

RIGHT or WRONG? Guided by the Ten Commandments

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We just don't hear about the Ten Commandments anymore. They carry the essence of the law of our land and guidelines for all of life. I'm embarrassed that our preachers apparently aren't preaching the Ten Commandments. Lots of morality issues would be settled if they did, don't you think?

I love the Ten Commandments. They distill many of God's laws and are unique among the legal codes of the ancient world. As you say, they have had a formative influence on our laws. Yet as wonderful as they are, they shouldn't be a central focus of Christian proclamation for many reasons.

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First, God calls us to a relationship with the living Christ, not a legal code. This relationship comes through the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 3:24-25 that the law was put in charge of us to lead us to Christ, so we could be justified by faith. Now that we have faith in Christ, we're no longer under the supervision of the law. Our moral and ethical guidance come from Christ's presence in us through the Holy Spirit.

Second, Jesus didn't make the Ten Commandments the centerpiece of his teaching and preaching. Remember the Pharisee who tested Jesus by asking him, "Which is the greatest commandment in the law?" (Matthew 22:34-40) Jesus didn't quote any of the Ten Commandments. Instead, he quoted Deuteronomy 6:5, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind," and Leviticus 19:18, "Love your neighbor as yourself." He said of these, "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these commandments" (Matthew 22:40).

Jesus meant that if we love God with all our beings, we'll fulfill his commands to worship him alone, to make no idols, and to keep his Sabbath day. If we love our neighbors as ourselves, we won't murder them or steal from them, or covet what they have. As the Apostle Paul wrote: "Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:10).

Third, the Ten Commandments have never been central to the church's proclamation of the gospel. Instead, Christians have focused on teaching believers to obey everything Christ commanded, including the two commandments listed above.

Although the Ten Commandments should not be central to Christian proclamation, they remain important because they give flesh and definition to God's commands to love. Love is subjective. Laws like the Ten Commandments anchor love in objective commands.

The Ten Commandments should be included in Christian instruction, but learning them won't solve moral problems in churches and in society. What's most needed in the church is for Christians to develop their relationships with the living Christ and imitate his attitudes and actions.

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Right or Wrong? is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to btillman@hsutx.edu.

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