

**Exod. 20:1–17**

**Ps. 19**

**1 Cor. 1:18–25**

**John 2:13–22**

# Covenant Living

**Goal for the Session**      *Adults will remember with Israel at Sinai the God we serve and the disciplines of living as God’s covenanted community.*

## ■ P R E P A R I N G   F O R   T H E   S E S S I O N

### Focus on Exodus 20:1–17

#### WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” W. Sibley Towner

The setting in Exodus places the Decalogue (meaning the “Ten Words”) at the beginning of the lengthy covenant passage known as the Sinai pericope (Exodus 20:1–Numbers 10:10). Its position in the text bespeaks its primary importance. This is categorical law, setting forward the principles essential for the viability of a community. It comes to us almost as a kind of legal credo, fundamental to what individual Israelites understood was expected of them as people of God. The Decalogue begins with four commandments aimed at establishing a right relationship between God and the elect people. The remaining verses regulate relationships between persons.

#### WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” George W. Stroup

One of the central convictions of Jewish and Christian faith is that human life is to be lived before God and that such life has an order and structure, constituted by God’s commandments. It is important to remember that the Ten Commandments presuppose Israel’s history and its understanding of covenantal life before God. They guide us as we journey in our life before God and our life with our neighbors. They do not show us what we must do or how we must live in order to receive God’s covenantal grace. They light our way and show us how we should live as people who have already been freely given God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

#### SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Craig Kocher

The Commandments come as a gift from God to the people of Israel to structure their common life, and to shape individual lives that are worthy of the God who has rescued them and with whom they are in covenant. To be bound in covenant with God is to be set free to live as God’s people. There is an internal logic to the Commandments that is both compelling and beautiful: The way we attend to God shapes the way we attend to our neighbor. In other words, faithful worship of God leads to proper love of neighbor.

#### NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Barbara Brown Taylor

These practices are not kindly suggestions. They express the purposeful will of God for God’s people. Those who ignore the divine teachings do so at their own peril—not because God is standing over them with a hammer, but because the teachings describe the way of life. To ignore them is to wander into the ways of death instead. The Ten Teachings also constitute a kind of trust exercise about the nature of reality; they challenge all other readings of reality. *Trust me, God says. Those other teachings are not good for you. The life you think they bring you is not real life.*

**FOCUS SCRIPTURE**

*Exodus 20:1–17*

## Focus on Your Teaching

Adults will likely be familiar with today's passage. Part of your teaching task will be to help the participants hear this passage in fresh ways for the sake of faithful practice of its commands. Young adults may be more apt to challenge or question rules that seek to order life and community. That spirit might help in digging deeper into the values these commands reflect and the community they seek to fashion, rather than a simple list of do's and don'ts.

*Holy God, help me to listen to these words anew, and to your vision for community reflected in them. And in so listening, to then lead others in their fresh hearing and faithful practice. Amen.*

### YOU WILL NEED

- ❑ Bibles
- ❑ cross
- ❑ purple fabric
- ❑ six votive candles and lighter or battery-powered votives
- ❑ copies of your congregation's or denomination's constitution or covenant
- ❑ copies of Resource Sheets 1 and 2
- ❑ copies of Resource Sheet 1 for March 10, 2024, unless it will be e-mailed to participants during the coming week

### For Responding

- ❑ option 2: one or more large sheets of newsprint, magazines, scissors, markers, glue sticks, and other collage materials

## LEADING THE SESSION

### GATHERING

*Before the session*, arrange the purple fabric in the center of your learning space and place the cross and votive candles on it. Place the constitution/covenant from your denomination or congregation on the fabric.

Welcome adults by name. Introduce any visitors or guests. Point out the constitution or covenant that you have displayed. Briefly discuss:

✠ How does such a document shape what we do as individuals and as a congregation?

Ask one participant to light three votive candles. As they are lit, say that today is the Third Sunday in Lent—and that today's text and theme remember a covenant shared by Jews and Christians that is an affirmation of who God is and how we live in covenant with God.

Offer this or a similar prayer:

*You are our God, and we are your people. You call us into covenant, teaching us what it means to be your people. Open our minds and hearts on this day, and open our lives and practices in days to come, to the ways you would have us live. Amen.*

### EXPLORING

Extinguish the candles, then read aloud Exodus 20:1–2. Have participants identify what these two verses reveal about the actions and thus character of God. Ask:

✠ Why is it important to begin a covenant statement with these assertions about God, even before getting to any of the commandments?

Read Exodus 20:3–11. Name the four commandments identified here. Ask:

✠ How are these words about keeping covenant with God grounded in the assertions about God in verses 1–2? For example, how do the affirmations of who God is (“I am

Some adults bring theologies that draw strong distinctions between “law” and “grace,” with undertones that New Testament “grace” replaces Old Testament “law.” This week’s text shows that both law and grace are bound together by God.

the LORD”) and what God does (“who brought you out of the land of Egypt”) lay the foundations for keeping Sabbath or not taking God’s name in vain?

Read Exodus 20:12–17. Again, discuss how these words about living in covenant are grounded in verses 1–2. For example, how does God as deliverer lay the foundation for not committing murder or not bearing false witness against one’s neighbor?

Invite participants to read the four excerpts on Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Exodus 20:1–17). Invite general questions or insights triggered by the excerpts regarding the passage. Look more closely at the final two sentences of the “What?” perspective that speak of the division of commandments regarding relationship with God and relationship with others. Discuss the significance of having four commandments that treat our relationship with God and six commandments that treat our relationship with one another. Ask:

- ✧ Why might more commandments guide our relationship with others than with God?
- ✧ What does that say about God’s valuing of social conduct and matters of justice?

Review the concluding two sentences of the “So What?” perspective to provide a concluding affirmation to this conversation.

Ask participants to listen as you read the following statements regarding the commandments from Resource Sheet 1. Ask them to choose which statement most represents their own thoughts.

“They do not show us what we must do or how we must live in order to receive God’s covenantal grace. They light our way and show us how we should live as people who have already been freely given God’s grace in Jesus Christ.” (“Where?” perspective)

“These practices are not kindly suggestions. . . . Those who ignore the divine teachings do so at their own peril—not because God is standing over them with a hammer, but because the teachings describe the way of life.” (“Now What?” perspective)

Form two groups, based on which statement participants most identify with. Have each group discuss what they see as most important in the statement with which they most identified, and why, and then have the groups offer brief summary statements to one another. Ask: Where is the common ground between the groups and these insights into the grace and command reflected in this covenant?

Form groups of three. Invite the participants to imagine they are standing among the people of Israel at Sinai, hearing these words spoken for the first time as Moses passes them on. Discuss:

- ✧ If you could ask God to be more specific on one commandment, which commandment would it be, and what would you be interested in learning?
- ✧ What would you tell your child about how God would have us live?
- ✧ How do these commandments translate to life today?

EASY  
PREP

Consider speaking with the pastor and/or worship committee the week prior, to see if there is interest in bringing the collage(s) into the worship service as part of the reading of the text.

## RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Ancient Commands and Contemporary Intersections** Have participants read Resource Sheet 2 (Ancient Commands and Contemporary Intersections) and then write their responses according to the instructions. Next, have individuals identify one commandment and its related issues on which they will focus special attention during Lent. Then form small groups of people who selected the same commandments. If some adults chose a commandment no one else did, have them work together as one group. Ask each group to identify one action they will take during Lent to engage that commandment's call to live in covenant with God and one another.
- 2. Create a "Covenant-Keeping" Collage** Discuss ways in which your congregation "lives" the commandments set forth in Exodus 20:1–17. Create a collage illustrating those specific practices using pictures, drawings, or words. If you have a large group, create two or more collages. Challenge adults to consider something missing that they would like to see on the collage, by way of a new or renewed practice of what it means to live in covenant with God or one another. Encourage adults to identify one particular action they will take this week to live out that calling to covenant.
- 3. The God We Serve by Serving One Another** Recall today's earlier conversation about the commandments that speak to our covenant life with God and those commandments that address our covenant life with one another. Covenant together as a group to take action this week on an issue related to one of the commandments regarding life with one another. For example, "You shall not murder" could evoke letters written in opposition to capital punishment. Or, not bearing false witness could evoke public stands taken against mudslinging in political campaigns.

## CLOSING

Gather in a circle around the candles and light them. Invite adults to call out words or phrases about practices of covenant keeping they will take with them from this session. Read Exodus 20:1–2. Affirm that these words spoken to Israel at Sinai are spoken to us as well. Close with this twofold commissioning as people face one another in the circle:

*Go now, people of the covenant,  
For to you God has spoken, and with you God has covenanted.*

Have participants now turn outward, as you offer the second half of the commissioning:

*Live now as the people of God, in faithful devotion and loving service;  
For to you God has spoken, and with you God has covenanted.*

Extinguish the candles. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for March 10, 2024, or e-mail it to participants during the week. Encourage adults to read all of the lectionary texts, with particular attention paid to the focus scripture, prior to reading the resource sheet.

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# Ancient Commands and Contemporary Intersections



It is one thing to read and hear the words of the Ten Commandments, whose traditional dating renders them nearly 3,300 years old. But how do these commands connect to contemporary issues and struggles faced by individuals and communities of faith (and the wider society today)?

On the left side of this page are brief summaries of each commandment. Across from them, please write a contemporary issue raised by this command (e.g., "Do not murder" might be identified with issues of capital punishment or war).

**ANCIENT COMMANDS**

**CONTEMPORARY INTERSECTIONS**

Have no other gods.

Do not make or worship idols.

Do not misuse God's name.

Keep the Sabbath.

Honor your mother and your father.

Do not murder.

Do not commit adultery.

Do not steal.

Do not lie about another.

Do not crave what others have.