

COMMON QUESTION NO. 8

MUST CHRISTIANS KEEP THE TEN COMMANDMENTS?

Sadly, there is much controversy around the Ten Commandments. There are those who insist that the Christian is no longer under these commandments because they were given to Moses under the old covenant and we are no longer under law but grace. Others allow Christians should keep them as long as they are repeated in the New Testament. We wish to show that the Ten Commandments as a whole continue as a rule of life to be obeyed by Christians.

1. The Ten Commandments are very special. Everything surrounding the giving of the 10 Commandments on Mount Sinai marks them out as very special, and as being far more significant. This separates them from other laws given through Moses.

- They were written with the very finger of God Himself, and on durable tablets of stone (Exodus 31:18, Deuteronomy 9:10).
- They from the first were to be kept inside the ark of the covenant (Deuteronomy 10:1-5, see 1 Kings 8:9, Hebrews 9:4).
- The commandments are 10 symbolizing the full number, the complete will of God. They are sometimes called the “covenant” (Exodus 34:28, Deuteronomy 4:13). So in his commentary Calvin sought to put all other laws under one or other of the ten Commandments.

2. The Ten Commandments were in force from creation. Sinai was only a formal republication of these laws as the heart of the covenant. They are a revelation of the very nature of God. For example, He is the only true God, so He alone is to be worshipped. Because He does not have a physical form He is not to be worshipped using any physical likeness. The 4th. commandment is grounded in God’s creation week (Genesis 2:1-3, see also Exodus 16:22-30). Cain was wrong to murder his brother, and so capital punishment was instituted for murder (Genesis 9:6). So these commandments are for all people, not for the nation of Israel alone.

3. The problem of the Old Covenant. There was nothing wrong with the Ten Commandments, but as written on stone they gave no power to obey. Law can only condemn because all have sinned (Romans 3:20, 7:7-11). Christ came to deal with curse the broken law brings upon sinners. So the new covenant promises to put this very same law in the heart as a guarantee of obedience (Jeremiah 31:33, see Ezekiel 36:27). There is the clear contrast between the law written on tablets of stone, or in a book, and on the human heart. But in each case it is God’s law. Hebrews 8:6-12 uses these words of Jeremiah and shows the superiority of the new over the old covenant. In the same way, Romans 8:3ff. shows that the inability of the law to save is because of sin, and so God sent His Son and Spirit. But God’s law does not change, because God Himself does not change.

4. The Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament. (1) Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:17-48) teaches about the standard of righteousness in His kingdom. Will it be different from the Old Testament? No, He came to fulfil them and not to abolish them. The standard must exceed that of scribes and Pharisees. And Jesus goes on to show how, by illustrating from the 6th. and 7th. commandments, and then other laws. Jesus expects His followers to be more strict in obedience, especially by paying attention to their inner life that the commandments address.

(2) Some of the Ten Commandments are clearly listed for Christians to keep, as in Romans 13:8-10, James 2:8-13. Ephesians 4:25ff. refers by implication to the 9th., 6th., 8th. commandments. It is possible that 1 Timothy 1:8-11 follows the Ten Commandments.

(3) Some say that the 4th. commandment is not repeated in the New Testament, yet Jesus spoke about it more than any other! And He never abolished it, as He did the food laws (Mark 2:27-28, 7:19) We shall deal with the 4th. Commandment in more detail in another 'Answer'.

5. The teaching of Romans – Objection 1: *“New Testament Christians are under grace and not law”* (Romans 6:14-15, Galatians 5:18). The objection assumes that not to be under law means that the Christian does not have the law as a standard for living. But in the context of the letter “under law” means to be under its condemning power. The following passages in Romans show that the law does remain for the Christian:

- **3:31** Romans makes it abundantly clear that justification cannot be by “works of the law”. But also in justification God’s law is not set aside but is kept by Christ on our behalf. The law is therefore not “overthrown” but “upheld”.
- **7:12ff.** Although the law can neither save nor sanctify, the problem is not with the law but with sin. The law remains “holy and righteous and good” (v. 12). Paul as a Christian “delights in the law of God, in my inner being” (v. 22).
- **8:4** The purpose of God’s way of salvation by grace in Christ is so that “the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk...”. This is about our Christian lives.
- **13:8-10** Paul appeals to some of the Ten Commandments to show what love for one’s neighbour means. The law remains to be “fulfilled” and love to the neighbour does that.

6. The teaching of Galatians – Objection 2: *“The Christian life should be guided by love and not law”*. The objection assumes that ‘love’ and ‘law’ are against each other. Yet we are **commanded** to love (for example, John 13:34, 2 John 5-6). The following passages in Galatians show that the law remains for the Christian:

- **5:13-14** The emphasis of this letter is to proclaim that Christians are redeemed from being “under the law” (4:5), that is, from being under the “curse of the law” (3:13). But Paul goes on to appeal to that very law, as found in Leviticus 19:18, so that the idea of freedom is not abused. As a Christian I am not free to fail to love my neighbour. I must fulfil the law in this regard.
- **5:23** “There is no law” against the fruit of the Spirit. The law pronounces no condemnation on displaying such fruit. The implication is that the fruit, the first of which is “love”, is according to the law of God. The lifestyle God requires of His people has not changed because we are justified by faith and not “works of the law”. Indeed, the law was never given as a means of justification. The Ten Commandments were given to a people already redeemed (Exodus 20:1-2).

In conclusion, let us not think that giving careful obedience to the Ten Commandments is unworthy of a Christian. Jesus said, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46); and, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). John makes it very clear that one of the essential marks of a true Christian is to keep His commandments (1 John 2:3-6). It is the very way our Saviour Himself walked. His life was totally devoted to doing the “will of God” even when that conflicted with His own will (see Matthew 26:42, John 4:34, 5:30, 6:38, 17:4). May we be given grace to be like Christ!