

A Study Guide on the Ten Commandments

For Use with the Ten Commandments Series of Sermons
at Grosse Pointe Memorial Church
August 9 - October 25, 2020

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The following Study Guide is provided as a tool for use by those following the sermon series on the Ten Commandments. Several copies of Mark Diehl's book *God of Deliverance and Transformation* are available to check out in the church library; however, the book is unnecessary to benefit from this series.

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Main Point and Summary of Each Commandment

Command 1 (Worship God) **Worship the God of your deliverance**

- Human beings are enjoined to worship the true God, the God of creation and redemption who seeks to provide for the good of all in the community. [Assumption: All human life is governed by some value or principle or relationship or being or power or purpose, often identified as “God.”]

Command 2 (No idols) **Don’t substitute lesser things as your God**

- The true God is not to be confused with humanity or culture. Humans and human creations that displace God only narrow the expansiveness of God’s image in creation, and distance the close reality of God’s presence. Such confusion between God and what-is-not-God serves only to confine and diminish the reality of God. An “unimaged” God is one that surprisingly breaks free of human-imposed restrictions and embraces all of humanity in its diversity and complexity without exclusion.

Command 3 (No misuse of God’s name) **Don’t invoke God’s name for your own purposes**

- The human community must be cautious and circumspect in presuming to speak for God. God associates the name of God with justice and mercy, with judgment and redemption, with healing and wholeness and freedom and life. God’s name employed to defame or condemn the “other” in an effort to promote advantage or gain is a misuse of God’s name. [Using God’s name to make our concerns bigger/more significant or make opposing ideas/concerns smaller/insignificant]

Command 4 (Remember the Sabbath) **A day of rest from labor is to follow in God’s steps**

- Worship places all humanity (and creation) in an equal position before God, and all are valued and sustained in their doxological role.

Command 5 (Honor parents) **Acknowledge with gratitude your dependence on others**

- Acknowledgement of the true nature of dependence on other people within the human community contributes to a blessed life.

Command 6 (No killing) **All human life is to be protected and nurtured**

- All human life is precious and is to be protected and nurtured in a community characterized by peace/shalom for all.

Command 7 (No adultery) **Sex rightly used is for the wellbeing of all in the community**

- Sexual relationships are for the welfare of all families and persons, providing nurture and peace/shalom to all.

Command 8 (No stealing) **Labor in order to earn and share rather than to possess**

- Stewardship rather than ownership is the standard for understanding the use of property and wealth. God is the source and provider of all, and the blessing of “things” is given for the use and benefit of all within the community.

Command 9 (No false witness) **Promote truth and justice in your speaking**

- Human speech is to be used for truth-telling and justice-seeking, ultimately supporting and encouraging all. (Speaking the truth in love.)

Command 10 (No coveting) **Desire the good for your neighbor**

- Misdirected desire undermines the human community, bringing discord and strife. [This focuses on human “interior motives” in ethics and religion; misdirected desire results in external acts and behaviors against the well-being of the community.]

An Approach for Studying Each “Word” of the Ten Commandments

As you begin your reflection on each “word” or commandment, recall the context for the giving of the Decalogue, and use the attached questions as a guide for further exploration:

- The formation of a unified nation was taking place out of a diverse and unorganized community of those formerly enslaved
- The purpose of the new community was worship (*consciously living in the presence of God*)
- The goal of the liberated community was Shalom: wholeness for the entire community, for individuals within the community, for visitors/sojourners among the community, and for the world’s ultimate benefit
- The history and experience of the community previously enslaved (in Egypt) had been characterized by oppression, servitude, and lack of self-directed purpose, resulting in the denial of personal and cultural worth/ value/ meaning, as well as freedom of expression and choice
- Moral/ethical standards imposed during slavery by the state were antithetical to the interests of slaves, and thus irrelevant for the freed Jewish community. What standards should guide them now?
- The future of the community was to advance in the direction of wholeness and wellbeing, with choices and responsibilities and opportunities (*moving toward the Land of Promise*)
- Values were necessary to give form and direction to what wholeness/Shalom would be for individuals and the community
- The “words” of the Decalogue may be conceived as declarations or vows to live into, to grow into, as a commitment taken on freely, in response to the deliverance of God (Covenant)
- The “words” of the Decalogue focus on protecting the other.
*[Keep in mind that in a society that centers on protection of the other, one’s own personal needs/concerns are protected because I am one of the “others” in the community. By focusing on the protection of the other, I am therefore protecting myself. (This contrasts with the present predominant cultural “assertion of my rights” and demands to “protect my rights.”) **The Golden Rule is built on the premise of securing the interests of the other rather than on a premise of protecting one’s personal rights: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”**]*

Questions for Reflecting on Each “Word” of the Decalogue

1. How might the formerly enslaved benefit from this “word”? Does this “word” provide a remedy or protection or liberation that would be meaningful to those previously subjugated?
2. What theological themes are reflected in this “word”?
(Theological themes address issues related to God and God’s relationship with humanity and creation, and human responsibility. These issues include: creation and its purpose, the image of God in humanity, human limitation/failure, sin/brokenness, salvation/redemption, forgiveness/restoration/reconciliation, justice/righteousness, wholeness/fulfillment, worship/living in God’s presence, Shalom/peace, hope/promise for the future, community of God’s people, the coming realm of God)
3. How does this “word” contribute to the creation and stability of a newly forming faith community? Does this guidance provide any cohesive force for holding the community together, or any protection for keeping the community from splintering?
4. How might this “word” contribute to addressing the issues we face today in positive ways? Or how might this “word” create tensions or conflict in today’s world?

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Study #1 - An Introduction (Exodus 1:8-14; 3:7-8; 20:1-2)

“To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.” ~ Nelson Mandela

The Ten Commandments were provided to the Israelites early in history in the years after the lives of the patriarchs and matriarchs of the nation (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel). The stories of the progenitors of the Children of Israel are found in chapters 12 through 50 of the book of Genesis. The drama that propelled the Israelites to move from their settled land in Palestine to Egypt is found in Genesis 37, 39-50.

The immediate background and context of the Israelites' enslavement in Egypt is detailed in Exodus 1-19, and these passages are recommended reading to understand their plight and the significance of the commandments to a newly freed people.

1. How many years had passed from the time Jacob and his sons settled in Egypt to the time that the Israelites departed Egypt?
2. Why did Pharaoh, the king of Egypt and leader of its vast military forces and recipient of its vast wealth, fear the Children of Israel?
3. What was Moses' first request of Pharaoh on behalf of the Israelites?
4. The Ten Commandments were given to the Israelites after they were safely delivered from slavery in Egypt. This pattern of God's deliverance (grace) followed by human transformation (response/obedience/change) occurs throughout Old and New Testaments. Can you name other places in scripture where you see this pattern?
5. Which version of the Ten Commandments are you familiar with? Did you know that more than one version of the Ten Commandments exists?

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Study #2 - First Commandment (Exodus 20:1-3)

“Worship the God of your deliverance”

“God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason.” ~ Dag Hamarskjold

1. Do you believe that “everyone has a god”? [whether that god is the supreme being, a force or power, a way of thinking or a set of principles that guides one’s life or community, an ultimate value that determines truth or beauty or justice or goodness]
2. What or who is “your god”? How do you know who or what is your god, and what is your proof of devotion to your God? The number of hours spent in worship or study? Your intellectual assent to a statement of beliefs or principles? Your compliance with the rules and regulations of your faith community? A change in your life making you more consistent with the pattern or image or behavior anticipated for followers of that God?
3. What does your God want you and your faith community to aspire to? What is the goal of your faith?
4. What interferes with your trust in the God of your deliverance?

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Study #3 - Second Commandment (Exodus 20:4-6)

“Don’t substitute lesser things as your God”

“A growing soul demands a growing thought of God; and mental images can be as stationary as marble or bronze. How perilous it is to carry in one’s mind at twenty the same image of God that stood there at ten!” ~ William Sloane Coffin, Sr.

1. In your experience, what are the most prevalent idols (substitutes that displace God) in today’s world?
2. What are common physical representations of God that may be confused with God?
3. Can you think of any intellectual constructs or belief systems or mental images that displace God?
4. What images of God are most helpful to you? What images of God are least helpful to you?
5. Can God be confined to any image or definition or representation that human beings can fully comprehend and understand? Do our definitions of the divine limit or control God and/or circumscribe to whom God’s love and care should go and engage?

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Study #4 - Third Commandment (Exodus 20:7)

“Don’t invoke God’s name for your own purposes”

“Use what language you will, you can never say anything but what you are. What I am and what I think are conveyed to you, in spite of my efforts to hold it back.” ~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

1. A typical rendering of the third commandment is “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.” What have you been taught (or what have you thought) this commandment meant?
2. Have you observed religious people claim that they know, precisely in this moment of time, what the will or intent of God is, and what a person or a community or a group of people should do based on that knowledge of the will of God? How do they know the mind of God and what authorizes or validates their claim?
3. Some Christian (and other) groups assert moral and spiritual superiority over others (based on belonging to a specific faith community, or on nationality or race or ethnicity or economic success or social/cultural status or celebrity or popularity). Often this assertion implies or specifically states that those who belong to the group are blessed and are exceptional while others outside the group can be ignored or taken advantage of or disrespected. Have you ever observed those belonging to exclusive groups critique outsiders in ways that benefit the insiders and disadvantage the outsiders?
4. How can those who have received God’s blessings and deliverance extend to others those same benefits so that all are included and considered “blessed”?

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Study #5 - Fourth Commandment (Exodus 20:8-11)

“A day of rest from labor is to follow in God’s steps”

“Judaism teaches us to be attached to the holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of the year. Sabbaths are our great cathedrals; and our holy of holies is a shrine that neither the Romans nor the Germans were able to burn....” ~ Abraham Joshua Heschel

1. The initial demand Moses made of Pharaoh was to allow the Israelites to center their lives around a celebration focused on their God. Because time for worship would interfere with their efficiency and work production, Pharaoh refused and redoubled the work quotas of the slaves. What priority do you give worship and how important is participation in worship to you?
2. The Children of Israel, enslaved in Egypt for over 400 years, escaped from their oppression and oppressors. How does escape from oppression translate into “freedom” and “independence” for former slaves?
3. In the Jewish and Christian faiths, a paradox exists related to freedom and dependence. Liberated from slavery in Egypt, the children of Israel are now bound to their God in covenant to worship and serve as directed in the Torah. The Apostle Paul reflects a similar paradox in Romans 6:22: “You have been freed from sin and enslaved to God.” In living by and observing the Ten Commandments, people of faith follow a path to true freedom and transformation. How do you understand “freedom” in terms of the liberation that God gives, and the continuing “dependence” that humans have on God?

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Study #6 - Fifth Commandment (Exodus 20:12)

“Acknowledge with gratitude your dependence on others”

“Our society must make it right and possible for old people not to fear the young or be deserted by them, for the test of a civilization is the way it cares for its helpless members.” ~ Pearl S. Buck

1. The fifth commandment about honoring father and mother begins a section of the commandments often referred to as the “second table” of the Law (commandments 5-10). The “first table” of the Law (commandments 1-4) focused on human responsibilities to God. The “second table” of the Law focuses on responsibilities toward other humans. Which table of the Law (the first or the second) do you consider more important?
2. How do you understand the commandment to “honor” parents? Does honoring mean to idealize them as if they were perfect, or to agree with them and never critique their values or actions? What is a proper relationship between parents and their adult children?
3. Typically, the fifth commandment is directed toward young children and youth (by their parents!) to instill deference toward, and compliance with, parental guidance. As is true with all the commandments, however, this commandment is largely directed toward adult children. The focus here is for adult children to “honor” their aging parents. What might this commandment mean today regarding care for the aging, and the increasing infirm and dependent population, whether it is our own parents or others?

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Study #7 - Sixth Commandment (Exodus 20:13)

“All human life is to be protected and nurtured”

“Love looks beyond appearances.... Love has both the discernment and the imagination to see the whole person within the wounded person, the complex person lashing out behind the angry person, the gifted person living encased in the flawed person.” ~ William G. Enright

1. The sixth commandment may be interpreted as “you shall not kill” or “you shall not murder” (either interpretation/rendering is legitimate according to the Hebrew language). What difference exists between these two interpretations? Which is your preferred understanding, and why?
2. Murder is considered the premeditated, intentional taking of life, while killing may be intentional or accidental. How do you understand the act of war or state-sanctioned capital punishment or self-defense related to this injunction against killing or murder?
3. Pacifism is an intentional stance or considered position that rejects any or most violence that may lead to physical harm or death for another person. The intent of pacifism is to resolve all disputes with non-violent means. Does the sixth commandment support pacifism?
4. Most people today can congratulate themselves for not transgressing the sixth commandment! However, the intent of the commandments is not merely to limit our liability but to embrace fully our responsibility for others. So, placing this commandment in a positive frame, what have you and I done to promote and protect and make full and meaningful the lives of others?

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Study #8 - Seventh Commandment (Exodus 20:14)

“Sex rightly used is for the wellbeing of all in the community”

“Let us be honest with each other. The threat to marriage is not the gays. It is the lack of loving commitment - whether it is found in the form of neglect, indifference, cruelty or adultery, to name just a few manifestations of the loveless desert in which too many marriages come to grief.” ~ Malcolm Turnbull

1. This commandment limits sexual expression to the two who have made a covenant or commitment for marriage. It provides no direct guidance for other relationships and sexual activity (such guidance may be found elsewhere in scripture). What role does sexual fidelity play in preserving a marriage and the structure of a family?
2. The commandments are given for the entire community to exercise on behalf of others in the community. The seventh commandment serves to protect vulnerable members of the family, not merely a married couple. Have you ever perceived that you are responsible for the wellbeing and growth and success of other people’s marriages in the community and not merely your own? How might the stability of marriages and family life in the community benefit you?
3. In biblical times, women and children were those most at risk for neglect and abuse and abandonment by those exercising greater power and independence in society (men). [Recall the story of Nathan the prophet exposing and confronting King David’s adultery with Bathsheba, which was framed as an abuse of power.] Abandonment and divorce doomed women and their children to extreme poverty since women typically were not “employed” outside the home and had no other source of income or support. The reality today is that women and children remain those most at risk in our society. How does this commandment raise issues of justice and equity for society’s most vulnerable populations today?

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Study #9 - Eighth Commandment (Exodus 20:15)

“Labor in order to earn and share rather than to possess”

“The bread of the needy is the life of the poor; he that defrauds them therefore is a man of blood, a murderer.” ~ Thomas Aquinas

1. To steal means to take for one’s own use what properly belongs to another, and this taking is typically done by stealth or deceit; sometimes it is accomplished by sheer power. In the context of people who had previously been enslaved, the Hebrews had stolen from them their lives and dignity and self-directed choices and family and community life. In the stories of their sojourn into Egypt, Joseph was the first one “stolen” into slavery but eventually all the Children of Israel were “stolen” into slavery. Create a list of all that is “stolen” from those who are enslaved.
2. Some find it surprising that the commandment “You shall not steal” is considered a safeguard for human freedom. Many in America are unaware of the epidemic of human trafficking taking place in our own country and around the world. News reports reveal incidents of foreigners lured to America with the promise of work and freedom only to be conscripted into the sex trade from which they cannot flee. Around the globe, children are forced to serve in armies to fight and kill and die. When you hear the commandment “You shall not steal,” is the issue of human freedom one that comes to mind for you?
3. As the saying goes, “many people are one missed paycheck away from poverty.” In the corporate business structure that dominates our world where profits go to investors and top management executives while employees often are paid minimum wages that cannot sustain a family, is the provision of a living wage a positive step to provide for neighbors at the lowest end of the economic ladder?

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Study #10 - Ninth Commandment (Exodus 20:16)

“Promote truth and justice in your speaking”

“Look at how a single candle can both defy and define the darkness.” ~ Anne Frank

1. Slaves as “non-persons” had no legal standing in a court of law and were given no protection by legal statutes. The testimony of the enslaved was considered unreliable and untrustworthy, and would never be admitted as evidence against a free person. In this commandment, the Children of Israel after 400 years of oppression were granted the status of those who are free, who are afforded the protection of a legal system, whose existence as well as whose personal assertions of fact were granted dignity and believability according to the law. Previously in a system that was stacked against them, truth-telling provided no benefits for the enslaved. Why might truth-telling be important in a new society and community they hoped to build?
2. John Calvin made the broad and sweeping claim that “Whoever bears false witness against his neighbor kills him because he robs him and is guilty of whatever evil proceeds from his lie.” A lie directed at another person calls into question that person’s testimony and life, defaming the image of God in that person. This is a serious offense. Why do people lie?
3. In Ephesians, this commandment is expressed in a positive manner: “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). Yet today the telling of truth is questioned, and truth-tellers are often ridiculed. “Alternative facts” are offered when real facts are embarrassing or inconvenient. Uniformity of belief (conforming with someone else’s belief) is more important than being allied with the truth. How is confusion about what is true or false impacting our society and world today?

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Study #11 - Tenth Commandment (Exodus 20:17)

“Desire the good for your neighbor”

“You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you.”
~ Augustine

1. The word “covet” means to “desire.” For some philosophies or religious practices, the goal is to eliminate “desire” because desire entangles the person into a pursuit for the unnecessary. Yet desire need not have a negative connotation. Consider these life-enhancing desires: the desire for greater knowledge; the desire to develop talents of artistry and craftsmanship through practice; the desire to build positive relationships and work for peace; the desire to alleviate or prevent the suffering of illness. At issue is “proper desire”: the pursuit of what makes life better versus the pursuit of possession and control of something for my own use and benefit alone. In many ways this tenth commandment reflects the first commandment to worship God alone. What are common “desires” today that may distract or displace God, or weaken our concern for others?
2. Unlike the other commandments focusing on external behavior, coveting is an internal process that inevitably leads to breeching other commandments that protect our neighbors: you shall not kill, you shall not steal, you shall not defame and lie, you shall not commit adultery. Jesus focused on this internal process rather than external behavior when he taught, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Our interior life is the springboard of our actions. What preoccupies our minds dominates our actions. How do you see this reality in your own life or in stories you may see in the media?
3. What good, beneficial “desires” might the Ten Commandments help us to cultivate?

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Study #12 - Conclusion: The Commandments and Love (Deut. 6:4-12)

“Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our own standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.”
~ Reinhold Niebuhr

1. The Old Testament and Jesus summarized the Ten Commandments into two: love God and love neighbor. The Apostle Paul said that the entire law was fulfilled by love (Romans 13:8-10). How would love provide an effective fulfillment of each of the Ten Commandments?
2. We recall that the Ten Commandments were given to rebuild a community disrupted by slavery and oppression and dehumanization. The two Tables of the Law pinpoint the focus of reconstruction: relationship with God and relationship with the neighbor. The commandments restored dignity and significance to the lives of those previously disregarded, and provided a template for how life could be lived peacefully and justly with others. The Christian Church found the commandments to be equally valuable as it understood that human sinfulness took many forms that effectively enslaved people and destroyed their lives. Do people in the Twenty-first Century need deliverance and transformation today? If so, in what ways?
3. What have been surprising new understandings you have gained in this study of the Ten Commandments?
4. What are the most significant learnings that may benefit you from the Ten Commandment study?