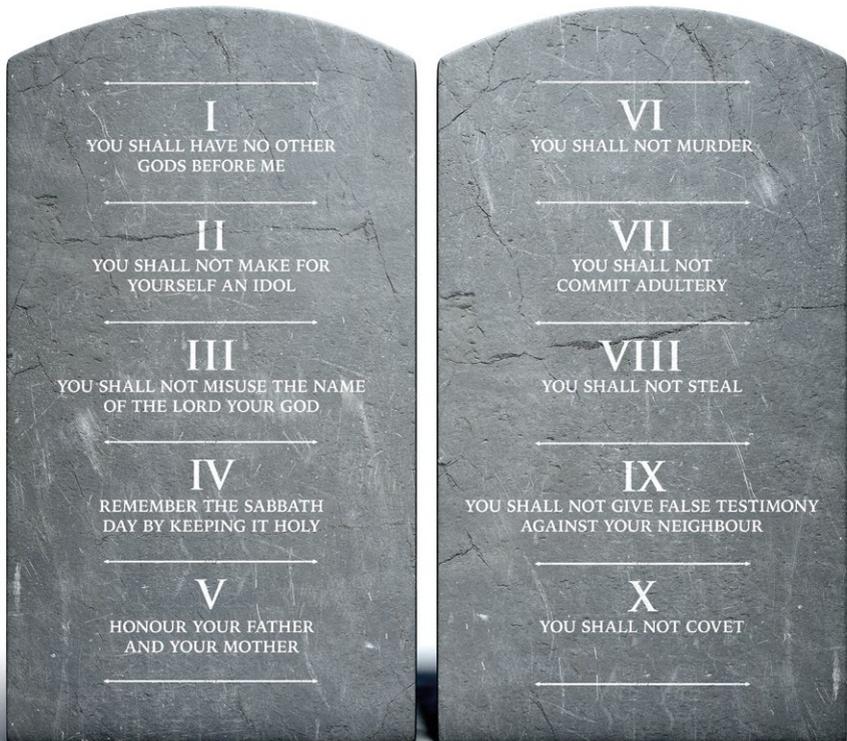




The place of the Ten Commandments today

RUPERT BENTLEY-TAYLOR





The place of the Ten Commandments today

RUPERT BENTLEY-TAYLOR

Copyright © The Christian Institute 2026

The author has asserted his right under Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs & Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

Printed in March 2026

ISBN 9-781901-086713

Published by:

The Christian Institute, Wilberforce House, 4 Park Road, Gosforth Business Park,
Newcastle upon Tyne, NE12 8DG

All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, mechanical, electronic, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of The Christian Institute.

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

The Christian Institute is a Company Limited by Guarantee, registered in England as a charity. Company No. 263 4440, Charity No. 100 4774. A charity registered in Scotland. Charity No. SC039220

Contents

Introduction	5
Ten convictions	13
Conclusion	33
Short bibliography	34
References	35

Introduction

Throughout the UK and Ireland, you can walk into churches and very often find on the wall the words of the Ten Commandments. This was required by canon law in England back in 1560. It was seen, as one writer says, as “the accepted summary and crown of the divine law”.¹ The Ten Commandments have been used in instructing children and converts to the Christian faith at least since the time of Augustine in the fourth century. They were a part of Roman Catholic instruction as well as Protestant. But there is no question that the Reformation brought an added emphasis to their importance.

Martin Luther worked all through the Ten Commandments in the Lutheran Large Catechism, and declared:

*This much is certain: those who know the Ten Commandments perfectly know the entire Scriptures and in all affairs and circumstances are able to counsel, help, comfort, judge, and make decisions in both spiritual and temporal matters. They are qualified to be a judge over all doctrines, walks of life, spirits, legal matters, and everything else in the world.*²

John Calvin goes through each of the Ten Commandments in his Institutes of the Christian Religion, and says that they “contain a complete rule of life,” and are “the true and eternal rule of righteousness”.³ That was typical of many catechisms and confessions of faith, such as the Westminster Shorter Catechism. In his 1692 work A Body of Practical Divinity, the Puritan Thomas Watson wrote a whole section devoted to the Ten Commandments, which is still in print as a book in its own right. Watson said, “The moral law is the copy of God’s will, our spiritual directory; it shows us what sins to avoid, what duties to pursue.”⁴

Obedience to the Ten Commandments has been commonly exhorted from pulpits for centuries. Bishop J C Ryle spoke for many when he said:

*The same Holy Ghost who convinces the believer of sin by the law, and leads him to Christ for justification, will always lead him to a spiritual use of the law, as a friendly guide, in the pursuit of sanctification.*⁵

A high view of the Ten Commandments was deeply embedded in our culture. In the 18th and 19th centuries, needlework samplers setting out the Ten Commandments were quite common. Many children, at least until the 1960s, after which learning by rote was generally abandoned, were taught to recite the Ten Commandments.

This approach was, of course, not universal. I remember my surprise in discovering that some dispensational theology among the Brethren saw the Ten Commandments as irrelevant for New Testament believers. Yet, by and large, a high view of the relevance of the Ten Commandments was standard Christian instruction until quite recently. Even as this changed, there have been and are still significant voices saying the same thing:

*The Ten Commandments is the Bible's fundamental statement of 'the law of liberty'.*⁶

Alec Motyer

*the New Testament teaches unambiguously that the Ten Commandments are still binding upon all men.*⁷

Ernest Kevan

*the Decalogue which is the ethical norm for the Christian's covenant way of life.*⁸

Robert Reymond

*The standards of the Decalogue remain relevant for all mankind because they encapsulate the moral law that is from creation.*⁹

John Mackay

*Not one of these laws is annulled either by Christ or his apostles and we can rightly claim that the Ten Commandments are still the hallmark of the people belonging to God.*¹⁰

Brian Edwards

Kevin DeYoung speaks of the Ten Commandments as:

*an objective moral code that isn't just true for some people, in some places, depending on their circumstances, but is true for all people everywhere.*¹¹

A list of similar quotations from other theologians could go on and on. John Frame, in one of his monumental books, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, published in 2008, devotes no fewer than 465 pages to expounding the Ten Commandments. With this long history and this weight of learned and godly judgement, one might have thought the issue was convincingly settled once and for all. But such a conclusion would be quite mistaken.

The fact is that, however well-supported this high view of the Ten Commandments' relevance has been in the past, the tide in current evangelical circles has turned. Of course, it is not surprising that our society has discarded the Ten Commandments as it has radically moved away from Christian thinking. However, what is striking is the degree to which some current evangelical theologians, and many in our churches, have also shifted in their view of the Ten Commandments. An older generation of conservative evangelicals saw the Law as what God used in people's consciences to drive them to Christ for salvation by faith alone. And then the Law guided them in how they might live to please God.

But there has been a sea change. Many Christians now are somewhat confused about how to view the Ten Commandments.

Evangelicalism has embraced what you might call a theology of grace. The number of current Christian books with the word ‘grace’ in the title is hard to keep up with and it is a popular choice to call your new church ‘Grace Church’! That might seem altogether proper, and indeed it absolutely is, when rightly understood. But what often does seem to be emphasised is grace as a substitute for Law. Law is only seen as what condemns. In Christ, we are freed from Law. The most damning accusation you can make today of another Christian is that they are “legalistic”. Don Carson wryly comments that we live in an age when Matthew 7:1 (“Do not judge, or you too will be judged”) has replaced John 3:16 as the only verse in the Bible the man on the street is likely to know.¹² In this thinking, it is often held that the Old Testament has no authority *unless the New Testament specifically endorses it*. The Ten Commandments, it is concluded, have no authority over the Christian believer, who lives by grace and not by Law. Carl Trueman writes:

*the emphasis upon God’s love to the utter exclusion of everything else has become something of a commonplace... there is the constant tendency to neglect the Old Testament in particular in our theological reflections and our devotional lives, both of which need to take full account of the Old Testament.*¹³

In addition, the distinction between the moral, civil, and ceremonial aspects of the Law (held, for example, by the Reformers) is often disputed. The Old Testament Law, it is argued, is an indivisible unit and you either have to keep it all or gladly set the whole of it aside as obsolete. J Daniel Hays declares:

The distinctions between the moral, civil, and ceremonial laws are arbitrary, imposed on the text from outside the text... When the Old Covenant was abrogated, the Old Testament Law ceased to be a Law for Christians. However, when the New Testament repeats a law it thus becomes a commandment for believers, to be obeyed as a commandment of Christ. But

*this validity and authority as a command comes from the New Testament and not the Old Testament.*¹⁴

And, the argument goes, when you look closely at the Ten Commandments, how can anyone pretend to be keeping the fourth commandment when they turn up to church on a Sunday rather than keeping the seventh-day Jewish Sabbath? It is firmly denied by some theologians that Sabbath observance is to be traced back to Creation, nor do they believe there is any direct connection whatever between the Old Testament Sabbath and the New Testament Lord's Day. Christians, it seems, have got it quite wrong all these centuries. But if you can't apply the fourth commandment to believers today, how can you meaningfully speak of the abiding authority of the Ten Commandments at all?

There are two things to say in reflection at this point. Firstly, it is right to observe that this is **not a simple matter**. The precise relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament and the measure of continuity as opposed to discontinuity is one of the most significant but difficult theological issues. Take Hebrews 12, which makes specific reference back to the giving of the Ten Commandments at Sinai. Verses 18-24 read:

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned." The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear." But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

There is clear discontinuity: “you have not come to a mountain that can be touched” (that is, Mount Sinai); there is “a new covenant”; we are not ancient Israelites just delivered out of Egypt. Yet the very next verse draws out a continuity, verse 25:

See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?

New Testament believers are in a similar position. Deuteronomy 4:24, in the context of the giving of the Law, says “your God is a consuming fire”. How very Old Testament! Yet Hebrews 12 goes on to say in verses 28-29, “let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire’”. There is to be just as much fear of God in our hearts in the New Testament era as in the Old Testament era. Indeed, Hebrews 12 implies that we should have an even greater fear since we have not come, as they did, to Mount Sinai on earth but we “have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God” (verse 22). So here is continuity, we have the same God and the same principles are at work.

Yet it is true that the New Testament uses some language that does seem to give credence to dismissing the Law:

John 1:17, For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Romans 6:14, For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

Romans 10:4, Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

Galatians 3:25, Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

On the other hand, Paul also says:

■ Romans 3:31, *Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.*

■ Romans 7:12, *So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.*

So this is not just a simple matter.

Secondly, it is a **very concerning matter**. Brian Edwards says:

■ *Never has the law of God been so attacked as it is today, and not by the world – that we expect – but by those who ought to be its friends.*¹⁵

John Mackay wrote:

■ *It is arguably the case that the Ten Commandments are more neglected in Britain today than they have been... The spirit of rebellion and antinomianism (lawlessness) has infiltrated the Church.*¹⁶

Rick Phillips, an American pastor, says:

■ *It would be hard to find a shift with more profound implications not only for Christian doctrine but also for our approach to daily living as followers of Christ.*¹⁷

This is a matter of great significance for The Christian Institute and other organisations – as well as individuals – that wish to speak out on current issues in politics and society. How do we evaluate current legislation and thinking? On what grounds do we object or approve? The Law of God, especially the moral Law, has always been a standard, a place from which to judge how we should respond.

The Christian Institute speaks out on issues of religious liberty, freedom of speech, and the defence of family life. If we

believe that God has spoken clearly on some matter – such as the nature of marriage, or the value of human life, or there being only two genders, or principles of justice – then it is part of loving our neighbour to speak out, because we care about our society. We know that God’s instructions are for the good of every single human being that he has made. We know from Proverbs 14:34 that, “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people”. And we take seriously Proverbs 28:4: “Those who forsake the law praise the wicked, but those who keep the law resist them.” Both Testaments contain instructions for life by the God who does not change. There are some issues the Old Testament addresses that the New Testament does not directly deal with, and frequently New Testament teaching clearly draws on the Old Testament. As an example of the latter, when Jesus spoke about marriage and divorce, he went back to the Old Testament to explain the principles (Matthew 19:3-6).

The Law helps us to know who and what we should praise or resist. It is no accident that The Christian Institute has produced a series of booklets with such titles as *God’s promise plan and his gracious law* by Walter Kaiser, *The moral law* by John Mackay, and *The threefold division of the law* by Jonathan Bayes. You could say that the whole work of The Christian Institute stands or falls by the relevance of God’s Law to life today.

Ten convictions

Let's try to find some rock under our feet on this matter. I believe there are ten secure stepping stones that take us to a good place for understanding the role of the Ten Commandments today.

1) The Bible teaches a positive relationship between Law and grace.

Law and grace belong together like two sides of the same coin. There is some very distorted thinking being expressed on this today. The context of the Ten Commandments is hugely significant. It begins with the assertion in Exodus 20:2: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." Alec Motyer wrote:

The grace that saves preceded the law that demands. The people were given the law not in order that they might become the redeemed, rather it was because they had already been redeemed that they were given the law... Grace and law belong together, for grace leads to law; saving love leads to and excites grateful love expressed in obedience.¹⁸

The Law was not some grim imposition, as you might think from reading some contemporary opinions. Rather, Psalm 19:7-10 declares:

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous.

They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.

Psalm 119 is passionately, wildly enthusiastic about the Law of God and takes 176 verses to tell us, again and again, how wonderful God's laws are. As we read in Psalm 119:44-47:

I will always obey your law, for ever and ever. I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts. I will speak of your statutes before kings and will not be put to shame, for I delight in your commands because I love them.

Note how the psalmist in verse 45 declares that freedom and Law go together. James 2:12 expresses the same conviction, "Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom". Note also how love and Law go together in verse 47 of Psalm 119. For the psalmist, obeying God's Law is far from a grim imposition: "I delight in your commands because I love them." Love and Law are intertwined, as we can see in Exodus 20 itself, where verse 6 speaks of "those who love me and keep my commandments".

No one is clearer about this than Jesus himself, who says in John 14:15, "If you love me, you will obey what I command." The apostle John wrote in 1 John 5:3, "This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome".

2) There are sound reasons for believing that the Ten Commandments had a special place both in Old and New Testament times.

In the accounts of the giving of the Law in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, we find that the setting was terrifyingly awe-inspiring, with God's presence on Mount Sinai visibly and audibly displayed in fire, thunder, and earthquake. Then God spoke in person the 'ten words', that is, the Ten Commandments. The rest of the Law God gave through Moses, but the Ten Commandments were heard by all the people, spoken by God.

Then these ‘ten words’ were inscribed on tablets of stone by God himself. What are we to infer from that? That these assertions were of a permanent and special nature. Subsequently, they were kept in the Ark of the Covenant, in the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle. And in their form the Ten Commandments stand out from the rest of the Law. The Law is generally given as case law, ‘if this, then that’. But the Ten Commandments are stated in terms of principle. Moses said of them in Deuteronomy 5:22:

These are the commandments the LORD proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly there on the mountain from out of the fire, the cloud and the deep darkness; and he added nothing more. Then he wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me.

Within the New Testament, Jesus drew attention to the Ten Commandments on several occasions. Three gospels record the same statement, Matthew 19:17-19, Mark 10:19, and Luke 18:20:

“If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.” “Which ones?” the man enquired. Jesus replied, “Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honour your father and mother”.

In Mark 10:19, Jesus adds, “do not defraud”. Jesus is listing the Ten Commandments as a standard of how people should live.

“But,” some may say, “everything changes after the death and resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We belong in a new age where Law is irrelevant.” What then is Paul doing in Romans 13:9, quoting the Ten Commandments still?

The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

Is Paul saying love replaces the Ten Commandments? Is he saying

that the specifics of those Commandments are now irrelevant? No. He is saying love means that you will keep exactly what the Ten Commandments say, that love is embodied in them. Why does James still refer to the Ten Commandments in James 2? In verses 8 to 11, he is challenging the behaviour of some in the Church who were showing favouritism towards the well-dressed and wealthy.

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbour as yourself,” you are doing right. But if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as law-breakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a law-breaker.

James sees the New Testament believers who are showing favouritism in the Church as ‘law-breakers’. He clearly regards the Ten Commandments as abidingly relevant.

3) The Ten Commandments reflect the unchanging character of God.

God was, is and always will be a speaking God, a holy God, a saving God, a jealous God, a loving God, the only God. The Ten Commandments reflect him.

Now, you could say that this is also true of the whole of the detail of Old Testament Law beyond the Ten Commandments. People are right to stress the importance of the particular circumstances and days in which the Law was given. We do live the far side of Calvary. The whole sacrificial system expressed the holy character of God, but it was fully satisfied by the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus at Calvary. That does not mean the principles are irrelevant, but the applications today may well be different.

The Ten Commandments are foundational expressions of what

God requires because of who God is. Alec Motyer says:

Each commandment represents some aspect of the likeness of God, and, therefore, obedience to God's law gives expression to what we really are, beings in God's likeness.¹⁹

Philip Ryken puts it like this:

If the law comes from God, then it must reflect his divine character... every one of the Ten Commandments was stamped with the being and attributes of Almighty God... He would have to un-God himself to set them aside. We should expect, therefore, that the Law that expresses his eternal attributes has eternal validity.²⁰

It will always be our obligation to worship the living God and him alone, it will always be wrong to murder, to commit adultery, or to covet, because they are fundamentally contrary to who God is and how he will always want us to live.

The Ten Commandments have a manifest authority about them as they are presented to us in the narrative of Exodus 19 and 20. They are not optional, 'take it or leave it', or just for a past generation. We are still to have no other gods before/besides the LORD, we are still not to bow down to and worship idols, and his name is still not to be abused but to be revered, which is why Jesus taught us to pray "Hallowed be your name".

Even in regard to the disputed Sabbath law, if we look at the reason for it in verse 11 of Exodus 20, it is rooted in Creation, in what God did at the very beginning of time.²¹ There are abiding principles involved in that command. As for honouring parents, not committing murder or adultery, or stealing, or giving false testimony, or coveting, who can possibly dispute the claim these laws have on our lives? They all flow from what our God is like, and therefore what we are to be like. Here is manifest wisdom and authority and there are manifest blessings that flow to individuals and to a society where such laws are honoured.

4) The moral principles embodied in the Ten Commandments existed prior to the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai.

We cannot just classify the Ten Commandments as ‘Mosaic’ and put them in a box marked ‘Sinai to Pentecost’. Genesis tells the story of mankind prior to the days of Moses, and we find that many aspects of the Ten Commandments are illustrated in that story.

- Principles of a seven-day cycle, of work, and of marriage, are all laid down in Genesis 1 and 2.
- Cain murdered Abel in Genesis 4, and that was not acceptable in the sight of God though it took place prior to Sinai.
- Ham dishonoured his father, Noah, in Genesis 9, and this was clearly condemned long before Sinai.
- Sexual immorality, and specifically homosexuality in Sodom recorded in Genesis 19, was one of the sins that brings down fearsome judgement. In the same way, Joseph, though he had no knowledge of the Ten Commandments, fled from Potiphar’s wife’s attempted seduction, because he knew adultery was “a wicked thing and sin against God” (Genesis 39:9), although the Ten Commandments had not been given.
- The Israelites in Exodus 20 are told to “remember” the Sabbath day because it was something they already knew about, as Exodus 16 displays, four chapters before the giving of the Law.
- In Genesis 26:5, God says: “Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws”. This is precisely the same language that is subsequently used of the right response to the laws later given at Sinai. Someone might say: ‘I thought Abraham was just the great example of faith.’ Indeed he was, but he was also a man of obedience who honoured God’s Law, long before the Mosaic covenant.

Walter Kaiser says:

every one of the Ten Commandments already is implicitly found in the Genesis record even before their publication on Sinai. Moses did not invent the moral law; God did, and He had already been holding men and women responsible for heeding it millennia before He finally wrote it on tablets of stone.²²

5) The Ten Commandments were not only for Israel.

A lot is sometimes made of the fact that the Ten Commandments were delivered to the Israelites alone. On that basis, it is argued that the Ten Commandments did not bind other nations, and today we should not be trying to call the unbelieving people around us to follow laws that are not given to them. But the God of the Bible is the God of all nations.

The Israelites were specifically told to apply God's Law to foreigners living among them: Leviticus 24:22, "You are to have the same law for the alien and the native-born."

More than that, prior to the giving of the Law to Israel, and after it, God judged the nations of the world for breaking his laws. What is going on in the Flood in Genesis 6? Or consider God's judgement on the Canaanites, when he used Israel as agents to execute his sentence of utter destruction. Leviticus 18 and Deuteronomy 18 list sexual sins and occult practices the Canaanites indulged in, which brought the judgement of God upon them, though they did not have the Ten Commandments.

In Deuteronomy 4:5-8, Moses commands the Israelites to observe carefully God's decrees and laws and thereby cause the Gentile nations to acknowledge their wisdom and understanding, and the uniqueness of their God. Moses says: "Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' What other nation

is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?" Their keeping of God's laws was to be a testimony to the nations.

Throughout the Bible, God's Law and Word are seen as directly relevant to unbelieving people. The account of Abimelech and Sarah in Genesis 20 conveys that even pagans understood at least some of the Law. Jonah was sent by God to Nineveh to declare coming judgement to pagan Assyrians because they too were held accountable by the God of Israel. Their remarkable repentance initially horrified Jonah, but was acceptable to God. In Daniel 4, the prophet tells Nebuchadnezzar to renounce his sins by doing what is right, and in Acts 24 Paul reasons with the Roman governor Felix about righteousness, self-control and the judgement to come. In 1 Timothy 1:9-10, Paul says the Law is for:

lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious: for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers...

What Paul does is essentially run through the second half of the Ten Commandments, and treats them as directly relevant to godless people.

Paul also speaks of the consciousness of God's Law among Gentiles, who do not have the Law. Romans 1:31-32:

They are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practise them.

Paul speaks of the same universal awareness of God's moral Law in Romans 2:14-15:

When Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.

Reymond says:

Paul's foundational premise here is that men are aware of the basic moral teaching of God made known through God's general revelation to them.²³

6) The coming age of the Gospel, the age of grace, is foreseen in the prophets in terms of relationship to the Law.

This is very strange, if God's Law is somehow an irrelevance to the New Testament believer, a heavy burden to be escaped from. Isaiah 2:2-3 anticipates Gentiles adopting the Law of God:

In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

Hebrews 8:8-10 quotes the wonderful promise of Jeremiah 31:31-33 in regard to the new covenant, about God's Holy Spirit working in the hearts of people:

"The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. This is the

covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.”

In a similar vein, Ezekiel 36:26-27 associates the future outpouring of the Holy Spirit with an eagerness to obey God’s Law:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

What God promises in the new covenant is not an abolition of his Law, but an internalisation of that Law in the hearts of those who trust him from all nations, and an outpouring of the Holy Spirit to enable them to keep his Law in a new way. Their positive relationship with God’s Law is what defines them as God’s people.

7) Distinctions within the Old Testament Law are found in the Old Testament and New Testament themselves, and are not an arbitrary imposition.

The case against the relevance of the Ten Commandments today is often connected to an emphasis on the Law being a single unit. The argument is that the Ten Commandments are part of a much bigger whole, and that the Law is not presented with any moral, ceremonial and civil distinctions. So if in any sense the Law no longer binds us, that must apply to the whole and not simply a part of it. Walter Kaiser responds:

we must recognize that there is a certain truth to the claim that the law exhibits a unity and stands as a unit. It is also true that the Bible does not classify laws according to a scheme such as moral, civil and ceremonial. But that argument holds true for most of theology as well. Nowhere does the Bible summarize most of our schemes found in systematic theology. The word

‘trinity’, for example, is never found as such, but that does not mean it is an improper conclusion. The only question should be: Is this categorization fair to the Biblical text?²⁴

Jonathan Bayes, whose PhD is in this area, writes very helpfully on this in his booklet on the threefold division of the Law. The notion of the existence of moral, ceremonial and civil distinctions in the Law has, he says, an “impressive pedigree”.²⁵ It goes back well before the Reformation. Calvin refers to it as “the well-known division” in his day.²⁶ Bayes traces indications of it back to about 200 AD. A view that has convinced generations of serious-minded believers should not lightly be set aside. Bayes makes a telling observation when he says:

As a matter of fact, it is virtually impossible to carry through a rigorous rejection of the threefold (or at least a twofold) division.²⁷

No evangelical claims we can be murdering people, and no one is saying we should be offering animal sacrifices. Some distinctions within the Law are made by everybody. Leviticus 19:18-19 reads:

love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD. Keep my decrees. Do not mate different kinds of animals. Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.

J Daniel Hays uses this to establish that the Old Testament makes no distinction between different types of law. Yet there is an obvious contrast between at least two types, which is why he quotes it. The fact that Jesus takes Leviticus 19:18 as one of the two summary principles of all the Law and the Prophets, and not the next verse, proves the contrast. Verse 19 is about avoiding the pagan practices of sympathetic magic, current in the Ancient Near East at that time, where people tried to induce fertility by mixing things. Therefore, Israel must stay away from such pagan practices. This matters, but it is different in its significance to the previous verse about loving your neighbour as yourself.

The Bible makes distinctions between laws:

■ 1 Samuel 15:22, *To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.*

■ Hosea 6:6, *For I desire mercy, not sacrifice.*

■ Isaiah 1:11-17, *“The multitude of your sacrifices – what are they to me?” says the LORD... “New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations – I cannot bear your evil assemblies... Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean... Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.”*

Sacrifices are commanded in Old Testament Law but mercy, justice and care for the needy matter more. It is the same in the New Testament. Jesus is quite explicit. Matthew 23:23:

■ *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practised the latter, without neglecting the former.*

The term ‘moral Law’ is used of those weighty principles that directly reflect the character of God for all time. Walter Kaiser says:

■ *some type of division within the law is not a concept that has been imposed on it from the outside... A fair interpretation of the Bible demands that we recognise a fundamental difference between those aspects of the law that reflect God’s character and those that symbolically point to the first and second coming of Christ and command only a temporary hold over believers.²⁸*

To be dealt with properly, the fourth commandment needs to be dealt with at length in its own right, as I have done elsewhere.²⁹ Here, I simply wish to say that there were some aspects of the Sabbath regulations that were ceremonial, belonging to the Jewish context, and there were other aspects linked back to Creation that are of abiding importance for us. But that is true of some of the other Commandments too. For example, the death penalty required for incest and adultery was not applied by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5 or Jesus in John 8,³⁰ though the commandments against these things are being upheld.

The fourth commandment is actually profoundly important in its view of work, as well as of rest (for one's servants and animals as well as for oneself), and the priority of worship of God over the pursuit of wealth. Are we going to set that aside? It is worth dwelling on the work aspect of the fourth commandment, even if we tend to associate this command with the rest it requires. Paul warns strongly against being idle (1 Thessalonians 5:14, 2 Thessalonians 3:6), and equally strongly urges such people to regular work: "we gave you this rule: 'if a man will not work, he shall not eat'" (2 Thessalonians 3:10). Why is Paul so emphatic about the importance of work? Surely his perspective is rooted in Genesis 2. God designed man to work, and in Exodus 20 in the fourth commandment, the requirement to rest on one day of the week comes in the context of the requirement to work for the rest of the week. Living in the light of that pattern is part of glorifying God.

That pattern is for the benefit of all human beings. Jesus' summary of the Law as both loving God and loving your neighbour is displayed in this command. When Jesus said in Mark 2:27, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath", we are not looking at a provision for Jews alone but for all people – and, of course, for a man's servants and ox and donkey and other animals, as Deuteronomy 5 specifies, reflecting the way God has created the whole world. Is anyone seriously saying we should be working 24/7,

week in week out? If we do that, what happens? The result is not good. No, humanity was designed to rest as well as work. This is not an exclusively Jewish matter. It therefore seems indefensible to suggest that the Sabbath of the fourth commandment has absolutely no connection with the Lord's Day of the New Testament: one day in a cycle of seven, giving time to prayer and worship, celebrating what God has done for us, anticipating the future rest into which God has already entered, and for which we are still longing. Thomas Watson wrote wisely and beautifully:

when the falling dust of the world has clogged the wheels of our affections, that they can scarce move towards God, the Sabbath comes, and oils the wheels of our affections, and they move swiftly on. God has appointed the Sabbath for this end. On this day the thoughts rise to heaven, the tongue speaks of God... the eyes drop tears, and the soul burns in love. The heart, which all the week was frozen, on the Sabbath melts with the word... The Sabbath is the market-day of the soul, the cream of time.³¹

8) How Jesus handled the Law is decisive.

Famously, Jesus said in Matthew 5:17-19:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

These remarkable verses have been the subject of huge debate. Don Carson goes so far as to say that they are “among the most difficult

verses in all the Bible”.³² However, Jesus’ words are not opaque. They were deliberately spoken in the hearing of a huge crowd of ordinary people who were “amazed at his teaching” (Matthew 7:28). There is much that is very clear in these verses.

For one thing, Jesus is firmly dismissing the idea that he had come “to abolish the Law or the Prophets” (verse 17). We are not to think that the Old Testament is now just past history and we can leave it behind and move on to Christ.

Instead, Jesus asserts that he came to “fulfil” the Law and the Prophets. This is a glorious assertion for us to delight in! Here at last was the one person who kept God’s Law perfectly, who lived out every detail of all the implications of the Ten Commandments. He, alone of all humanity, could genuinely and confidently ask the question, “Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?” (John 8:46). This is the grounds of our justification: not our obedience but his! Because Christ perfectly lived the righteous life God requires, he is able to be the utterly acceptable atoning sacrifice for sinners who run to God in repentance for sin and put their faith in Jesus and *his* righteousness alone. By his death, Jesus fulfilled the entire Old Testament sacrificial system by the once-for-all offering of himself.

Jesus also fulfilled all the promises of the Prophets, as he explained to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). He is the climax of the revelation of God so that Hebrews 1:1-2 tells us: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things”.

Yet, as recorded in Matthew 5, Jesus immediately goes on to emphasise that we should not imagine that his fulfilling the Law and the Prophets thereby knocks the Old Testament into the long grass of irrelevance. Quite the contrary. In verse 18 of Matthew 5 Jesus underlines the abiding relevance of the Law and the Prophets

in the strongest of terms. “Not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen” in the Law will disappear “until heaven and the earth disappear... until everything is accomplished”. This sets a timescale of relevance, which will last until the final return of the Lord Jesus in power and glory to bring in his eternal kingdom in its fullness, to which Old Testament prophets graphically point and for which Jesus teaches us to pray every time we use the Lord’s Prayer.

Furthermore, in verse 19 Jesus goes on to warn against those who break “one of the least of these commandments” and ‘teach others to do the same’, and commends those who do the opposite.

So where does this leave us in regard to the relevance of the Ten Commandments? Jesus leaves us in no doubt whatever, for he immediately goes on to refer directly to two of them, “Do not murder” and “Do not commit adultery”. Far from setting these commands aside, Jesus applies them in the most searching way:

Anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment... anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell... anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Jesus is uncompromising about the claims of God’s Law on our hearts and words, as well as on our actions. Is this a novel interpretation? No. This is what God always had in mind. We are to see these as examples, as paradigms, showing us that each brief command in the Ten Commandments identifies a whole area of God’s concern and requirement. We are surely not to conclude that Jesus failed to endorse the other commands he did not refer to here. No one can be seriously suggesting that Jesus did not have the same approach in regard to the commands to “have no other gods before me”, “honour your father and your mother”, “you shall not steal”, or “you shall not covet”.

When we listen to Jesus, far from learning that the Ten Commandments are just ancient history, we find they are alarmingly

searching and relevant to us all. And Jesus of course did set aside, very clearly, whole aspects of Old Testament ceremonial laws, the food laws, temple worship in Jerusalem and the sacrificial system, which he brought to its fulfilment. So it is all the more striking that he did not dismiss the Ten Commandments.

Bishop Ryle in his commentary on these verses expresses the matter in this way:

...let us beware of despising the law of the Ten Commandments. Let us not suppose for a moment that it is set aside by the Gospel, or that Christians have nothing to do with it. The coming of Christ did not alter the position of the Ten Commandments one hair's breadth... The law of the Ten Commandments is God's eternal measure of right and wrong. By it is the knowledge of sin; by it the Spirit shows men their need of Christ, and drives them to Him: to it Christ refers His people as their rule and guide for holy living... It cannot save us: we cannot be justified by it; but never, never let us despise it. It is a symptom of an ignorant ministry, and an unhealthy state of religion, when the law is lightly esteemed. The true Christian 'delights in the law of God.' (Rom. vii. 22.)³³

9) Paul endorses the Ten Commandments.

Paul's view of the Law has been a major issue of debate among theologians, which this booklet can only touch on briefly. However, what is clear is that when Paul refers to the Law, he does so in more than one way. He is very robust in denying that the Law is the means of justification and in showing that it never has been. Through faith, by God's grace alone, not through works of the Law, but by the work of Christ in his life, death and resurrection, we are made righteous before God:

Romans 3:21, But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.

Romans 6:14, *For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.*

Romans 10:4, *Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.*

All these verses refer to the bankruptcy of Law as a means of justification. And yet Paul can add in Romans 3:31: “Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.” Paul vigorously refuted Judaisers who were trying to get Gentile believers circumcised. But listen to his conclusion in 1 Corinthians 7:19: “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts.” In Romans 13, Paul, as we have already seen, lists a number of the Ten Commandments. In Ephesians 6:2-3, he also quotes from the Ten Commandments:

“Honour your father and mother” – which is the first commandment with a promise – “that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.”

Paul is endorsing this command. Again, let us listen to how Paul argues in 1 Corinthians 9:8-9: “Doesn’t the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses”. And again in chapter 14:21, “In the Law it is written...”. And verse 34, “[Women] must be in submission, as the Law says”. Paul is applying statements in the Old Testament Law to the New Testament Church, in regard to the support of gospel workers and the participation of women in corporate worship. He is not dismissing the Law; he is appealing to the Law.

10) Finally, we must take seriously the biblical pattern of prioritising principles.

Later rabbinic teachers of the Law established that there were 613 commands in the Old Testament Law. The Ten Commandments represent a God-given, ten-point summary of the principles

that underlie all those laws. Jesus himself prioritises principles, drawing from two verses in the Old Testament to provide us with his authoritative summary in Matthew 22:37-40:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Deuteronomy 6:5). This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

Thus all the laws, whether seen as moral, ceremonial or civil, reflect some aspect of loving God or our neighbour. Paul says the same thing when he writes in Romans 13:9:

The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

This means that even when we are dealing with Old Testament Law that is not moral Law, and not obviously directly binding on us, there is always a principle being expressed that retains its relevance. That is why the Old Testament needs to be taught today. We see this in the way Paul applies Deuteronomy 25:4, “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” Paul, in discussing this in 1 Corinthians 9:8-11, does not apply it to Christian farmers but to the right of gospel workers to receive financial support. Members of the congregation, whether farmers or businessmen, or anyone with the wherewithal to contribute, were to play their part in supporting gospel workers.

Doesn't the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses: “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the ploughman ploughs and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the

■ *harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?*

Thus the command to the owner of oxen is applied to the life of local churches. Paul, then, does not dismiss Old Testament Law. In the same way, the commands to farmers to leave the edge of their fields unreaped, and to leave grapes in the vineyard that have fallen to provide for the poor (Leviticus 19:9-10), and the command to build a parapet around your roof (Deuteronomy 22:8) are all expressions of concern for the well-being of others that still make a call on us to express in our different circumstances, even if we do not own vineyards or oxen, and do not reap fields or have flat roofs. All the Old Testament Law comes under the promises of Romans 15:4: “everything that was written in the past was written to teach us”, and 2 Timothy 3:16: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness”.

Conclusion

So, let us take fresh confidence in what God has given us in the Old Testament as well as the New, and specifically in the abiding relevance of the Ten Commandments and the law of love they embody for God and for one another in God's world. They continue to give us a framework of understanding by which we may speak into our society in all its need and confusion. And they always will. We can and must exalt grace and love God's Law, at one and the same time, so that we can say with the psalmist in Psalm 119:97, "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long."

Short bibliography

Bayes, J, *The threefold division of the law*, The Christian Institute, 2017

Bentley-Taylor, R, *The fourth commandment*, The Christian Institute, 2023

DeYoung, K, *The Ten Commandments*, Crossway, 2018

Edwards, B, *The Ten Commandments For Today*, Day One, 2002

Frame, J, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, P&R, 2008

Kaiser, W, *God's promise plan and his gracious law*, The Christian Institute, 2005

Mackay, J, *The moral law*, The Christian Institute, 2023

Motyer, A, *The Message of Exodus*, IVP, 2005

Reymond, R, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Nelson, 1998

Ryken, P, *Exodus*, Crossway, 2015

Ryle, J C, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Matthew*, Banner of Truth, 2001

Searle, D, *And Then There Were Nine*, Christian Focus, 2006

Watson, T, *The Ten Commandments*, Banner of Truth, 2025

References

1. Baldwin, J, 'The Role of the Ten Commandments', *Vox Evangelica*, 13, 1983, pages 7 and 10
2. Luther, M, The Large Catechism, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds Kolb, R and Wengert, T J, Fortress, 2000, page 382
3. Calvin, J, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Henry Beveridge, Hendrickson Publishers, 2021, pages 218 and 979
4. Watson, T, *The Ten Commandments*, Banner of Truth, 2025, page 14
5. Ryle, J C, *Holiness*, Charles Nolan Publishers Moscow, 2001, page 33
6. Motyer, J A, *The Message of Exodus*, IVP, 2005, page 215
7. Reymond, R L, *A New Systematic Theology Of The Christian Faith*, Ed. 2, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998, page 777
8. *Ibid*, page 770
9. Mackay, J L, *The moral law*, The Christian Institute, 2017, page 61
10. Edwards, B H, *The Ten Commandments For Today*, Day One, 2002, page 138
11. DeYoung, K, *The 10 Commandments*, Crossway, 2018, page 28
12. Carson, D A, *The Gospel According to John*, Apollos, 1991, page 317
13. Trueman, C R, *The Wages of Spin*, Christian Focus, 2007, pages 165-166
14. Hays, J D, 'Applying the Old Testament Law Today', *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 158, 2001, pages 21-35
15. Edwards, B H, *Op cit*, page 31
16. Mackay, J L, *Op cit*, pages 9-10
17. 'The Ten Commandments as God's Moral Law', Philips, R, *Servants of grace*, 24 March 2015, see <https://servantsofgrace.org/rick-phillips-the-ten-commandments-as-gods-moral-law/> as at 12 March 2026
18. Motyer, J A, *Op cit*, page 214
19. Motyer, J A, *Op cit*, page 214
20. Ryken, P G, *Exodus*, Crossway, 2015, pages 485 and 488
21. For more detailed comment on the fourth commandment, read Bentley-Taylor, R, *The Fourth Commandment*, The Christian Institute, 2023
22. Kaiser, W C, *God's Promise Plan and His Gracious Law*, The Christian Institute, 2019, page 24
23. Reymond, R L, *Op cit*, page 772
24. Kaiser, W C, *Op cit*, page 7
25. Bayes, J F, *The threefold division of the law*, The Christian Institute, 2017, page 8
26. Calvin, J, *Op cit*, page 979
27. Bayes, J F, *Op cit*, page 9
28. Kaiser, W C, *Op cit*, pages 8
29. Bentley-Taylor, R, *The Fourth Commandment*, The Christian Institute, 2023
30. Some would argue that the account in John 7:53-8:11 is absent from most of the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament. However, Don Carson comments: "there is little reason for doubting that the event here described occurred, even if in its written form it did not in the beginning belong to the canonical books". See Carson, D A, *The Gospel According to John*, Apollos, 1991, page 333
31. Watson, T, *Op cit*, pages 94-95, 97
32. Carson, D A, *The Sermon on the Mount*, Baker, 1994, page 38
33. Ryle, J C, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Matthew*, Banner of Truth, 2001, page 38

About the Salt&Light series

The Lord Jesus commanded Christians to be salt and light to those around them (see Matthew 5:13-16). The Salt&Light series endeavours to give believers the tools to understand what this means in our world today.

Other books in the series include:

- Common grace (*N R Needham*)
- God's promise plan and his gracious law (*Walter C Kaiser*)
- When does human life begin? (*John R Ling*)
- The moral law (*John L Mackay*)
- The dignity of work (*John L Mackay*)
- The threefold division of the law (*Jonathan F Bayes*)
- A call for Christian thinking and action (*David Holloway*)
- The Fourth Commandment (*Rupert Bentley-Taylor*)

The place of the Ten Commandments today



Many Christians are somewhat confused about how to view the Ten Commandments. Very often, the Law is simply seen as that which condemns. In Christ, we are freed from Law. Therefore, it is concluded, the Ten Commandments have no authority over the Christian believer, who lives by grace and not by Law.

Acknowledging that this is not a simple matter, but one that is very concerning, this booklet sets out ten convictions to help with understanding the role of the Ten Commandments today. It concludes with a call to take fresh confidence in the abiding relevance of the Ten Commandments and the law of love they embody.

Rupert Bentley-Taylor was a pastor for 30 years. He was the President of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC) from 2007 to 2010 and served on the FIEC Trust Board. He is a trustee of The Christian Institute.



CHRISTIANINSTITUTE



CHRISTIANORGUK

Copyright © The Christian Institute 2026 | All rights reserved