



God's Self-Portrait

The 10 Commandments teach us much more than how to behave

"A sermon series on the Ten Commandments? Why would you do that?" I looked to see if he was joking, but I could tell from the look on my friend's face that he was deadly serious: "What possible benefit could there be," he asked, "in reminding people of God's law instead of celebrating his grace?"

I was surprised and taken aback by the line of questioning, but maybe I shouldn't have been: my friend, a fellow pastor, was simply reflecting a view of the Old Testament, and especially the Law of Moses, that has become increasingly common.

For some 15 centuries — from the time Moses first recounted God's law at the foot of Mt Sinai until Jesus fulfilled the law's requirements in His life and bore its penalty on the cross — these "10 words" were recognised by Israel as the summary and embodiment of His moral law: this was the kind of life God required of His (old) covenant people. And for much of subsequent Christian history, they have been accepted as the standard for God's new covenant people too.

In recent times, though, the Commandments have fallen on hard times, not only in our wider culture, but in our churches too. Didn't Jesus effectively supersede the Ten Commandments, when he summed them all up in two — "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind,*" and "*Love your neighbour as yourself*" (Mt. 22:37-40)? And if God in the new covenant now writes His law directly on our hearts (Jer. 31:33), what point is there in dwelling on the "dead letter" of old covenant — commandments written on tablets of stone? Hence the question I confronted — why inflict the Ten Commandments on your congregation?

In the end, though, I decided to go ahead as planned exploring each commandment in turn, to see what they had to teach about the character of God, and the character of His redeemed community. And I'm so grateful I did, because here is the discovery I made — the unexpected conclusion I came to as I studied them closely (though maybe I should have known this all along!). The Ten Commandments weren't simply, or even primarily, a list of things God's people had to do in order to satisfy or appease him. God had rescued Israel from slavery, setting them apart both to belong to Him, and to represent Him to the world around them — to be His "*kingdom of priests and holy nation*" (Ex. 19:5-6) — and this was what it would look like for Israel to reflect his character. To put it another way: the Ten Commandments were, and are, a representation of what it looks like for the holy and righteous character of God to take on flesh and manifest itself in the context of a sinful and fallen world.

If that's true, two implications immediately become apparent. First, along with the rest of the Old Testament the Ten Commandments point forward to the Lord Jesus, who alone perfectly embodied them and completely fulfilled them (cf. Mt. 5:17-20). Second and consequently, the Ten Commandments deserve a central place in the thinking of New Testament believers. If we, like Israel of old, have been redeemed from slavery, set free from the power of sin and death; and if we, having trusted in Christ, are destined to bear His image (1 Cor. 15:45); then here we discover what God intends that to look like, as long as we remain in this sinful and fallen world. Here is the perfect law — the law that gives freedom (cf. James 1:24), as it reveals to us the character of our Saviour ... and helps us to reflect His character in our own daily lives.

Gordon Coleman

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