

# Basic Faith

## Christian Theology for Everyone

### **Session 5: The Decalogue and Christian Ethics**

#### **The Deca...What?!?**

Decalogue is the formal name of the 10 Commandments. It is derived from the following Greek:

Deca – ten      &      Logos – word      →      Decalogue – ten words

#### **What is the Decalogue?**

The Decalogue is the first ten commandments of the law code of 612 commandments, statutes, and stipulations God gave to Moses to pass on to the journeying Israelites. It is an introduction and summary for the entire law code.

#### **Where is the Decalogue?**

Exodus 20:2-17 & Deuteronomy 5:6-21

There are two Decalogues, not because they are different (they're not), but because Deuteronomy retells the wilderness journey parts of the Exodus told earlier in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. The text of both Exod 20:2-17 and Deut 5:6-21 are almost identical.

#### **The movie "The Ten Commandments" runs 3 hours 40 minutes. Will this class take as long as the movie?**

No.

#### **As Christians, the law code received by Moses on Mt Sinai doesn't apply to us. Why study it?**

Two reasons: 1. It is the law code that forms the foundation of Jesus' ethics  
2. Wait for it . . . you'll find out soon

#### **Were Israelites expected to obey all 612 commandments, statutes, and stipulations?**

Yes . . . and no. They were to try their best with the understanding that perfect obedience is not always possible or even practical.

## The Decalogue (several commandments edited for brevity):

*Note: the commandments are labeled with a D, short for Decalogue, and a number.*

D1. You shall have no other gods before me.	D5. Honor your father and mother.
D2. You shall not make an idols and worship them.	D6. You shall not murder.
D3. You shall not make wrongful use of God’s name.	D7. You shall not commit adultery
D4. Keep the 7 <sup>th</sup> day as a sabbath day to the Lord.	D8. You shall not steal
	D9. You shall not bear false witness against others.
	D10. You shall not covet that which others have.

### Commandments D1 - D4:

#### D1. You shall have no other gods before me.

A fundamental concept from the beginning of the Bible is that there is only one God. Yet Israelites lived among peoples who were polytheistic—they worshipped many gods and goddesses. Thus it was necessary to make clear that God (the only God) does not tolerate rivals, even when they are imagined.

Take note that the command does not read only “You shall have no other gods.” The phrase “before me” is specific and intentional. The concept of monotheism (one god) was alien to A.N.E. (Ancient Near East) cultures, and “before me” helped the Israelites to not become stuck trying to make sense of the concept. Instead, D1 allows for one to believe that there may be other gods, but they would be lesser than God, who receives one’s highest honor and loyalty.

#### D2. You shall not make an idols and worship them.

An idol is a physical object that represents a deity. To worship an idol by praying or offering a sacrifice to it is to worship the god it represents through it. Idols were installed in temples, shops, homes, and public spaces. Politically, it was often believed that possession of a god’s idol afforded one the preference, privilege, and even power of the god.

This command prohibits any attempt to capture the likeness of God and thus any attempt to “own” God or assume God’s favor. It also prevents useless, misguided worship of something that is not and can never be God.

### **D3. You shall not make wrongful use of God's name.**

In the A.N.E. a name was considered a short-form description of an individual, rather than a label or simple identifier. Names throughout the Bible have meaning. For example, when Jesus gives Simon the name Peter, which means "Rock", he then goes on to say that "on this rock I will build my church". In the Old Testament, Jacob is renamed Israel, meaning "the one who strives with God".

To misuse a name, treat it with disrespect, or use it lightly is to thus disrespect the one named. To do this with God is to insult God and communicate to others disrespect for God.

Another misuse of God's name in particular is the attempt to use it to exploit God's power through a magical spell or to claim divine authority by using it. These attempts to manipulate God are a kind of identity theft.

### **D4. Keep the 7th day as a sabbath day to the Lord.**

The concept of a special 7<sup>th</sup> day was unique to the Israelites. In fact, Israelites identified themselves as a unique people because they kept the sabbath, and thus lived their obedience to God.

The special 7<sup>th</sup> day, in which the work activities of the rest of the week are to be suspended functions religiously as a commemoration of God's rest after six days of creation. It also functions in a humanitarian way to provide a day of rest for everyone.

### **D1 – D4 as a unit:**

These four commandments are about the relationship between God and humanity. They establish the structure and boundaries of that relationship.

In what ways may these commandments apply to our relationship with God today?

## Commandments D5 - D10:

### D5. Honor your father and mother.

The basic unit of society in the A.N.E. was the family, a multi-generational group, typically composed of grand-parents, their children, and grand-children. Harmony and healthy relationships within this family group would naturally extend to community in which they participated.

Conversely, a dysfunctional family group might also bring dysfunction to the larger community. A healthy family group helps bring health to the community in which it participates.

While parents have always had a natural tendency toward care and protection of their children, the latter tend to rebel against their elders as they seek their own identities. It helps to be reminded that respect for one's parents is a necessity.

In addition, we need to remember that there were no retirement communities, assisted living facilities, or nursing homes in the A.N.E.. The welfare of the eldest members of a family was the responsibility of their children (and grand-children).

### D6. You shall not murder.

This is one of the commandments that needs to be read carefully. It has been misread as a prohibition against killing in a general sense. Rather it applies specifically to homicide, thus it cannot easily be applied to capital punishment, the use of lethal force to protect the weak or vulnerable, or vegetarianism. The concern is intentional homicide outside of war or self-defense.

This command created a prohibition against killing when there was no legal justification. One such example was the revenge taken in a blood feud, especially when the death being avenged was accidental.

### D7. You shall not commit adultery.

Adultery in the A.N.E. was considered an act of sexual relations between a married woman and any man not her husband. By contrast, married men could engage in sexual relations with any single woman.

There seems to be two reasons for this view of adultery:

- (a) Because of the importance of inheritance of name and wealth, it was vitally important for a man to be sure that the children of his wife were indeed his own.
- (b) A wife's adultery was a dishonor to her husband. In an honor/shame culture, this would have been most serious.

*[ This is a good place to mention that we cannot impose 21<sup>st</sup> century American social values on the cultures of the A.N.E. Rather, we must take them as they were. ]*

## D8. You shall not steal.

This refers to taking anything away from someone else to whom it belongs without their permission. The theft might be of a possession or property (by moving a property line, for example). It also refers to a prohibition against kidnapping.

Theft engendered mistrust, which is corrosive to the bonds within a community.

## D9. You shall not bear false witness against others.

To get the disappointment and misunderstanding out of the way, this commandment is not about lying in general. The best way to think about D9 is to imagine a courtroom proceeding. *The prohibition here is against making a false accusation against another.* Thus the concern is wrongful prosecution.

The misuse of the legal system through false accusation is not a new phenomenon, and when it happens it erodes trust and negatively affects the community.

## D10. You shall not covet that which others have.

If one desires what another has enough, theft (see D8) or even murder (see D6) may occur. If that which is desired is another's spouse, then adultery is a risk (see D7). Enough said . . .

### D5 – D10 as a unit:

Whereas the first four commandments circumscribe the God-human relationship, the last six set boundaries around relationships between people, and more importantly, people in community.

It should be easy to see how D5-D10 provide for the safety needed allow a community to be both cohesive and functional, regardless of whether that community is a family or a nation.

The Decalogue provides functional guidance for living together in our world. It is not just a symbol. Those who want to place the replicas of the tablets in a public space need to be clear about their rationale. If it is to declare that we should live moral lives (D5-D10), then we already have most of it encoded in our laws. If it is to assert a religious preference for a community (D1-D4), then those outside Judeo-Christianity will be disenfranchised in a nation that allows freedom of religion.

Why couldn't God have put these on a flash drive or stored them in the cloud?

