

# The Last Five Commandments

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We know what it means to break the commandments, but what does it mean to keep them? How does one go about keeping the commandment not to steal, or lie, or covet? For that matter, how does one keep the commandment not to murder? When we avoid doing wrong, is that the same as doing right? When we remove evil, do we get down to an underlying layer of holiness? No, holiness is much more than merely the absence of evil.

One aches to find answers to these questions. It is not just an academic exercise, because in the book of Hebrews we read that, "without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:4). If only God had continued His series of explanations so as to include the last five commandments as well as the first five! Well, He did, but they're not in Exodus 20. They're in Matthew 5.

When Immanuel, "God With Us," came to this earth to live among us, He continued His earlier series of explanations in another sermon on another mountain right where He had left off before – with commandment number 6. This is the one that says, "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13). Here's what Jesus says:

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'<sup>22</sup> But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.<sup>23</sup> "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you,<sup>24</sup> leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.<sup>25</sup> "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.<sup>26</sup> I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny." (Matthew 5:21-26)<sup>1</sup>

Next Jesus restates and explains the seventh commandment, "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). Here He expands His topic to include the matter of divorce.

<sup>27</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.'<sup>28</sup> But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.<sup>29</sup> If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.<sup>30</sup> And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.<sup>31</sup> "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'<sup>32</sup> But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for

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marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

Jesus' third explanation has to do with the ninth commandment, rather than the eighth. He returns to number eight later. Notice that as Jesus continues He makes us think more about what the commandments are really saying. The ninth commandment is the one that governs our use of words. "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:15).

<sup>33</sup> "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' <sup>34</sup> But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; <sup>35</sup> or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. <sup>36</sup> And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. <sup>37</sup> Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

The eighth commandment says, "You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:14). Jesus makes clear that this commandment goes beyond taking to embrace the opposite of taking, i.e., giving.

<sup>38</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' <sup>39</sup> But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. <sup>40</sup> And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. <sup>41</sup> If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. <sup>42</sup> Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Before going further notice that commandments six through ten deal with things that are progressively less physical. We could think of murder as the ultimate act of violence. Adultery is physical, but not necessarily violent. Stealing involves touching a person's things, but not their owner. Lying does not involve touching anything, but we can potentially tell when someone is lying. When we come to the tenth commandment, however, and it says, "You shall not covet . . .," that's something that takes place only within the mind. If you covet, no one would ever have to know. Loving and hating also take place only within the mind. So when Jesus talks about how we feel in our hearts toward other people, we can be sure in this context that verses 43-48 are an explanation of the tenth commandment.

<sup>43</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup> But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. <sup>46</sup> He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? <sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

That last line ("Be perfect, therefore, . . .") has stimulated a lot of comment and speculation. What does this mean? Are we to be without sin? It seems like an impossibly high standard! Actually, if not sinning is our concept of what it means to be holy, that's a relatively shallow standard. If we start with a sinful fallen human being and just remove everything bad, what would be left? Is this the way to attain holiness? Just remove everything that is not holy?

Before reading Matthew 5 we might have thought that holiness consists of nothing more than just not breaking the law. But now that we have read it, we should have a higher concept of

what God requires. So in view of what we now know, how should we interpret Jesus' final and culminating statement that we must go beyond all limitations and be perfect?

Consider what we have learned. The sixth commandment involves thinking of fellow human beings as a "brother" (verse 22) – and a sister. The seventh commandment involves maintaining positive faithfulness (see verse 32). The eighth commandment means being willing to "give" (verse 42). The ninth commandment involves telling the truth "simply" (verse 37). And the tenth commandment means that the way we think of other people in our hearts must be consistent, mature, and godlike (see verse 48).

How do we do that? This is not a rhetorical question. The way to obey the command Jesus gives in Matthew 5 is by obeying the command He gives in Matthew 11.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

Everything about Jesus is holy. When we come to Him in faith, willing to do what He commands (bear in mind that what we've been talking about are commandments), all of His holiness becomes available to meet our need. If our need is infinite, so is His grace. In Christ all of God's requirements are met. God's commandments cannot be kept by simply not breaking them. More than the absence of bad, what we need and must have is the presence of good. This means Jesus. There is a reason why God made the standard so inconceivably high. He could afford to do that because in Christ He has made the provision so inconceivably high.

Even John, the beloved disciple, the one who most fully reflected the likeness of the Saviour, did not naturally possess that loveliness of character. He was not only self-assertive and ambitious for honor, but impetuous, and resentful under injuries. But as the character of the Divine One was manifested to him, he saw his own deficiency and was humbled by the knowledge. The strength and patience, the power and tenderness, the majesty and meekness, that he beheld in the daily life of the Son of God, filled his soul with admiration and love. Day by day his heart was drawn out toward Christ, until he lost sight of self in love for his Master. His resentful, ambitious temper was yielded to the molding power of Christ. The regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit renewed his heart. The power of the love of Christ wrought a transformation of character. This is the sure result of union with Jesus. When Christ abides in the heart, the whole nature is transformed. Christ's Spirit, His love, softens the heart, subdues the soul, and raises the thoughts and desires toward God and heaven.<sup>2</sup> {SC 73.1}

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<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1956), p. 73.