

## THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

*Exodus 19:16-25; 20:1-21*

First see how much the children can tell about the crossing of the Red Sea. Then remind them that when the people found other difficulties and dangers as they traveled through the wilderness, the Lord saved them each time. They reached Sinai in the third month after they left Egypt. The teacher in preparation should read carefully chapters 15-19, especially all of the nineteenth chapter, and begin the story for today with the events of that chapter.

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### Doctrinal Points

*The ten commandments are divine laws—not man-made ones.*

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### Notes for Parents

The journey of the children of Israel through the wilderness was to last for forty years, although the Israelites had no idea of this when they started out. They were a great multitude of people—some six hundred thousand—with flocks and herds which had to feed along the way. But their delay was caused by their own complainings and rebellions and cowardice, not by the length or difficulty of the journey. So it is with us. The wilderness journey pictures the period in our lives when, after we have determined to break off the fetters of worldly and selfish living, we are trying to make our lives over, to break our bad habits and learn good ones. We, too, often complain and rebel and waste time and strength looking back instead of pressing forward.

You know the many wonderful ways in which the Lord met the needs of the people one after another as they arose. He also meets ours. When we find new truth bitter, as the Israelites found the water at Marah, He shows us the “tree” which will make it sweet—

the principle of loving service. He gives us our periods of rest and content—our “oases” of Elim. When we become too unhappy, He brings us some wholesome pleasure, like the flocks of quail which came over the camp in the evening. And in every new state, if we look for it, we find our daily bit of spiritual bread provided. He brings us living water from the apparently hard rock of the letter of His Word, and when doubts and discouragements, like the Amalekites, attack us, He teaches us to lift up our hands to Him and let His strength bring us victory.

Then we begin to see the orderly purpose behind all the Lord’s laws, and we are ready for a better organization of our thoughts and for more detailed instruction. The Israelites spent nearly a year camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. During that time the Lord gave them through Moses a complete code of laws to govern their civil, moral, and religious life. From an unorganized horde of people they became a nation, with the tabernacle as the center of their life.

In the inmost room of the tabernacle was the ark containing the two tables of stone on which the ten commandments had been written by the finger of God. The first commandments, relating to duties to God, constitute the first table; and the rest, relating to duties to the neighbor, constitute the second table. We recall that in the Gospels the Lord says that love to God is the first and great commandment and love to the neighbor is the second.

Our chapter tells us, however, that the commandments were first given to the Israelites by the living voice of God. This is because they are God’s laws, the fundamental laws of the universe. They had been known always, but men had forgotten—as some have forgotten today—that they were not man-made. Your older children should now be learning the ten commandments. We should all know them and repeat them often to ourselves, for keeping them is the only way to happiness and peace.

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### Primary

This class should be able to recall that the Israelites are on their way from

Egypt to the Holy Land, how they are being led, and who is their human leader. Now they should learn the name *Sinai* and the fact that it was a great mountain and that from its top the Lord spoke the ten commandments. Dwell on the verse, “And God spake all these words, saying.” Then go through the commandments rapidly, being sure the children get the literal meaning of each one. Some will be familiar and easy for them to understand. Others will not. The commandment about coveting is a good one to emphasize with children of this age. Others may be suggested by their questions.

You can imagine how happy the children of Israel were when they found themselves on the other side of the Red Sea and saw how the Lord had saved them from the Egyptians. Moses sang a song of victory and praise of the Lord, and his sister Miriam and the other women sang and danced for joy.

Then the people set out into the wilderness, led by the pillar of cloud and fire. There were a great many of them, as many people as there are in a large city today, and they had flocks and herds with them which had to stop and feed: so they could not travel fast. They slept in tents. Whenever the pillar of cloud and fire stopped, they stopped and set up their tents: and when it moved on, they broke camp and followed it.

Once the Lord brought great flocks of quails for them to eat, and because they could not stop to raise grain for bread, He gave them something they called *manna*, which they gathered every morning and made into cakes. It tasted like honey. And He helped them to conquer an enemy who attacked them.

Their way was not easy and they often complained.

But the Lord always took care of them.

In the third month the pillar of cloud and fire stopped near a great mountain, and the people camped at its foot.

What was the name of this mountain?

The Lord told Moses that He would speak to them from the mountain.

On the third day there were “thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people in the camp trembled.”

Then the people all heard the voice of the Lord speaking.

What did He say first?

Then what did He give them?

We must all learn and keep the ten commandments because they are God's laws.

No one who breaks them can be happy.

So the Lord gave them for our good, to keep us from unhappiness.

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### Junior

The Juniors should all learn the commandments thoroughly. This is the age at which memorizing comes most easily. Impress the children with the fact that the Lord Himself gave the commandments to us so that we might go through life in the right way and be able to live in heaven when we die. All the unhappiness in the world comes from people's not obeying the commandments as the laws of God. Point out also that in addition to their literal meaning, each one has inner meanings which the children will understand as they grow older.

At what mountain did the Israelites arrive in the third month?

What wonderful thing happened there?

What famous laws were given there?

The commandments are the Lord's laws and are universal. They had always been known by men, but people had forgotten that they came from God and were not man-made laws. So God Himself spoke the commandments with a living voice from the top of Mount Sinai.

We should all know the commandments by heart and say them to ourselves often, for it is only by keeping them that we can be safe and happy. They were afterwards written on two tables, or tablets, of stone; the first three [four]\* (Exodus 20:1-11) we think of as those of the first tablet, the last six [five] (verses 13-17) as those of the second, and the fourth [fifth] (verse 12) as belonging to both. This is because the first three [four] teach us our duty to God, the last six [five] our duty to our neighbor, and the

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\*The bracketed numbers reflect the most common way of numbering the commandments. Swedenborg, however, follows the Catholic-Lutheran numbering system which includes the injunction against graven images as part of No. 1. This in turn requires the illogical subdivision of the mandate against coveting into Nos. 9 and 10. The more usual numbering will be used in the following pages. –Ed.

fourth [fifth] ties the two duties together. For father and mother mean not only our earthly parents, but our heavenly Father and our spiritual mother, the Church. Read Matthew 22:34-40.

Many people nowadays complain of the commandments because most of them are *don't's*. But this is necessary. For we all naturally do many wrong things, and we cannot be good until we stop doing wrong. For example, as long as one insists on telling lies, he cannot be truthful. Isaiah says (1:16-17), "Cease to do evil; learn to do well." If we wish to do right, the first thing necessary is to stop doing wrong.

We should keep the commandments literally. But, as we grow older, we shall find that there are deeper ways of keeping them, too. For example, take the commandment "Thou shalt not steal." We think first of stealing as taking someone's money or belongings. But when we say bad things about a person, we steal his reputation; when we make fun of a companion for doing right, calling him names, we are trying to steal his character; when we are proud of our own good deeds, we are stealing from the Lord, for all our power to do good comes from Him.

The commandments are our protection against wrongdoing, and they are all necessary. Many people acknowledge and try to keep those of the second table, but forget those of the first which command love and worship of the Lord. But we cannot be good without the Lord's help. When we imagine we do not need the Lord, we become self-satisfied, and that closes our minds against learning anything we do not want to learn about what is right and wrong. The first commandment comes first because it is necessary to keeping all the others.

See if you remember these important points:

How were the ten commandments first given at Sinai?

On what were they afterwards written?

Which commandments were written on the first table?

What do they teach?

Which were written on the second table?

What do these teach?

How was the fifth written? Why?

### Intermediate

Note the fact that during the first two months of their journey the Israelites were an unorganized horde of people held together only by their recognition of Moses as their leader. They followed the pillar of cloud and fire with no real understanding of how they were to live—even physically—and no internal order or direction. They reached Sinai during the third month and remained there about eleven months. During that time, through the giving of the commandments and the great body of lesser laws and the establishment of the tabernacle and forms of worship, they were formed into an orderly nation and prepared for their further journeys and for the conquest of the Holy Land. If you have a copy of William Worcester's booklet *An Adventure with Children*, you will find it helpful in preparing this lesson.

The crossing of the Red Sea and the destruction of the Egyptians represent our victory over the first temptation which follows a good resolution, and the realization that our selfish habits are powerless if we obey the Lord and look to Him for help. As we read the story in the Word, we imagine that witnessing so great a miracle would surely have made the Israelites so convinced of the Lord's presence and help that they would have had no further difficulties. But the story goes on to tell how they traveled three days into the wilderness and found no water and then came to Marah where there was water; but the water was bitter so that they could not drink it, and again they were completely discouraged, and complained. The new life on which we set out often seems dry and bitter at first. We miss the old selfish indulgences and feel lost without the old selfish thoughts. The Lord made the waters of Marah sweet by showing Moses a particular tree—which represents the principle of loving service—which he was to cast into the water to make it sweet, and the next stopping-place was an oasis where they found ample shade and water. The Lord always gives us these needed intervals of peace and satisfaction.

After this the people hungered, and longed for the fleshpots of Egypt, and the Lord sent quails and manna and also showed Moses how to bring water out of a rock. Finally the Israelites met their first enemy, the Amalekites, and were given victory over them as Moses sat on the hilltop and Aaron and Hur kept his hands lifted

toward the Lord. The Amalekites, whose method of attack was to lie in ambush and fall upon the stragglers, picture our doubts and discouragements, which attack us unexpectedly when we are physically weary. All these experiences were behind the children of Israel when in the third month they came to the wilderness of Sinai and camped at the foot of the mountain.

We are so familiar with the ten commandments that we scarcely realize their importance in our lives. From our early childhood our parents have been trying to form our characters according to the ten commandments. Even people who have been brought up with no direct knowledge of the Bible have learned through school and through the law courts that stealing and killing and falsehood will get them into trouble. Because the substance of the commandments is found in codes of law which antedate the time of Moses some have called the Bible story of Sinai a myth. But we are told that the Lord gave the commandments in such an awesome way because it is necessary that we recognize them as divine and not man-made laws. The ten commandments are not long as compared, for example, to the statutes of any state or city; yet they contain all the fundamental principles necessary to safe and happy individual and social life.

There are, however, some things about the commandments which the world at large does not recognize. One is that the first four commandments are quite as essential to happiness as the rest of them. Some people think they can do their duty to their neighbor without worshiping the Lord. But this is not true. Without worship of the Lord we naturally take credit to ourselves for our good deeds, and this self-satisfaction poisons all that we do. The Lord says, "Without me ye can do nothing."

Another thing not generally recognized is that there are deeper things within the letter of the commandments. For example, the commandment "Honor thy father and thy mother" means much more than to obey and cherish our earthly parents. Our true father is our heavenly Father and our true mother is the Church, by means of which we find heavenly life. Unless we honor the Lord

and the Church we cannot be happy in heaven, where our earthly ties no longer exist.

Also, the deepest and worst form of stealing is stealing from the Lord, taking to ourselves credit for the good we do instead of recognizing that all good is the Lord's. And to steal another person's character by gossip and slander is just as much a breaking of this commandment as to steal his purse. So we might go through each of the ten and find its deeper meanings.

Each of the commandments, kept literally, opens the way to some positive good, and as we grow older and our problems become more complex and critical, we shall see more and more deeply into the meaning of these "Ten Words," as they are called—the *Decalogue*. They are like a complete and strong foundation on which the house of our character is to be built, or like strong walls which surround a city, giving the inhabitants protection from the attacks of enemies. We need to know and keep the commandments and never to fall into the error of thinking that they can be broken at any time with impunity.

*Basic Correspondences*

thy father = the Lord

thy mother = the Church

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**Senior**

With the Seniors the emphasis should be placed on the fact that the commandments are divine laws and cannot be transgressed even in their letter without an aftermath of suffering and a permanent loss of some good which might have been gained. They have always been and always will be the basic rules for a sane life. They are the laws of the heavens. And they require specific things. We should know them by heart, repeat them often, and meditate on both their literal and their spiritual meaning. They are our blueprint for the building of our house of character.

Church people often mention the commandments. The Lord in the Gospels mentions them several times and says, for example, "If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments." Yet if we went through the membership of any church, how many do you



think we should find today who could repeat the commandments or even who knew just where they are to be found in the Bible? How can we keep what we do not know? There is a tendency even with very well intentioned people to feel that if one is regarded as a good person by his neighbors, he is keeping the commandments.

Even in the letter the commandments require specific things. They are not broad generalities. They are injunctions to be obeyed in our daily lives. If we ignore the Lord, if we put anything above service to Him as our supreme object in life, if we take His name in vain in our daily conversation, if we fail to observe Sunday as a day in which to think of Him and to worship Him, if we fail in respect and obedience to our parents, we are breaking the commandments just as much as if we kill, commit adultery, steal, lie, and covet—things for which our neighbors would condemn us. Indeed the first few commandments are of prime importance, for they are the ones summed up by the Lord as “the first and great commandment” (Matthew 22:38). It is only because the committing of sin against the neighbor brings external consequences that we are prone to think the last five commandments are more important. But in reality the consequences of breaking the first five are much more serious because they go deeper.

And indeed when we consider all the commandments in their deeper meanings, the keeping of them requires self-examination and self-discipline of every one of us, for they reach our thoughts and motives and demand much more than a mere outwardly orderly life:

1. To have no other gods before the Lord requires that our ruling motive in all things great or small shall be to do right in His sight, not to be like those who love “the praise of men more than the praise of God.”

2. To make no graven image means not to rely on man-made ideas or feelings in preference to God’s as standards for our thoughts and affections.

3. Not to take the name of the Lord in vain requires that we inwardly love and respect divine qualities and especially the Word

of God, never taking them lightly or being led away into thinking the Word is a mere human book.

4. To keep the sabbath holy requires that we welcome Sunday as an opportunity to put aside our weekday preoccupations and seek spiritual nourishment and strength.

5. To honor our father and mother demands open acknowledgment and worship of our heavenly Father and support of our spiritual mother, the Church.

6. “Thou shalt not kill” requires, as the Lord Himself taught, that we rid our hearts of all feelings of resentment, hatred, and revenge, which are the root of murder.

7. “Thou shalt not commit adultery” demands not only purity of thought, speech, and conduct but, in the deepest sense, the acceptance of the truths of the Word in their purity, unmixed with our own ideas.

8. “Thou shalt not steal” forbids also harmful gossip, belittling of our neighbor, and especially anything which shakes his faith or puts a stumbling block in his way, and inmost self-satisfaction, taking credit to ourselves for goodness and wisdom, for this is stealing from the Lord Himself.

9. “Thou shalt not bear false witness” requires honesty with ourselves as well as with others. We must seek to recognize and support the good in our neighbor and not to misjudge him or exaggerate his evils. And we should remember Swedenborg’s teaching concerning the larger neighbor, and exercise the same justice and restraint in our dealings with our community, our country, and the church.

10. “Thou shalt not covet” demands contentment with the talents and opportunities which the Lord has given us to use and with the environment which He has assigned to us as our field of service. (Swedenborg numbers the commandments differently, dividing the commandment concerning coveting instead of that concerning worship of the Lord.\*)

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\*It was Augustine (354-430) who first included image-making in the first

### Adult

Stress the reason why the commandments were given as they were, and the primary importance of those on the first table. Then run through the ten, suggesting the deeper meaning of each, based on the outline given in the Senior notes. Finally call for questions and let these determine the points for further discussion.

Egypt is behind, but an unknown land, barren and rocky, is now being entered. When we take as an example the breaking of a bad habit, we know that one victory does not finish the conflict; it merely shows us that with the Lord's help we can conquer, if we go forward bravely. The story of the first two months of the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness pictures some of the experiences which come to us in the earlier stages of our period of reformation. They had to be undergone before the people arrived at Mount Sinai, where their nation was to be organized and fully instructed. They reached Sinai in the third month of their journey and camped at the foot of the mount.

The external laws embodied in the ten commandments were known long before the time of Moses; they are the basis of the oldest code of laws known to history. People who think of the Bible as a merely human composition have argued from this that the story of the giving of the commandments from Sinai is not a true story but merely an adaptation of an old myth. Swedenborg, however, explains why the Lord found it necessary to give the commandments to the children of Israel in such an impressive way. It was not because men did not know them, but because men had forgotten that they were the laws of God and thought of them as man-made rules which might be set aside or outgrown. Some people think of them in this way today. Not too many years ago a book was written by a Christian minister to prove that some of the commandments are out-of-date. But they are not out-of-date and never will be, and the Lord wished us to be very sure of this.

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commandment. Among Protestants only Luther followed this method of division. Judaism, ancient and modern, the Greek Church and most Protestants use the more logical divisions. –*Ed.*

So there were thunders and lightnings, and Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, and all the people heard the voice of the Lord when He gave the commandments. And then they were written by the finger of God on two tables of stone that they might be preserved. They are divine laws, the foundation of all right and happy living both for the individual and for the social group.

We are told that there were two tables of stone. The laws of the first table were those telling of our duty to the Lord, and those of the second table were those telling us our duty to our neighbor. Many of these laws are prohibitions. This makes them seem harsh to those who do not want to obey them. But they must be put in this form for just these very people, which means for all of us part of the time. We are all often in a state of not wanting to do what we ought to do. In the story the people were not ready to receive the truth as it first came from the Lord on tables of stone taken from the top of the mount. We ourselves are not always willing to take the loving suggestions of our family and friends or to obey the Lord from love of Him. We persist in doing wrong, and the same advice, prompted by the same love, must take the form of stern command and harsh prohibition in order to reach us and affect our conduct. The second set of tables was hewed by Moses from stone found at the foot of the mount, which pictures the putting of truth in a form which would reach men in low states of life. We all need it in this form before we are prepared to see divine love and mercy showing through the harsh letter. We must stop doing wrong before we can learn to do right (Isaiah 1:16-17).

The Lord wants us to be happy, but we cannot be happy if we do any of the things forbidden by the commandments or if we neglect to do any of the things required by them. They are the foundations of a happy life. When you are driving along the road in your car, you see a great many signs which tell you where the road leads and how to get where you want to go. Then—very often, it seems—you come to a sign which says *Stop*. You do not always

want to stop; sometimes it is very inconvenient and sometimes you see no reason for the sign at that particular place. But you know that the signs are not put up to make trouble for motorists but to keep them out of trouble, and that if you are wise, you will obey them. The journey of the Israelites from Egypt to the land of Canaan, as we know, is a picture of our journey to the promised land of heavenly character. The commandments were given to the Israelites as their guide. They were told that so long as they obeyed them they would prosper, and that when they disobeyed, trouble would inevitably follow. They are given to us for the same purpose. If we recognize this, and write them firmly in our minds, we shall find that whenever we are tempted to do some wrong which will lead us into trouble and may even perhaps wreck our lives, the Lord will recall to us one of these commandments, just as a stop sign appears suddenly at a dangerous crossing. We often think we know better than the Lord what we can do without harm, but we do not. He tells us that these laws are absolutely essential to our welfare and happiness, and we may believe Him. The testimony of history, of reason, and of everyday experience shows that where the ten commandments are broken there is neither peace nor happiness. The twenty-fourth verse of the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy is a good verse to learn and remember: "And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, *for our good always*, that he might preserve us alive, as it is this day."

All this is true of the commandments even in their literal sense. But, like everything else in the Word, the commandments have depths of meaning within the letter. Suppose we take the third commandment as an illustration: "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." What does this mean? The first and obvious meaning is that we should not indulge in profanity. Most of us are brought up not only to know that this is wrong but to have an actual distaste for it. It is perhaps no temptation to us. Is this commandment therefore of no importance in our lives? A name is the symbol of the quality of a person or thing. The

Lord's name is more than just the appellations by which He is called. It signifies all His qualities and especially the Word, which is the expression of His love and wisdom. When we in any way belittle the Word, allowing ourselves to think of any part of it as the work of men, to use its stories in jokes or in careless conversation, or even to let our minds wander to worldly thoughts when we are hearing it read in church, we are breaking this commandment. And when we indulge in this deeper form of profanity, we injure ourselves and also influence others to their hurt. This is especially true of the New Church person, who knows better—who knows the holiness of the Word and its source and has the responsibility of leading others to understand and reverence it.

We might go through all the commandments. We find them explained not only in the *Arcana Coelestia* (nn. 8859-8912) where this chapter of Exodus is covered, but in TCR 283-331.\* These are sections which we should all study seriously in order to understand the meaning and relevance of the commandments in our lives. The Lord says, “If ye love me, keep my commandments.”

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#### From the Writings of Swedenborg

*True Christian Religion*, nn. 412-416: “Those who do not know what the term neighbor means in its true sense, suppose that it means nothing else than the individual man, and that loving the neighbor means conferring benefits upon him. But the neighbor and love to him have a wider meaning and a higher meaning as individuals are multiplied . . . Thus, a community smaller or greater is the neighbor because it is a collective man; and from this it follows that he who loves a community loves those of whom the community consists; therefore he who wills and acts rightly towards a community consults the good of each individual . . . One's country is more a neighbor than

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\*Also in the *Doctrine of Life* and the interchapter articles in *Apocalypse Explained* (nn. 950-1028). (This latter material has been abstracted and printed separately as *The Spiritual Life and the Word of God* [Swedenborg Foundation] and *Religion and Life* [Swedenborg Society].) Note that in this latter work, Swedenborg curiously followed the order of the decalogue as found in the LXX version, which reverses the “kill” and “steal” commandments. —Ed.

a single community . . . Moreover, loving one's country is loving the public welfare . . . It should be known that those who love their country and render good service to it from good will, after death love the Lord's kingdom, for then that is their country, and those who love the Lord's kingdom love the Lord Himself, because the Lord is the all in all things of His kingdom . . . Since man was born for eternal life, and is introduced into it by the church, the church is to be loved as the neighbor in a higher degree . . . This does not mean that the priesthood should be loved in a higher degree . . . The priesthood merely serves, and is to be honored so far as it serves . . . The Lord's kingdom is the neighbor that is to be loved in the highest degree. . . he who loves the Lord's kingdom loves all in the world who acknowledge the Lord and have faith in Him and charity towards the neighbor; and he loves also all in heaven. Those who love the Lord's kingdom love the Lord above all things . . . Therefore love towards the Lord's kingdom is love towards the neighbor in its fullness."

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### Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. Through what kind of country did the Israelites have to travel to reach the Holy Land? *wilderness or desert*
- J. What things did they miss which they had had in Egypt? *fresh food, water*
- J. How did the Lord take care of them? *manna, quails, water from rock*
- P. To what mountain did they come in the third month? *Sinai*
- J. Were they allowed to go up on the mountain? *no*
- J. On the third morning what happened which made the people tremble? *thunder, trumpets*
- P. Whose voice did they hear? *God's*
- P. What did the Lord first say about Himself? *"I am the Lord thy God"*
- P. Then what did He give the people? *the ten commandments*
- J. Into what two groups can the commandments be divided? *1-5, 6-10*
- J. What does the first group teach? *duties to God*
- J. What does the second group teach? *duties to man*
- I. Had these commandments been known before? *yes*
- I. Why did the Lord speak them from Sinai? *to show they were divine laws*
- S. What does the wilderness journey picture? *reformation—the long period of preparation for spiritual living*