



JESUS' TEACHING ON THE

10

COMMANDMENTS

*Jesus did not teach the Law;
He used it to teach
THE HEART OF GOD.*

Persons descending from the peak of Mount Sinai. According to tradition, this was the path that Moses took when he met the Lord and received the stone tablets.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BOB SCHATZ (10/7/0)

By Randall L. Adkisson

WITH RECENT DEBATE about displaying the Ten Commandments in courthouses and schools, one might conclude the Commandments play an overt role in the New Testament and specifically in Jesus' teachings. A survey of the Gospels reveals a different reality.

In the Gospels, Jesus seldom referenced the Ten Commandments (also called the Decalogue). John's Gospel does not mention them at all. The Synoptics, though, record Jesus' conversation with a young ruler; the story includes five of the ten (Matt. 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 18:18-23). While one may rightly assume Jesus was steeped in the Torah and that the Gospels record only a portion of His teachings, simply reading the Gospels might lead one to assume Jesus did not come to negate the Ten Commandments but to neglect them. The lack of direct citations of the Ten, though, is not a sign of their unimportance but of a culture saturated by their knowledge of them. First-century Judaism was steeped in studying, dissecting, and discussing the Torah. The Decalogue was foundational in the Law and was always in the background of New Testament events.

The Heart of God

Still, one is caught off guard by Jesus' limited citation of the Ten Commandments. Besides the five mentioned above, which prohibit murder, adultery, theft, false witness, and call for honoring one's parents, Jesus directly cited the Commands only one additional time. Jesus used the Commands regarding murder, adultery, and false witness in His discourse on the Law (Matt. 5). But instead of directly referencing the other seven, He mingled these three with regulations concerning divorce, revenge, and loving one's neighbor.

Jesus did not debate the Law; He explained it. He did not teach the Law but used it to teach the heart of God and demand a righteousness that transcended mere law keeping. He confronted and challenged the false but legalistic righteousness of the times. Teaching a deeper application of the Law, He revealed Himself as One greater than Moses (Heb. 3:1-3).

When asked which was the greatest commandment, Jesus did not mention the Ten Commandments but focused instead upon the *Shema* and on loving one's neighbor (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18). All three Synoptics

record Jesus quoting these two, the great commandments. Only Matthew's Gospel records the comparative "you have heard it said" statements, which incorporate three of the Ten Commandments.

The Whole Law

Believers cannot separate Jesus' understanding of the Ten Commandments from His understanding of the entire Old Testament. His using the Torah, Prophets, and Writings showed He accepted the Old Testament as the authoritative Word of God.

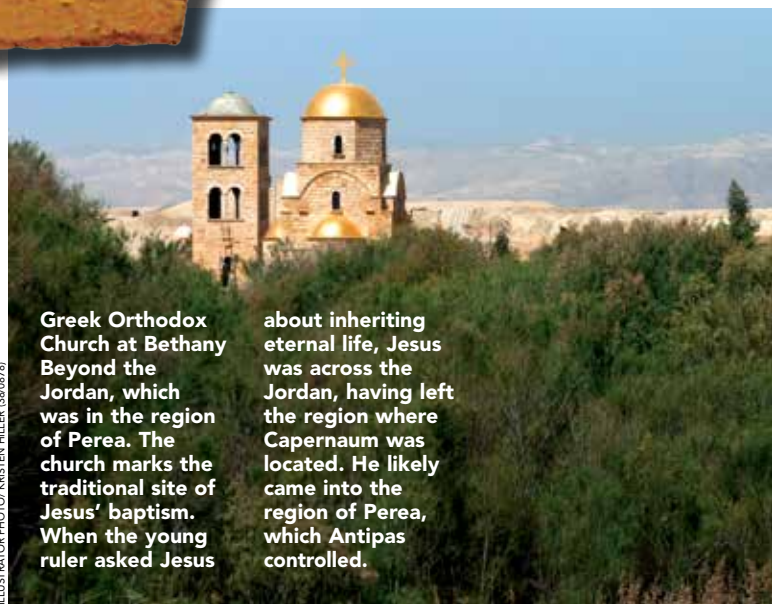
Matthew emphasized Jesus' relationship to the totality of the Old Testament, quoting: "Don't assume that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For I assure you: Until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or one stroke of a letter will pass from the law until all things are accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commands and teaches people to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:17-19, HCSB).

Nevertheless, fulfilling the Law did not mean allowing the first-century Jewish understanding of the Law to remain intact. Jesus quoted the Law as a demarcation from the standard interpretation to a new understanding



Left: Fragmentary terra-cotta Ammonite ostrakon; from the Baq'ah Valley in Jordan; dated to the late Iron Age

(about 701-586 B.C.). Although the inscription is incomplete, it does contain the Hebrew word *shema*, meaning "to hear."



Greek Orthodox Church at Bethany Beyond the Jordan, which was in the region of Perea. The church marks the traditional site of Jesus' baptism. When the young ruler asked Jesus

about inheriting eternal life, Jesus was across the Jordan, having left the region where Capernaum was located. He likely came into the region of Perea, which Antipas controlled.



Left: At Gortyn on the island of Crete, is the oldest known European law code. Dating to the 5th cent. B.C., the code, written on the smooth stones, is inscribed in a style called "boustrophedon," which translates "as the ox plows." Like an ox plowing a field, boustrophedon writing alternates its direction from one row to the next. Tradition states Titus was from Gortyn.

Below: From the 4th cent. A.D. synagogue in Capernaum, detail of a pomegranate carved in either a lintel or facial stone. Jews used pomegranates to decorate their houses of worship. Pomegranates also decorated the hem of the priestly garments. Rabbinic teaching explained that the pomegranate has 613 seeds, which correspond with the 613 commandments in the Torah.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (28/20/6)

leading to the Law's original intent. "What is going on in the passage—and in the antitheses—is not a countering or suspending of the OT [Old Testament] law, but an exposition of the will of God that starts from the OT law but goes behind and beyond it and that certainly goes far beyond the Jewish leaders' interpretation of the OT."¹

Thus, Jesus expanded "You shall not bear false witness" to demand truthfulness in all interactions. He explained "You shall not murder" by prohibiting hatred that might lead to murder. The absence of adultery was not the intent of the Law; fidelity in all aspects of marriage was. New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg argues: "Jesus' person and ministry so fulfill the purposes of all the Old Testament that he alone now has the authority to dictate how his followers must obey those Scriptures in the new age he has inaugurated."² In this sense, Christ's followers were no longer to interpret the Law legalistically.

A New Era

The faith community established at Pentecost was not to ignore the Law. The New Testament clearly explains that while ceremonial and cultural laws of the Old Testament, which defined and set apart the Jewish nation, were no longer relevant to the church, the moral law the Ten Commandments summarized was to be expanded.

Jesus' answer to the inquisitive lawyer revealed that the whole Law could be narrowed to two principal commands. If one would love God fully with heart, soul, and might, and if one would love his neighbor as himself, then that person would achieve the Law's full intent (Matt. 22:37-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28). Loving God covers the first four of the Ten Commandments and loving one's neighbor covers the final six.



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At times, people have used the Law to justify a minimum of behavioral standards. Jesus used the Law as a starting point for righteousness, not its end. The believer, for instance, who argues over whether one should tithe or if getting a divorce is permissible has missed the intent of Jesus' teaching on the Ten Commandments and the Law. A believer is not to focus on legalistic ways to skirt the Old Testament prescriptions of holiness and relationships but rather on how to fulfill God's intent through a relationship with Him in Christ.

Only One has ever kept the Law's requirements completely. Faith in Him brings rescue from the Law's condemnation and grace to grow toward the Law's obligation. "What the law could not do since it was limited by the flesh, God did. He condemned sin in the flesh by sending His own Son in flesh like ours under sin's domain, and as a sin offering, in order that the law's requirement would be accomplished in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:3-4, HCSB). 🕊

1. David Wenham, "Guelich on the Sermon on the Mount: A Critical Review," *Trinity Journal* 4, no. 2 (Fall 1983): 99.

2. Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 30.

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