

# Defining Right and Wrong: Are the Ten Commandments for Christians Today?

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How do you know when something is morally wrong? A murderer speaks of a horrendous murder causing a “rush” and shows no remorse. A teenager fabricates a story about the new dent in the fender of the family car. A woman calls a neighbor to pass on a juicy rumor about a mutual friend. A man assures his girlfriend that “everyone” has sex after dating three months.

People usually feel that whatever decisions they are making—if they “feel” right—must be okay. How do we define right and wrong? Does it really matter?

Even Christians are drawn into this controversy as some teach a doctrine that the Ten Commandments are “done away” and an abstract standard of “love” put in its place. They speak of adherence to the Ten Commandments as “legalism”. Have the Ten Commandments been abolished? If so, what has replaced them?

## *The beliefs of many*

Many teach that Jesus abolished his Father’s Commandments, and established a “New Covenant” that sets up “grace” as a *replacement* for the Ten Commandments. These teachers would portray God’s laws as harsh, and claim that they have been “nailed to the cross”. They especially like to dwell on the words of Paul, words often not easy to comprehend. Yet all these different teachers should be able to agree *that true Christianity must be based on the teachings of Jesus Christ himself*. Nothing written by his followers can negate the teachings of Jesus.

## *What did Jesus teach about the Law?*

Jesus knew His coming would be misunderstood by many. He explained, “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did NOT come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law, until **all** is accomplished,” (Matthew 5:17-18.) The New American Standard Bible is quoted throughout this article unless otherwise stated.

Some self-proclaimed expert may interject at this point that, “all is accomplished” and the Law is no longer in effect. But Jesus went on to make doubly sure we didn’t misunderstand with the very next verse, “Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others,” (a person who teaches **against** keeping even the smallest commandment) “shall be called **least** in the kingdom of heaven (of the lowest standing); but whoever **keeps and teaches them**, he shall be called **great** in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 5:19).

Jesus is clearly promising great rewards to those who keep the commandments and to those who teach the commandments!

In the rest of Matthew chapter 5, Jesus goes on to greatly *magnify* the law of God and to help us understand that even our mental intent, what we think in our minds, has to be brought under control! “You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT

ADULTERY' (the Seventh Commandment); but I say to you, that every one who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart." Matt. 5:27-28. Jesus did not abolish any of the Ten Commandments, instead he **magnified, strengthened and made each one more clear.**

### *What are the Ten Commandments?*

Here are the Commandments in a shortened form. You can read the full wording in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5.

1. You shall have no other gods before Me. (We should not put other things before God in our lives. No other gods are to be worshipped.)
2. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath. You shall not worship them. (Don't make a sculpture or physical representation of God or Jesus. Nothing man-made is to be worshipped or bowed down to.)
3. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain (uselessly), for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain. (Swearing or misusing the name of God or Jesus will not go unpunished. See also James 5:12.)
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy....The **seventh** day is a Sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work. (The day we call Saturday was set apart by God at creation to be a special day of rest. See also Genesis 2:1-3 and Luke 4:16, also Hebrews 4:9 which is correctly translated in the New International Version and New American Standard, "There remains a **Sabbath rest** for the people of God".)
5. Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you. (We are to show our parents respect and honor, especially caring for their needs in their old age. See Jesus' words in Matt. 15:1-6.)
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery (sex when one or both are married to someone else). Premarital sex, referred to in the Bible as "fornication", is also wrong, see I Cor. 6:18, Eph. 5:3, and I Thess. 4:3.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. (This covers testifying falsely under oath, lying, slander, gossip and spreading rumors.)
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's house...wife...or anything that belongs to your neighbor. ("Covet" means to **envy** something belonging to another person.)

### *Jesus teaches observing the Commandments instead of traditions*

One example of the conflict between the Ten Commandments and the traditions of men is the seventh-day Sabbath mentioned in the fourth commandment which conflicts with Sunday, the first day of the week, traditionally used today as the day of worship. Most people simply ignore God's instructions for worshipping on the seventh day, trusting instead in "authorities" that claim God's laws are "no longer in effect for Christians today". What did Jesus say about traditions that oppose Commandments?

Some Pharisees came to Jesus to reprimand him about his disciples neglecting a tradition the Pharisees practiced, the repeated ceremonial washings of hands before

eating. Jesus completely reversed the situation and told them they were the ones that put tradition above God's commandments, "...And why do you yourselves *transgress* the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" (Matt. 15:3). He told them, "...you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your **tradition.**" (Matt. 15:6). Jesus berated the Pharisees for trying to use "tradition" to negate the Fifth Commandment of honoring their father and mother. They neglected helping support them in their old age. The Pharisees had allowed individuals to refuse all care for elderly parents by simply saying they had given the money needed to care for them to God. By this tradition, they completely negated a commandment. Wouldn't Jesus say the same things to those today who cling to any of man's traditions when they are in *direct conflict* with one of the commandments of God? Jesus took up for the commandments! No matter how many millions of people observe a "tradition" it is plain from the words of Jesus that we must obey God's Ten Commandments rather than go along with what is traditional.

### ***Can doing good works substitute for keeping the laws of God?***

To some, it seems logical that enough good works will make up for their failure to keep all of God's laws as defined in the Ten Commandments. After all, look at all the good they have done! To warn people who reason like this Jesus said, "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; *depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.*'" (Matt. 7:23). People who believe they can be exempt from God's Ten Commandments by doing good deeds will find out that Jesus does not reason as they do!

### ***What is the New Covenant?***

Some teach that because we are under the New Covenant we are no longer to observe the Ten Commandments. Always go to the Bible to define its own terms. Paul writes in Hebrews 8:10, "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: *I will put My laws into their minds, and I will write them upon their hearts,...*"

Paul continues in verse 13 of the same chapter to refer to this as "A new covenant". The new covenant is God's laws **internalized**, having become a part of our very minds and hearts! See also Hebrews 10:16, "This is the **covenant** I will make with them after that time, says the Lord, I will put my laws in their **hearts**, and I will write them on their **minds.**" This agrees perfectly with all the teachings of Jesus refining and explaining the Ten Commandments in their spiritual intent involving your mind—your private thoughts—and not just your outward actions! The New Covenant is putting God's Laws **inside of us**, into our minds and hearts until they are a part of us, a part of the way we live and a part of the way we think! Then they are no longer external but internal, a part of who and what we are! **This** is the New Covenant.

For examples of Jesus magnifying the Ten Commandments see Matt. 5:21-22, 31-32.

### ***Peter warns us about difficult to understand teachings***

Despite the opinions of many, Paul honored the Ten Commandments and never taught disobedience to them. Yet the writings of Paul are sometimes difficult to understand. The apostle **Peter knew this and warned**, "...Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that

God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people *distort*, (twist) as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position.” (2 Peter 3:15-17 New International Version).

There were some men who taught a **lawless** doctrine (an anti-law doctrine against the Ten Commandments) that twisted the writings of Paul, therefore the apostle Peter warned believers not to be “carried away by the error” these men taught! Today many teachers still propagate these same false doctrines; doctrines that seek to abolish or change some of the Ten Commandments. What proof do they use? They use passages from Paul’s letters that are difficult to understand to teach their anti-law doctrines, **exactly as Peter warned!** Peter’s warning echoes across the centuries, “...Dear friends,...be on your guard so you may not be carried away by the **error of lawless men** (those who deny the Ten Commandment laws of God) and fall from your secure position.”

We are secure because we have been forgiven our sins through our Savior. We are to go forward walking in the path of God’s Laws and not slip off into an abyss of lawlessness!

#### ***What does Paul write about the Law that is easy to understand?***

Paul writes to the Romans some rather complex ideas teaching that *the law reveals what sin is*. Some parts of Romans can be misunderstood if you *distort* what Paul is teaching. In Romans 7:7 he explains, “What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, “YOU SHALL NOT COVET.” (Here Paul is directly quoting the Tenth Commandment, and teaches that the Ten Commandments reveal what sin is. They *define* sin.)

So the Law teaches you that harboring **envy** toward another person is wrong, and even a sin! Once we realize that something is a sin, we realize, also, that by doing that thing we have come under the death penalty and we need the sacrifice of Jesus applied to our sin that we might be forgiven. Do we continue to harbor envy and jealousy within ourselves? No! We appeal to God for help in overcoming such feelings, before they poison our relationship with that person and lead to hate, slander, theft, adultery, or even murder.

In a clear, easy to understand passage, Paul writes: “So then, the Law is Holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.” (Romans 7:12).

Another easy to understand passage sets us straight about Paul’s real teachings: “For not the hearers of the Law are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.” (Romans 2:13). Those who do the commandments will be justified (or forgiven their sins) as they stand before God Himself.

#### ***Was Paul teaching on a different day?***

When did Paul teach Gentile (non-Jewish) believers? “And the next *Sabbath* nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of God.” (Acts 13:44). See also Acts 13:42, and Acts 17:2. Paul kept the Commandments of God and taught Jews and Gentiles to do the same!

### ***Who first taught that “grace” replaced the Commandments?***

We are warned in another place in the New Testament that there would be people who would equate the word “grace” with lawlessness.

“For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are *godless men*, who change the *grace* of our God into a **license for immorality** and **deny** Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.” (Jude 1:4).

How did they “deny” Jesus Christ? These “godless men” deny that Jesus taught us to observe the Ten Commandments! Remember that Jesus taught that those who obeyed and taught the Commandments would be *great* in the world to come, see Matt. 5:19. These “godless men” taught instead a brand of sexual immorality justified by grace, much like many people practice today. For them, “grace” means lawlessness, or the right to disregard the Ten Commandments! What does grace really mean? “Grace” is the great **kindness** of God by which He forgives our sins because of the sacrifice of our Savior. Grace has to do with forgiveness we do not deserve; it does not encourage or condone the continued and willful breaking of the Ten Commandments.

### ***What was “nailed to the cross”?***

Anyone who has ever darkened the door of any church has heard that *something* was nailed to the cross. Just what was it? First of all, Jesus Himself was nailed to an upright stake most people think of as “the cross”. Once He was crucified, the soldiers nailed something else up as well.

“And they put up above His head the **charge** against Him which read, “THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.” (Matt.27:37 NAS).

It was traditional to let the public know the crime the person had committed by a sign mounted above his head. It stated the reason for crucifying the condemned felon. Only in this case, Christ Jesus was not guilty of any crime! The real reason for His death was the combined sins of mankind--your sins and my own! These are the charges that should have been posted above His head!

Paul understood this well, and sought to point it out to church members in Colossians 2:13, “And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions.” We were “dead” or under the death penalty for the sins we had committed, and when Jesus Christ was resurrected He made us “alive together with Him”! He saves us from the death penalty we deserve because of our sins!

Paul continues with his analogy, “having cancelled out the *certificate of debt* consisting of *decrees against us* and which was hostile to us;” (Colossians 2:13,14 NAS). These “decrees against us” are the charges which should be posted above *our heads as we are crucified for our sins!* This is the listing of our sins publicly for all to see! Paul finishes, “and He has taken it (the charges against us) out of the way, *having nailed it to the cross.*” It was as if our sins were removed because they were nailed to the cross of Jesus!! They were a “certificate of debt” because we owed our very lives due to our sins! They were “decrees against us” proclaiming our sins! We are saved from our sins, and the penalty of death, by the death of our Savior! Our sins were nailed to the cross! Now we could be forgiven for breaking the Ten Commandments that define sin.

### ***Does Keeping the Commandments cause our sins to be forgiven?***

We must understand that our sins are not forgiven *because* we have kept the commandments. "...A man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be *justified by faith in Christ*, and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified." (Galatians 2:16 NAS).

Jesus is the sacrifice for our sins and His death allows us to be "justified" or forgiven for our sins. Some have gone on to teach, falsely, that once we are forgiven we no longer have to keep the Ten Commandments of God. If a condemned criminal is pardoned at the last minute by the Governor, is he free to break the laws from then on? Can he ignore laws because he has been pardoned? We go forward from repentance and baptism to walk in God's Commandments as best we can; leaning on Him for strength to change the former pattern of our lives. Yet commandment keeping does not "save" us. Only the death of our Savior allows our sins to be forgiven. Our continued faith in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for us allows us to go before the throne of God and ask for forgiveness for our shortcomings..

### ***Can we "know Him" and yet not keep the Ten Commandments?***

John explains it very clearly: "My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world. And by this we know that we have come to know Him, *if we keep His commandments. The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him;*" (1 John 2:1-4).

You will notice that John, speaking to converted Christians, says "if anyone sins", for sometimes, in a moment of weakness, we do break one of the Commandments and sin. (John defines sin for us in 1 John 3:4 KJV, "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law, for *sin is the transgression (breaking) of the law.*") If we confess our sin before God and totally turn from our sin, our Advocate, Jesus Christ, "is the propitiation for our sins". We can be forgiven when we miss the mark! Yet our sins should not be the habitual and purposeful *rejecting* of God's commandments! As Christians we are trying to do the will of God to the very best of our ability! It is His will that we keep His Commandments.

In the same chapter John tells us, "And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever." (1 John 2:17).

### ***Can we just "love God" instead of keeping His commandments?***

Some teach a doctrine of an abstract "love" that substitutes for obedience. How is love for God defined? How do we demonstrate our love for God?

John clears up the controversy, "For *this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments*; and His commandments are not burdensome." (1 John 5:3 ).

Love is demonstrated by obedience. "Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in *deed and truth.*" (1 John 3:18).

"By this we know that we love the children of God, *when we love God and observe His commandments.*" (1 John 5:2).

If you are not doing what He asks *you* to do, how can you expect *Him* to do what you ask in your prayers? Even a human father is not apt to grant the requests of a disobedient child.

***Did Jesus warn about widespread religious deception?***

When the disciples of Jesus asked about the “end of the age,” (the end of this present era) Jesus had an urgent warning for them, and for us today, “See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name saying I am the Christ, and will *mislead many*.” (Matt. 24:4-5). (There is no punctuation in the original Greek Biblical manuscripts; all punctuation was added by translators. In this verse many translators have added punctuation that changes the original meaning.)

Notice that it is the “many” that teach *falsely*, and that they are *coming in the name of Jesus*, teaching about Jesus, and teaching a part of His message, but not all of it. Only a few will still believe *all* of the true teachings of Jesus Christ. We are warned not to be misled because so *many* people will be deceived! How are these many religious leaders misleading the majority of the people? The most common and **most widespread deception** is the teaching that Christians today **do not have to observe, keep, and obey all the Ten Commandments that Jesus Himself obeyed and taught us to obey.**

***Are the Ten Commandments for Christians today?***

The Ten Commandments are a central part of the way of life taught by Jesus in His years upon the earth. Jesus observed them, clarified them and *magnified* them to include even the thoughts of our minds. They were believed and practiced by the apostles, including Paul and the early New Testament church, even when they conflicted with the traditions of men. The New Covenant is these same Laws so engrained inside of us that they are *written on our hearts*, never to be forgotten!

In the revelation given to John we are told directly, “Here is the perseverance of the saints...” (Here is how the true believers persist and stay steadfast in the last days that John writes about.) These true believers are saints, “**Who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.**”(Revelation 14:12).

Each of the Commandments will be increasingly maligned, ridiculed and ignored as we come into the last days of this era, but those who continue to cling to God’s way of life, as defined in His Ten Commandments, and their *faith* in the *saving power of the sacrifice of Jesus*, these people will finally attain to the LIFE ETERNAL promised them by Jesus Himself! Jesus tells each of us, “...if you wish to enter into life, **keep the commandments.**” (Matt. 19:17)

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