

Explore the Bible: January 12

God's Commands • Exodus 20:1-17

By Wayne VanHorn



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The Escape (Ex. 20:1-2)

Once God liberated the Hebrews from the system that had enslaved them, He brought them to Mt. Sinai, where He would give them Ten Commandments as the foundation of the new system to govern their lives. The Hebrew text refers to these commandments as the "10 words." (Ex. 34:28). God was establishing a new "complete system" that would save His people and then enroll them in the great evangelistic enterprise of winning the world's people to faith in Him.

This enterprise grows ever clearer as we march toward the New Testament. God's promise of making His people "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" was contingent upon their obedience (Ex.19:4-6). Peter employed these same concepts in 1 Peter 2:9-12, applying them to the Church.

The memory verses, Ex. 20:2-3, serve as a direct statement of God's authority and power over His people's enemies. They emphasize the Lord as Israel's redeemer, who brought them out of Egypt. These two statements are the basis of the Ten Commandments that follow. In the 15th century BC, God delivered them from the grip of Egyptian oppression. He freed them to serve Him. Today, billions of people have been delivered from the grip of oppressive sin. He frees us to serve Him as His witnesses (Acts 1:8)

Relating to God (Ex. 20:3-11)

The commandments address two topics. The first topic deals with our relationship with God. All but two of the commandments are worded negatively. Both topics have one positively stated commandment. Why are eight commands negative in form, but all ten are positive in effect?

The word "not" used in the Hebrew is the strongest particle of negation, resulting in the most forceful prohibition. We might say, "Don't ever think about having another god before Me,"

“Don’t you dare make an idol fashioned after any created thing,” and “Don’t even begin to take the name of the Lord in vain” (Ex. 20:3-7).

The fourth commandment, stated positively, is the last to express our relationship to God and it is the longest. God designated the seventh day as a day of rest (Shabbat) for His people, basing it on the six days of creation found in Genesis 1:1-31. God did not need to rest any more than Jesus needed to be baptized; both lead us by their example. They did what was beneficial to the spiritual and physical aspects of our lives.

Interestingly, in the parallel account of the Ten Commandments (Deut. 5:7-21), Moses based the Sabbath command on the reflection of the Hebrews’ labors in Egypt. Thus, we are to observe a day of rest to reflect on God as Creator (Ex. 20:9-11) and on God as Redeemer (Deut. 5:15). Paul united these two themes, creation and redemption, in 2 Corinthians 5:17.

Relating to Others (Ex. 20:12-17)

The second topic deals with our relationship to others. The other positive command is to “honor your father and mother” (Ex. 20:12). The first institution God created was the family, consisting of a man, his wife, and their children (Gen. 1-2). The term “honor” derives from the Hebrew “to weigh heavily.” Parents raise children to love and obey the Lord. When children obey parental instruction, they will not soon turn from the Lord.

The remaining commands can be written in two Hebrew words: the strong negating particle mentioned above and imperfect form of the verb. “You shall not murder” acknowledges the sanctity of human life. “You shall not commit adultery” proclaims the importance of holy matrimony. “You shall not steal” teaches a respect for others’ property. “You shall not bear false

witness" speaks to the need of honest communication in general, but more specifically to not perjuring yourself in the courtroom. "You shall not covet" is followed by a sampling of things belonging to your neighbor: his house, wife, servants, livestock, or anything else. This tenth commandment is the most comprehensive because a covetous attitude could lead to all other prohibited actions.

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