

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)
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***Morality and the Post-Modern World:
The Ten Commandments for Today
“But It’s the 21st Century!”***

1 Corinthians 10:1-13 (NIV)

10 For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. 2 They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. 3 They all ate the same spiritual food 4 and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. 5 Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

6 Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. 7 Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: “The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.” 8 We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. 9 We should not test Christ, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. 10 And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.

11 These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. 12 So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! 13 No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

Exodus 20:1-17 (NIV)

20 And God spoke all these words:

2 “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

3 “You shall have no other gods before me.

4 “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God,

punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

7 “You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

8 “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 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 male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. 11 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.

12 “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

13 “You shall not murder.

14 “You shall not commit adultery.

15 “You shall not steal.

16 “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

17 “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning church! This morning I’m beginning a new series entitled “*Morality and the Post-Modern World: The Ten Commandments for Today.*” I believe that this will prove to be a somewhat provocative topic, but also a crucial topic for us as followers of Jesus Christ situated in Lawrence, Kansas in the year 2022. My message this morning is an introduction to the entire series, an overview of the whole issue before we look at the individual commandments one by one.

[Slide 2] *Introduction*

Let’s begin with some definitions: specifically, definitions of the key words and phrases in the title, so we’re all clear about what it is we’re talking about.

First, “morality”: The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (5th edition) defines “morality” as follows: “(1) the quality of being in accord with standards of right or good conduct; (2) a system or collection of ideas of right and wrong conduct; (3) virtuous conduct.” Wikipedia, which is hardly an

authoritative source, but nevertheless, one that is often accurate and representative of what is commonly understood to be the case, puts it this way:

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“Morality is the differentiation of intentions, decisions and actions between those that are distinguished as proper and those that are improper. . . .

Morality can be a body of standards or principles derived from a code of conduct from a particular philosophy, religion or culture, or it can derive from a standard that a person believes should be universal.”

So, when I say that this series concerns “morality,” I’m talking about the standards of conduct, actions, intentions, and decisions, that are in accord with what is right, what is good, what is virtuous; and the delineation of what is contrary to those standards. To put it bluntly and simply: we are looking at the question of right and wrong. What is right, and what is wrong? What is permissible, and what is out of bounds? What is good and what is evil? In particular, I’m asking the question: How do we determine these moral standards that establish what is right and what is wrong?

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Let me say from the get-go that many in our world today, perhaps most of the people in Western cultures today, answer this question entirely wrong. I fear, perhaps, even in the church today, far too many answer this question as follows: “*Well, I think that . . .*” And they assume that they have just given an adequate explanation for the basis for whatever moral determination they have made. “*I think that . . .*”—it’s the declaration of my opinion and no one can question my opinion. I am the authority over myself, and since I, and I alone, am the only one who can speak to what I think, therefore, my opinion about all moral questions will rule the day.

Let me challenge that opinion straight on: When you say, “*I think that . . .*”, and assume that *your opinion* is an adequate basis for formulating the standard for morality—even your own personal morality, and not, say, the morality of your family, or your community, or the world—you are claiming that you have a knowledge base that is sufficiently large and broad and deep, the experience that is similarly deep, observations that are comprehensive enough, and the reasoning power that is adequate to be able to give you the wisdom that is above that of every other person in the world’s history, so that you now stand as the pinnacle of human development. Or, perhaps, more modestly, you simply think that you know enough to ignore everyone else and choose instead to trust your own instincts.

Let me just say that standing in that spot is a dangerous place to stand. But that is where most of the Western world stands today.

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What about the term: “Post-Modern World”? I expect that many of you may have heard the expression, but know little about it. That’s not surprising; there’s a lot of confusion even among those who study postmodernism today, including confusion about what exactly we’re referring to when we use the phrase.

But for our purposes in this series, the expression, “post-modern world” refers to the general way of thinking that has been adopted by our culture which has come to be the dominant view among the majority of those who are the most influential voices today: especially information media, academics and the sciences, entertainment and the arts, politics. We can sum up the main ideas in postmodern thinking like this: There is no overarching narrative to human history that makes sense of the whole. There are only individual stories. There are no certainties, no objective truths, only conflicting interpretations. The meaning of your life is something you determine, because human history and culture is meaningless in itself. And there is no transcendent God to give meaning or purpose to life.

This is the underlying and prevailing mindset of our age. But how did we get here?

[Slide 6] *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*

I’m currently reading a difficult book as a part of a discussion group that includes an international mix of Christian leaders: *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, which was selected by the editors of *Christianity Today* as a winner of the 2022 Book Awards in the category of “Politics and Public Life.” The book is a tough read: the author, Carl Trueman, traces the intellectual history of the past 250-plus years to show how certain philosophers, authors, scientists, and poets have directly influenced one another, and consequently, our world today. Some of the names on his list would be familiar to most: Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx; others only to students of modern philosophy. I won’t subject you to slogging through the details with me. But I’d like to share with you the gleanings from this impressive work, the “take-aways” for you and me, for they are quite important.

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You may say, “*I don’t care about the intellectual history of philosophical notions, whether they are from famous people or obscure people. It has nothing to do with me.*” Ordinarily, I would say, “*That’s quite understandable, and frankly, I can’t blame you.*” But ideas matter. And in this case, a great deal. Here is why.

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Francis Schaeffer, a prominent Christian thinker and author who died in 1984, made the case pretty clear for us. Philosophers come up with ideas—it's what they do. Some of those ideas are good, some bad, some just odd. They develop those ideas, and they teach them to students at universities and write about them in books read by intellectuals and seekers of wisdom. Some of those seekers of wisdom are artists who embrace their ideas. Those artists—especially those in the dramatic arts, such as writers, poets, film makers, actors, and directors, along with musicians and those in the visual arts (painters, sculptors, etc.)—take the ideas they have embraced and turn them into artistic works. Those works become the vehicles by which these ideas, which often are at odds with traditional values of the culture, are translated into the vernacular of the public. The artists use their skills at creating plays or movies or writing songs to spread these ideas so that they become widely known and permeate the collected awareness of the general public. Even if the philosopher's ideas are discredited, proven false, or discarded by his or her peers when they are examined, those ideas that have been embraced and spread by the vehicles of the artists continue to take root in the minds of those who remember the movie or the song because they liked it. And now the idea has become part of a person's world and begun to change what he or she thinks about that world.

[Slide 9] *Trueman's conclusions: Foundational assumptions and beliefs of present post-modern culture*

So you may not have any interest in philosophical speculation and the history of ideas. Again—that's quite understandable. But let me show you some of the relevant conclusions from Carl Trueman's study.

(1) When we think of ourselves, we think of a person whose essential being is her or his internal self. That person and her or his subjective ideas, beliefs, and feelings constitutes the "authentic self." My "authentic self" is who I imagine myself to be, apart from any influence from others outside of me (supposedly), and completely independent of and unencumbered by any outward reality.

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(2) Societal pressures to conform to traditional norms, morality, and mores are a form of oppression that threaten my ability to express my "authentic self." The structures, institutions, systems, and powers that compel my conformity and continue to oppress me must therefore be destroyed and replaced with new structures and systems that allow me to freely determine what I wish to be and do. Religious structures, with their insistence upon restrictive limitations upon sexual

freedom, in particular, must be invalidated and dismantled. Social revolution is therefore necessary to achieve authentic freedom.

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(3) Because there is no transcendent reality to which humans are subject, there is no such thing as absolute right or absolute wrong. There is only what the individual person chooses. There is no “morality,” only preferences. The goal, therefore, to which society should be moving is amorality—the elimination of the notion that these categories of right and wrong, good and evil actually exist. The authentic human will transcend right and wrong.

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(4) The vast majority of people, however, remain unenlightened and will not concern themselves with the need to pursue this goal of authentic freedom. Therefore, in order to attain the “right” society, those who are enlightened must gain the power to bring about this change. Those who gain power—through celebrity status, political advancement, military dominance, financial wealth, or social/media influence—will determine which preferences will be permitted. The governing elite will therefore select those preferences and use persuasion, education, or compulsion to see that the rest of us adopt these preferences as their own. All must conform to what the ruling class approves.

We have seen such things before, under communism; we see them still. In China, Vietnam, and North Korea, for instance, those who do not conform to the party line are routinely rounded up and imprisoned, sent to re-education camps until they comply, or simply disappear. China currently requires all its citizens to view on their phones a daily message from the Communist Party and are quizzed on its content.

We have not seen such draconian measures in the West, yet. But the same intolerance for dissent from the approved viewpoint exists. So, today, for instance, we see examples of this on college campuses across the country where student demonstrations have prevented guest speakers from presenting their viewpoint because that viewpoint was objectionable to the students. Only speech that conforms to their preferences will be tolerated.

Other examples: The Canadian Parliament recently passed legislation, *without debate*—something that is unheard of in Parliamentary history—making it illegal to counsel or otherwise try to dissuade someone from transitioning from one gender to another; those convicted are subject to a \$10,000 fine. (A similar statute was passed in Lawrence last year, with a lesser fine.) In Finland in the past few months, the pastor of a church and a medical doctor have been charged with a

crime for writing a statement that has been on the church's website for fifteen years stating that the Bible teaches that homosexual acts are sinful. They face jail time and a fine.

[Slide 13] *The basic foundation*

Through all of these philosophical developments and societal influences, changing trends, and so on, what is clear is that there are two fundamental planks in the foundation of the post-modern society, two prevailing assumptions that are held as unquestionable givens. (Any who do question them show themselves to be unenlightened and in need of correction or, if need be, elimination.)

(1) There is no God, no transcendent ruler to whom we are accountable. There might be something inexplicable beyond our knowing, but it does not affect us in any way. We are not accountable to him/her/it/them. Those who believe in a god or gods, or something like a god, are welcome to believe what they like, *so long as they understand that what they believe has nothing to do with real life, and doesn't actually mean anything at all. Their belief is simply a private coping mechanism for life; it cannot be allowed to affect anything in public. And it especially cannot be said to be necessary for anyone else to believe.*

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(2) I alone will determine what is right. I answer to no one for my beliefs, my moral choices, my actions: what I believe is right for me and cannot be questioned or challenged—*unless it contradicts what those in power say is acceptable.* So in the U.S., according to the “Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act,” last amended in 1972, destroying the embryo of a bald eagle is a criminal felony, punishable by a fine of up to \$100,000 and a year in jail, but destroying a human embryo is a “reproductive right.”

[Slide 15] *The Ten Commandments*

Let's step back from the present day and return to the setting in the Ancient Near East when Moses received the Ten Commandments from God on Mount Sinai. The historical and cultural backdrop for that scene is critical for us to grasp the significance of what is happening in Exodus 20.

The people of Israel were an absolute anomaly in the ancient world. Every culture around them in the Ancient Near East was polytheistic: everyone believed in a variety of gods, spirits, and superhuman beings. The gods were viewed as having some measure of control over what happened in the world. Therefore, it was necessary to appease them and hope to gain their favor through appropriate religious rituals done in the proper manner, with the necessary sacrifices.

Piety, therefore, was measured by one's attention to the forms of worship—sacrifices, prayers, obeisance, payments; ritual was all that was required. Morality—what was right or wrong—was not connected to piety. Morality varied from culture to culture and from time to time, depending upon who was in power, what your family traditions were, where you came from, what was possible. There were certain constants; murder, for example was usually forbidden—at least, the murder of a nobleman, or a free male. *But God gave to Israel a completely different understanding of who God was, and the relationship of knowing God, worship, and morality.*

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When we read Exodus 20, therefore, and think about the Ten Commandments, we need to do two things from the start: (1) We must contrast what we read in Exodus 20 with what we know of the surrounding cultures; and (2) We must contrast what we read in Exodus 20 with what we know of our culture today. For what we read in this passage is distinctly different from everything that everyone else in the ancient world understood, and drastically different from what the majority of people in our world today understand. It's not that the specific commands are incomprehensible; it's not that we don't see similar statements then or now in these contrasting cultures of the ancient world and the post-modern world. *It's that there's a distinctly different set of assumptions upon which the words of this passage rest.*

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We see that difference clearly in the opening two verses of Exodus 20: *And God spoke all these words: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."* The Ten Commandments begins with an address from a personal God to a specific people to whom God has shown himself through a saving event in actual human history—their history—in order to bring that people into a covenantal relationship with himself.

The setting for this passage is therefore crucial for understanding it. Israel is at Sinai. It is about a year after they left Egypt. God has been preparing them and providing for them in the wilderness of Sinai. Here, on the mountain, he is making a covenant with them, a covenant that will establish them as his people. The Mosaic Law is connected to that covenant, but the covenant is prior and primary. The covenant establishes a relationship between God and the people of Israel. And relationship precedes governance. The Law explains how the covenant will be lived out. The stipulations and requirements of the Law show how the people must live as those who are related by covenant to God.

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The Ten Commandments are the foundation for the rest of the Mosaic Law. The various sections of Leviticus and Deuteronomy that contain the full Law of Moses are expansions and applications of the basic principles and truths set out in the Ten Commandments. We can see the importance of these ten commands in three crucial, distinguishing points in the narrative.

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First, throughout the rest of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible which together form the Mosaic Law), Moses is the mediator for God. God speaks to Moses, tells him what to say to the people; Moses then repeats what God has told him to say. The people bring their complaints and Moses presents them to the Lord. God answers him, and Moses takes the answer back to the people. Before Exodus 20 and after Exodus 20, Moses is the mediator through whom God speaks to his people. But here, in this exceptional instance, God himself speaks directly to the people. (The fact is repeated for emphasis in verse 22: *Then the Lord said to Moses, "Tell the Israelites this: 'You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven.'*")

Second, throughout the passage, in all of the commandments, the pronoun "you" is singular. (*"You shall not make an image, you shall not steal, etc."*) That means God is addressing every hearer individually, not simply speaking to the group as a whole. The covenant might be with the people as a nation, but each individual in it is summoned to respond to God's commands.

Finally, in the Hebrew language, there are two forms for stating a prohibition: one is weaker and is used when stating a particular instance or example in which something or other must not be done; the other is stronger, a categorical prohibition that is universally valid and binding. The prohibitions of the Ten Commandments are all stated using this latter, stronger form.

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So, what are we to do with all of this information? Here is what it's all pointing to: The Ten Commandments are not simply a floating "Top Ten" list or a list of important parts of a generic moral code. They are the foundational center of the Law, which defines and regulates how the covenantal relationship with God must be lived out by the people of Israel. *They are therefore inseparable from that covenant, and only make sense in connection with that covenant.*

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Well, someone may pipe up and say, *"But isn't that the old covenant? Aren't we Christians under a different covenant? Why should we pay attention to*

these Commandments?” It’s a fair question. Unfortunately, I don’t have time today to discuss the seven main ways that question has been answered in the history of the church. But here’s my answer, in brief.

The Mosaic Law is no longer applicable to the Christian as a covenant by which we relate to God, but the individual commandments or the eternal principles on which they are founded are still applicable to the believer, either because they are included in the New Covenant or are founded in God’s nature. In other words, the Law, including the Ten Commandments, reflects God’s nature and expresses his nature to us to show us how to live out what it means to be in relationship to God. We do live under a new covenant; you cannot be right with God simply by trying to obey the Ten Commandments. But they are still part of Scripture, they reveal God to us, and they are still instructive for us to understand who God is and what it looks like to be his people.

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Paul emphasizes this for us in the passage we read earlier today from 1 Corinthians. He reminds us that the examples of the people of Israel were given to us through the writings of the Old Testament in order to instruct and direct us. That’s one of the reasons why both Jesus and the authors of the New Testament regularly appeal to the Old Testament as authoritative writings which are presumed to be inspired by God and determinative for knowing God’s will and ways. They believed that the Holy Spirit was still speaking to them through the Scriptures in their current situation. And so should we.

[Slide 23] *Conclusion*

What then is our conclusion? We have a Law, the basis of a covenant made by God with the people Israel, through which God has personally and directly revealed himself and his ways to the world. It instructs us, upon whom the ends of the age have come. Its words show us crucial principles for how to live as God’s people and presents us with an authoritative set of moral principles that define what is right and good and what is wrong and evil.

But we live in the 21st century! We live among a people who have been formed by the musings of philosophers that have been embraced by artists and film makers and musicians (and politicians and activists and social media influencers and entrepreneurs and business moguls). We live in a world that insists we start with the unquestioned assumption that there is nothing transcendent to which we are accountable. We live among people who insist that there is no such thing as morality; only preferences—and everyone’s preference is acceptable, unless it challenges the prevailing order by insisting that there is a God whose will

can be known and whose word alone determines what is right and what is wrong and what is good and what is evil!

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What do we do in such a world?

If we are the people who are related to God by a covenant, our moral standards cannot be determined by the popular culture around us, no matter how loudly it is proclaimed to be good or right. Our moral standards cannot be determined by our own preferences, or by our family's traditions, or by our own reasoning, or by the changing mores of our community, and certainly not by the changing of the calendar's page!! The moral foundations of our lives, our moral compasses, must be shaped by God's nature and his word, not by what we think ought to be the case or what others tell us they think ought to be the case.

Whatever happens elsewhere, we are different! Just as Israel was called to be a distinctive people in the midst of a world of polytheists with despicable and horrific customs and practices; just as the early church was called to be a distinctive people in the midst of a world of pagans worshiping a host of gods and goddesses in a culture of rampant immorality and barbaric practices; just as the church in every age has been called to be a distinctive people in the midst of contrary voices, brutal governments, and hostile cultures; so too we are called to be a people distinguished by the way we live in relationship to our God. If we are faithful to him, we will stand out as different—and that will not be popular. We will be misunderstood, accused of being hateful and backward and ignorant and worse; we'll be despised by some, pitied by others, mocked by many, and even attacked.

Better get used to it—if you're going to follow Jesus, this is the road we're on. And if we keep on it, there will be some who will be convinced to follow with us, when they tire of the insanity that is flooding this world.

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Transition to communion

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]

Benediction /Blessing

[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]

Invite people to receive prayer; mention membership