers and members over this issue, but grasped the reality of the gospel of Jesus Christ and our relationship with Him. The blood sacrifices had a clear purpose, **first** to teach us how seriously God views sin. Hebrews 9:22 tells us that: *In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and **without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.*** Hebrews 10:12-14 follows this by reminding us, with respect to Jesus, that: *when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God.¹³ Since that time He waits for His enemies to be made His footstool,¹⁴**because by one sacrifice He has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy.*** This ceremonial law had a **second** purpose to point forward to the perfect Saviour and Redeemer Jesus. Paul in Galatians 3:24 says: *So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.* (b) **Civil Law** All the numerous rules and regulations for the functioning of the routine running of day-to-day life. Exodus 22:1-15, for example, covered the approach to theft of property, where the principle of restitution was central to handling the cases that came before the courts. Under Old Testament civil law it was assumed that convicted criminals would wish to repent of their actions and put right the wrong they had done. All sentences, apart from death sentences

for capital offences, were served in the community. There was no plan for keeping people in prison for years. It is interesting that the State of Florida in 1983 set up a scheme called 'innovative justice'. It is a modernised version of the Exodus 22 scheme in which the victim is fully compensated for their losses and the criminal also spends time with the victim with a view to reconciliation between the two individuals. By 2,000AD 14,000 criminals in Florida had been sentenced to this programme. Under the previous policy of simply 'educating people not to reoffend' in prison 75% of prisoners had gone on to commit other crimes upon release. Under the 'innovative justice' scheme 93% quit for good a life of crime, only 7% offended again [Brian Edwards, *The Ten Commandments for Today*, p. 17]. God knew what He was doing with the civil laws established for the new nation of Israel! (c) **Food and Hygiene Laws** Leviticus 11 has a series of guidelines for healthy living, both with respect to diet in the desert and the cleanliness of pots and cooking utensils. In the ancient world no other culture had such strict requirements in this area; Deuteronomy 23:12-14, for example, dealt with sanitation, requiring the rudimentary toilet facilities to be erected outside the camp. We forget it was only in the nineteenth century that Western society began to take these issues seriously. Hungarian doctor Ignaz Semmelweis (1818-1865) was in charge of one of the obstetrical wards of the famous Allgemeines Krankenhaus teaching hospital in Vienna. He was alarmed at the mortality rate amongst women who had been examined by teachers and their students who had come from dissecting bodies in the mortuary. Approximately one in six of these patients died. No later than 1847 he ordered them to wash their hands before touching live patients and the casualty rate plunged to one on eighty-four patients. Then he extended it to other medical staff asking them to wash between examining living patients. Again remarkable improvements in the survival rates followed. Unfortunately other doctors got him sacked for his silly ideas about washing hands and personal hygiene. All the wash basins he had installed were taken out. He died a broken man as death rates rose drastically again. Yet he was vindicated after his death [various website have details on his work]. Leviticus 15 has numerous guidelines for washing, to prevent the possible spread of infections, in 'fresh' or literally 'running' water (Lev.15:13). The rules seem so boring and obvious to us today. Pity it took humans 3,000 years to grasp the benefits of keeping God's rules on health and hygiene! (d) **Moral Law** The New Testament is our guide as to how we keep God's laws. They tell us something of the character of God and what is important to Him and how He views us as His children. Clear guidance is given as to how we are to live our lives in obedience to His decrees. The Moral Law, or the Ten Commandments, were central in the teaching of Jesus for the lives of His followers. Listen to these words from Matthew 22:34-39: *Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵ One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶ Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law? ³⁷ Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'* ⁴⁰ *All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.* A group of Pharisees asked Jesus what was the most important commandment God had given in the Scriptures for His people to obey. In effect Jesus summarised the Ten Commandments under the guise of offering two of them. In other places He addressed individual commandments, but made it very plain that the Moral Law was central to life in God's kingdom for His followers. As 'Lord' of His people, a covenant, relationship term, God made these laws for their and our good, as well as for His glory.

3. **Why should we obey Him?** (Exodus 20:2b) *who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*

Redemption from slavery, a helpless downtrodden mass of people brought out and transformed into a nation under the leadership of Moses and Joshua. This is ideal material for a Hollywood blockbuster! Why did God choose them? *The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.*⁸ **But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath He swore to your forefathers that He brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.**⁹ *Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; He is the faithful God, keeping His covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commands.*¹⁰ *But those who hate Him He will repay to their face by destruction; He will not be slow to repay to their face those who hate Him.*¹¹ *Therefore, take care to follow the commands, decrees and laws I give you today (Deuteronomy 7:7-11).* God's motivation for delivering Israel and transforming their circumstances was simply His love for them. There was nothing in them that was particularly attractive, but He chose to take that course of action. On the human level it is difficult to predict (at least for us men!) who might fall in love with whom, let alone who might commit to and enjoy a lifelong marital union. Every time a Jewish family celebrated the Passover Festival there was an annual reminder of the love of God in their redemption. (Exodus 12:14-28 gives the details.) The instructions for its observance are given in Exodus 12:24-28: **Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants.**²⁵ *When you enter the land that the Lord will give you as He promised, observe this ceremony.*²⁶ *And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?'²⁷ then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when He struck down the Egyptians.'* *Then the people bowed down and worshipped.*²⁸ *The Israelites did just what the Lord commanded Moses and Aaron.* As Christians we have a similar command to observe the Lord's Supper (I Corinthians 11:23-34). Jesus demonstrated His love for us in dying in our place on the cross. The least He can expect from us is to obey the commands He has given us as we follow Him. Do you / Do I honour Him in our lives as we should?

4. Do these Ten Commandments apply to everyone –not just Jews and Christians?

I have already highlighted the distinctive nature of the Moral Law that transcends time and culture and is applicable in each and every human society in every era. It alone was spoken directly by God; it alone was written on tablets of stone to indicate its permanence. It alone was placed in the Ark of the Covenant for safekeeping. Throughout the Old Testament there was an assumption that all people would keep these rules for living. Eve and Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden for violating the First Commandment by listening to Satan (Genesis 3); God punished Cain for murdering his brother (Genesis 4:8-16); and was outraged by Lamech for boasting about a so-called 'honour killing' he had carried out (Genesis 4:23-24). The sanctity of life was spelt out to Noah when the mandatory death penalty for murder was commanded in Genesis 9:6); the sanctity of marriage (Genesis 2:24) highlights God's opposition to sexual immorality; There are also a number of condemnations of pagan nations for breaking God's Moral Law, under the assumption that they are also required to obey it. Nahum in his book castigated the Assyrians for murder, greed and covetousness; Habakkuk brings similar charges against the Babylonians. Isaiah attacks idol worship and the making of such objects by craftsmen amongst the pagan nations (Isaiah 44:9-20). If the Moral Law was not binding on all these people then the above examples would be pointless. The same is true in the New Testament era. John the Baptist fearlessly denounced the adultery of Herod Antipas (Matthew 14:3-4) and Paul in his defence statement before the Roman Governor Felix challenged this mighty official concerning the Lord Jesus and the Moral Law. *Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was a Jewess. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus.*²⁵ *As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it*

*convenient, I will send for you (Acts 24:24-25). In his final words to the nation before he died, Moses told them the importance of heeding what God had commanded: Assemble the people—men, women and children, **and the aliens living in your towns**— so that they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law.¹³ Their children, who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess (Deuteronomy 31:12-13). Notice the assumption here that everyone not just the Jews were expected to keep God’s boundaries for healthy and holy living. An old Methodist preacher once remarked that ‘We either keep the Ten Commandments or we illustrate them’. May God help us to honour the Lord by respecting the boundaries He has given for our lives. May our heart attitude be like that of the Psalmist who wrote: *I wait for your salvation, O Lord, and I follow your commands.*¹⁶⁷ *I obey your statutes, for I love them greatly* (Psalm 119:166-167), for Jesus’ sake, Amen.*