

Have the Ten Commandments lost their value in a modern world
... or are they still words of life?

God's 10 words

By [Earl Creps](#)

Pentecostal Evangel, March 11, 2001, pp. 9-14.

In 1992, a Florida judge ordered that the Ten Commandments posted outside his courtroom be covered. His reason: To ensure that the jury for a murder trial being held inside would not lose its "freedom of conscience."

The Ten Commandments are still a force to be reckoned with. But what kind of force?

Interpretations of the moral code given to Moses by God (Exodus 20) tend toward two extremes. One defines the commandments as the 10 suggestions, quaint values that guided less-enlightened times.

In this view, a person has a right to adopt whatever portions of God's covenant suit him or her at the moment. The Decalogue offers options, not obligations. It may be a source of inspiration — on a par with singing the national anthem before a baseball game.

The other extreme sees the commandments as the 10 laws. Longing for the certainty of written rules, legalists understand these 10 statements as statutes to be enforced. Some insist that the moral guidance of the commandments become a legislative agenda, hoping that enforcing these rules will constitute the kingdom of God on earth.

While the commandments are ancient (approximately 3,500 years old) and much of our legal code is, and should be, based upon them, both of these views miss the point.

These "10 words" (literally translated) were spoken by God to equip His people for their destiny. "If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5,6, NIV).

God's 10 words provide the best possible opportunity to live the life He has planned for us. After all, "we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10).

A recent survey reports 100 million Americans are confused about the meaning and purpose of life. Perhaps the commandments have never been more necessary. They benefit us in several ways.

An early warning system

Life is filled with risks. Even sincere people can fail to see trouble coming until it is too

late. "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death" (Proverbs 16:25).

The commandments shelter our future by sensitizing us to deadly hazards in the present. Many of these operate in stealth mode: No danger is detected until the chance to escape has been lost. Paul wrote, "I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet' " (Romans 7:7). While no law has the power to produce righteousness in our hearts, it can awaken us to the truth about sin in time to do something about it.

With the entire human race at risk for defying God's moral law, the 10 words speak of wisdom and self-control. As a marker on the surface allows us to avoid underground utility cables, the commandments help us avoid choices that could curtail our potential in God. Much of the Old Testament shows that obedience maximized God's blessing; disobedience put everything at risk. Nothing has changed.

Anyone who understands the horrific implications of adultery never begins an office flirtation. The businessperson who recognizes the wisdom of God's prohibition on stealing doesn't turn in falsified receipts. In both cases, God's plan for the individual is preserved, and the life-destroying consequences of sin are prevented. "Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord" (Psalm 119:1).

An adhesive

Our culture is becoming increasingly fragmented into competing interest groups that meet mainly in court. Our individual lives are moving so fast that communication is often little more than exchanging Post-it notes on the refrigerator door. New technologies connect us electronically, but make it easier to disconnect personally.

The Ten Commandments are vital at this point. Every time we live by God's values, our relationships improve. The first four "words" bind our hearts to God; the last six cement healthy relationships with one another.

The only relationship with God that works is one that honors Him as Creator, admitting no substitutes. Jesus died on the cross to make this possible. He said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17).

Making human relationships work also requires "words" of instruction. The prohibitions on lying, stealing, murder, etc., recognize a key bonding agent: the refusal to take advantage of each other. When we trust that another person will not harm us, we both live from a pool of shared values and can enjoy a deepening friendship. Without such assurances we have our guard up constantly and keep score mentally to determine if a relationship is safe and worthwhile. Vigilance is the product of distrust. Without trust there is little hope for love.

God's 10 words encourage right relationships. These connections become the portals through which we pursue our destiny. Imagine fulfilling God's plan for your life without family, friends or co-workers. There is success in having many counselors (Proverbs 15:22).

A portrait

If a moral code or value statement could have changed us, Jesus would not have had to come. The Law came through Moses, but "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

However, while Jesus' death and resurrection make salvation by grace possible, they also call for a radically new way of life. Jeremiah prophesied a day when the law of God would be found, not just on stone tablets, but written on the human heart (Jeremiah 31:33).

The Scriptures describe this "new self" (Ephesians 4:24) as "in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25). Righteousness is not achieved by force of will, but by the life of the Spirit within. "Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2).

Thus, the "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22,23) are New Testament echoes of the 10 words spoken by God to Moses. All these traits culminate in the person of Jesus, into whose image the Spirit is conforming the believer (Romans 8:29).

The commandments provide a miniature portrait of life in the Spirit. If their values are not appearing in a believer's life, God's 10 words make this failure impossible to conceal.

However, even our worst lapses cannot be remedied with more rules. The Bible describes such restrictions as "powerless" (Romans 8:3). Only the Spirit can close the gap between the reality of our lives and the portrait given to us by God. The commandments define His character in practical terms that can be lived out daily.

If more laws could save us, God would have given us a rulebook. Instead, He gave us His Son. Jesus' life fulfilled all of the Law. He warned of hidden dangers within (Mark 7:21-23). He taught us how to preserve relationships. And He modeled life in the Spirit. He is the Word made flesh.

The commandments point us to Jesus. They show us not what we must be, but what we *can* be.

Earl Creps, Ph.D., is director of the Doctor of Ministry Program in Pentecostal Leadership at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary. 1435 N. Glenstone, Springfield, MO 65802. 1-800-467-AGTS. www.agts.edu .