

# LECTURE 3: INTERPRETING THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

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## General rules for interpreting the moral law

In this section we will see how the Ten Commandments are to be interpreted and incorporated into one's ethical system and life. First we will study the Reformed method of interpreting the commandments; then we will examine NT passages specifically dealing with this question.

## Rules as expounded in the Westminster Standards

The particular section of the Standards which deals with this matter is WLC 99, "What rules are to be observed for the right understanding of the ten commandments?"

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For the right understanding of the ten commandments, these rules are to be observed:

1. That the law is perfect, and bindeth everyone to full conformity in the whole man unto the righteousness thereof, and unto entire obedience for ever, so as to require the utmost perfection of every duty, and to forbid the least degree of every sin.
2. That it is spiritual, and so reacheth the understanding, will, affections, and all other powers of the soul; as well as words, works, and gestures.
3. That one and the same thing, in divers respects, is required or forbidden in several commandments.
4. That as, where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden; and, where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded; so, where a promise is annexed, the contrary threatening is included; and where a threatening is annexed, the contrary promise is included.
5. That what God forbids, is at no time to be done; what he commands, is always our duty; and yet every particular duty is not to be done at all times.
6. That under one sin or duty, all of the same kind are forbidden or commanded together with all the causes, means, occasions and appearances thereof, and provocations thereunto.

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7. That what is forbidden or commanded to ourselves, we are bound, according to our places, to endeavour that it may be avoided or performed by others, according to the duty of their places.
8. That in what is commanded to others, we are bound, according to our places and callings, to be helpful to them; and to take heed of partaking with others in what is forbidden them.

The answer in WLC 99 lists eight rules for applying the Ten Commandments to all areas of life. These rules are summarized below.

- 1) The law is perfect, and is to be obeyed perfectly, both positively and negatively.
  - a) Perfection of the law, Ps 19:7
  - b) Perfection of obedience, Matt 5:19; Jas 2:10
  - c) Obedience of the heart, not mere traditionalism; cf. work on the Sabbath, Matt 12:1-14 = Mark 2:23-28 = Luke 6:1-5
- 2) The law is spiritual; it reaches the understanding, will, and affections, as well as words and deeds.
  - a) Law is holy, Rom 7:12
  - b) Heart intended, Matt 5:22, 28
  - c) Sins originate in the heart, Matt 15:1-20 = Mark 7:1-23 = Luke 11:37-41
- 3) Laws often overlap.
  - a) E.g., Col 3:5, covetousness equals idolatry
- 4) Laws imply their opposites.
  - a) Commands and prohibitions imply each other; e.g., stealing in Eph 4:28
  - b) Penalties and rewards imply each other; e.g., parents in Lev 20:9; Sabbath in Isa 58:13-14
  - c) But use caution when “expanding” the ten commandments; it is possible to prove too much, unless results also confirmed by Scripture
- 5) Laws are always in effect (except some duties not required at all times).

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- a) Laws for all generations, Deut 4:9
  - b) Not all duties at all times; e.g., help poor in Mark 14:7
  - c) Meaning of “love neighbor as self” is to not sin against him; allow him to follow his own will. Cf. U.S. Constitution: “provide for the national defense,” but only “promote the general welfare”
- 6) Laws are to be understood as hedged about.
- a) Laws include sins or duties of the same kind (Greek of 1 Thess 5:22)
    - i) E.g., honor parents, includes all authority
  - b) Laws include areas surrounding sins or duties
    - i) Causes, Matt 5:32
    - ii) Means
    - iii) Occasions, Prov 4:14-15
    - iv) Appearances, 2 Cor 8:20-21
    - v) Provocations, Heb 10:24 (good); Col 3:21 (evil)
  - c) NOTE. This rule must be a general principle; it should not be perverted into legalism. For example, not all these qualifications should surround all duties (secret prayer, giving, etc.). Likewise, we cannot always avoid providing the causes or means which might lead to sin (entrusting someone with money, etc.). God himself does not sin, yet he in his providence provides means and opportunities for men to sin.
  - d) This principle was absolutized by the Pharisees. Jesus rebelled against such “hedging of the law” (Matt 15:1-20 and parallels). For Jewish legalism, see *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, “Oral Law,” and “Commandments, the 613.”
  - e) This tendency was a danger for some of the Puritans (no secular reading, iconoclasm, no Christmas observance, etc.).
- 7) Laws are to be as influential in society as possible.
- a) For children, Gen 18:19; Deut 6:6-7; Josh 24:15
  - b) For those under authority, Exod 20:10; cf. Rom 13:1-6
  - c) For neighbors, Lev 19:17

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- d) The phrase “according to their places” in this rule protects this section from advocating a pseudo-theocracy, in which sinful men regard their ideas as divine rules for others to obey.
- 8) Laws include our associations, which should influence them and us to obey.
- a) Duties —2 Cor 1:24; Heb 10:24
  - b) Sins —Eph 5:11; 1 Tim 5:22

## Rules as expounded in Scripture

The Scriptures link the Ten Commandments and their significance to the concept of love: love to God and love to neighbor. In turn, love is defined by the Ten Commandments.

WSC 42, WLC 102, 122 (adds the Golden Rule)

## The law in the Synoptic Gospels

- The Golden Rule, in the Sermon on the Mount, Matt 7:12 = Luke 6:31.
- The lawyer’s question in Judea, Luke 10:25-37. Both great commandments given; Jesus answers follow-up question with the parable of the Good Samaritan.
- The ruler’s question, Matt 19:16-19 = Mark 10:17-19 = Luke 18:18-20. Deals with second table of the law; Matthew links with the second great commandment.
- The lawyer’s question in the temple, Matt 22:34-40 = Mark 12:28-34. Love summarizes both tables of the law; Mark adds comment by scribe.

## The law in John

- Christ emphasized the second table, said it was a “new” commandment, John 13:34; 15:12, 17; cf. 1 John 2:7-10; 2 John 5.
- In the same context, Christ defined love to God as keeping the commandments, John 14:15, 21, 23-24; cf. 1 John 5:1-3; 2 John 6.

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## **The law in Paul**

- Paul in Rom 13:8-10 and in Gal 5:14 clearly teaches that the second table of the law is summarized and interpreted by the second great commandment, to love one's neighbor.

## **Conclusion, Scriptural interpretation of the law**

The gospels and epistles agree that love defines the essence and purpose of the commandments. On the other hand, the love God desires is defined by those commandments.