

# The Ten Commandments: Universal or Tribal? Divine or Cultural?

*Exodus 20:1-17*  
*College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa*

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This morning I'm going to give an overview of the Ten Commandments, as found in the Old Testament book of Exodus. By the way, which do you prefer, the controversial or non-controversial assessment? I'm just kidding, I don't have a non-controversial version.

Let me begin by asking you some similar questions that I asked of the children of the church a few moments ago. Did you have a lot of rules to follow in your home when you were growing up? Which rules do you remember best? Do you still follow them? Who made the rules in your household when you were growing up? Who makes them in your life now?

Let me also ask, what's your overall stance when it comes to following rules? Do you tend to follow them diligently; bend them occasionally to suit your needs; or break them regularly and make your own rules? What about the rules and laws we encounter in the Bible? Tradition says that there are 613 in the Old Testament alone. But more specifically, what about those rules we call the **Ten Commandments**?

Written over 3000 thousand years ago for a relatively small tribe in the ancient Middle East, do they still apply to us as written today? Let me ask it this way, **are the laws we call Ten Commandments universal in nature – meant to apply to all people in all times and places – or, should they be seen primarily as ancient tribal laws** that applied to that particular band of ancient Israelites who had recently left a life of captivity in Egypt?

Well, you may (or may not) be surprised to learn that some progressive biblical scholars believe that all the laws given to the nation of Israel do not apply specifically as written to Christians and the Christian church. But, just watch the reaction you get when you tell that to all the Christians who vehemently support the Ten Commandments monument on the State Capital grounds in Oklahoma City.

Let's look at this issue from a couple of different perspectives. First, I would suggest that the Old Testament does not cease to contain meaning for us today just because it may or may not be specifically applied to the Christian church. For yes, murder, stealing, bearing false witness, etc. are still rightfully considered morally wrong in the 21st Century. But again, **do the Ten Commandments apply directly "as written," or were they written with a more specific intention in mind that dealt with the culture in which they were written?** While many would interpret that question itself as heretical, it brings up a very important issue.

There is a difference between the conventional wisdom of society as a whole (the rules "everybody knows" and are expected to follow), and the subversive, alternative wisdom of individuals whose words and actions go against the grain of

society – a person such as Jesus, for example. It is this subversive, alternative wisdom, in fact, that at times led Jesus to act and make statements that seemed so contrary to the political and religious rules in his day.

In today's gospel lesson we heard the familiar story of Jesus "cleansing the temple," overturning the tables of the moneychangers. In reality, however, selling animals so that people could make sacrifices was perfectly legal. In fact, it was required by religious law. **It was Jesus who was breaking the rules of conventional wisdom!** In the past century, others that have worked to overturn conventional wisdom, including such leaders as Gandhi and Martin Luther King - both very subversive to their dominant culture and system. And we see it today in the efforts to support marriage equality.

There is another person who has spent his career offering alternatives to the conventional wisdom of church tradition in our day. Most of you may know his name, and may have read some of his books. He is the now-retired Episcopal Bishop of Newark, **John Shelby Spong**. I've had the honor of hearing him speak in person when I lived in Dallas. Called a heretic by some, Spong has written books with titles like: *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*; *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*; *A New Christianity For A New World*; and his provocatively entitled 2005 book, *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love*.

Let's just say that everything that most Christians hold near and dear to their heart is open game in the hands of Bishop Spong. I'd like to share a bit of his subversive, alternative wisdom with you this morning concerning the Ten Commandments, using his words from *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*. Spong begins by informing us that the folklore of every ancient people contains a narrative that purports to record the moment when that nation received the laws by which its tribal life was organized. These laws were almost invariably said to have been dictated by, or in some way received from, the divine hand. We are most familiar with the Jewish version of this tradition. It is said to have occurred on Mount Sinai while the Jews were wandering in the wilderness toward their promised land, and it resulted in the divine gift of the Torah – the "Law," the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, that we call the Old Testament. Included in the Torah are the Ten Commandments.

I'm sure we all have ingrained in our heads the 1956 Cecil B. DeMille movie classic, *The Ten Commandments*, where Moses climbs a mountain, hears the voice of God from a burning bush that doesn't burn, and watches the very finger of God become a fiery divine drill that carves Hebrew letters into stone tablets. This film actually captured accurately the **primitive assumptions about the sacredness of the laws by which the Israelites lived**. But, quoting Spong:

This mythology of a divine source of ethics enforced by the all-seeing God, however, has been revealed by the ancient codes themselves to be utter nonsense. A careful study of these codes reveals nothing less than the tribal prejudices, stereotypes, and limited knowledge of the people who created them.

How do you like that statement for heretical subversive wisdom? Spong continues:

The first clue in the Bible to the human rather than divine origin of these rules is seen in the fact that they were regularly violated when dealing with people outside the Jewish world. For instance, The Ten Commandments state, "**You shall not kill,**" or literally, "You shall do no murder."

Yet in Numbers 31, when the Israelites go to war against the Midianites, we're told that five kings of Midian along with every male are killed. The women and children are gathered and brought back to the Israelite camp. But this does not please **Moses**, and you may be surprised why. Verses 15-18 state, "Moses said to them, 'Have you allowed all the women to live? These women here, on Balaam's advice, made the Israelites act treacherously against the Lord in the affair of Peor, so that the plague came among the congregation of the Lord. **Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known a man by sleeping with him.** But all the young girls who have not known a man by sleeping with him, keep alive for yourselves.'" **God's will? Or, tribal justification of slaughter and domination?**

Later, when Joshua prepares to lead the Israelites into the promised land of Canaan, his army goes in first to clear the way. A reading from Joshua 10:40, "So Joshua defeated the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings; he left no one remaining, but **utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded.** And, of course, there's **David who killed his "tens of thousands."**

Spong concludes, "**It appears that the God of the Bible does not take the commandment not to kill seriously when dealing with the non-Jewish world... A universal or divine code these laws were not.**" And I find it ironic that some of the strongest supporters of displaying the Ten Commandments on state property are also the loudest advocates for the death penalty – state-sanctioned murder. Somehow, this just doesn't add up. Spong continues:

The laws found in the Ten Commandments also reflected the patriarchal mentality present among ancient people in that they assumed that a woman was the property of a man. This sexist attitude is overtly present in the last commandment, "You shall not covet," and by implication it is present in the commandment "You shall not commit adultery." [Let's look at those.]

The full text of that final commandment says, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. **You shall not covet your neighbor's wife**, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that belongs to your your neighbor (Exod. 20:17). Please note there is no written prohibition anywhere in the Torah against coveting your neighbor's husband! This is not an oversight. The reason for this was that a husband was not property, but a wife was.

The seventh commandment, against **adultery**, was enjoined in a culture that practiced polygamy, not monogamy. A man could possess as many women as he could afford. In its primary, literal meaning, this

commandment simply prohibited a man from violating the woman who was the property or possession of another man.

If a Jewish man had a sexual liaison with an unmarried woman, it was not considered adultery. It was rather a crime against the property of her father, because he would be unable to collect a proper "bride price" for a daughter who was now considered "damaged goods." **[Old Testament] biblical adultery was about property and economics [not the faithfulness and fidelity between spouses]!**

Spong forcefully comments, **"A code of law that treats human beings as if they are property needs to be pronounced immoral at once and forthwith abandoned. Parts of the Ten Commandments are surely in this category."**

We don't have time, unfortunately, to get into the other commandments, like making graven images. (I've often wondered if that includes wearing a cross.) What we learn is that ethics, including biblical ethics, are *not* always clear cut! As Spong concludes, "How inadequate the ancient code we call the Ten Commandments has become amid the vagaries of ethical concerns today. The ethical debate today is so complex, and the ancient religious codes are not capable of shedding light on that complexity."

Well, the purpose of today's sermon was to get us to focus not so much on whether or not we should follow the rules, but rather look at where those rules might have come from in the first place and what they originally meant. **Please note that I am neither dismissing the Ten Commandments out of hand, nor saying that living in accordance with the ways of God, especially in following the commandment of Jesus to love God and our neighbor as ourselves, isn't crucial to living a life of faith.** But with all the religious fervor about living strictly in accordance to the Ten Commandments is concerned, it's worth asking:

- Do the Ten Commandments come directly from the hand of God, or are they influenced by the culture in which they were written?
- Therefore, are they to be universally applied as written, or do they apply primarily to their original tribal setting?

I'll leave you to ponder the implications, and to decide whether what you have heard this morning is heretical or not.

Amen.

Resources:

Bishop John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile*, 1998, Harper Collins Publishers.