

# The Ten Commandments for Today's Christians

The Ten Commandments are familiar territory for most Christians. We learn them in childhood. This is appropriate, because they originally were arranged for easy memorization by beginners. Ten fingers, ten commandments! They offer a basic orientation to fundamental behaviors that make a decent society possible. Their very familiarity, however, may make us underestimate their significance. Though they do not cover every imaginable area of human existence, they do provide a starting point for moral reflection.

To understand them, we should pay attention to several elements:

- (1) **Structure.** The Ten Commandments break into two recognizable sections, with a bridge linking them. Commandments 1-4 (worship God, make no idols, avoid false oaths, and keep the Sabbath) orient us to God. Commandments 6-10 (do not murder, commit adultery, steal, lie in court, or covet) focus on human relationships and processes. Commandment 5 (honor parents) links the two because reverence for those who give us life relates closely to reverence for the ultimate source of life.
- (2) **Content and Character.** Commandments against violence, sexual infidelity, theft, and abuse of judicial process would hardly seem to need explanation or defense, and they receive none in this text. A society that tolerates such behaviors will have many problems. On the other hand, some of the other commandments seem less than obvious. Take the last one first. How does one enforce a command against covetousness? Answer: the commandment is trying to form character, not merely to create external rules. This commandment directly concerns justice because it instructs us to allow to each person what is rightfully his or hers. It assumes that humans need certain things to exist and that God's people should make sure that persons receive that much.

Extend this point further to other commandments. For example, the rule of the Sabbath, because it concentrates on how a community regards itself in the presence of God, reveals two important aspects of justice. (a) Justice involves every person in the community, not just those with power. (b) Justice is rooted in God's creative act. We treat others justly because doing so helps return us to the state God intended for us in the first place.

Moreover, the Commandments' attempt to connect human behavior with the nature and actions of God operates in the foundational commandments against idolatry and "taking God's name in vain" (involving God in our plans when we do not intend to be godly). The God of Israel does not resemble the unjust, fickle, cruel gods of the nations, but rather seeks the wholeness and happiness of human beings. To please God, to live as God intended humans to live, and thus to become God's people, we must treat each other well.

- (3) **Stories, laws, and spiritual formation.** Behind the Ten Commandments lies a story, as the introduction makes clear. The story is that God has rescued slaves from bondage and led them to a land in which they can flourish as free people. No longer must they be subject to the cruel whims of others. Now they must act as moral agents on their own. This story of faith creates the context in which the laws make sense.

We can draw two further lessons from this observation. The first is that many of the biblical stories make sense as ways of reflecting on the norms of behavior set forth in the Ten Commandments and other biblical law. Think of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39; adultery), or the murder of Naboth (1 Kings 21; bearing false witness), or the failed siege of Jericho (Joshua 7; involving God and the things of God in one's own nefarious plans), or the

many stories of idolatry. The moral reflection that goes on in storytelling assumes a set of basic orientations like those of the Ten Commandments.

The second lesson is that the story of the people of God constantly returns to a consideration of the norms guiding us. Or, to put it another way, the commandments get lived out in the lives of men, women, and children. Committing to the practices of justice in the Ten Commandments will allow the story of our lives to work itself out in a godly direction.

- (4) **So it may go well for you, and you may live long.** The commandment concerning parents states a goal that applies at some level to all the commandments. God's desire for humans is that we should flourish as fully as possible. This happens when we show sustained concern for the welfare of all those around us. Responsibility is the name of the game.
- (5) **Education.** Remember that the Ten Commandments are easy to learn and very suitable for children. This is no accident. We want to raise just people from childhood on, not allow them to discover this major part of their discipleship late in life.

### **Important Lessons**

The Ten Commandments rest on some assumptions that we do well to recover.

- ☸ The people of God are a community in which the welfare of each is the concern of all. We cannot view each other as objects to be used, but as fellow heirs of the saving acts of God.
- ☸ God works to establish justice in the world. God does not validate the power structures as we see them. Therefore, we must question those same power structures so that we can work for their eventual demise and their replacement by a world of peace. At the very least, we must make sure that they do not become characteristic of the church.
- ☸ Justice operates in the family (honor father and mother), in the economy (let everyone rest), in friendships (do not covet or lie), and so, in short, in every human relationship. Our work for justice is, at its core, work to build relationships with as many as possible.
- ☸ Worship of one God leads us to see the people of God as one people. We cannot truly worship God while allowing our brothers and sisters to remain in want.
- ☸ The story of redemption is an ongoing story initiated by God but lived out by us all. In practicing justice in our own lives, we imitate God's acts of deliverance and so become more faithful to our own calling.

## Lesson 1: One Lord, One Life

*Focus: All the work of the church's life rests on its understanding of the nature and activity of God. Awe before God leads to an ethical life, and the life of the church rests in the life of God. Understanding, to the extent that we can, the nature of God is crucial.*

The Bible portrays its chief character, God, in many ways. Some of the descriptors include promise-keeper (Genesis 12, 22); inspiration for human goodness (Leviticus 18-19; Deuteronomy 5); cohabitor with people (1 Kings 8; John 1:1-18); the rescuer of the perishing (Psalm 80); the source of justice (Amos 6; Micah 6); the One who cares for all humanity (Isaiah 49, 56; Acts 8-11); the companion of the lowly (1 Samuel 1; Luke 1); the king (Matthew 5-7); the bringer of freedom (Exodus 14-15; Romans 8); the self-emptying One (Philippians 2:5-11); the One who calls us to ministry (2 Corinthians 4); and the One to whom we go (Revelation 21-22). These and many other attributes or actions of God appear in Scripture because they remind us of who we are and whose world we live in.

In describing God, the Bible also describes the human search for God in many ways. Without being overly simplistic, we could say that, in some respects, the Bible is a how-to book for approaching God. Human beings come to God through prayer, moral lives, humility and sacrifice, and, in general, a recognition of our status as creatures. We bring to God only ourselves, as the hymn says, "Just as I am, without one plea, but that Christ's blood was shed for me." The search for God involves the whole of our lives, and it will never finish until we die, or rather, until we are united with God in the final time.

\*\*\*\*\*

One of the most powerful treatments of the nature of God appears in the book of Exodus, which contains a richly layered set of stories exploring the question, "What sort of God do we have in our midst?" This story lies behind the Ten Commandments and gives them their rationale. Rather than creating a long philosophical discourse on God, the scroll of Exodus weaves together stories about divine actions and conversations around those actions. The narrative opens with an absent God who becomes present in plague and destruction. This introduction opens the door to the rest of the story, which must ask whether the plague-bringing deity has other job descriptions. In exploring the implications of a God who makes covenant and practices a radical commitment to mercy, Exodus looks into some interesting, even troubling, problems. It does not avoid the challenges that belief in a redeemer God poses. Along the way, it helps us address some of the most vital questions we still face related to God.

In meditating on Exodus, we should not imagine that it provides all the answers. In truth, it makes little sense at the end of the day to expect complete answers in regard to the infinite, and we can safely conclude that anyone claiming to have deity figured out and made describable is simply unaware of what the term "God" refers to. We should see theological reflection as the search for partial answers and existentially gripping questions that will shape our commitments and attitudes for a lifetime. The proper attitude is not that of the technician holding God under a microscope, but of the poet trying to find words for the inexpressible. God truly is Other.

\*\*\*\*\*

Exodus 20:1-6 and Deuteronomy 5:1-10 contain the prologue to the Ten Commandments and the first commandments proper. Deuteronomy is an expanded version of Exodus. We should notice the elements of each text

## **Exodus**

God's name (the Lord your God)  
God's action: deliverance from Egypt  
Command: do not have other gods  
Command: do not make an image  
Qualification: no image fitting any habitat  
or appearance known to people  
(compare Genesis 1)  
Repeat command: do not serve them  
Reason: "I am the Lord"  
Qualifications of God: "jealous/loyal,"  
Attentive to sin but merciful

## **Deuteronomy**

Charge: love and keep God's words  
Reminder: God made a covenant with Israel  
Reminder: God spoke face to face with  
Israel  
Reminder (and qualification of previous  
one): Moses is the mediator  
God's name  
God's action: deliverance from Egypt  
Command: do not have other gods  
Command: do not make an image  
Qualification: no image fitting any habitat  
or appearance known to people  
Repeat command: do not bow to or serve  
them  
Reason: "I am the Lord"  
Qualifications of God: same as Exodus

The basic ideas here are clear enough, but to understand the text's theological aims, we must notice how it portrays God acting and how humans should respond to those actions. (1) The texts wish to portray God as separate from the creation yet profoundly involved in it. Unlike other ancient and modern religious texts, which either risk making God simply a feature of the natural world or isolating God so fully from the world as to leave us out of touch with the divine realm, the biblical account seeks to maintain a balance. (2) Worship risks idolatry whenever it confuses the creature with the creator, no matter how blessed or perfect the creature may be. (3) Worship of God derives from the story of God's people. Worship does not happen in a historical vacuum, but rather in a continuum of past, present, and future experience.

\*\*\*\*\*

Many other biblical texts intersect with the introductions to the Ten Commandments. Here let us examine just two, Hosea 11 and 1 Corinthians 8:4-6.

**Hosea 11** contains a soliloquy (internal dialogue) of God's. Verses 1-4 describe God's saving work in the past, comparing the liberation during the exodus to the loving parenting that a father or mother gives to a small child. Verses 5-7 contrast God's love with human ingratitude and idolatry, which lead to military defeat and social collapse. Verses 8-9 portray God as weeping for the lost child Israel (= Ephraim), revealing a profound sense of divine mercy. Note especially verse 9, which connects the divine nature directly to mercy and a refusal to punish sin

as it might be. Verses 10-12 envision the restoration of Israel that will follow God's new act of mercy. The text thus portrays God as one who repeatedly saves, even in the face of human sin.

**1 Corinthians 8:4-6**, meanwhile, offers Paul's commentary on the first commandments. He acknowledges that many people call many things "god," but argues that only one being really deserves that name. Any being that is not the greatest that can be conceived is not God. Thus he describes God in several ways: the Father (that is, the One from whom all things originate), the Lord (Jesus Christ) through whom all things exist. Paul's theology in this text is binitarian (as opposed to Trinitarian, which also acknowledges the Holy Spirit). He directly connects the life of Christ with the life of God. To speak of Christ is to speak of God.

### **Questions for Further Reflection**

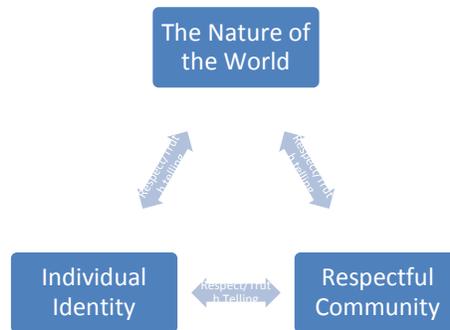
1. The Ten Commandments root worship in the nature of God. How does our worship reflect the nature of God? When does it fail to do so?
2. What does idolatry look like in our own setting? What are some elements of life that take on the trappings of the holy when they are not?
3. How do you understand the relationship between moral accountability and God's mercy? What does a text like Hosea 11 say to you?
4. What past events, of your life or the Bible or of church history, have revealed to you the nature of God? What do you learn from such events?

## Lesson 2: Honor God

*Focus: How we respond to our understanding of the nature of God will shape how we treat others, understand ourselves, and construct our lives. Worship and ethics flow out of and into each other.*

How do Christians help build a culture of respect? The charge not to take God’s name “in vain” offers us a starting point for answering that question. Reverencing the name of God leads to a culture of respect because we recognize that everyone is made in God’s image, just as we are, and that we cannot assume God’s responsibilities of evaluating the world or deciding who is good and who is evil. Our tasks are much more humble.

The following graph illustrates the levels of reality with which we must interact in building a respectful world. We must honor God and the world God has made. We must see in ourselves the image of God, covered by sin, to be sure, but still intact and still capable of goodness. We must treat others justly and graciously and insure that the ways in which we all interact promote the same ends.



When the commandment enjoins Israel not to take God’s name lightly, it means primarily that human beings should not try to involve God in our sinful activities. We should not presume that God will endorse what we do simply because we want coverage for our actions. Rather, we should submit our will to God’s will. The commandment primarily forbids false oaths, but by extension, it also applies to any form of communication that involves God under false pretenses.

\*\*\*\*\*

Several texts illustrate what respect for God might look like. These examples, though far from exhaustive, give some sense of how we might grow in our respect for God.

**Deuteronomy 6** explores human use of God’s name in several ways. (1) Verses 4-5 lay the groundwork by noting the uniqueness and unity of God (“one” cuts both ways) and the need (and possibility) for humans to love God with their entire being. (2) Verses 10-19 talk about how God uses language. God’s words are always true. Intent and action always match up. (3) Verses 13-14 call on Israel to swear by the name of God (rather than other, false gods) whenever they swear. That is, they should match their actions and words to the intent of God. (These verses have an informative parallel in Exodus 23:1-3, which talks about avoiding abusive or negligent words.) And (4) Verses 20-25 use respectful words both to recite the story of God’s

saving acts and to invite Israel to remember those acts and live in light of them. The honor God showed them should inspire their respectful actions toward both their Redeemer and the rest of the redeemed.

Another relevant text is **Exodus 34:6-7**, in which God uses the language of worship (probably the same language used in the Temple by the priests) to describe the divine attributes relevant to our religious lives. God shows mercy to those who, though sinful, try to live righteous lives. God can perfectly balance mercy and justice, something no human can unfailingly do. Anything we say about God must portray Him in this way. Any overemphasis on divine wrath or the uncompromising nature of divine commands is blasphemous and disrespectful.

A third relevant text is **Philippians 2:9-11**, part of the great hymn to Christ. This early Christian song, quoted by Paul and undoubtedly familiar to many of his readers, speaks of Christ's self-abasement, redemptive death, and subsequent exaltation. Christians give honor to the Triune God by celebrating both divine glory and divine humility. We thus assume our destined position as those who bow the knee to the right person, not to false gods, but to the true one.

\*\*\*\*\*

In his detailed book, *The Ten Commandments* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009], 82-90), Patrick Miller notes five features of the Old Testament's use of God's name.

- Revering God's name is the same as worshiping God alone. Monotheism is respectful.
- The primary place for the use of God's name is in worship.
- The name of God is what makes worship true and proper.
- The proclamation of the name distinguishes true worship from whatever comes from outside the story of faith or opposes God's self-revelation.
- Speaking God's name in worship leads to the blessing of God's presence.

\*\*\*\*\*

In short, the discussion about taking God's name in vain is not just about what we do not say. It is more about what we do say. We use God's name in honoring, world-creating ways rather than dishonoring, life-destroying ones.

### **Questions for Further Reflection**

1. Other than profanity, what are ways in which God's name is abused? Can religious people have their own ways of doing so?
2. Miller claims that the use of God's name is an avenue to blessing. What does that mean to you? When and how do you invite God to be present in your life?
3. This lesson claims that respect for God is the foundation for respect among human beings. Is this claim plausible to you? Why or why not?
4. How can we Christians contribute to a culture of respect among ourselves and toward others? What would we need to change to make such a reality possible?

## Lesson 3: The Sabbath

*Focus: Human beings are not just economic units; we transcend our work and the status that comes from work.*

The law of the Sabbath rests on the assumption that we can trust God enough to lay aside our habits of acquisitiveness and our desires to reduce others to the level of things. The law also creates a way for free people to preserve their freedom by creating a community of respect and dignity involving all its members. The Bible roots the practice of observing Sabbath in creation (Genesis 1:1-2:4; Exodus 20) and in Exodus (Deuteronomy 5), events that it often sees as two of a kind. Both events and the stories reporting them point to a deep feature of reality, the status of everything and everyone as a creature of God.

Hence some of the details of the story in **Exodus 16**, which we might well consider this week. In this story, Yahweh feeds Israel with “bread from heaven,” instructing them to gather just enough manna each day for solid meals, but twice as much on Friday so as to allow them to rest on the Sabbath. None would be available that day. The story of the miracle of the manna reveals a God anxious not just to feed slaves, but to bring them dignity through rest, planning, and commitment. Israel’s deep need to learn trust explains several details of the story, including the unexpected rotting of the surplus manna (except on the Sabbath), the attention to the special nature of the Sabbath itself, the emphasis on the vision of God’s glory (Exodus 16:7-8), the strange manner of winning the battle with the Amalekites (Exodus 17:8-16), and so on. These unanticipated behaviors teach Israel to think in new ways. Also, the narrator helps us think in new terms by introducing several words or phrases that point us to these new ways of thinking, such as “all the community/assembly,” “bread from heaven,” and “Sabbath.” The stories thus paint a strong contrast between Israel’s confusion and complaining, on the one hand, and Yahweh’s patience and mercy, on the other. Israel becomes a people when its suffering becomes an occasion for learning, rather than a source of despair or infighting.

This last point is most clear whenever God speaks in these chapters. Consider two examples, Exodus 16:4-5 and 16:28-29.

*And Yahweh said to Moses, “I am going to rain down bread from heaven on you. The people should go and gather a day’s worth each day so that I can test whether they will go by my instructions or not. But on the sixth day they should make sure to come and there will be twice the normal amount to gather.” And Yahweh said to Moses, “How long will you [plural] refuse to observe my commands and my instructions?” Recognize that Yahweh has given you the Sabbath. Therefore, he is giving to you on the sixth day enough bread for two days. Each person should stay put and not go about from his or her place on the seventh day.*

In the first speech, God responds to the cry for food by promising to give human beings angelic food (whatever that is, hence the Israelites’ word *manna* or “thingamajig”) and thus to provide for them the best possible sustenance, signaling the deepest possible care for their fate. God gives manna as both a gift and a test to see if Israel can obey a single instruction (Hebrew: *torah*). Thus at some level the story foreshadows the giving of the law at Sinai, and it shows that that law reflects God’s generosity.

Similarly, the second speech, which shifts from words of God (Exodus 16:28) to words of Moses speaking for God (Exodus 16:29), states God’s frustration at Israel’s foolish refusal to follow instructions that are for their own good (and are, in any case, easier to follow than to

break). The speech also returns to the theme of “my Torah and my commandments,” again foreshadowing what is to come.

The point is that the first law of God that Israel learns is the law of the Sabbath. Unlike their lives in Egypt, in which every day offered the same drudgery and utter vulnerability, their new life with God will be one in which they can afford to rest from their labors in the confidence that they will be provided for. They can cease being animals and become human beings, just as God originally intended them to be. The lesson of trust could hardly be clearer.

\*\*\*\*\*

In addition to this narrative of Sabbath in action, other texts explore the role of the day as a time of deliberate rest, as a means of insuring social justice (since everyone gets to rest, regardless of social status), and as a way of providing a rhythm to life.

For example, even the book of Psalms itself never uses the word Hebrew *shabbat*, the superscription to **Psalms 92** says that it is a psalm for the Sabbath day. If so, what would the Psalm tell us about observing that day? The opening (vv. 1-4 in English) remarks on the joy of worship, while vv. 5-9 praises God for vindicating the righteous and disciplining the wicked. Verse 5 reminds us of how remarkable such a thing is because only God can accurately decide when to time punishment so as to allow for repentance but also protect the innocent. Meanwhile, vv. 10-11 expand the idea by thanking God for protecting the psalmist. Then, finally, vv. 12-15 speak of how God continues to give life to those who worship. Like the wise person of Psalm 1, the righteous Sabbath-keeper of Psalm 92 can expect, if not an easy life, then a blessed one.

**Mark 2:23-28** operates in a similar world of faith and piety, even if, on the surface, it seems to contradict it. The text reports a dispute between the Pharisees and Jesus on how to observe the Sabbath properly. Jesus does not argue for careless breaking of the day. Rather, he notes that it serves people by bringing them to God, rather than being simply a hoop through which we must jump. The clincher verse seems to indicate that the disciples may break the Sabbath because they are in the company of the one who brings them to God. Thus the purpose of the Sabbath will be served whether they keep it strictly (in every circumstance) or not. Note that the parallel story in Matthew 12 “fixes” Mark by reporting (Matthew 12:1) that the disciples were “hungry.” This fact would alter how one understood the disciples’ actions: hungry people may preserve their life even when breaking, at a technical level, the rules against work on the Sabbath.

### Questions for Further Reflection

1. The law of Sabbath assumes a rhythm to life centered on a time of quiet. Eventually the day takes on an explicitly religious quality. How do we find a religious rhythm to our lives? What helps us do so? What hinders us?
2. The law also has a social justice aspect: no one can be treated as a tool for the use of others. How do our own religious practices help free people from being reduced to the status of property (or at least a lower status)? What do we need to change for this reality to exist?
3. In Mark, Jesus’ comments on Sabbath observance seem to fit all religious practices: they serve human beings. In what ways do you find this to be true? When does it seem untrue in your experience?
4. What specific practices of worship do you use to shape your life? What would you like to grow in?

## Lesson 4: Honor Parents

*Focus: Fidelity across generations insures the health of a society, a church, and a family. Recovering such fidelity rooted in a notion of honor should transform us all in our daily lives. Note, however, that honor does not necessarily equal obedience if parents are abusive. The exact shape of such honoring will vary somewhat.*

The commandment to honor parents forms a bridge between those commandments that have to do primarily with God and those that have to do primarily with neighbor. It leads us from the encounter with God, through the encounter with family, to the encounter with the neighbor. However, the shift from God to people does not leave God behind. Not at all. Rather, we come to understand respect and love for those closest to us – and those responsible for our upbringing and faith development – us a window onto our love for God. If we cannot honor those closest to us, then how can we honor either other people or God?

The commandment has several elements:

- It protects the well-being and good of other members of the community;
- It helps us understand our own identity, as well as the identity of others in our family, our community, and our world;
- It promises a positive outcome for those who honor their father and mother. What is heard and obeyed brings long life and good for the one who obeys. Obedience has good results, so obeying makes sense;
- It creates communion between generations and thus makes broader community possible;
- It highlights the responsibility that each of us bears to those older and younger than we are;
- It connects to other texts, such as Deuteronomy 6:4-9, which require passing on the commandments of God to the next generation and gives a mechanism and a context for doing so;
- It reminds us that respect for authority is not a bad thing when that authority is used to honor God and bless people;
- It fosters in us an attitude of reverence.

These features of the commandment, or rather the assumptions behind it and goals to which it points, paint a complete picture of an ideal according to which human relations function harmoniously. How do we make that ideal a reality?

\*\*\*\*\*

What does “honor” mean in the command to “honor father and mother”? First, remember that as with all the commandments, the audience of this one is adults. It is not primarily addressing little children. Thus honor and respect are behaviors of adults toward adults. Second, the Hebrew verb *kabbēd* means to count something as significant (or even heavy, when physical mass is under consideration). Thus to “honor” parents means to recognize their importance and gravity. Third, to honor is to demonstrate fidelity across generations and thus to insure the health of a society, a church, and a family. Recovering such fidelity rooted in a notion of honor should transform us all in our daily lives. Fourth, honor is not just an internal state, nor is it a matter of words or emotions only. Rather, it is about practices and structures that

use physical and social resources in ways that benefit everyone appropriately. Fifth, note, however, that honor does not necessarily equal obedience if parents are abusive. The exact shape of such honoring will vary somewhat. In some cases, we may honor parents by saying no and calling them to honor God.

\*\*\*\*\*

A number of other texts are relevant to this discussion. Some of these include Leviticus 19:2-8, 14; 20:9; Deuteronomy 27:16; Proverbs 23:22-25; and Ezekiel 22:6-8. (Some of these texts contrast respect with dishonor or belittling people.) At this point, we can focus on just two.

In **Ruth 4:11-17** we see a good example of honoring parents. Here, the tragic story of Naomi's loss takes its final turn toward a happy resolution. The wedding of the Moabite Ruth and the Israelite Boaz is accompanied by a ritual in which the town of Bethlehem adopts Ruth into Israel's story of faith by asking God to make her like their greatest female ancestors (a case of honoring parents at a long distance). Then, when the baby Obed is born, he is counted as an honorary offspring of Naomi, continuing her name and lineage. The people of the village remind Naomi that the new baby will take care of her in old age and bring to her great joy. This story is what the biblical text has in mind when it imagines honoring parents.

At the other end of the Bible, **Ephesians 6:1-4** reflects on the commandment to honor parents by noting that the command has a promise associated with it – and thus it is a gospel saying – and then by flipping it around. Just as offspring honor ancestors, so do those of us being honored show honor to those who follow us. The relationship is mutual. A child's honoring of parents should evoke a response of parents to be worthy of the honor of the child. Thus parents have a moral obligation to avoid harassing their children. The parental role is to bring up children to honor God and conduct themselves as Christians. Thus the commandment is not about power and obedience, but about responsibility and respect. It is important to get this focus right.

\*\*\*\*\*

It is worth noticing that many biblical stories about families involve strife and struggle. Thus the command to honor has important practical implications.

### **Questions for Further Reflection**

1. What do words like honor, respect, and obligation mean to you? How do you show them? Receive them?
2. How could hospitality toward our elders be a way of doing justice? How could we grow in our relationships to those older than we are?
3. What are the challenges of honoring our parents or grandparents in their old ages? What are the benefits of doing so? What can we learn by taking on the obligation to respect them?
4. In a recent study, 40% of women and 26% of men caregivers reported “very high levels of emotional stress.” How can we recognize their duty to support and honor the work of these caregivers in our midst?
5. Elder abuse or neglect often occur in situations of family stress and economic hardship. How can we help the victims of such abuse?

### **Lesson 5: Protect Life**

Focus: The taking of another human life should fill God's people with abhorrence. The sanctity of human life is high value that must be celebrated. Note that the command's word for "kill" extends in other biblical texts to accidental death and to judicial execution. Thus the Ten Commandments underline the fact that the default move of the people of God is the protection of life.

Other texts: Genesis 4, Exodus 21:23-25, Leviticus 24:10-23, Numbers 35, Matthew 5:21-24, Ephesians 4:31-5:2

Behind this commandment to avoid homicide lies a crucial value: humans reflect the image of God, and each human being bears a basic dignity worth preserving.

How can Christians contribute to the preservation of life.

### **Lesson 6: Honor Marriage**

Focus: Marriage provides a vehicle for God's grace to many human beings. It can also be a place of suffering and faithlessness. Christians need to make choices that allow for the first rather than the second outcome.

Other texts: Genesis 2, Leviticus 18:6-18, Deuteronomy 22:13-21, 2 Samuel 11-12, Song of Songs 8:6, Hosea 1-3

Prohibition of negative behaviors vs. affirmation of positive behaviors – where is the focus? What is adultery? What is not?

Does it matter that many of the texts focus on males and their behaviors?

In what senses can marriage be an avenue for divine grace?

### **Lesson 7: On the Proper Use of Property**

Focus: The accumulation and use of property need not be problematic in itself, though it often creates temptations to false security, arrogance, greed, or lack of concern for others. This focus should focus on the prohibitions of both stealing and covetousness.

Other texts: Exodus 23:4-5, Leviticus 25:35-38, Deuteronomy 22:1-4, 24:8-25:4, 1 Kings 21, Proverbs 30:7-9, Mark 10:17-31 (and parallels)

These texts recognize the need for property and the protection of human dignity through its proper use. They also recognize that power tends to allow some people to steal, often under various disguises. Christians who think of their property as a trust and themselves as stewards will take a somewhat different angle on these texts than those merely defending our culture's egocentric and consumerist impulses.

### **Lesson 8: Telling the Truth, even when It's Inconvenient**

Focus: The command to avoid bearing false witness in court recognizes the social interconnectedness of people and the ways in which lying can tear those relationships.

Subversion of the legal system leads to injustice.

Other texts: Exodus 23:1-9, Leviticus 19:16, Deuteronomy 17:2-7, 19:15-20, 24:10-22, Psalms 27, 35, 50:16-20, Acts 5, Ephesians 4:25-5:2

To defame or denigrate another person diminishes that person and denies his or her value before God. How do we avoid doing so? The commandment focuses on what happens in court, but the application is somewhat broader.

Truth-telling here involves risk to the one speaking (there would be no reason to command truth-telling when no risk was involved!). A text such as Acts 5 involves telling the truth about oneself.

## **Lesson 9: Christians and the Ordered Life**

Focus: The commandments fit together well. They concern the formation of human character as it can reflect divine character. How, then, do we move from discrete rules to broad patterns of behavior? This lesson should allow us to pull together the various strands of the previous weeks. Other texts: Mark 10:17-22, Romans 13, James 2

Let the class brainstorm how it can grow in keeping these commands as forms of honoring God and serving people. As John Calvin put it, “since the Lord well knows, and also attests through his prophets, that no benefit can come from us to him, he does not confine our duties to himself, but he exercises us ‘in good works toward our neighbor [Ps 16:2].... It is certain the Law and the Prophets give first place to faith and whatever pertains to the lawful worship of God, relegating love to a subordinate position. But the Lord means that the law only enjoins us to observe right and equity toward men, that thereby we may become practiced in witnessing to a pious fear of him, if we have any of it in us.”

### **For Further Reading**

Brown, William P., ed., *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2004).

Miller, Patrick D., *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2009).