

The First Five Commandments

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These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9)¹

Why did God tell Israel to spend so much time thinking about His law? One reason is that there is so much in it to think about. Let me try to illustrate this point by looking more closely at one aspect of the text of the law. There is an introduction that says, "And God spoke all these words:" (verse 1). We'll leave that aside for now, but let me start by quoting the first five commands below for the reader's convenience:

1. "You shall have no other gods before me." (verse 3)
2. "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; . . ." (verses 4 and 5)
3. "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, . . ." (verse 7)
4. "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates." (verses 8-10)
5. "Honor your father and your mother, . . ." (verse 12)

Again, these commands are all familiar to us. No other Gods before the Lord. No idols. Don't misuse God's name. Remember the Sabbath. Honor your parents. All five of the commandments we're dealing with are represented. But wait! I left out more than just the introduction. Let's go back now and get the rest of it. I quoted the commands, but left out the explanations. Here they are:

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1. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." (verse 2)²
2. "for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments." (verses 5 and 6)
3. "for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name." (verse 7)
4. "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (verse 11)
5. "so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you." (verse 12)

Now let me ask, which list do you think is longer? Both have the same number of items, since there are five commands and five explanations. In that sense they're both the same length. But that's not what I mean. If words were like objects we could touch or hold, and if each of them weighed some small amount, and if we were to count them all up, which list would weigh more?

Since we would get different results with different translations, let's not use a translation. We'll do our counting in the Hebrew original. It may surprise you to know that, when we do this, the list of explanation clauses weighs slightly more than the list of command clauses. The two are very nearly the same, but not quite. When the numbers are all tallied, some 51 percent of the words in the Hebrew text of the first five commandments fall within explanation clauses.³ If we were to include all ten of the commandments in our count, the explanations from the first five would make up fully 43 percent of the total.

What does this fact tell us about God? That there are commandments which allow us to raise questions like this tells me at the outset that our God wants to be obeyed. But the fact that, in the first five of those commandments He spends as much time explaining as commanding, tells me that God also wants to be understood. He wants to meet our minds and have a relationship with us that is characterized by intelligent fellowship.

God created our world in the beginning so the man and the woman would have a place to stand. And He made everything around them beautiful so that living here would be enjoyable. But the point of the exercise – His main reason for doing all of this – was so He could have fellowship with us and so we could have fellowship with Him.

"For this is what the LORD says -- he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited -- he says: 'I am the LORD, and there is no other'" (Isaiah 45:18).

This statement speaks of God's creatorship and shows how very majestic and powerful God is. But there is another side to this. It could be a very lonely experience occupying a

² Notice that in commandments 2-5 the command comes first and that the explanation follows it. In the first commandment, however, the explanation comes first. We must know who God is (verse 2) in order to put Him first (verse 3).

position such as the one just described. Is loneliness something God could experience? We are made in His image. Is loneliness something we can experience?

We talk about having a relationship with God but perhaps overlook the fact that for any relationship to be real it has to work both ways. Knowing all things, God is too wise to be fooled by shallow substitutes. He wants something genuine and real in His relationship with us. And we, if we are honest, want something genuine and real in our relationship with Him.

For any of this to make sense we have to realize how much we need God. "For in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). On this level God receives nothing from us. "[H]e is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else" (Acts 17:25). We have needs that only He can supply.

But the other thing we need to realize is that there is a void in God's heart which only His human children can fill. That means you. We are all His children. What He needs is not our things. Those were His already. We can't give Him anything He doesn't already have. That's where we got it in the first place. Everything we have comes from God initially. So that's not it. What He needs is us. Not our things, but our hearts. Think of Jesus standing outside our door knocking (the word literally means 'calling'). "If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20). And if no one hears? If no one pays attention? Well, He will not force Himself upon us.

I suspect that one of the many things which conspired to break Jesus' heart and crush out His life on the cross was the fact that those He loved so much, and was dying for, insisted on withholding themselves from Him. He came to our world to save us, it is true, but He also came here to be with us. The name Immanuel means "God With Us." That's why Jesus was sent into the world - to be with us and to help us be with Him in heaven. But those who crucified Him would have none of it.

What we have said here about God becomes clearer in the New Testament, of course, but I think a hint of these same things can already be seen here – woven into the very words of the law. The fact that He places such high value on our willingness and ability to understand Him speaks volumes about God, about what He wants in His relationship with us, and about what He can offer to us in our relationship with Him.

As we close this discussion notice that the last five commandments are much shorter than the first five, and that none of them have an explanation clause. In another paper we'll talk about why this should be and we'll also point out where to look for those five missing explanations.³

³ See <http://www.historicism.org/Documents/LawMatt.pdf>.