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Properly Interpreting God's Law

JOSHUA 1:8

Introduction

1. Most people think the Ten Commandments are straightforward and easy to understand.
2. There are only ten of them and they are not very long.
3. A literal translation of Exodus 34:28 calls them the "Ten Words."
4. A closer study of the Ten Commandments shows them to have a more depth than we might first consider.
5. They are very broad and, as we shall see in our study, are relevant for any and every situation.
6. Our goal is know how to apply them.
7. Tonight, I would like for us to consider some rules of interpretation.

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A. THE SCRIPTURE INTERPRETS SCRIPTURE RULE

1. This is an important principle when it comes to Biblical interpretation.
2. For us to understand the complete meaning of any Bible passage it is important to know what the rest of the Bible says about the same theme.
3. As it pertains to the Ten Commandments, every commandment must be understood in the context of the entire Bible.
4. Take the second commandment as an example, "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. "You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who

hate Me," (Exodus 20:4–5, NASB95)

5. Our understanding of this commandment is expanded considerably when we consider what the rest of the Bible says about worship in general and idolatry in particular.
 - a. The prophet Isaiah had a good bit to say about the foolishness of making idols with our own hands and then bowing down before them (Isaiah 44:6-23).
 - b. Jesus told the woman at the well that we are to worship God in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).
 - c. Paul declared covetousness and greed to be a forms of idolatry (Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:5).
6. Why is this Scripture interprets Scripture method so important?
7. Because of where all of Scripture originates. It is "inspired by God" (2 Timothy 3:16).
8. Thus, what God says in one place must agree with what He says in another because God cannot disagree with Himself.
9. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addressed some of the same issues that God dealt with in the Ten Commandments.

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10. When it came to the sixth commandment, He said, "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not commit murder' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court" (Matthew 5:21–22a, NASB95).
11. Jesus wasn't giving a new law but correcting the Pharisees' misinterpretation of the sixth commandment.
12. So, if we want to properly understand the Ten Commandments, we need to know how Jesus interpreted them.

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B. THE INSIDE/OUTSIDE RULE

1. Simply put, the Ten Commandments are internal as well as external.
2. Paul said, "the law is spiritual" (Romans 7:14).
3. The fact that God's law deals with our souls as well as our bodies distinguishes it from man's law.
4. Man's law governs our behavior while God's law governs our intent.
5. As David pointed out in Psalm 139, God is immediately aware of everything we think, say and do (Psalm 139:2,4).

"You know when I sit down and when I rise up;

You understand my thought from afar."

"Even before there is a word on my tongue,

Behold, O Lord, You know it all."

(Psalm 139:2,4, NASB95)

6. As God told the prophet Samuel, "God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7b, NASB95)

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7. Consider the tenth commandment:

"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 belongs to your neighbor.'" (Exodus 20:17, NASB95)

8. While the first nine commandments address observable actions, the tenth commandment focuses on the heart.

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9. Consider also what Jesus said about the seventh commandment:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already

committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5:27–28, NASB95)

10. The seventh commandment forbids not just sexual activity, but sinful desires.
11. As Jesus would later say, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders.” (Matthew 15:19, NASB95)
12. So it is that we must apply the Ten Commandments to our inward affections as well as to our outward actions.

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C. THE LAW OF OPPOSITES

1. This means that every commandment has both its positive and negative.
2. If a commandment forbids a specific sin, it also binds upon us a moral duty.
3. Where a commandment requires a moral duty, it likewise forbids the corresponding sin.
4. Because we as humans have such a propensity to do what is displeasing to God, most of the commandments tell us not to do something.
5. The fifth commandment is the only completely positive commandment — “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you” (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16).
6. The sixth commandment in telling us not to murder by default requires the preservation of life.

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7. Likewise, the eighth commandment in teaching us not to steal simultaneously demands that we give generously to those in need.
8. The apostle Paul stressed this in his letter to the Ephesians (Ephesians 4:28).

“He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something

to share with one who has need.” (Ephesians 4:28, NASB95)

9. Consider the fourth commandment which has these words within it — “Six days you shall labor and do all your work” (Exodus 20:9).
 - a. The command to work promotes the virtue of industry.
 - b. At the same time it forbids those sins which hinder our work (i.e., laziness, wasting time).

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10. That same command begins with “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8).
11. In encouraging the Israelites to keep the Sabbath day holy, it also forbade their breaking of the Sabbath.
12. Jesus used this law of opposites to counter the legalistic attitudes of those Pharisees who condemned Him for healing on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:11-12).

“And He said to them, “What man is there among you who has a sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it and lift it out? “How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”” (Matthew 12:11–12, NASB95)

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D. CATEGORIES OF SINS

1. Each commandment represents a whole category of sins.
2. Not only does it address the specific sin which it names, but every other sin which leads up to it.

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3. Take the sixth commandment: “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17).
4. With this commandment, God not only forbids the actual act of murder, but everything that harms the body, threatens physical well-being or

makes us more accepting of violence in general.

5. The seventh commandment which teaches us not to commit adultery (Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18), includes not simply the act of adultery, but every other form of sexual misconduct.
6. This would also include those sins which lead up to adultery.
 - a. This is why the apostle Paul instructed those in Corinth, “The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband” (1 Corinthians 7:3).
 - b. “Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control” (1 Corinthians 7:5).
7. We could say that the Ten Commandments generally forbid the most extreme form of a particular sin.
8. But the truth is that God considers every sin in these categories to be just as sinful as the one He lists.
9. God knows that if we commit the lesser sins, they will by their very nature eventually lead us in time to commit the greater sins.
10. This is why we as parents correct our children when they take a small inexpensive item or tell a little white lie.
11. We know that if we don't stop it early on — “nip it in the bud” — it may lead to something far greater down the road.

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E. THE BROTHER'S KEEPER RULE

1. You may remember that following Cain's killing of his brother Abel, God asked Cain where he brother was.
2. Cain responded with “I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?” (Genesis 4:9).
3. Applying the *brother's keeper rule* to the Ten Commandments means that

in addition the keeping the commandments ourselves, we are to help others keep them as well.

4. This means that not only must we not encourage someone to do something we know we are not to do, we must do everything in our power to help them keep God's law.
5. We all have spiritual influence over others to some degree or another.
6. As parents, we shape the morals of our children both for good or ill.
7. When God says that we are to train up our children in the way they should go (Proverbs 22:6), He requires that we teach them how to put God first, how to tell the truth, etc.
8. This same principle applies for teachers in the classroom and supervisors in the workplace.
9. Employers set the moral standard for their employees.
10. If we fail to help others keep God's law, when we have the opportunity, then to some extent we share in the guilt of their sin.

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F. THE LAW OF THE TABLETS

1. We know that the Ten Commandments were written on two tablets of stone (Exodus 31:18).
2. While we have no way of knowing for sure, some claim . . .
 - a. the first tablet contained the first four commandments which focused upon our duty to God.
 - b. the second tablet contained the last six commandments which address our duty to one another.
3. Looked at this way, it is argued that the first tablet always takes precedence over the second.
4. Thus, our love for our neighbor is subject to our love for God.
5. For example, if a parent instructs a child to worship something other than the true God, then the child is bound . . .
 - a. by the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me"

(Exodus 20:3), and

- b. not by the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and your mother"
(Exodus 20:12).
6. It is a version of this that played out when Rahab lied to the king of Jericho as to the whereabouts of the two spies (Joshua 2:1-5).

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7. We also see this principle at work when the high priest and the Sanhedrin had given Peter and the apostles "strict orders not to continue teaching in this [Jesus] name" and they responded "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

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G. THE RULE OF LOVE

1. This rule states that the purpose of every commandment is to show love, especially love for God.

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2. In Romans 13:8, the apostle Paul wrote, "Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law."
3. Two verses later Paul adds, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:10).
4. The apostle John put it this way, "If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20, NASB95).

Conclusion

1. As you can see, there is more to the Ten Commandments than meets the eye.
2. I hope each of you will immerse yourself in this study as we seek to better

understand these commandments and how to apply them in our lives today.

3. Please feel free to share with me your thoughts and questions for I too want to learn all that I can.
4. As I pointed out in our last study, God's moral law shows us not only how sinful we are but also the fact that we need someone to save us from our sins.
5. That someone is Jesus, God's only Son, who lived a perfectly sinless life and died on our behalf to take away our sin.
6. Only through His atoning blood can we find our salvation.
7. Do you need to come to Jesus tonight?