

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS RELOADED

Today's Text: Matt. 5:17-48

Extracts:

[Jesus taught the multitudes and His disciples, saying]:

“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ... Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” [Matt. 5: 17-19; 48]

*In the movie, **The Matrix** (1999), a computer hacker (Neo) lived an ordinary life which he thought was in the year 1999.¹ Then he was contacted by an enigmatic character (Morpheus) who opened his eyes to the real world, namely, that the world had been laid waste and taken over by advanced intelligence machines that had created a false version of 20th-Century life, ‘The Matrix,’ to keep the human slaves satisfied, whereas the machines actually drew power from real humans. Neo was hailed as ‘The One’ that would lead the humans to overthrow the machines and reclaim the earth. A sequel, based on events six months after the events in *The Matrix* was released as **The Matrix Reloaded** (2003). In it, Neo freed more and more humans from the matrix and brought them to Zion, the stronghold of the Resistance. He discovered that he had superpowers, including super speed and ability to decode what was inside the matrix.*

We can liken Neo to Moses, the man that God opened his eyes to see the false world of sin that Satan had created since the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. On Mount Sinai, God gave him the Ten Commandments to guide humans back to God. About sixteen hundred years later, God raised up another Prophet like Moses [Deut. 18: 15], Jesus the Christ, to save the world from sin. In today's lesson, Jesus gives us a kind of the sequel to the Ten Commandments which we can call ‘The Ten Commandments Reloaded.’

¹ Story based on the following sources: Plot summary for *The Matrix* (1999), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133093/plotsummary> ; Plot summary for *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0234215/plotsummary> ; and ‘Matrix 101: Understanding the Matrix,’ <http://thematrix101.com/reloaded/>

1. The Ten Commandments: Exhaustive or Indicative?

After using Moses to lead the children of Israel out of a 430-year-long bondage in Egypt, God brought them to Mount Sinai where He gave them the now famous Ten Commandments. For the avoidance of doubt, they can be summarized as follows [Ex. 20: 1-17; Deut. 5: 6-21- KJV]:

- 1) I am the Lord thy God and thou shalt have no other gods besides Me;
- 2) Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain;
- 3) Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy;
- 4) Honour thy father and mother;
- 5) Thou shalt not kill;
- 6) Thou shalt not commit adultery;
- 7) Thou shalt not steal;
- 8) Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour;
- 9) Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife; and
- 10) Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's goods.

The list is deceptively short and that has given some people cause to question whether the commandments were meant to be exhaustive or merely indicative. Let us examine both arguments:

a) *The Ten Commandments are exhaustive*

Those who see the Ten Commandments as comprehensive and exhaustive are of the view that they cover all aspects of human conduct in relation to God and fellow humans. They were revealed to Moses over 3,500 years ago and they have never been amended whereas the Constitution of the United States that is less than 250 years old and that is considered one of the most resilient in the world has 27 Amendments!² Therefore, the Ten Commandments can be regarded as exhaustive. If you can keep them, you are 'holy'!

That point of view places *emphasis on the letter of the law*. In that sense, you are only guilty if it can be proved beyond reasonable doubt! Truth is established in the mouths of two or more witnesses even when such witnesses could be lying [1 Kgs 21: 13]! Any sin not overtly listed is permissible. For example, the law covers adultery but not fornication or homosexuality! Therefore, what is not covered should not be punished. That is why a recent *Newsweek* magazine writer had this to say on gay marriage, "While the Bible and Jesus say many important things about love and family, neither *explicitly* defines marriage as between one man and one woman."³ Yet, long before Moses received the Ten

² The United States Constitution, <http://www.usconstitution.net/const.html>

³ Lisa Miller, 'Gay Marriage: Our Mutual Joy,' www.newsweek.com/id/172653?GT1=43002, Dec. 6, 2008 from magazine issue dated Dec. 15, 2008

Commandments, Sodom and Gomorrah had been destroyed on account of homosexuality, among other sins [Gen. 19: 4-13]. Moreover, at the time that Cain killed his brother Abel, there were as yet no laws but God recorded it against him as murder [Gen. 4: 1-15]. That suggests that we may need to look beyond the letter of the Ten Commandments in order to appreciate the true essence of God's law.

b) *The Ten Commandments are merely indicative*

There are some countries, such as Great Britain, which do not have written constitutions but still operate under the rule of law. In such countries, the written laws are merely indicative or in support of the traditions and norms that the people share and live by. When Moses received the Ten Commandments from God, they were written on two stone tablets [Ex. 31: 18]. They were like a written constitution for the nation of Israel. It did not exhaust all aspects of human conduct but summarized the key *themes*. Therefore, *the spirit of the law is as important as (and much more important than) the letter*. The letter is merely indicative of that spirit.

That point is well brought out in the encounter between Jesus and a rich young man [Matt. 19: 16- 22]. The young man had asked Jesus what good he should do in order to have eternal life. Jesus told him to keep the commandments. The young man asked which ones, and Jesus cited some of the Ten Commandments. The young man replied, "All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?" Jesus replied, "If you want to be perfect, go sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow Me." The young man went away sorrowful because he could not give up his wealth. He had put the love of material wealth (other gods) above the love of God, the essence of the first commandment! That is why to stumble in one aspect of the law is tantamount to having stumbled in the whole law [Jam. 2: 10-11]!

The secrets of God remain with Him but the laws that He has revealed are for us to obey [Deut. 29: 29]. God's thoughts and ways are higher than ours [Is. 55: 8-9]. When He revealed the Ten Commandments and the ceremonial laws to Moses on Mount Sinai, He also spelt out the essence, namely, that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and strength, and to measure our righteousness by careful and total obedience to Him [Deut. 6: 5, 25]. Sixteen hundred years later, by the time that Jesus came in flesh, the Law had been reduced to mere rituals, being enforced by hypocrites, such as the scribes and Pharisees. The time was ripe for a sequel to the original law. The Sermon on the Mount can, therefore, be regarded as 'The Ten Commandments Reloaded'!

2. Jesus reinforces the Ten Commandments

A firebrand evangelical pastor was fond of telling his young congregation that they should forget the Old Testament and its rituals and concentrate on the New Testament. In no time, he noticed that there was a significant drop in takings from tithes. He asked some of the church leaders to investigate what was happening. They reported back that the congregation had heeded his sermons. Tithes are covered in the book of Malachi [3: 8-10], an Old Testament book!

Jesus told His listeners during that famous Sermon on the Mount, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill” [Matt. 5: 17]. On the eve of His return to heaven, the risen Christ told His disciples, concerning the Scriptures [Lk 24: 44-45]:

“These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me,” and He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.

From those passages, we can conclude that the Ten Commandments are as valid today as they were when God gave them to Moses on Mount Sinai. Then, God saw the children of Israel as “a holy people” that He had chosen for Himself, “a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth” [Deut. 7: 6]. Now, through their faith in Christ Jesus, believers have also been called “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, [God’s] own special people” [1 Pet. 2: 9]. The same Jewish carpenter that has grafted you into the chosen nation of Israel has also explained to you what the Ten Commandments actually mean. You had better listen to Him and not your pastor or those who want to be politically correct!

We can examine how Jesus harmonized the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament with the New Covenant by first looking at the illustrations from His Sermon on the Mount and then setting out His general framework from His subsequent teachings.

Jesus addressed the commandments covering murder, adultery and marriage, oath-taking, and love of enemies, among others. In each case, He would state the law as taught by the religious leaders (who claimed to be doing as Moses had taught) and add how God expects us to observe it. Here are the highlights of some of the issues that He covered:

- Murder

His listeners had been taught, “You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of judgment” [Matt. 5: 21; Ex. 20: 13]. But Jesus taught them that whoever was unjustifiably angry with his brother or called him a fool was in danger of judgment and hell fire [v. 22]. In other words, murder is not only with a lethal weapon, such as the gun or knife, but with the tongue!

The tongue has been called “an unruly evil, full of deadly poison” [Jam. 3: 8]. Among the seven abominations that God hates are a lying tongue, a heart that devises evil plans, hands that shed innocent blood, feet that are swift to run to evil, a false witness who speaks lies and a person who sows discord among brethren [Prov. 6: 16-19]. Therefore, we may be worse murderers (with our hearts and tongues) than those behind bars!

- Adultery

The Commandment says, “You shall not commit adultery,” which we understand as sexual relations between a man and a woman, either of whom is married to somebody else. Does that cover relations between two unmarried people (fornication) and other sexual sins? So, Jesus gave God’s position as follows, “*Whoever* looks at a woman to lust for her *has already* committed adultery with her in his heart” [Matt. 5: 27-28]. Therefore, we learn from His teaching that the only sexual union acceptable to God is the one between a man and his wife; any other form (such as fornication, homosexuality, etc) is immoral. Second, the sin begins from the heart. Therefore, you have done it even before you actually do it! That means that pornography and masturbation, things that you may be doing alone with yourself behind closed doors, are sexual sins in the sight of God!

- Marriage and divorce

Under the Law of Moses, men could divorce their wives provided they gave them ‘certificate of divorce’ [Matt. 5: 31; Deut. 24: 1]. However, Jesus taught that marriage was for life and that divorce was only permissible on grounds of *sexual immorality* (fornication in KJV) [Matt. 5: 32]. That is clearer within the context of differentiating between a legal and a moral marriage. Under human law, a man and a woman are married so long as it is not bigamous (in another marriage that is still valid). In some countries, same-sex marriages are legal. In some countries, people are into cohabitation or common law marriages, that is, a man and woman living together and, possibly, raising children together without any formal or legal sanction. But *in the eyes of God, every legal marriage may not be morally acceptable*. That is why believers are encouraged to solemnize their weddings in the church even though their marriage certificates are validated by the state. That way, you are assured that you have fulfilled God’s commandment concerning marriage.

- Love your enemies

As taught the people by the scribes and Pharisees, God’s commandment to love your neighbour does not include your enemies [Matt. 5: 43]. However, Jesus taught them that they should love their enemies and bless those who cursed them. They should do good to those who hated them and pray for those that spitefully used them and persecuted them [v. 44]. For the Jews at the time

under the cruel yoke of Roman rule, that was strange doctrine, just as it would sound to us today as we face racial discrimination, ethnic cleansing, terrorist attacks and economic exploitation. But if we are to fully obey God's commandments, we have no choice but to do His will.

3. Conclusion: The Ten Commandments- A framework for perfection!

In rounding up, Jesus told His listeners, "Therefore, you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" [Matt. 5: 48]. That was not a new statement because God had also instructed the children of Israel through Moses, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" [Lev. 19: 2]. Perfection or holiness cannot come by human effort in the form of works but only by grace through faith in Jesus the Christ of God [Eph. 2: 5-9]. Basking in the love of His Father, Jesus told His disciples, "This is My commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you" [Jn 15: 9-12]. John adds, "God is love, and (whoever) abides in love abides in God and God in him" [1 Jn 4: 15].

Table 1 below summarizes the harmonization of the OT and NT teachings on the Ten Commandments. May God give you full understanding.

Table 1: The Ten Commandments Reloaded		
Main Theme	The Commandments covered	Spirit of the Commandments
Love God	1) I am the Lord they God and thou shalt have no other gods besides Me; 2) Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; 3) Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy	<i>Love God with all your heart, soul and mind</i> [Matt. 22: 37] <i>God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must do so in spirit and in truth</i> [Jn 4: 24]
Love your Neighbour	4) Honour thy father and mother; 5) Thou shalt not kill; 6) Thou shalt not commit adultery; 7) Thou shalt not steal; 8) Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour; 9) Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife; and 10) Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's goods.	<i>Love your neighbour as yourself</i> [Matt. 22: 39]