

# BibleWise

## The Ten Commandments by Mary Jane Chaignot

- In Hebrew they are called the Decalogue. *Deca* = ten. *Logue* = word.
- There are many parallels in Babylonian and Egyptian texts to the last six, which regulate the relationships between people. There aren't any parallels to the first four, which address the relationship of people to God.
- Setting: These words are addressed by God to Israel gathered, by His command, to the perimeter of the mountain at the base of Sinai. These people have been on an emotional roller coaster for three months. They've been ecstatic, fearful, comforted, saved, complaining. They've been getting ready for three days. They were taking this all very seriously. Now, what was the first thing they heard? "*I am the Lord your God.*" It could also be said: "*I the Lord, am your God.*"
- The first commandment starts with God. It sets the tone for everything that follows. First they were to know God; God is disclosing himself. "*I am your God who brought you up, don't have any other gods before my face.*" This word demonstrated God's concern for their newly acquired freedom. They didn't have a clue how to be a people. God wanted them to be His people, and they didn't have it yet. They didn't know how. So He was trying to help them. Don't sell your birthright. Be single-minded. Start from God. To believe in God is to believe from the consciousness of God. We believe in a lot of things, we only believe from the standpoint of one thing.
- *Thou shalt have no other gods before me.* **Today:** "*Please have a God.*" Many people don't. But is that really true? Isn't there always something as a last resort on which people depend and to which they give their final allegiance? When God is gone, people put something else in His place, some object in which they place their final trust, some idol of their own making. Everyone has a god. Now we're just talking about what kind of a god it will be.
- *Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image...* **Today:** The point is one's view of God. God cannot be imprisoned in the forms of this world. He is free. He is beyond creation's control, not concrete. He does not become tangible in holy things. God is in His voluntary self-giving, His love, free judgment, and sovereign grace. God does not want us to destroy ourselves by serving the creature instead of the Creator. He doesn't want anything between us. He doesn't want anything between us even if it is good. He wants direct communication.

- *Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain...* **Today:** This has to do with the divine reputation. The Hebrew word for "take" is nasa -- sounds like NASA, sending up shuttles that carry things up, lift things up. Nasa means "to lift up, to carry, to bear." To do this in vain means to do it falsely, to make use of it for any idol, frivolous, or insincere purpose, or for mischief. God gave His name in friendship, for a relationship. All of God's names have to be honored, celebrated, blessed. To do anything less would be to treat this gift very lightly, to underestimate His power, and to misrepresent His nature. God's name is really saying, "I am here, you don't have to call me. I am here." God's name is consistent with His nature. And if we're going to that name, if we're going to carry it, bear it, and lift it up, then our nature must be consistent with it as well.
- *Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.* **Today:** "Remember" is a very emphatic imperative. It isn't for those days when we have time to remember; it is to remember without lapse. Remember this in terms of the covenant. Do this every week. Why? God does not condemn people to slavery. He has built rest into His creation. We call it R and R, rest and recreation. And what is recreation except re - creation? The Sabbath is a time to step back; it is a time to be with God.

The next six words will focus on the horizontal line -- people to people.

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- *Honor your father and your mother.* **Today:** Honor is in the imperative; it means "give weight to, glorify, esteem in the sense of giving precedence." It means taking someone seriously. It's not meant to just be subject to them, but to be respectful and to recognize their right of importance, to esteem them for their priority of importance and to love them. In that sense, they will be honored. Now, as we honor parents, we become honored parents. To the extent that we are honorable and honored parents, that is what we are teaching. And that is what the children pick up.
- *Thou shalt not kill.* **Today:** It would be a whole lot better if there had been a direct object. Unfortunately, it is open ended. But wait! Isn't this the same society that just witnessed the death of a whole lot of Egyptians, who fought a big battle with the Amelekites? Before they ever move away from this mountain, 3,000 of their own community are going to die. So what is this "Don't kill?" Does it make any

sense? Let's go a little bit deeper. At that time, the sovereignty of God was determined by geographical boundaries. Each community had its own gods. The one with the strongest god was expected to prevail. Enjoying the spoils of war was really demonstrating glory to their god. But within the group, they were expected to hold each other in mutual esteem. All were under the care of that same God. Since God is the author of life, no one should dare act as God. And if someone did, the community acted on God's behalf. There is an underlying, basic principle that life belonged to God. When they went to war, they asked God. When crimes were committed, they cast lots or needed corroborating testimony from two witnesses. Both were considered to be signs from God. This word was intended to stop feudal killing. Such behaviors violated the standard of living that God expected of those who had given themselves to Him. This is still hard for us today. We have war, capital punishment, abortion, euthanasia. These all raise hard questions. Whether we like it or not, these are all forms of killing.

- *Thou shalt not commit adultery.* **Today:** Again, this was given by God to a forming community. It is intimately connected to life within that community. The word "adultery" comes from two words meaning "add and other." Together, they mean to "add other," to dilute something by adding something else to it. To adulterate means to cheapen the quality or to upset the completeness. In antiquity, adultery meant sexual intercourse with the wife of another man, the fiancée of another man, or a wife with a married man. It was not meant to regulate one's love life; it was given to protect the institution of marriage. It provided societal stability. Marriages were not monogamous and divorce was permitted. But an existing marriage was given fullest protection. Actions that dilute, cheapen the quality, pollute, or upset the completeness in relation to marriage violate the covenantal agreement. In so doing, we adulterate our own self worth as persons, sell ourselves short on the real meaning of life, and all of this affects our relationship with God. At issue is the purity of our actions not the prudishness of them. God did not make us to use or to be used by other people. We should love and regard each other as priceless because we are each in a relationship with God.
- *Don't steal.* **Today:** This is best described as depicting stealing of any kind and sometimes may apply to the duplicity of it, the secrecy of it. Stealing of any kind disrupts relationships. This word was given by God to a forming community that had agreed to live in relationship, first of all, with Him. The penalty was not the main point; the real point was the breach of covenantal relations and the loss of God's presence. People who live in a relationship with God were not to steal from one another. A Thesaurus has dozens of words available to depict stealing. There's really only one way to be honest. Nothing anyone has is really his in any ultimate sense. Everything is God's; we are merely custodians. This is a word that speaks to those who are tempted to misuse their lives, to pilfer other people's lives, or to rape the earth. It stems from a vision that is out of focus.

What's mine is God's, and we'll share it.

- *Don't bear false witness against your neighbor.* **Today:** In ancient Israel, occasions that demanded truth-telling were in relation to public affairs. Disputes between families involved property, business, and personal injury. If an Israelite had a dispute with someone, he brought his witnesses and spoke before the elders at the main gate. There a decision would be rendered. Witnessing depended on truth-telling. At the heart of this commandment was the knowledge that language is the essence of culture and community life.
- *Don't desire anything that is your neighbor's.* **Today:** The Hebrew word is *chamad*. Typically, it means "desire, yearn for, covet, lust after someone or something specifically for your own use or gratification." But, some say that this is too broad, too inclusive. It's too strict, too hard. They then argue for a narrower meaning, like *connive*, saying that it prohibits any practical action that attempts to acquire what belongs to your neighbor. But we have to read the whole commandment. It doesn't say desire is bad; it says desiring what belongs to your neighbor is bad. This is a commandment that deals with root causes. Attitudes affect the way people live. This is like an itch that won't go away. There may also be some significance in the fact that this is the tenth and last of the series. In fact, let's think of this as a summary commandment. The violation of this commandment is like the gateway to the violation of all the others. Because it describes an attitude, it is also unenforceable. How can you enforce against coveting or desire? Who would know? If it were limited to *connive*, we might be able to see that. But as *desire*, that is something just between God and us.

These were spiritual guidelines. This was a pattern for living. These were the limits. Everything else was okay. This was not a one-time thing; this was a process. The children of Israel spent the rest of their days figuring out the practical application of those Ten Commandments given to them at the base of that mountain. They learned how to live with God and, thereby, how to live with each other. In a very real sense, we are still learning, too. Our story is very much connected to theirs.

— Mary Jane Chaignot