

eternal God.” This gives us a greater sense of strength and firmness about this gospel: its roots go back into eternity in the mind of God.

God makes us strong through the gospel—that is, strong in faith (see Romans 1:11–12). That is what the gospel does. The gospel is aiming at the obedience of faith. The gospel strengthens us in faith so that we will live obedient lives. This is called “the obedience of faith.” The gospel is the means to obedience because it is the means to faith, and obedience comes from faith. Paul closes his letter with the very same aim that he began with in Romans 1:5: “We have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations.”

There are three parallels between the beginning and the ending. (1) His aim is the obedience of faith. (2) This is for all the nations, not just Israel. (3) In Romans 1:5, this is all “*for the sake of his [Jesus’s] name,*” and in Romans 16:27, Paul breaks into the concluding doxology: “to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ.” *For the sake of Jesus’s name and for the glory of God through Jesus* is the same thing. That is the ultimate goal of the gospel: the gospel awakens and strengthens faith that leads to conformity to Christ, which displays the glory of God.

This is the key to life: to love God. This is the whole story of Christianity, the whole story of God’s redemptive love: the cross, the resurrection, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the preaching of the gospel throughout the world, the believing of it, the receiving of the Lord into our own hearts; all this is simply the way by which God has made it possible to obey his word and love him. “*Shema,*” hear and act upon what you hear.

God created humans to love. There was never a person made who does not love something. Put a prisoner in a cell in solitary confinement and he will find a tiny flower growing in a crack in the wall and love that. We must love, that is what we are made to do. We can love either a person, a place, or a thing.

The tragedy of humanity is that without Jesus Christ the fallen heart of humans loves something less than God, and what we love in place of God becomes a god in our lives. It might be a sports car, it might be another person, it might be an idea, it might be fame, it might be wealth, it might be power, anything that is less than God. But in the gospel, we learn for the first time that it is possible for us to love God. This is the central reason for living, the answer to why human beings are on earth—to learn to love God.

Daniel Webster was once asked “What is the greatest thought that ever entered your mind?” And he answered immediately, “My accountability to God!” This is the great thing. If this is true, then it follows that the person who knows how to love God will never go astray in life. And the child who learns to love God will be kept through every testing, every trial, every danger. In fairy tales when children left home their parents would often give them a magic talisman, with the parting instructions. “Anytime you get into trouble, or need help, or are in real danger, rub this and everything will turn out all right.” That is a fantasy representation of the truth. There is a magic talisman—it is love for God!

If we learn to love God everything else will turn out all right. That is the central truth of life. Living an obedient life by loving God.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



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“Ten Words of Obedience”

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Based on Deuteronomy 5:1-12; 6:4-6

Long before on demand video streaming was even dreamt of, I would gather with my family around the television and watch the same three films every year when the networks broadcast them. We’d watch “The Wizard of Oz,” “The Sound of Music,” and sometime near Easter, we’d watch “The Ten Commandments.” I was too young to understand the connection of this film and how it related to our Easter celebrations, but it had action and some special effects that appealed to my young adolescent eyes.

As I grew older, I began to understand the story how God spoke to the Israelites through Moses, guiding them out of slavery in Egypt to the promised land, but I still had questions about when God spoke the Ten Commandments to Israel directly and recorded those words on stone tablets. The King James version sounded quite archaic to my young ears, with all of the “Thou shalt nots.” Were the Ten Commandments meant for a different time and people? I, like many others, knew of the Ten Commandments, but if asked to recite them, or even describe the subjects they covered, I might be able to get five correct if I was lucky.

Christian evangelist and author, Charles Colson, discussed a report from the National Association of Scholars, regarding a survey from a random sample of graduating seniors on what they had learned about ethics and morals in the workplace during their college education. “Nearly all the respondents said that college had prepared them ethically for their professional lives. At the same time, three-quarters reported that they had been taught that “*what is right and wrong depends on differences in individual values and cultural diversity*” They believe they are prepared ethically to live in a world where ethical behavior is purely circumstantial and may change from day to day.<sup>1</sup>

When we look at the state of our society today, we must admit that we are in a time of moral crisis. The news and social media are filled with images and stories that challenge us physically, mentally, and spiritually. Is there anything to help with these issues? Do the Ten Commandments spoken by God around 3,500 years ago, still have any bearing today?

God, as the redeemer of Israel from slavery in Egypt, spoke the Ten Commandments to guide them in their covenant with him and their community. Specific instructions for how Israel, and by extension all of us, should interact in our relationship with the Lord, and how we should interact in our relationships with each other, and our neighbors, not just geographically, but with all of humankind. Is the key, for want of a better term, for truly living the Ten Commandments our obedience to God’s Word?

“Obey.” That word has many meanings to many people. The simple definition in the dictionary is: “to comply with or follow the commands, restrictions, wishes or instruction of another person or law; also submit to the authority of.” The latter half of that definition is sometimes viewed with contempt in society these days. Many wedding participants choose to skip the vow “to honor and obey.”

The Hebrew language doesn’t have a word that translates as “obey” in the same context we use for that term in English. The closest Hebrew term is שָׁמַע (*shema*), which translates roughly to “hear,” and in the fuller sense when used in Hebrew is to “hear and act upon what you’ve heard.” While there is no Hebrew term that equates to our English “obey,” there is also no English term that equates to the Hebrew “*shema*” in the sense that is being used in the Bible.

1 Begg, Alistair. *PATHWAY to FREEDOM: How God’s Laws Guide Our Lives*. S.L.: Moody Press, 2021.

When the Bible says that Moses “heard” YHWH, it means that he heard God and then acted upon what he heard. When the Bible says that YHWH heard the people, it means that God heard them and acted upon what was heard.

Deuteronomy 5 describes Moses gathering all of Israel and saying to them: **“Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently.”** Moses opens this passage with “Hear,” in Hebrew “*Shema*,” Hear (and act upon what you hear), O Israel.” Moses is commanding the Israelites to be obedient to God’s Word. I could unpack each of the Ten Commandments, which would have us wrapping up our service sometime this evening, so I’ll spare you the seminary deep dive and focus on the parts that I would like you to “hear.”

Exodus 20 describes the Ten Commandments spoken by God on Mount Horeb, now in Deuteronomy 5, Moses is preparing Israel to cross the Jordan river into the promised land and giving the people explicit final instructions before he dies, leaving Joshua to continue in his place of leadership. He continues his lengthy farewell speech before restating the Ten Commandments. The opening verses of Deuteronomy 5:(4-5), are often glossed over quickly when they are read, but they tell us some vital information about this passage. These verses tell us that it is God that spoke *directly* to the Israelites. Moses was not an intermediary this time, relaying the messages to Israel of what God had told him, using his own human interpretations of God’s commands. This time God speaks directly to the people, and they are shown that the covenantal laws are between the Lord and them directly.

The next two verses are where God reminds the Israelites that he was the one that redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, therefore he has the right to command them as God (Deut. 5:6) and to give them clear instruction of how they should approach their relationship with him as their God, and with each other as their community. The literary structure of this passage is like royal treaties used at the time of Moses. These verses are used to identify the king that is speaking the proclamation, and a prologue describing the events making the covenantal treaty necessary. Using this ancient royal treaty pattern shows Israel, as subjects, that God is formally acknowledged as their king and ruler. As subjects of the king, they are to submit, and declare allegiance and obedience to their ruler, as a sign of gratitude for his mercies, reverence for his sovereignty, and trusting in his continued care for them. How the people should interact obediently with God, their rightful ruler, and with each other.

Something to also consider, that you might not have picked up from reading the text, the words “commandment” or “law” appear nowhere in Ex 20:1-21, nor Deuteronomy 5:1-21. The various translations over the years view these words as “commandments,” but the original Hebrew word used is דָּבָר (*dabar*), meaning “spoke.” God *spoke* just *ten words*.

The belief underlying this is that divine speech is different from human speech, it is much more concise, so the Ten Commandments, some of which are relatively expansive in human speech, are each a single, supernatural utterance in divine speech, giving Israel the Ten Words. The Greeks use the word Decalogue to describe the Ten Commandments. Translated from the Greek, this too means Ten Words.

Bible scholars view that the Ten Commandments/Ten Words may be divided into two categories. The first four words, or commandments, may be considered “vertical” describing covenant loyalty directly between God and humans. The remaining six commandments are considered “horizontal” describing covenant in the community between humans. Eight of these commandments use a negative phrasing, not an immediate or specific prohibition, “Don’t go to the movies today,” but are written with an absolute or permanent prohibition, “You shall not ever...” The are only two that command what we *should* do, any ideas? “Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you,” (Deut. 3:12) and “Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you.” (Deut. 3:16).

Let’s turn to Deuteronomy 6:4-6, Moses continues his instructions to Israel, **“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and**

**with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.”**

These verses are part of a Jewish prayer that lie at the heart of the daily morning and evening prayer services. In the Hebrew Bible, the name of God is written as YHWH. A small number of Bible scholars believe that YHWH might be pronounced as a breath, with YH being an inhale, and WH being an exhale. YaH-WeH. YAHWEH. Eventually Jehovah. Following this train of thought, with every breath we take, we speak the name of God. A baby’s first breath speaks God’s name, and with our final breath we exhale, we speak God’s name one last time before we meet him face-to-face. It’s just a theory, but I like its premise.

Ancient Judaism teaches that YHWH, is the actual name of God, and as such is not to be read aloud in the “Shema” but is traditionally replaced with “Adonai” meaning “LORD.” For that reason, the Shema recited aloud “Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD is One (meaning our only God—alone).”

That’s the background for these passages we’ve read today, so what do we do with all this? The Ten Commandments give us the basic moral guide of how we should interact with God and each other. They aren’t meant to be the be means to the end. Just keep the Ten Commandments, checking them off as you go, and everything will be just fine. Israel learned the hard way that rules and laws were never meant to be the answer. Judaism had over 600 written laws that the people were meant to observe and obey. Breaking any of these laws meant that you had to offer a sacrifice to atone for the sin before you’d be right with the law again. It was and is a no-win situation, we can never be good enough to reach God on our own. God doesn’t grade us on our “obedience” to sacrifice and ritual for man-made laws, punishing us when we’ve failed the test. It was humans that imposed the 613 written laws in Israel. The Lord gave us just 10 words as a guide for how we should show our love for God and each other, just as he has shown love for us.

The “*Shema*” gets to the root of the commandments, obedience to God, not the laws. When you love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might, that doesn’t leave a lot of room left for selfish things that do not honor God.

Jesus even recites the “*Shema*” in his response to the Pharisees in Matthew 22.

**When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matt. 22:34-40).**

The only proper response for us is to love God with all our being. “You shall love the Lord your God.” Not serve him to gain recognition, or slavishly obey him, but love him. Those other things are all involved in loving him and if you love God everything else in life will fall into place. Jesus said so. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all other things shall be added unto you,” (Matthew 6:33 KJV). This by no means implies that we won’t have any suffering, or periods of pain and grief. God never promised the journey would be easy. No, God promised that he would never leave us, but remain with us always.

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans gives instructions for living an obedient life:

**Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen. (Romans 16:25-27)**

Paul tells us that this faith-strengthening gospel is “the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long [eternal] ages.” This reminds us that the gospel has roots in eternity. It is not something God came up with when creation went badly, and sin entered the world (see 2 Timothy 1:9). That’s why Paul says in the middle of verse 26 that the gospel was by the “command of the