

Decalogue discipleship

By [D. Brent Laytham](#)

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No preacher should miss this week's opportunity to preach on the Ten Commandments.

The Ten Commandments just won't go away. Though Israel misplaced the tablets of stone long ago, the Jews never forgot their decisive encounter with the living God at the foot of Mount Sinai. They heard God speak the words that were meant to forever shape their common life. But as Paul later told the church at Corinth, their story reminds us that hearing doesn't guarantee doing—that observing the commandments is not something we do with our eyes but with our actions (see 1 Corinthians 10).

- I have a friend who preached a ten sermon series on the Decalogue this summer. His intentionality contrasts with a profound amnesia about the Ten Commandments in much Christian worship. Whereas it was once common to rehearse them as part of weekly Sunday worship, they have now all but disappeared from not only our worship, but from our consciousness. It is important to note that the original, canonical context for the commandments is worship (see Exodus 19), and that rightly practiced, these commandments ground our worship in the living God and guard our worship against every false god. A story to illustrate: a few years ago I called my denomination's bookstore to order a book. The person who answered the phone said, "Hello, would you like to order patriotic worship bulletins or flags today?" "No, and don't get me started," I replied. What I should have said is "No, as a Christian I am forbidden by the Ten Commandments to worship falsely."
- Don't hear my suggestion that we reclaim the Decalogue as more strident calling for commandment displays in schools and courthouses, or another nostalgic rant about America declining because we've lost sight of the commandments. I did suggest once, tongue in cheek, that "Coveting begins with television rather than kindergarten teachers; it flourishes at the mall more than the school. Let the Ten Commandments be engraved over the entrance to Wal-Mart, let them be read aloud at next year's Super Bowl halftime." In fact, Israel lost sight of the commandments pretty quickly. Sure, God inscribed them on tablets of stone, but almost immediately had Moses hide them in the ark of the covenant, never to be viewed again. Israel was supposed to keep the tablets well-hidden because Israel was supposed to keep the commandments in plain sight. That is, they were to live out these commandments in such a public, visible, obvious way that the world would sit up and take notice. The appropriate display of the Decalogue is not a plaque on a wall, nor a replica out front, but the faithful people of God.
- The key for any preacher is to find the gospel in the text, and that can be tricky if the text is a list of laws that we are most prone to take as constraints or limits. After all, eight of these ten words are "no" or "don't." Yet in the end and on the whole they articulate God's active, saving "yes," the same "Yes" that takes flesh in Christ and takes form in faithful ministry (see 2 Corinthians 1:19-20).

One place I find gospel in this text is by considering how Jews number the commandments. Some Christians will be vaguely aware that Catholics and Lutherans count commandments differently from Presbyterians and Methodists; the former see the first commandment running from "no other gods" to "make no idols," whereas the latter count "no idols" as commandment number two.

Less well known is the fact that Jews count “no other gods” as the second commandment. The first commandment in Jewish tradition is “I am the Lord your God.” Let’s parse the grammar of that for a moment: grammatically, commands and laws have the imperative form. But “I am your God” is not an imperative; there is no rule to keep or action to do. It is an indicative, an announcement: gospel news for a people desperate to hear it. It is a creative word that speaks into reality a new existence: I am your God and you are my people. This reorients the grammar of the Decalogue, for it means that the one who keeps the first commandment—on which all the other commandments rest—is the faithful One of Israel. The other nine commands for Jews—all imperative in form, all engaging Israel’s active response to divine initiative—simply shape a life of gratitude, a life poured out in grateful response to the gospel announcement that precedes: I am your God.