

# Obedience Brings Rewards

Printed Text • Exodus 20:1-11

## Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: AFFIRM that the Ten Commandments are God's instructions to believers; BE ENCOURAGED to follow God's commands; and DEVELOP ways of living that reflect godly obedience.

## In Focus

Cheryl was very excited yet had some trepidation when it was time to take her son, Jordan, to get his learner's permit. She knew he had come of age, and she celebrated that fact. But Cheryl also realized that there were many problems and pitfalls that a teenage driver, especially a young Black male, could encounter in our often unjust society. She made sure that Jordan studied the driver's manual diligently. In addition, Jordan's father taught him what to do if police officers accosted him.

"Listen to me, son, if an officer ever pulls you over while driving, memorize this rhyme, and you'll know what to do:

Lights in the mirror,  
Rolling in my ride.  
Turn on my signal,  
Pull to the side.  
Wallet on the dashboard  
Hands at ten and two  
Smile at the officer,  
And say,  
How may I help you?"

When Cheryl felt that Jordan was ready, she asked some of her coworkers to remember Jordan in prayer and drove him to the local Department of Motor Vehicles to take the driving test.

*Like the rules we must follow when we drive a car, God also gives us rules to protect us. In today's lesson, God gave the Children of Israel His Law (the Ten Commandments) as a covenantal agreement. This agreement was binding between God and the people. What motivates you to obey man-made and God-made laws?*

## Keep in Mind

"I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2-3, KJV)

## Words You Should Know

**A. Covenant** (Exodus 19:5) beriyth (Heb.) — An agreement; a covenant with God based on God's character, strength, and grace

**B. Graven image** (Exodus 20:4) pecel (Heb.) — An idol or likeness cut from stone, wood, or metal and then worshiped as a god

## Say It Correctly

**Decalogue.** DEK-uh-log

**Hallowed.** ha-lod, HA-lo-wed

**Sabbath.** SAB-uhth

## KJV

**Exodus 20:1** And God spake all these words, saying,

2 I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

3 Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

4 Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

5 Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me;

6 And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

7 Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

8 Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

9 Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work:

10 But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates:

11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

## NLT

**Exodus 20:1** Then God gave the people all these instructions:

2 "I am the Lord your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery.

3 "You must not have any other god but me.

4 "You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea.

5 You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations of those who reject me.

6 But I lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations on those who love me and obey my commands.

7 “You must not misuse the name of the Lord your God. The Lord will not let you go unpunished if you misuse his name.

8 “Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

9 You have six days each week for your ordinary work,

10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath day of rest dedicated to the Lord your God. On that day no one in your household may do any work. This includes you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, your livestock, and any foreigners living among you.

11 For in six days the Lord made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and everything in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as holy.

## The People, Places, and Times

**Jethro.** This Midianite priest became a crucial person in Moses’ timeline. He welcomed Moses into his home at a time when Moses really needed help because he was fleeing from the Egyptian king. Jethro’s daughter Zipporah became Moses’ wife and, while tending Jethro’s sheep, Moses encountered God and learned about his destiny as leader of God’s people. Though not an Israelite, Jethro became a worshiper of the true God. In Exodus 18, the chapter just before the account of Moses’ experience with God that resulted in the Ten Commandments, Jethro visited him. After Moses told Jethro all that God had done for him and the people of Israel, Jethro proclaimed, “Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods,” (18:11).

**The Times.** Egyptian dynastic history dates back to 3100 B.C., when the kingdoms of upper and lower Egypt, already highly sophisticated, were united. Egypt’s golden age coincided with the 18th and 19th Dynasties (sixteenth to thirteenth centuries B.C.), when the New Kingdom phase of Egypt began. The book of Exodus was probably written between 1450– 1410 B.C. Some scholars prefer a later date.

## Background

The Law (the Ten Commandments) is “(1) A law of God’s making and (2) a law of God’s own speaking. God has many ways of speaking to the children of men (Job 33:14); he never spoke, at any time, on any occasion, as he spoke the Ten Commandments. This law God had given to man before (it was written in his heart by nature); but sin had so defaced that writing that it was necessary, in this manner, to revive the knowledge of it” (NIV Matthew Henry Commentary in One Volume, 97).

The Ten Commandments is also called the Mosaic Law because God gave these commands to Moses on Mount Sinai, His “holy mountain or hill,” to present to the Children of Israel. They were to live by this Law.

### At-A-Glance

1. God Reminds the Israelites of Past Blessings (Exodus 20:1–2)
2. God Gives the Israelites His Law (vv. 3–11)

## In Depth

### 1. God Reminds the Israelites of Past Blessings (Exodus 20:1-2)

The Children of Israel had come out of the land of Egypt and were now in the wilderness of Sinai. In chapter 19, we read that the Lord had told Moses to be ready because He would come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of the people. Moses and the people prepared by sanctifying themselves (consecrating, setting themselves apart) and washing their clothes. They only came to the foot of the mountain, because God set boundaries that the people could not cross. Here we see God speaking to the people, after Moses went down from the mountain to the people. God ties the promise of deliverance of His people from Egypt with His name. The Lord is now proclaiming His name again, now that the deliverance is reality for the Children of Israel. God reminds the Israelites of past blessings, of His deliverance of them from slavery in Egypt.

All that the Lord is and does is embodied in His affirmation and proclamation of His name. When we consider the capacity in which God has moved in our lives and in others' lives, we are assured of His power. As a result, our faith in Him is renewed and our hope is revived. We must continue to remember what God has done in our lives and associate His marvelous works with His name. We, too, must remember past blessings and be grateful. These past blessings should cause us to worship the compassionate, merciful God, who is worthy.

### 2. God Gives the Israelites His Law (vv. 3-11)

Clearly, throughout the existence of this world, God has demonstrated that He is a jealous God and that we are to have no other gods before Him. This is the first commandment and the phrase "before me" (or, "no other gods but me," NLT) may seem difficult to grasp. It is best translated as "You shall not prefer other gods to me." Whichever way we understand it, the meaning is that there is only one true God. The God that we serve is the only true God, and He is "a jealous God" who expects fidelity to the covenant made with His people. Anything that occupies all our attention and receives our total devotion is considered a "god" in our lives. If something takes us away from spending time with the God of heaven, who created us, that is considered a "god" in our lives. There is no other god that can do what the God of heaven can do. Therefore, we must be careful not to elevate anything else above our God. If we do not keep them in their proper place and give them their proper status, even our children, education, jobs, homes, cars, etc., can become "gods" in our lives. We should worship God the Creator and never the things He created.

In verse 8, God commanded His people to have a time set aside to pay homage to Him (worship Him) and totally dedicate themselves to Him. The word "Sabbath" is derived from the Hebrew verb shabbat, which means "to rest or cease from work." The command was to set aside each seventh day as belonging to the Lord. The Sabbath in essence was another sign of honoring the covenant which God had with His people.

### Search the Scriptures

1. How does God refer to the land of Egypt (Exodus 20:2)?
2. In what way does God describe His feelings toward persons who bow down to carved images and other gods (v. 5)?

3. What type of love does God show to those who love Him (v. 6)?

### **Discuss the Meaning**

1. Was there a need for God to remind the people about Egypt? How might the people, as well as Moses, have responded if God did not bring this to their remembrance (Exodus 20:2)?
2. What makes God jealous? How might the people have responded differently to God saying not to have any other gods before Him (vv. 3–5)?

### **Liberating Lesson**

Clearly, God has the power to bring us out of the things that have us bound. We need to realize that God is omnipotent (all-powerful) and He can do anything but fail. So when the challenges of life knock at our door, we need to remember the God that we serve. When we are faced with obstacles and mountains that seem too high to climb, we also need to remember the God that we serve. We need to consider His track record and know that He still has a lot more that He can do in our lives. However, if we want God's blessings to continue to shower down upon us, we need to make sure that we are obedient to His Word. We should not constantly challenge Him as the Israelites, His chosen people, did.

### **Application for Activation**

This week, ask God to help you to follow His commands, His statutes, His Word. Pray that God will aid you in successfully living in a way that reflects the commands that He has given. Remember that our lifestyles are also a direct witness to a lost and dying world. We talk the talk of a Christian, but can we walk the walk?

### **Follow the Spirit**

What God wants me to do:

---

---

---

---

### **Remember Your Thoughts**

Special insights I have learned:

---

---

---

---

## **More Light on the Text**

**Exodus 20:1–11**

## **1 And God spake all these words, saying,**

This week's passage recounts one of the most climactic moments of the Old Testament: God giving the Ten Commandments to Moses for him to pass along to the Children of Israel. Another word for "Ten Commandments" is "Decalogue," which comes from the Greek deka logos (DEK-ah-LOG-os), or "ten words," as they are called later in the Old Testament (see Exodus 34:28, where the words translated "Ten Commandments" literally mean "ten words").

"God spake all these words." We must not ignore the importance of God speaking. The alert Bible reader will connect this passage to Genesis chapter 1, where God first speaks into history. We see there that God's speech is not like ours; it does not simply describe what is already there. On the contrary, when God speaks, things come to be, things that were not there before! In the same way, when God speaks here, we might well describe it as an "act of re-creation" (Enns, 411) in which God is forming not only the worlds themselves, but also His people after His image and character. So the words that come after demonstrate not just the "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not" to be observed by God's people, but also the very nature of God Himself, out of whose perfect holiness and justice these heaven sent commands come forth.

## **2 I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.**

How do we know that the Ten Commandments are more than arbitrary do's and don'ts? This verse demonstrates the twofold foundation on which the Decalogue is built: God and His grace. First we see the majestic self-revelation of God, as Yahweh ("the LORD"), who revealed Himself by this name to Moses and showed His kindness to the Israelite forefathers, all the way back to Abraham. The declaration "I am the LORD thy God" shows the innate authority God possesses. It is enough to declare His identity as the reason that Israel is bound to His commands. (Think of a parent saying to a child, "I am your father," or "I am your mother"—this usually speaks for itself!) But God also demonstrates His kindness to His people in that He does not stop at the simple declaration, "I am your God." Though His character and authority are reason enough for Israel to obey, He brings forth another reason: I have redeemed you; I have brought you out of slavery.

The phrase "have brought" in Hebrew is yatsa' (yaw-TSAW), which means "to cause to go or come out." As though Israel needed reminding, God points back to the recent events of the Exodus. There's no doubt that the people would have thought back to the plagues on the Egyptians, to the Passover miracle, and to their stunning deliverance through the Red Sea. Even before the last of these events takes place, God prepares the people to remember the greatness of His power and of His kindness toward them: "And it shall be when thy son asketh thee in time to come, saying, What is this? that thou shalt say unto him, By strength of hand the LORD brought us out from Egypt, from the house of bondage," (Exodus 13:14). Here we see the pattern God establishes for His people: first, He acts to save them in His mercy; second, they remember the greatness of what He has done; and third, they respond by honoring Him with their obedience.

## **3 Thou shalt have no other gods before me.**

This first command, though just eight short words in the King James Version, conveys powerfully the heart of biblical religion from beginning to end. In an age that already managed to develop an innumerable number of “gods” to worship (not unlike the age in which Christ lived, or our own age), Yahweh ensures that the Israelites will make no mistake about the call to monotheistic, wholehearted devotion to their Lord.

**4 Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth:**

The phrase “graven image” translates the Hebrew word *pecel* (PEH-sel), meaning “carved image” or “idol.” The second commandment is closely tied to the first. Though most cultures today no longer make actual physical idols that receive worshipful adoration, this kind of literal idol-making was common in the day of Moses. (Again, the golden calf incident will show us just how common it was!) So Yahweh addresses specifically what it looks like not to have any other gods before (besides) Him. Knowing the waywardness of the Israelites’ hearts and the frequency of idol-making among their neighbors, Israel’s God reveals that to make an image (“graven” means “engraved” or “made out of physical things”) is to violate the heart of the first commandment. To worship images is, by definition, to have other gods beyond the Lord. Whether the object of the image is “in heaven above” (either the sky or heaven itself) or somewhere on or under the earth, such worship turns upside down the proper and beautiful relationship between Creator and creature. The Bible calls this worship idolatry. But the prohibition found in verse 4 does not apply only to worshipping images of things that are not God; it also clearly includes the worship or veneration of images of God. The telling phrase here is “in heaven above.” Though this phrase can sometimes refer simply to the sky, usually in that case it uses the plural “heavens.

**5 Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me;**

God repeats the command against worshipping idols or other gods and now answers the “why” question that may have been lingering in the minds of the hearers. “I...am a jealous God” may not be the answer that a generation bent on pleasing itself might want to hear, but it is the answer nevertheless. As noted above, God’s jealousy is perfect and appropriate, like a spouse’s intense desire that their spouse’s body be theirs and theirs alone. Yahweh, by His covenant and powerful acts of salvation, has claimed Israel for Himself. For them to take any other master is not just ungrateful, but deeply offensive and detestable. “For the LORD thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God” (Deuteronomy 4:24). When the mountain quaked with smoke and fire as God delivered the Decalogue, the Israelites could hardly have had any doubt about that!

The word “visiting” in the Hebrew is *paqad* (paw-KAD), which means “appoint, assign,” or “punish.” The noun “iniquity” is *avon* (Heb. `avown, aw-VONE), which means “sin, depravity, fault.” The latter part of Exodus 20:5 might trouble us. Is it fair, after all, to punish children or grandchildren for the sins of their parents or grandparents? Many interpreters of this verse have pointed out that God may have been speaking about the consequences of sin; certainly a grievous sin committed by one generation can reverberate harmfully into the next generation and the one beyond it. This may explain the verse in part, but we do not do the idea justice if we

do not remember that God gives this pronouncement as part of His covenant. God's covenants are always made with corporate bodies (like Israel, or the church), not simply individuals. And so it is important for us to acknowledge that the sins of God's people affect each other, even other generations, not just in a natural sense but also in a covenantal sense.

## **6 And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.**

However severe God's justice might seem, such justice is completely miniscule when compared to His mercy (see James 2:13). If justice lasts a few generations, then mercy lasts for thousands and thousands! Exodus 20:6, like verse 5, deals with the covenant. The word translated "mercy" is, in the Hebrew *cheded* (KHEH-sed), the word typically used in the Old Testament to describe God's particular love to His covenant people. Likewise, the phrase "those who love me and obey my commands" (NLT) is covenant language; it speaks to those who are called to keep up their end of the deal in response to God's overwhelming mercy and grace. So the reference does not mean that God's mercy only comes to people when they are loving God and keeping His commandments. Rather, His mercy comes at all times to those found in His covenant. Their love and commandment keeping flow out of this mercy.

## **7 Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.**

This commandment is probably the one about which the Church has had the most confusion. Part of the confusion comes from the importance God places on His name— something not as familiar to modern society as it was to the ancients. As The NIV Application Commentary asks: "What's in a name? Plenty. The name of God, the tetragrammaton (Hebrew name for God) YHWH, is God's name. It is the name whose significance was patiently explained to Moses in chapters 3–4. It is the name whose very mention connected the Exodus community to the patriarchs. It is God's salvation name (3:15; 6:6; 15:3), and as such must be treated with the highest respect," (Enns, 417). With this in mind and considering the focus of the first two commandments, we can see that God is primarily concerned about how the Israelites used the holy name of Yahweh. The phrase "in vain" in Hebrew is *shav'* (shawv), which means "falsely, lying," or "worthlessness." God's name, then, should never be used in spells or incantations, for example, as other kingdoms would use their gods' names. If the name was used in a vow, then that vow should be very carefully kept.

But the third commandment, like all the others, says more than it appears to at first, as Jesus makes clear in His treatment of the commandments about murder and adultery in Matthew 5:21–22, 27–32. It concerns not just the mouth but also the heart. As such, this commandment forbids both speaking and believing things about God that are untrue or unworthy of Him.

## **8 Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.**

The fourth commandment brings to a close what is often called the "first table" of the Ten Commandments—the ones that deal particularly with the people's relationship to God, rather than to each other. As such, the fourth commandment goes with the other three; the honor and



worship of God are the paramount concern for those who would keep the Sabbath holy. The first way to honor God concerning the Sabbath is to “remember.” The word “remember” in Hebrew (zakar, zaw-KAR) means “be mindful, recall,” or “call to mind.” Throughout the Bible, remembering is never just something done with the mind, but rather an act of worship, and something that prompts the people to thankful obedience. Israel is a remembering people, and remembrance of their deliverance in the Exodus continues to shape the lives of Jews even to this day. God’s people are called to “remember” the Sabbath. In Hebrew, shabbat (shab-BAWT) means “ceasing from work.” The Sabbath, then, should be observed in the way verses 9–10 demonstrate for a particular reason: “to keep it holy.” The phrase “to keep it holy” in Hebrew is qadash (kaw-DASH), which means “keep sacred” or “honor as sacred.” As verse 11 will demonstrate, the Sabbath is a holy day because God has made it so. God’s people have the awesome duty of preserving the day’s holiness!

### **9 Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work:**

We see God’s mercy in the explanation of the Sabbath command: though the chief issue is God’s honor and glory, the people’s Sabbath rest is certainly also for their blessing (for a New Testament picture of this blessing, see Hebrews 4:1–11). The Bible always assumes that God’s people will work hard. The word “labour” in Hebrew (“abad, aw-BAD) means “to work,serve.” Whether gathering manna (food) or doing more modern tasks, the pattern of six days’ work is an ancient one. It is the gracious gift of rest, finding peace with God, that stands as the central point of God’s command. The six days of work will culminate with feasting, celebration, and worship, even as God’s rest followed His work of creating the world (v. 11).

### **10 But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates:**

God’s Sabbath command, when spelled out in detail, shows itself to be a covenantal command. The hallowing of the seventh day is not simply a matter of respecting oneself, but of revering the solemn commitment of one’s entire household. The Lord calls on the covenantal heads of the families to see to it that He is honored by their conduct on this day of days. Even animals are included in this matter! Certainly it is true that animals need a day of rest just as much as human beings, and in this sense God is gracious also to His creation.

### **11 For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.**

The third commandment contains not only the “what” of the command but the “why”: “for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain” (20:7). The second commandment, likewise, contains its own reasons for why God forbids graven images: “for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God” (20:5). We might even say that the first commandment has its own reason for being, as explained in the verse before it: “I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (20:2). Likewise, the Lord graciously grounds the Sabbath command for His people on the foundation of His own character and work. “The LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it” (20:11). The word “hallowed” is a synonym for

the Hebrew qadash (kaw-DASH), and here it means “consecrated, dedicated, or set apart.” Surely anything that Almighty God has consecrated, dedicated, or set apart should also be consecrated, dedicated, and set apart by those who are called by His name!

# Daily Bible Readings

## **MONDAY**

1 Corinthians 10:1-11

## **TUESDAY**

1 Corinthians 10:14-21

## **WEDNESDAY**

Psalm 135:13-18

## **THURSDAY**

1 John 5:13-21

## **FRIDAY**

Exodus 32:15-24

## **SATURDAY**

Exodus 32:30-35

## **SUNDAY**

Exodus 32:1-10