

The Foundation of Biblical Instruction

You can ask any learned Jewish or Christian person, who reads his or her Bible consistently what the foundation of Biblical instruction and understanding is, and this person should logically tell you that it is **the Ten Commandments** contained in the Decalogue of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 4. These Ten Commandments are found inscribed on the walls of synagogues and churches and numerous government buildings and special places across the world. They have been reproduced and quoted in countless books and philosophical works, many of which were written to help formulate opinions on what is right and wrong. They establish the foundational basis of Western civilization and provide the moral guidelines that we all cherish and hold dear.

In our day, the Ten Commandments play an even more important role. As the Lord is in the process of restoring all His people, He is restoring the critical principles of the Torah to us. A foundation to all of us properly understanding the Torah is found in the Ten Commandments. If we can grasp the role of the Decalogue, then we can properly understand the role that the rest of the Torah plays.

Sadly, we have discovered that as the Torah's validity has come under considerable attack from many, supposedly Bible-believing Christians today—many of the same are making a concentrated effort against the Ten Commandments. (And again, I hope that this is just the result of immaturity, and not the result of those who really do oppose God's Law.) In 2001, while I was waiting in the lobby of a Christian counselor's office picking up a friend, I looked around at the various books that the counselor offered for sale. I was flipping through one book and found a very disturbing picture. The picture was of a withered and dying tree, and on the top of the tree, causing the tree to "die," were the two tablets of the Ten Commandments. A second picture was provided on the next page, this one of a "living" tree that was not withering. Underneath the tree were the smashed tablets of the Ten Commandments.

The implication of the picture was that those who live in obedience to God's Law, live a life of legalism and bondage—one that Christ came

to free people from. It was misunderstood that *Jesus came to release people from sin and the guilt of sin*, not release people from the standard of sin contained in the Law! It is sad that such things are being propagated today. Those of us who see the obvious errors in this need to (re)dedicate ourselves to return to a foundational grounding in God's Word! May we never "smash" the tablets where He wrote the basic guidelines of what He expects from us. Similarly, may we demonstrate that an obedient life to God's commandments is not a life of bondage!

The Ten Words

Moses summarized the importance of the Ten Commandments by saying, "So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, *that is*, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone" (Deuteronomy 4:13, NASU).

Most of us have known the ten guidelines that God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai as the "Ten Commandments." These ten guidelines are most certainly commandments, in that they list the absolute minimum requirements that the Lord expects for His people; but they are not known as the Ten "Commandments" in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Hebrew says that what was written on the tablets of stone are *aseret ha'davarim*, "the Ten Words" or "the ten matters" (YLT). The Hebrew term *davar* specifically means "*speech, discourse, saying, word*" (BDB).¹ The understanding of the Ten Commandments being Ten Words or Ten Sayings is reflected in the Septuagint rendering of *aseret ha'davarim* as *deka logous*, also meaning "ten words," and from which the common theological designation of the Ten Commandments being the "Decalogue" originates.

It is important that we understand that the Ten Commandments are **more** than just "commandments." They are the Ten Words, the Ten Sayings, or the Ten Matters that God has established for the foundational understanding of *all of His Word*—and most importantly how His own are to direct their lives as being holy unto Him. Exodus 31:18 describes, "When He had finished speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God" (NASU).

The Ten Commandments or Ten Words were written *b'etzba Elohim*, with the very finger of God, and are indicative of the their Divine and supernatural origins. **We must all recognize the severity of this**, because while these foundational statutes have always come under considerable attack from critics of the Bible—attack is now even coming from those who are not supposed to be "critics." Is it because these people have no regard for an Eternal Creator who would give them guidelines by which to live, or is it just a misunderstanding? In our age when "philosophical enlightenment" has led to lies like "God is dead" or "religion is the opium for the masses," should we be that surprised?

¹ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 182.

People naturally do not want to be told what to do—even by God. In certain sectors of the Christian and Jewish communities, the prevailing, unspoken opinion is that God has a “hands off” approach when running the universe and that He will not punish sin. The Ten Commandments are thought to just have been for another time when God’s people needed harsh instruction.

As you continue reading, we will address the importance of these Ten Words, Ten Matters, or simply the Ten Commandments. We all must have a foundational grounding in these principles if we intend to properly follow God’s Torah and have it written on our hearts, coming as second nature to us.

God’s Covenant

Moses testified, “When I went up to the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant which the LORD had made with you, then I remained on the mountain forty days and nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water” (Deuteronomy 9:9, NASU). He said that the Tablets of the Ten Commandments were the *luchot ha’b’rit* or “the Tablets of the Covenant” (NJPS). The Hebrew word *b’rit* means “*pact, compact, covenant*” (BDB).² The Ten Words or Ten Matters are a critical part of the covenant that God originally made with Ancient Israel. The details of this covenant, of course, are expounded upon in the remainder of the Torah, which specifies additional things that God expects from His people upon the basis of the Ten Commandments.

It cannot be overemphasized that the Ten Commandments are the foundational guidelines that God’s people are to all follow. Nowhere in the New Testament do we ever see Yeshua or the Apostles attempt to rescind the Ten Commandments. Even though Yeshua’s sacrifice at Golgotha (Calvary) has affected some changes to the Torah in terms of the sacrificial system and Levitical priesthood (Hebrews 7:11-12), and the capital punishment for sins (Colossians 2:14), that is about as far as the major changes to the Torah go. Claiming that the Ten Commandments themselves have somehow been invalidated, is a position, that I believe rightly, **many of the Christians of yesteryear would strongly disagree with.**

In our day as the Body of Messiah is in the process of being fully restored, our Heavenly Father definitively promises to write the Torah on our inward parts:

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them and on

² Ibid, 136.

their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (Jeremiah 31:31-33, NASU; cf. Hebrews 8:8-12).

This *b’rit chadashah* or New Covenant is unique because God will not inscribe His Word on tablets of stone, but rather onto tablets of human hearts via the power of His Spirit. He decrees that “I will put My Teaching into their inmost being” (Jeremiah 31:33, NJPS). This teaching is the Torah or the Law of Moses, as God’s Word becomes internalized for each of His people. Surely while this promise involves the ultimate restoration of the Kingdom to Israel, redeemed individuals have been partaking of this promise ever since the time of Yeshua (Luke 22:20). Even if some aspects of the Torah have been overlooked—Christian theological traditions which have appealed to the perceived “moral law” of the Old Testament have surely partaken of the New Covenant, even if in a limited way in some areas.³

When this covenant is fully initiated before the Messiah’s return, all of God’s people will have His Instruction placed upon their hearts, in a very, very conscious and worthwhile way. They will understand its full relevance for their lives, and how understanding its commandments enables men and women of faith to comprehend the holy character of God and His dealings with the human race. The purpose of having God’s commandments written on the heart is so that our good conduct can be seen in the world (Matthew 5:16). Consider what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

“You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Messiah, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Corinthians 3:2-3, NASU).

Paul indicates that the Corinthians have the Messiah’s “letter” written on their hearts, and that they have been “read” by all people, in the sense that all have seen Yeshua’s example evident in their lives. *May we endeavor to do the same.* As the Spirit of God steadily writes the Torah upon our hearts, let us be an example of the Messiah’s “letter” to all as we follow the Lord’s Instruction by demonstrating His love and compassion to others, making a difference to those we meet.

As God molds us into the people who He wants us to be, let us indeed remember that the Ten Commandments are the foundational principles upon which Israel’s restored Kingdom is established! They form the basis of the rest of the Torah’s commandments, and are imperative to understand if one is to follow the Torah properly with the right motivations.

Two Tablets: One Vertical and One Horizontal

Love is the ultimate manifestation of one truly following the Torah. God did not give us His Instructions so that they would be burdensome or a hassle—“For this commandment which I command

³ For a further discussion, consult the author’s exegetical paper “What is the New Covenant?” (appearing in *The New Testament Validates Torah*).

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you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach” (Deuteronomy 30:11, NASU). He gave us His commandments so His people would be set-apart from the world and would truly be different—“the LORD hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto himself, above all the nations that *are* upon the earth” (Deuteronomy 14:2, KJV). It is such peculiarities that are to draw others toward the Holy One. The most crucial of those peculiarities is to have unbridled love for one another. Yeshua talks about this again and again in the Gospels:

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And He said to him, “YOU SHALL 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 great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF” [Leviticus 19:18]” (Matthew 22:36-39, NASU; also Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:27).

In this short dialogue, the Messiah distilled the Ten Commandments to two. It is often concluded, and I think correctly, that the two tablets of the Ten Commandments represent the “vertical” and “horizontal” relationships that people have. The first tablet, which contains the first four of the Ten Commandments, deals with human beings’ vertical relationship to God, and how we, as the Messiah emphasized to the lawyer, are to love the Lord our God with all that we are. The second tablet of the Ten Commandments, containing the last six, pertains to human beings’ horizontal relationship to one another and how we are to love others. For as Yeshua said, “On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:40, NASU).

We must learn how to honor and obey God in *all* our actions, yet reflect the love of the Messiah to those around us. As you continue reading, this book offers a series of short chapters on the Ten Commandments and how important it is for us not to forget these foundational guidelines of Biblical Instruction. We will be considering how the Ten Commandments relate to the life of Torah observance that God is in the process of restoring to all of His people.