

## “Tablets of Stone”

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*Exodus 19:4–6 (ESV)*

<sup>4</sup> You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. <sup>5</sup> Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; <sup>6</sup> and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.<sup>1</sup>

Let me begin with a story: when I was growing up, my family would go to a Red Sox game at Fenway Park about once or twice a year. I remember that on one particular occasion, it happened to be “Kid’s Night” at Fenway. This must have been the spring of 1990, shortly before I turned 14. Everyone 15 and under received a copy of a book called *The Techniques of Modern Hitting*, by Wade Boggs, the third baseman for the Red Sox.<sup>2</sup> In case you don’t remember Boggs, he is now in the Hall of Fame. He finished his career with 3,010 hits, a .328 career batting average, and twelve All-Star Game appearances. This book was about 150 pages and it featured lots of pictures of Boggs in his batting stance and in various parts of his swing. It told you how to balance your weight in your stance, how to use your hands and wrists, how to rotate your hips, how to follow through in your swing, and so on. It also had charts of the strike zone that showed where the best pitches to hit were. I thought it was a pretty cool book.

They gave this book to kids as they entered the stadium. Then we sat down in our seats in the bleachers. At a certain point in the game, Rich Gedman stepped up to the plate. Gedman was the catcher for the Red Sox. He had two or three good years in the mid-’80s—he was even on the All-Star Team for two years. But in 1990, his skills were going downhill rapidly. He batted .202 for the season. In fact, he only played ten games with the Red Sox that year, batting .200. For his career, Gedman had a .252 batting average, which was .076 points below Boggs’s career average.

So we’re watching the game, Gedman comes up to the plate, and I hear a man behind us shout, “Hey, kids, come back tomorrow night, when they’re giving away *The Science of Hitting*

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> Boggs’s book was patterned after *The Science of Hitting*, by Ted Williams, another Hall of Fame Red Sox player and probably the best hitter that ever lived.

by Rich Gedman. It's a full-color, one-page brochure!" I remember laughing when I heard that. Why was it funny? Who would want to learn about hitting from a guy who couldn't bat his own weight? Rich Gedman wasn't an authority on hitting. The joke was that even if he wrote a book on hitting, everything he knew would fit on one page. How do we know that Gedman wasn't as good a hitter as Boggs? Because in baseball, we have different standards that can be used to measure performance. We have several statistics: batting average, on-base percentage, slugging percentage, and other statistics. We know that a higher average is better than a lower one, because a higher batting average generally leads to scoring more runs, and the whole point of baseball is to outscore the other team.

I tell that story in part because it's funny, but it also introduces us to a very important concept. In this life, we receive a lot of conflicting messages. We hear people say that this is right and that is wrong. Then we hear other people who say the opposite: this is wrong and that is right. There are conflicting messages given regarding ethics, politics, the economy, and religion. Who are we going to listen to? If you were trying to become a better hitter, who would you listen to? Wade Boggs, with his .328 career batting average? Rich Gedman, with his .252 career batting average? That guy in the bleachers, who couldn't hit to save his life? And what standard are we going to use to determine how to live? What standard are we going to use to determine what is right and what is wrong, what is true and what is false?

Over the last several weeks, we've been looking at the major turning points in the story of the Bible. Last week, we saw that God delivered the Israelites out of Egypt, where they had been slaves. He promised to bring the people to the Promised Land of Canaan. But before he brought them there, he brought them to Mount Sinai. This is where God had appeared to Moses in the form of a burning bush. (See Exodus 3, where the same mountain is called Horeb).

The plot of Genesis and Exodus moves along rather swiftly until the Israelites get to Sinai. And then things come to a bit of a halt. They stay at Sinai for almost eleven months, and for the most part, there's not a lot of action. Over the course of fifty-eight chapters, until Numbers 10, the Israelites receive various commandments. God makes a covenant with the Israelites. He gives them the Ten Commandments and other laws. He gives them instructions on how to build a tabernacle, a place where he could dwell among them. And he gives them instructions on how the Israelites are to worship. Today, we'll look at the covenant that God

makes with Moses and the Israelites, the Ten Commandments, and some of the laws that he gave them.

When the Israelites arrive at Mount Sinai, God is pictured as being on top of the mountain. Of course, God is omnipresent—his presence is everywhere. But his special presence is on top of the mountain. The Israelites are camped at the bottom of the mountain. Moses serves as the mediator. He goes between God and the Israelites. God gives Moses a message to deliver to the Israelites. God is about to make a covenant with them, and he wants them to know the terms of the covenant. If the people obey God, they will have a very special status. We find this in the words that were read before the sermon. It's worth reading Exodus 19:4-6 again.

<sup>4</sup> You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. <sup>5</sup> Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; <sup>6</sup> and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.

God didn't save the Israelites so they could go their own way and live for themselves. God brought the Israelites out of Egypt in order to bring them to himself. Because he is both the Creator as well as the Savior of the Israelites, he is the Israelites' ultimate authority. He's the ultimate authority, period. So now that God, the Creator of the universe and the redeemer of a nation of slaves, has brought these people to himself, he wants to enter into a special agreement with them. He's going to do that through this covenant he makes with them.

In the ancient Near East, a conquering king would make a treaty with a weaker party. This is what God is doing here. He's making a binding pact with Israel. The covenant is a conditional one: If the Israelites will obey God's voice—his commands—then they will be something special. They will be God's treasured possession. The whole earth is God's, but the Israelites will be God's most precious thing. As one theologian puts it, "The whole world is like a ring on God's hand, and his chosen people are the jewel in that ring."<sup>3</sup>

If they obey, they will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. What does it mean to be a priest? A priest serves as a mediator between God and others. Back in Genesis 12:2, God told Abraham, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." God said he was going to bless the world through one man and his

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<sup>3</sup> Peter J. Gentry, in Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 318.

family. It seems that God is going to do that through Israel—if they will obey. Douglas Stuart, in his commentary on Exodus, writes, “Priests stand between God and humans to help bring the humans closer to God and to help dispense God’s truth, justice, favor, discipline, and holiness to humans. Israel was called to such a function.”<sup>4</sup> Israel was going to show the world what it looks like to live in God’s kingdom, under his rule. They were to be a model of justice and holiness to the nations around them. As priests, they would speak God’s word to the nations around them. Stuart says Israel “would proclaim the truth of God and invite people from other nations to accept him in faith as shown by confession of belief in him and acceptance of his covenant.”<sup>5</sup> God would reveal himself in special ways to Israel, and they would write down God’s word so it could be preserved. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul says that “The Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God” (Rom. 3:2).

God had chosen this group of people to be his representatives. God was going to reveal himself to the world and bless the world through the Israelites. This is the same role that Adam and Eve had. It’s the same role that Noah had. It’s the same role that Abraham had.

I’m going to talk about the Promised Land in a couple of weeks, so I’ll talk more about why God put Israel in Canaan at that time, but I should say this now: This little strip of land was the bridge between Egypt and the rest of the civilized world. All trade would have to go through Canaan, and as the people of God lived under his rule by obeying his word, the nations would learn about God and how to live for him. Old Testament Peter Gentry says this: “Since Israel is located geographically on the one and only communications link between the great superpowers of the ancient world (Egypt and Mesopotamia), in this position she will show the nations how to have a right relationship to God, how to treat each other in a truly human way, and how to faithfully steward the earth’s resources.”<sup>6</sup>

But in order to show the nations how to have a right relationship with God, Israel would have to know how to live as God’s people. They needed to have a standard, a way of knowing what was right and what was wrong. So God gave Israel his word.

That leads us to the Ten Commandments. In the Bible, these commandments are literally called “words” (Exod. 20:1). These Ten Words act as broad principles, much like amendments of our Constitution. All the laws that follow them, which are called “rules” (Exod. 21:1), are

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<sup>4</sup> Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 423.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 303.

specific applications of the Ten Commandments. We might wonder why there are Ten Commandments, and why these are so special. First, let's talk about the number. Ten is a number that is a number of perfection, similar to the number seven. It can be used in a representative fashion, so that ten represents the whole. All of God's commandments are represented by these ten. But there's something else that's interesting. In Genesis 1, ten times we read "and God said."<sup>7</sup> Just as God ordered the creation to be his temple with ten "words," he created Israel into a nation with these ten "words."<sup>8</sup> The Ten Commandments would serve as Israel's Constitution.

We also notice that these commandments were written directly by God himself.<sup>9</sup> Exodus 31:19 says they were written on "tablets of stone" by "the finger of God," which may be another way of referring to the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup> They are also spoken directly to the Israelites, which is unique. The rest of the law is mediated to the Israelites through Moses.<sup>11</sup> Obviously, these "words" are very important.

So let's start to look at these Ten Commandments. We'll begin in Exodus 20:1-2:

<sup>1</sup> And God spoke all these words, saying,

<sup>2</sup> "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

I want us to see something very important. God gave Israel these commandments *after* he saved them out of slavery in Egypt. God did not say, "Okay, Moses, tell the Israelites that if they first obey, I will save them." No, God saved the Israelites because he chose Abraham and he made a covenant with him. He committed to Abraham and his family. And remember that God chose Abraham not because he was obedient, and not because he had faith in God. First, God chose Abraham. Then, he Abraham believed God. And, finally, Abraham obeyed God by circumcising himself and his son, and by being willing to offer up his son as a sacrifice. Here, God first saved Israel, then he gave them his commandments. If they trusted that God was good, and that his

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<sup>7</sup> In the ESV, it says "And God said" nine times (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 28, 29), and "Then God said" one time (v. 26). The same Hebrew phrase is used each time.

<sup>8</sup> "In a very real way, the entire creation depends or hangs upon the word of God. . . . It is also Ten Words that brings about the birth of the nation. Like the creation, Israel as a nation hangs upon the Ten Words for her very being." Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 327-28.

<sup>9</sup> See also Exod. 32:15-16. Deut. 4:12-13 indicates that it was the Ten Commandments, synonymous with the Sinai covenant itself, that were written on the stone tablets.

<sup>10</sup> In Matt. 12:28, Jesus says he drives demons out "by the Spirit of God." In Luke 11:20, Jesus says he casts out demons "by the finger of God." This suggests "the finger of God" is an anthropomorphic way of referring to the activity of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 413.

commandments were good for them, they would obey. The important point is that “grace always precedes obedience.”<sup>12</sup>

The fact that God redeemed Israel was a good reason for him to tell them how to live. After all, they were his. He bought them out of slavery. But we should also remember that God is the Creator. Since he made everything, he knows how things work best. Sometimes, when people talk about God and the commandments found in the Old Testament, they act as though God is always saying “no” in order to squash people, to keep them under his thumb, to take away their freedom. But that’s not really how things are. God is telling the Israelites: “I made everything, and if you want to live well, this is how things go best.” It’s like an inventor giving someone a manual on how to use his invention.<sup>13</sup> If the Israelites wanted to live according to God’s design, they would obey his word. That’s why in Deuteronomy, which is a second giving of the law,<sup>14</sup> God often says something like this: “Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for all time” (Deut. 4:40).<sup>15</sup>

The Ten Commandments can be summarized by two verses that we find later in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. Deuteronomy 6:5 says, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” And Leviticus 19:18 says, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” In the New Testament, Jesus says the whole Law depend on those two commandments. We see that the first four commandments show the Israelites how to relate to God rightly. The next six commandments then show them how to relate to each other rightly.

Let’s first look at the first four commandments. The first commandment is found in Exodus 20:3: “You shall have no other gods before me.” There is only one true God. He will not share his glory with anyone else. The Israelites shouldn’t put anyone or anything above God. They shouldn’t love, value, or prioritize anything higher than a relationship with God.

The second commandment concerns idols. We see this in the next few verses:

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<sup>12</sup> John Dickson, *A Doubter’s Guide to the Bible: Inside History’s Bestseller for Believers and Skeptics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 69.

<sup>13</sup> “Christians have always said that living God’s way puts us in harmony with God’s world and with his purposes for our lives. God’s ways ‘work’ in the way that a manufacturer’s instructions work or the advice of an expert works.” *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>14</sup> That’s essentially what “Deuteronomy” means: In Greek, “deutero” refers to two, and “nomy” refers to the law.

<sup>15</sup> See also Deut. 5:16; 6:1-3; 12:28.

<sup>4</sup>“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. <sup>5</sup>You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, <sup>6</sup>but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

God cannot be properly represented by something manmade. No statue or carving or painting can represent God. After all, God doesn't have a body. He's immaterial. He's spirit. And, truly, nothing in creation can compare with God. He's incomparable. Trying to make a physical representation of God would be like having one of my young sons try to capture the beauty of a sunset with crayons: a lot would be lost in the process. But I think there's another reason why God doesn't want something manmade to represent him: God made man and woman in his image. Human beings are the God-made representations of God. We represent him and reflect his character. At any rate, this commandment makes clear that idolatry will not be tolerated. God is the only object of worship.

We also see that sin, the idolatry, of a person, affects future generations (v. 5). This doesn't mean that God was judging future generations based on what their father or grandfather did. It means that the consequences of one person's sin has effects on future generations. We still see that truth today. Patterns of sin are often passed down from one generation to the next.

The third commandment is found in verse 7: “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.” We often think of this as a command against saying, “Oh, my God,” or using “Jesus Christ” as an expletive. Of course, we shouldn't say these things. But this commandment is greater than this. God's name represents his character and his presence. When we say, “In Jesus' Name” at the end of our prayers, it's not some magical incantation that makes God hear us. Prosperity gospel preachers use “in the name of Jesus” that way—but that's trying to manipulate God. Praying “in the name of Jesus” is a way of saying, “God, I'm praying because of what Jesus has done for me. I'm praying this according to who Jesus is. I'm praying this because I think it lines up with Jesus' teachings.” So this third commandment is against using God's name in an irreverent way, but also in a way that is false. The Israelites were not supposed to make oaths in God's name if they didn't mean it. They were not to speak false things about him. They were not supposed to try to manipulate God. There's also another possible translation of “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.” It could be translated, “You shall not *carry* the name of the LORD

your God in vain.” If we call ourselves Christians, we should live like it. We shouldn’t bear that name if it really doesn’t mean anything.

The fourth commandment concerns the Sabbath. We read this in verses 8-11:

<sup>8</sup>“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. <sup>9</sup>Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, <sup>10</sup>but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. <sup>11</sup>For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

The Ten Commandments are also given in Deuteronomy 5, and there it says, “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.” The Israelites were slaves in Egypt. They had to work all the time. Now, God is giving the Israelites a day of rest. It taught the Israelites that they were no longer slaves and that work was not their god. Instead, they would have to trust God would provide for them. The Sabbath was so important to Israel that it was the sign of the covenant, just as the rainbow was the sign of the covenant that God made with Noah and circumcision was the sign of the covenant that God made with Abraham. It reminded the Israelites that God created them and he redeemed them.

We see that these first few commandments concern worship. The next six are more concerned with how humans relate to each other. These two things are entwined: If we don’t worship God rightly, we won’t treat others well, because we won’t see that they were created by God. Or put it the other way around: If we’re not treating each other well, then we’re not worshiping God properly. One author I read this past week said that both the religious hypocrite and the atheist make equal and opposite errors. The religious hypocrite may think he’s worshiping God rightly, but then he doesn’t treat other people well. The atheist may want to live in a just society, but he ignores God. Both the hypocrite and the atheist separate the love of God from the love of other people.<sup>16</sup> But God won’t allow that. That’s not how we designed things to function.

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<sup>16</sup> Dickson, *A Doubter’s Guide to the Bible*, 77.



Let's now look at the commandments that deal with how the Israelites were to relate to each other. I'll read verses 12 through 17:

<sup>12</sup>“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

<sup>13</sup>“You shall not murder.

<sup>14</sup>“You shall not commit adultery.

<sup>15</sup>“You shall not steal.

<sup>16</sup>“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

<sup>17</sup>“You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.”

These commandments show the importance of family. Parents must be honored and marriage must not be violated. They show the importance of human life: innocent human lives should not be taken. They show the importance of personal property: one's possessions shouldn't be stolen. And they show the importance of one's reputation: people should slander or say false things against others.

The tenth commandment, the one that says not to covet, shows that the law is not just about external actions like murdering and stealing. God wanted his people not to desire things that he didn't give them. Instead, they should be content with what they have.

The Ten Commandments begin with commandments concerning idolatry, which is really a disordered desire. Instead of desiring to worship God, the idolater desires to worship a false god. And the Ten Commandments end with a warning against wrong desires. This shows that the human problem isn't just one of doing wrong things. We do wrong things because we desire wrong things.<sup>17</sup>

Before I leave the Ten Commandments, I want to make two more observations. One, most of the commandments are in the negative form: “Thou shalt not . . .” Sometimes, people get the idea that God is forbidding everything, as if he wants to take away a person's freedom. But think about it this way: if God forbids a few actions and attitudes, that means he is allowing all kinds of other choices. This is similar to what we saw in the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were allowed to eat from any tree but one. In a similar way, these commandments were not designed to take away freedom, but to give life. God made everything, and he knows how things function

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<sup>17</sup> See James 4:1-2.

best. When we do things God’s way, life might not be easier or more fun, but it will go well for us.

Some people think real freedom is the ability to choose whatever we want. But this can’t be right. Some choices are self-destructive and enslaving.<sup>18</sup> Choosing to destroy life, or choosing to destroy families, or choosing to destroy our bodies—this is not freedom! It’s another form of slavery.

The other observation I want to make is that these commandments are general principles. They aren’t applied to specific cases. The rest of the laws that are given to Israel are basically specific applications of these commandments. So there are many commandments regarding proper worship of God (Exod. 20:22-26), and there are commandments about personal property (22:1-14), and laws about the Sabbath, and so forth. If you read these laws in Exodus, or in Leviticus, or if you read the laws in Deuteronomy, you may find that some of them seem very strange. Some of them may even seem offensive. But we must remember this: these laws were given to the Israelites almost 3,500 years ago. This was a different time and place and culture. Also, Israel was a theocracy: that meant they were a nation, and God was their King. So these laws cover religion, society, and the economy. Today is not the time to explain some of the laws that seem strange to us, but there are good reasons why God gave these laws to Israel.<sup>19</sup>

Now, after these laws were given to Israel, there was a ceremony to ratify the covenant. We read about this in Exodus 24. Moses tells the people all of the “words of the LORD”—what we would call the Ten Commandments—as well as the “rules,” the rest of the laws. And the people say, “All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do” (v. 3). Then Moses writes down the words of the LORD, builds an altar and erects twelve pillars, which represent the twelve tribes of Israel. They offer burnt offerings and peace offerings. Then Moses does something strange: he takes half of the blood from the sacrifices and throws it against the altar. Then, after reading the words of God to the people, he throws the rest of the blood on them. What’s happening here?

There are probably three things going on. One, a covenant was a solemn agreement made between two parties, and sometimes the covenant was sealed with blood. This happened when God made a covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15). This symbolized what would happen to the

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<sup>18</sup> Dickson, *A Doubter’s Guide to the Bible*, 79.

<sup>19</sup> I would recommend that anyone troubled by the laws of the Old Testament read Paul Copan’s *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011). While I don’t agree with everything he writes, he does provide a context for the law and he explains why God gave Israel the law.

ones who break the covenant. If the people broke the covenant, there would be death. If you read through all the laws, the death penalty is prevalent. Two, to be in a covenant with God, the sinful people of Israel needed to be made clean with blood. They needed to be taught that atonement must be made for their sins. The logic is simple: because they were sinners, they deserved to die. But an animal sacrifice could be offered in their place. This shed blood reminds the people of their need for atonement. Three, it seems that this ceremony is something like a marriage ceremony. The two parties, God and Israel, were not related naturally, yet they entered into an exclusive relationship. This sounds strange, but this reading of the covenant ceremony is supported by what happens next: after the sacrifices and sprinkling of blood, Moses, Aaron and his sons, and the elders go up the mountain to meet with God and to eat and drink in his presence. This is very much like a wedding banquet. The leaders of Israel, representing the nation, join in a feast with God. Throughout the Bible, there is a metaphor used to describe the relationship between God and his people: He is their husband, and they are his bride. This metaphor shows the intimacy and exclusivity of the relationship between God and his people.

Now, in the story of the Bible, the law is a good thing, but it produces a bad effect on Israel. Almost immediately, the Israelites start breaking all the laws that God gave them. Before they leave Sinai, they commit idolatry by making a golden calf—an image of a false god—and worshiping it. The laws that God gave them didn't make the people good. It didn't change their hearts and their desires, any more than that book on hitting made me a good baseball player. (It didn't.) Throughout the story of Israel, we see that the people broke God's commandments even though the commandments were good for them.

The question that we may ask today is, How does this apply to us? Do these commandments and laws apply to us at all?

This is a complex subject, so whatever I say now is going to be something of a generalization. We should first remember that these laws were given to Israel in a certain time and place. In one sense, the laws were never meant to be universal. According to the book of Galatians, which we explored last summer, the law was given for a limited time. The point of the law was to “imprison . . . everything under sin” (Gal. 3:22-23). The law revealed God's will, but it also pointed out sinful Israel was. And the law has the same function for us: The Ten Commandments still point out God's design for humanity, and they still point out how we fall

short of God's demands. I think the Ten Commandments are timeless expressions of God's will, even though the specific applications of the Commandments given to Israel are not timeless.

But Galatians 3 also says that the law was intended to lead us to Jesus. And Jesus himself said he came to fulfill the law (Matt. 5:17). In the book of Romans, the apostle Paul says that Jesus is the "end," or the goal of the law (Rom. 10:4). The Israelites failed to live up to the demands of the covenant God made with them at Mount Sinai. That means they deserved to die. And all of us have gone astray from God. We don't do live on his terms. We ignore him. We ignore his design. We worship lesser things. We covet. We lie, we lust, we hate people, we don't bring honor to our parents, and so on. That means that we deserve death, too.

The only person who obeyed the law perfectly was Jesus. He always worshiped the Father. He didn't worship anything else. He never spoke vainly about the Father. He brought honor to his parents on his earth and his Father in heaven. He never coveted or lied or murdered. He never sinned (Isa. 53:9/1 Pet. 2:22; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 1 John 3:5).

Jesus is the only one who fulfilled the demands of this covenant. And when he died on the cross, he ratified a new covenant. If you're a Christian, you are part of this new covenant. You are not bound by the "old" covenant made at Sinai. The book of Hebrews makes this clear. It calls this covenant "obsolete" (Heb. 8:13).

The old covenant was conditional. If the Israelites failed to obey, they wouldn't be God's treasured possession. They would be removed from the Promised Land. Yet the new covenant isn't like that. If you are part of the new covenant, you can never be removed from God's people (John 10:28-29; 1 Pet. 1:3-5). No matter what you do or how you fail, you will not lose your inheritance, so long as you have received the Holy Spirit and been transformed by God. According to Peter, Christians "are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for [God's] own possession" (1 Pet. 2:9). That status will never be taken away.

Does that mean we don't have to obey the law? Yes and no. We don't have to obey all the law of the Old Testament. It wasn't given to us. Yet we do have to obey. The new covenant promise is that the law will be written on our hearts, by means of the Holy Spirit (Jer. 31::33; Ezek. 36:26; 2 Cor. 3:3). God writes his law on tablets of flesh—hearts—and not on tablets of Stone. So we have the Holy Spirit to lead us. Also, Jesus says that if we love him, we will obey his commands (John 14:15, 21, 23; 1 John 5:3; 2 John 6). So we pay attention to the

commandments that Jesus and the apostles—his messengers—gave to us. And we read the Old Testament law through the lens of Jesus, to see how it applies to us.<sup>20</sup>

What’s interesting is that though Jesus fulfills the law, including the Ten Commandments, nine of these commandments are restated and reinforced in the New Testament. The only one that is not repeated—at least not in the same form—is the command to honor the Sabbath. Colossians 2:16-17 says that the Sabbath was a shadow, but the substance belongs to Christ. The Sabbath was about rest. When Jesus preached, he said, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). The only way to have true rest, the only way to have rest for eternity, is to trust in Christ and follow him. As Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*: “You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”<sup>21</sup>

Let me end with these questions: Who is your authority? Is it Jesus or is something or someone else? Who is your king and master? Everyone has an authority. It could be you, your desires, your spouse or boyfriend or girlfriend, your peers, politicians, professors, or so-called “experts.” Are any of these authorities as powerful as God? Are any of these authorities as good as Jesus? Have any of them created the universe? Will any of them die for you?

What is your standard? Everyone has a way of measuring right and wrong, good and bad, valuable and worthless. Is your standard your feelings? Is it popular opinion? The laws of our nation? These standards will always shift. They’re fickle. You can’t rely on them. You can’t trust that they are true. Or is your standard God’s Word? We can trust God’s commands because God made everything, he knows everything, and he is good. His commandments show us how life is meant to be lived. Let us love God, worship him, and obey him, and let us love others as we love ourselves, that it may go well with us.

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<sup>20</sup> Dickson (*A Doubter’s Guide to the Bible*, 83) suggests we should think of the Old Testament law as light refracted through the prism of Jesus: some laws remain the same and some laws are transformed radically. I would add that some laws were very temporal, such as Israel’s food laws.

<sup>21</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.