

THE LAWS OF THE LORD

Please do not read these comments until you have read the Scriptures for this lesson. Begin by letting the Holy Spirit teach you directly from His Word.

Summary and Historical Background

It is customary, after two parties agree in principle to a contractual relationship, that the details of that contract be specified in writing. That is exactly what God did for Israel at Sinai when He drew up the Mosaic Law and formally established Israel as a nation. Israel was to be governed as a theocracy (a God-ruled nation). Moses was its first theocratic leader and the Mosaic Law was its official constitution. The Ten Commandments express the fundamental aspects of God's complete covenant law with Israel. They also reveal God's high and holy standards.

New Testament Christians often question the degree to which the Old Testament law applies to them. The ritual was prophetic of Christ and He fulfilled that prophecy at His first coming. The sacrifices were tokens in lieu of Christ's perfect sacrifice (Heb 10:11-14). Christ Himself summarized His own relationship to the law when He said, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill" (Mt 5:17). While the ceremonial aspects of the law were replaced by the perfect sacrifice of Christ, and the civil laws apply to a theocratic government, the moral and ethical standards are universal and timeless in their application.

Following the Ten Commandments, God gave Moses a series of practical laws regarding civil and social life. These laws reflect the righteousness and equity of God which is clearly seen in the value they place on human life. Justice is on a plane far higher than those in the secular legal codes composed by natural man.

I. The Ten Commandments — 20:1-21

It has generally been recognized that the Ten Commandments are divided into two tables; the first containing those precepts pertaining to man's relationship to God, and the second summarizing man's duty to his fellow man. Jesus acknowledged this distinction in His two-fold summarization of the Law (Mt 22:37-40).

A. Godward Responsibilities — 20:1-11

20:2 — "I am the LORD your God" - This verse forms an obvious preface to the Decalogue (ten words). God pointed to His single-handed deliverance of Israel as the irrefutable ground of His demand for their obedience and allegiance.

1. FIRST COMMANDMENT

20:3 — "You shall have no other gods before me" - Literally, you shall have no other gods "against me" or "in addition to me." It is quite proper that this command should head the list since it is foundational to all the others. Furthermore, it is the keystone to the entire theocracy. Although they were surrounded by idolatry in Egypt and in Canaan, Israel was never to forget that there is but one true God (Isa 44:6; 45:5). This command does not militate only against those idols made by man's hand, but also those wrought in his heart and mind. When this command is properly observed the LORD is peerlessly enthroned as the master of one's life.

2. SECOND COMMANDMENT

20:4 — "You shall not make . . . any graven image" (of me). While the first command identifies the exclusive object of worship, the second elaborates on the proper mode of worship. God did not appear to Israel in material form at Sinai lest they would attempt to reproduce His similitude as a religious fetish (Deut 4:12, 15, 23). Secular history recounts how that nations were completely demoralized upon

seeing their gods broken down and carried off by invading armies. Israel's religion in this sense would remain indestructible.

20:5 — "You shall not bow yourself down to them" - This prohibition is not against carving or fashioning the likeness of a beast, bird, or fish, etc., but against allowing them to represent deity and therefore becoming a cult object. God knew that Israel would soon forget the emblematic signification of such images and worship them as the embodiments of deity just like the pagans did. The Israelites grossly violated this principle when they urged Aaron to make them the golden calf (32:1ff).

"I the LORD am a jealous God" — As the Creator of the worlds and all that they contain, God deserves and demands exclusive reverence (Is 42:8; 48:11).

"Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children" — This is not a vengeful spirit, but the natural consequence of sin. While God does not punish one man for the sins of another (cf. Ezek 18:2-24), subsequent generations do suffer the ill effects of their father's sins. These effects may be in the form of poverty, loss of reputation, birth defects, or simply the ungodly atmosphere in which they grow up.

20:6 — "Showing mercy unto thousands" - This numerical designation as well as the previous one are not to be construed as exact and definite. They show by contrast, the shortness of God's wrath and the longevity of His mercy.

3. THIRD COMMANDMENT

20:7 — "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain" - This precept carries a two-fold prohibition: (1) It was against any false swearing or perjury. The most solemn profession of integrity a man could attach to any contract or agreement would be the name of God. Therefore, to seal a false oath in such a way would connect God with evil and would imply an absolute lack of reverence for God. Since perjury subverts justice, it has long been reckoned among the greatest of civil and social offenses. (2) The command also prohibits the irreverent use of God's name. This includes cursing, swearing, and any other type of rash or blasphemous reference to God's name.

"The LORD will not hold him guiltless" — By this statement, God emphatically declared that He will not disregard such impunity but will demand personal accountability from every offender.

4. FOURTH COMMANDMENT

20:8 — "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" - The word for "remember" implies more than mental recollection and could be rendered, "observe." The command does, however, presuppose knowledge of the Sabbath which goes all the way back to the creation week (Gen 2:3). God had already applied the Sabbath principle to the gathering of manna (16:23-30) but with the fourth commandment He officially incorporated it as an integral part of their covenant relationship.

20:10 — "In it you shall do no work" - The practical aspect of this precept is that it provided necessary rest for those who worked (cf. Deut 5:13-15). The rest requirement pertained to all persons and animals "within your gates." This term encompasses the entire community, not just individual dwellings.

20:11 — "For in six days the LORD made" - One purpose of the Sabbath observance was to memorialize God's creation. To this end it was to be a day of worship observed to the glory of Israel's creator God.

B. Manward Responsibilities — 20:12-21

5. FIFTH COMMANDMENT

20:12 — "Honor your father and your mother" - Literally, "treat with distinguished esteem." It is no coincidence that this statute heads the list of those pertaining to societal relationships since a proper family order is foundational to a stable social structure. It naturally follows that if a man honors God, he

will also honor those who are placed over him as the representatives of God. This principle is implied in Leviticus 19:3 where obedience to parents is paralleled to observance of the Sabbath. Although the principle application is to children, it ought to challenge parents to be worthy of such reverence.

"That you may live long" — This is the first commandment which has a promise attached to it (Eph 6:1). Primarily, this was a promise to Israel guaranteeing long and prosperous life in Canaan for all those who complied. However, the promise of longevity is found elsewhere as a general token of God's favor (Deut 6:2; 22:7; 1 Kgs 3:14).

6. SIXTH COMMANDMENT

20:13 — "You shall not kill" - Literally, "murder" or "slay." This law represents the principle that human life is sacred since man was made in the image of God (Gen 9:6). Consequently, the perpetrator of any act, careless or premeditated, is considered blood guilty (Deut 12:8; Lev 19:14, 17, 18). Since the verb of this command has no object, the application must be broadened to include suicide. Since abortion is the willful taking of human life, it can only be considered an abomination in the eyes of God. Furthermore, man has no right to accelerate his death by the use of tobacco, alcohol, drugs, excessive food consumption, etc.

7. SEVENTH COMMANDMENT

20:14 — "You shall not commit adultery" - The marriage bond is the basis of the home. God ordained it thereby giving it divine respectability (Gen 2:23, 24). Violation of this divine ordinance was regarded so seriously that it was punishable by death (Lev 20:10). The spirit of this law moves beyond the physical act to include all manner of sexual impurity whether of the mind or the body (Mt 5:27, 28).

8. EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

20:15 — "You shall not steal" - The intent of this law is to preserve fellowship within the covenant community and to promote the principle of property rights. The preservation of property rights is necessary in any society to guard against the incursion of anarchy and chaos. Again, the application of this principle is not limited to outright larceny, but to any act whereby a person is deprived of his rightful possessions. This may include anything from failure to return a borrowed item to large scale tax fraud.

9. NINTH COMMANDMENT

20:16 — "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" - The major intent of this law was to prevent spurious legal indictments. In a society where so many crimes were punishable by death, the witness stood in a very critical position. To encourage veracity, the witness was required to act as executioner (Deut 17:7). The spirit of the law prohibits any misrepresentation of the truth for any reason.

10. TENTH COMMANDMENT

20:17 — "You shall not covet" - Literally, covet is to "earnestly desire" or "lust after." This is an emotion which must be self-judged since no civil magistrate can properly do so. However, it is no less a command than the other nine and it is divinely enforceable. It serves as a stern warning against those lustful and covetous thoughts which may result in overt acts of sin (James 1:14, 15). While the moral standards of the Decalogue far exceed those of other ancient codes, this final precept seals that distinction, making it unique among all legal codes. It served as a reminder to Israel that God "looks on the heart" (1 Sam 16:7; cf. Heb 4:12-13).

II. The Covenant Code — 20:22 - 22:31

This Book of the Covenant, as it is called (24:7), contains a series of laws pertaining to civil, ceremonial, and criminal matters. In a certain sense, they are a commentary of the Decalogue.

A. Laws Concerning Worship — 20:22-26

20:24 — Altars had been constructed and used for burnt sacrifices since the time of Adam (Gen 4:4). God now gives Israel specific principles governing the construction of those altars. They were to be built of permanent materials and only in those places where God had revealed Himself by name.

20:25-26 — They were not to use hewn stones in altar construction. Possibly this would prevent them from embellishing them with cultic figures. Furthermore, they were not to build steps in order to prevent indecent exposure while ascending.

B. Laws Concerning Slaves — 21:1-11

This section pertains only to the treatment of Hebrew slaves, while regulations concerning foreign slaves are given in Leviticus 25:44-46.

21:1-6 — Due to economic disaster or some other misfortune, a person could sell himself into slavery (Lev 25:39; Amos 2:6; 8:6). Such slaves were to be treated as hired laborers and released in the seventh year (sabbatical year). If they desired to be indentured for life, they were symbolically attached to the house by having their ear pierced against a door.

21:7-11 — Special laws pertained to slave girls: (1) They could not be sold to Gentiles since this was a far less humane type of slavery; (2) if engaged to the owner's son, she must be treated as a daughter; (3) if she is not provided food and clothing, she must be released.

C. Laws Concerning Personal Injury — 21:12-32

21:12-17 — The sanctity of human life and parental authority are strongly advocated by these principles of justice. It is interesting to note that if a man struck another man he was required to recompense damages, but if a child struck his parent he was to be put to death. Furthermore, if a child would so much as treat his parent contemptuously, he would be put to death.

21:18-22 — The legal explanations listed here pertain to physical violence. Masters had the right to punish slaves, but the law protected slaves against the overzealous master who might beat his servant to death. It is assumed that a man would not willfully kill his servant since to do so meant financial loss.

21:23-27 — This law of retaliation was not necessarily carried out to the letter, i.e., "an eye for an eye." Its purpose was to limit the extent of retaliation so that a man who was struck by another would not retaliate by murdering his assailant.

21:28-32 — These rules pertain to bodily injury caused by a man's live-stock. A man must recognize that he is to control himself and also that which belongs to him lest someone else be harmed through his carelessness or neglect.

D. Laws Concerning Property Damage — 21:33 - 22:6

21:33-36 — The climate was dry in Palestine so people were forced to dig deep cisterns for the collection and storage of water. Grain was also stored in pits many times. Since these holes were a potential hazard to grazing livestock, it was the responsibility of every owner or user of such a pit to make sure that it was covered. This law was very important since cattle and sheep were the Israelites' prized possessions.

22:1-6 — Property rights, as well as human rights, were highly regarded by the Mosaic Code. In all cases of theft and vandalism the law demanded restitution. If the damage was caused by accident (v. 6), restitution was to be 100%. If the damage or theft was deliberate restitution was 200 - 500%, depending on the circumstances.

E. Laws Concerning Morality — 22:7-31

1. **Honesty — 22:7-15** - In a culture which knew nothing of banks or warehouses, people were often forced to deposit their valuables with a trusted friend so as to leave them unencumbered for travel. When a man agreed to such a trusteeship he was honor-bound to preserve those deposits with utmost care and integrity.

2. **Purity — 22:16-17** - A daughter was considered part of the family wealth since she brought a large dowry at her marriage. Therefore, this crime was two-fold: a deprivation of her virginity and a family's resource.

3. **Orthodoxy — 22:18-20** - The sins listed here were especially repulsive since Israel was to be a holy nation under the direct rule of God. These were sins which would pervert her faith and degrade her morals.

4. **Kindness — 22:21-27** - Israel was commanded to show kindness to the strangers as a memorial to the fact that they also were one time strangers and pilgrims (cf. Deut 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:19-21; 26:12, 13).

5. **Consecration — 22:28-31** - Israel was to give proper respect to the gods, literally, "judges" (cf. Rom 13:1-7). All of the negative precepts of the law could be positively summarized by the fact that Israel was to be consecrated unto God as a holy people.