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**Interpreting the Ten
Commandments:
A Study in Special
Hermeneutics**



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This study is broadly informed by a course syllabus written by Lambert Ponstein for students at Hope College and also by the lectures of George Forell at the University of Iowa.

Interpreting the Ten Commandments: A Study in Special Hermeneutics

Thomas K. Johnson

People often have strong feelings about the Ten Commandments. Just a couple years ago Americans observed the strange spectacle of a national judge ordering a state judge to remove an artistic portrayal of the Decalogue from the courthouse. But then a large group of citizens gathered to protest the removal. Both those in power and those on the streets had strong and opposed feelings about God's law, which may serve as a good illustration about how our world feels about the rules written in stone: some love them, some hate them, and many love and hate them at the same time.

Possibly the intensely contradictory feelings about the Decalogue, and especially the hatred of the commandments, could arise from serious misinterpretations. Surely there are serious misunderstandings of each of the commandments, but there are also serious misinterpretations of the Decalogue as a whole. In fifteen years of teaching philosophy and religion in secular universities, I have repeatedly heard two misunderstandings of God's law as a whole. The first says that these commandments are arbitrary and irrational, that they have no connection to human

nature or human well-being, and that they do not contribute to human happiness. Though it is seldom said so directly, some seem to think that if you want to have a miserable and messed up life, you just have to follow these old-fashioned, irrational rules. This first misunderstanding makes it important to emphasize the organic connection between the Decalogue and the natural moral law or created moral order. The second misinterpretation says that the main purpose of the Ten Commandments is that people need to know how to earn God's favor. If you want to go to heaven, if you want to be sure you are accepted by God, if you want to overcome your guilt and sin, it is said, you must keep the commandments. This is the most common misinterpretation of the Decalogue as a whole, and it is so common because it is so deeply rooted in our sinful nature, the nature that keeps on whispering, „If we need to be saved, we can do it ourselves.“ Because of this second, standard misunderstanding of the purpose of the law, we must always emphasize the contrast between Law and Gospel. The gospel tells us that we are justified by faith alone, a faith that trusts in the promise of God

of forgiveness based on the death and resurrection of Christ. The gospel tells us that the proper purposes of the law must be something other than telling us how to earn God's favor.

So what are the proper purposes of God's law, if not to earn salvation? There are at least three proper purposes or uses of the moral law that seem to stand up to critical scrutiny, and none of them have to do with earning salvation.

1. God's law shows us our sin and need for the gospel. This is commonly called the „theological use“ or „converting use“ of God's law. Whether at the beginning of our life of faith or on a continuing basis over many years of living by faith, God's law drives us to cry out, „God, be merciful to me, a sinner.“ By showing us our sin, the law drives us to love the gospel ever more strongly, for in the gospel we learn about forgiveness, justification, and adoption as God's children. 2. The law also restrains our sin, so we do not act out all of the sinful tendencies in our hearts. This is sometimes called the „political“ use of the law, using the ancient meaning of the word „polis“, which is community. Our sin is so powerful that if it is not restrained, the communities for which God created us are easily turned into the total chaos of the „war of all against all“. But God's law comes to us a wide variety of ways, some not so pure, including conscience, reason, civil law, family, and scripture, with the effect of normally restraining our sin at least partially. In this way it is a primary means of God's common or civilizing grace, which makes life in

society possible most of the time. For this reason, this is also called the „civil“ use of the moral law. 3. The law of God also provides a norm or standard for the life of gratitude. Because of the tremendous grace we have been given in the gospel, our entire lives should be an expression of thankfulness to God, but this gratitude needs some structure and direction. This we find in the commands in the scriptures, which are not only the condemning law but also, by the Spirit, the empowering directives and descriptions of the new possibilities for believers. The law describes the restored life which God wants us to live for his glory.

We must notice and say over and over again that none of the proper uses of God's law have anything to do with earning God's favor or salvation. There are multiple valid and good uses of God's law, and in life experience the various uses may tend to slide together, but earning our way to heaven is not a proper use of God's law.

If very strong feelings about God's law are often connected with mistaken interpretations as well as with mistaken uses of God's law, we should try to articulate clear principles of interpretation and application. The following seven principles have been developed by a range of theologians, ethicists, and bible scholars. They are presented here as a kind of compendium or short study for those who may not be able to read extensively in Christian ethics or hermeneutics. Serious students will want to read much farther.

I The negative implies the positive

Many of the commandments are phrased in the negative, „you shall not ...“ From that starting point a mature, morally sensitive reader can normally see the positive expectation of a particular commandment, what we should do. Since God did not make us to be robots or computers, apparently he wants us to engage in the process of considering the positive demand implied by the negative prohibition. For example, Commandment 6 says, „You shall not murder“. If you are able to read this article, you probably also have the ability to think out the positive demand of Commandment 6, that God wants us to protect and care for the lives of people. Even if no murder detective is hot on your trail, you are not finished with this commandment. We are required to treat the people we meet as images or reflections of the Lord himself. But even that does not complete our obligations. We have to think about society very generally. What is there that we could do to protect and care for the lives of other people in our city, our country, and beyond? Obedience to this commandment goes far beyond avoiding murder. It should make us consider long and hard what we need to do to protect people’s lives and safety. There is a direct spiritual line from this commandment to actions like working to abolish slavery, starting orphanages, providing disaster assistance, and ending abortion. If the negative prohi-

bition implies and assumes the positive demand, we can spend a lifetime learning to obey the will of God.

If we are morally sensitive readers of the Decalogue, we must do something like this with most of the ten. We will begin a process of thinking, consideration, and action that can change our lives, families, and communities.

2 A direct prohibition of an action makes improper moral rationalizing more difficult

This is a moral consideration that also has to do with the negative phrasing of the commandments. One can understand this by contrasting a very general moral principle like „private property“ with God’s commandment, „You shall not steal“. Of course the general moral principle is very good and has much value in life and society. But in a moment of weakness or temptation it is much more powerful for us sinners to have the explicit negative command echoing in the back of our minds. The commandment confronts us precisely at the point of our weakness. It puts a name on the sinful act we might otherwise prefer to leave unnamed and unnoticed, and we sinners would prefer to leave our sins unnamed and unnoticed. Of course the negative confrontation is uncomfortable for us, but precisely this moral discomfort may be what is necessary to restrain some of our destructive instincts. Many of the com-

mandments can be rephrased as positive, general moral principles, and as suggested above, this is a good thing to do. If done properly, this will be extremely challenging, even life changing. But this must never replace the negative, confrontational format in which God chose to give the commands. All too often our sinful nature would seek to find good sounding rational/ethical reasons for doing what is simply wrong. Then we need to be confronted by the divine „You shall not“!

3 If we interpret the commandments properly, we will be confronted in our sinfulness

If God had given the commandments to Adam and Eve prior to the fall into sin, the disturbing word „NOT“ might have been avoided. But since the fall, all of us, the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, need to be continually confronted with our sin. One could say we need to get to know ourselves as God sees us, and that means getting to know ourselves as sinners. This self knowledge is not something that one learns simply and quickly, like a bit of information; it is a continual process of learning that lasts a lifetime, something like the process of learning wisdom. The commandment says „You shall not“, to which a dark voice in our souls sometimes still replies, „But I want to“. In this experience we encounter one of the darkest sides of sin: sometimes we

want to do something simply because it is wrong. This leads to the unpleasant collision with the little word „not“.

This experience is a key that helps us understand the continually recurring controversy about the public display of the Ten Commandments. If one reads the American legal documents surrounding this controversy, one will probably find competing theories about the separation of church and state. Some of us think that as long as the state does not fund or directly promote a particular church, and as long as no church is controlling the state, we have enough separation of church and state. Others seem to want almost no contact between any state agency and anything vaguely religious, even symbols or terminology, perhaps an impossible goal. But this disagreement might be a quiet debate among scholars, were it not for the intense reactions people have to the Ten Commandments. The law of God makes us feel guilty because we are guilty; there is no escaping this unpleasant truth. If we are believers, it pushes us to more deeply appreciate the gospel of forgiveness in Christ. But the person who does not accept forgiveness in Christ may simply become angry, and this anger may be taken out on people who have a different reaction to God's law.

4 The Decalogue is a sharpening and clarification of the general revelation of God's law through creation

We should normally speak of two revelations from God, his special revelation through Christ and Scripture and his general revelation through creation. There are very significant differences in content between the two revelations: special revelation has Christ and the gospel at its very center, whereas general revelation contains only vague hints about grace; general revelation gives us a sense of God's majesty and holiness, whereas special revelation gives us much more specific information about God's character and also explains his mercy; by special revelation God's law was specifically written on stone at Sinai, whereas by general revelation his law was partly written in the human heart and mind. This means that even if people do not acknowledge it and do not like it, they know something about the demands of God's law. This knowledge comes through conscience, through feelings for the needs of others, through thinking about what is rational for people to do, through relationships, and through the everyday demands of life. We could call it an unrecognized demand, because some do not want to recognize that the demand comes from the Almighty. It is this unrecognized demand that is a primary means of God's common, civilizing grace that helps keep life in society somewhat humane, and which also can prepare

people to see their need for the gospel.

Because of this general revelation of God's law, also called the natural moral law, the Ten Commandments are not exactly „new“ or „news“. Reading or hearing the Decalogue is more like taking passive knowledge and making it active or like taking subconscious knowledge and making it conscious. For some it may be like remembering a pleasant dream, for others it is more like being pushed back into a frightening nightmare because of the demanding Law Giver they hoped to avoid.

People just know that murder, stealing, lying, and adultery are wrong, even when they try to defend their foolish actions. People just know we should practice love, justice, honesty, faithfulness and courage, even if some may not want to admit that we know. This is because of God's general revelation. We should not talk as if the Ten Commandments primarily give us new information that we did not have before. The written law of God takes the demand that may have previously been unrecognized and makes it more clear, conscious, and precise, while also emphasizing that this demand comes from our Creator.

5 The Ten Commandments each build on and protect an important dimension of the creation order

Each of the commandments makes certain assumptions about human life

and the created moral order. Because of the reality of this created order, it is possible for people to abuse this order or go the wrong direction within this order. Some examples will make this clear.

We are commanded, „You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor“. A crucial assumption of this commandment is that words are powerful and play a large role in relationships and in society. This is a distinct dimension or structure of the created moral order. Part of the image of God in us is that our words make things happen; after all, God created the whole universe by speaking. We also create by means of words, including plans, policies, goals, reports, and even the words we speak only to ourselves. Of course, relationships are created largely by means of words. This is enough on the topic of speech to illustrate the way this commandment builds on and protects a particular dimension of the created moral order. Or maybe we should say the commandment requires us to go the right direction within a created structure.

A second illustration using a different commandment may be in order. We are told in the first commandment, „You shall have no other gods before me.“ Of course, this commandment confronts idolatry, which is common. This commandment is necessary because of at least two dimensions of the created moral order. First, people are incurably religious. Even if people do not worship the true God, they can hardly stop themselves from looking somewhere for

their hope, comfort, and meaning. And as soon as people turn somewhere for hope and comfort, they turn something created, some created good, into a god-substitute, hoping this idol will provide what they need. This dimension of human life moved the atheist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach to say that the main difference between humans and animals is that people are religious. Idolatry would not be possible as a sin if people were not created as religious beings. This first commandment builds on and directs this dimension of the created moral order.

The first commandment also builds on and directs a second dimension of the created moral order. This has to do with the role of religion in personal and cultural life. False religion, idolatry, is important not only because it insults God but also because religion plays such a large role in shaping personal and cultural life. If we worship personal peace and affluence, our lives will take one shape; if we worship our Creator and Redeemer, our lives will take another shape. The philosopher Paul Tillich summarized some of the better sociological and anthropological insights when he said, „Culture is the form of religion; religion is the substance of culture.“ This observation may not be as penetrating and critical as the Old Testament assessment of why idolatry is so dreadful. About idols we read, „Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them“. (Psalm 135:18) The first commandment builds on a crucial dimension of how God

created human life: Our choice of an object of worship will play a massive role in shaping our personal and cultural life. This relationship between worship and the shape of human life is part of the creation order.

These comments on two of the commandments must be seen as illustrative of a principle of interpretation. Each of the ten builds on, protects, and directs our actions in relation to a particular dimension or structure of the created order that is at risk because of sin. The commandments teach us how to use the different dimensions of creation properly and how to move in the right direction within the various structures of creation.

6 The Ten Commandments were given to us in a particular organic order

The Decalogue does not begin with the prohibition of adultery, not does it end with the rule against lying. Even if you have not thought about it, you probably sense a certain order of presentation. Some reflection on this order can teach us much about moral life and experience. The first commandment addresses the deepest motives of our hearts, the choice of an object for our worship. This commandment seems to be in the first position because all of life flows from our choice of an object of worship. With a little exaggeration one might say that our response to the first commandment decides our response to

the other commandments. The second and third commandments build on the basic principles of the first commandment, giving a lot more definition and content to our worship, while also speaking to the problems of our worship becoming mixed with idolatry or unbalanced from an improper view of God. The fourth commandment (Sabbath) requires that our worship include the public institutional expression of our faith. It is not only about a day but also about public worship, which requires having a time, place, plan, facilities, and so on. It is valuable to see that the Sabbath commandment stands between the commandments that may be largely hidden matters of the heart (the first three) and the commandments that address public society matters, such as stealing, lying, murder, etc. This order closely parallels an important characteristic of life: a person's faith begins to effectively transform a person's life partly by means participation in public worship with a worshipping community. People can claim to have a deep faith without that faith having much effect on their life and habits. Participation in worship, Bible study, prayer, giving, serving, and witnessing in a real community with a living congregation turns a hidden faith into a transformed life. The fourth commandment makes a hidden faith public and equips a person for the commands that follow.

The fifth commandment, about honoring parents, is in some ways similar to the Sabbath command. People who have intact relations with their parents

and who also keep the Sabbath will be largely equipped to keep the following commandments. Phrased differently, it is by means of church and family that a real faith becomes a power that changes life and culture. And even those people who do not share in the life of faith in the church, but who do have intact relations with their parents, are much better able to keep the following commandments and have a humane life in society. Even without a proper faith, an intact family is means of common grace that helps keep human life humane.

Commandments six through nine are the primary social commandments. They are intended to protect life, marriage, property, and truth. Though most societies have some rules on these topics because these topics are central to the natural moral law (revealed by God through creation), these commandments remind us that God is very interested in these matters. Our actions in all these areas are either glorifying or dishonoring to God. They are the major areas of concern in the study of applied ethics.

The last commandment says, „You shall not covet“. As the apostle Paul discovered (Romans 7:7), this is a commandment that is different from the previous four. We cannot easily deceive ourselves into thinking we have fulfilled it. All of us covet in some way at some time. But coveting is not really a specific sin so much as a desire to commit some other sinful action. The commandment says we are not to covet a neighbor’s house or wife, referring back

to the commandments about stealing and adultery, in this way illustrating God’s expectation of a right attitude or desire in relation to all the commandments. So the last commandment is a principle of interpreting all the commandments: all the commandments require not only the right actions but also the right desires and intentions. All the commandments address the attitudes of the human heart.

If we encounter the last commandment properly it forces us to our knees to confess our sin, and then it drives us back to the beginning of the Decalogue, to learn that our God is a God who delivers from bondage. This means that the order of the commandments is not exactly a line; it is more like a circle. Once we have discovered that our hearts are filled with coveting, then we are ready to properly consider the question of a pure faith, which is demanded by the first three commandments.

7 The Ten Commandments contain a dynamic dialogue between law and grace

Throughout the Bible we are confronted by both the Gospel, a set of promises of God’s grace, and the Law, which is a set of commands to obey. For the life of faith to stay in balance, we must be continually responding to both the law and the Gospel. Distortions arise when either is neglected or misconstrued. What we might miss is the way in which the Decalogue itself points to the

life of faith as a dynamic dialogue with both the Law and the Gospel.

Of course the Ten Commandments are primarily law, the outline of all of God's law. Where do we see the gospel of grace in the Decalogue? The first place is the preamble: „I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery“. For Old Testament believers, the Exodus out of Egypt was the great act of God to rescue and save them. In their faith, the Exodus played a role very similar to the role played by the death and resurrection of Jesus for New Testament believers. It was the key historical event which formed a basis for their redemption, faith, and identity. As New Testament believers we could almost substitute that says something like, „I am the Lord your God who sent Jesus to pay for all your sins.“ Of course this sets the Ten Commandments into a context or framework of a life of response to grace, a life of gratitude. It would be a big mistake for us to neglect reading the preamble when we read the Decalogue.

A second place we see the dynamic dialogue between law and gospel is in the third commandment, „You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God“. In parts of the Old Testament, and especially in the book of Exodus, the phrase „name of God“ had a very particular meaning. It referred to a proper recognition of both God's holiness and wrath, on the one hand, but also his grace and mercy, on the other hand. In Exodus 34: 6 & 7 God proclaimed his own name to Moses saying, „The Lord,

the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation“. This description of God explains what his „name“ means: the carefully balanced understanding of both God's grace and his wrath on sin. In this balanced description of God we see the basis for both the promise of forgiveness in the gospel and the demand for obedience to his law. To not misuse the name of God, to speak of him properly, requires we that keep both his law and his gospel, his wrath and his grace in view.

A final way we see the dialogue between law and gospel is in the last commandment. When God says, „You shall not covet“, all we can do is fall to our knees and say, „God be merciful to me, a sinner“. If we are honest with ourselves, God's law will drive us to seek God's grace and forgiveness once again.

8 Reflections

God's law will probably always be controversial among fallen men and women. People love or hate God's commands, and maybe both at the same time. This complex reaction is to be expected because the law both confronts our sinfulness and also guides us in the direction of living consistently

with how God created us to live. In the midst of these strong feelings, and maybe to overcome these strong feelings, it is important to try to interpret the commandments carefully. It is probably wise to always emphasize that the law is not the gospel and is not the way to earn salvation, since mistakes on this topic are so common and so serious. It is probably also wise to emphasize that the commandments fit so closely with the general revelation of the natural moral law and with the created moral order. This helps overcome the misunderstanding that sees God's law as arbitrary or destructive of human well being. These insights may help us learn to love God's law.

Further reading:

There are two truly classical studies in the special hermeneutics of the Decalogue that theological students will surely want to read. They are John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book II, Chapter 8, sections 1 to 12 (Final Latin version in 1559, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, edited by John T. McNeill, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960); and Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, Chapter 19, sections 1 to 3. (Originally published in 1873. Reprint edition, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986.) An excellent overview of Calvin and classical Reformed theology related to the law is I. John Hesselink, *Calvin's Concept of the Law* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1992).

The distinction between law and gospel was classically developed for evangelical thought by Martin Luther, especially in his *Commentary on Galatians* of 1536, which is available in various editions. The connection between natural law and the Decalogue was classically articulated by Thomas Aquinas in his *Treatise on Law*, which is questions 90–97 of his *Summa Theologica*, originally published in the 1270's, now available in various editions. The views of Aquinas were substantially followed by Calvin and Luther, and can bear the type of light improvement suggested by Albert Wolters in *Creation Regained* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1985).

The slogan „The War of all against All“ was probably coined by Thomas Hobbes and enjoys a prominent place in his work *Leviathan* (1651). Good excerpts from Hobbes are found in most good anthologies of readings in ethics and political theory. Ludwig Feuerbach's philosophy of religion received its most prominent articulation in his *Essence of Christianity* (1841), selections of which are found in many good anthologies on the history of philosophy. The Tillich quotation is from „Aspects of a Religious Analysis of Culture,“ in *Theology of Culture*, by Paul Tillich (Oxford University Press, 1959).

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