

Lesson 23

The Ten Commandments and the Golden Calf

Exodus 19:20-20:17, 32



Teacher, please remember that the commentary below is intended to help you in your study, not to be read to your students. Make your own list of applications, using the help from the commentary, but don't necessarily try to cover everything! Think of the students in your class, then be prayerfully selective.

Contents:

1. Preparation
2. Memory verses
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9. Bible Text (in full, without commentary)

1. Preparation

- 1) Choose memory verse
- 2) Select attention grabber to start off lesson / break the ice - optional, recommended for younger classes. See point 7.
- 3) Suggested activities- optional, recommended for younger children. See point 8.

2. Choose memory verse

Mark 12:30, ""

Matthew 4:10, "For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.' "

3. Themes

God's commands to us are perfect, but we break them so easily; that's why we need a perfect Savior!

4. Lesson introduction

To the teacher: This is a **combined lesson** on the ten commandments and Israel's idolatry when they worshiped the golden calf just a few weeks after they received the Law of God. Try to give equal emphasis to each if you can to show that God's Law is right and good, but that we all break it so quickly despite our promises to be obedient. That is why we need a perfect Savior!

Have you heard of the Ten Commandments? How many of them do you know? God gave these commandments to men to reveal His righteous standard. No man has been able to keep these rules without failure. Only Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man, was able to keep the Ten Commandments perfectly throughout His life. God knew that man would not and could not keep His commandments. God had a plan. At the right time, He would send a Savior, Jesus Christ, to bring sinful man back to God. Not only is there forgiveness for our sins through Jesus Christ, but the power to do what pleases God. One person explained, "The Law sets forth what a person ought to be, grace exhibits who God is."

After giving the Law from God to the people of Israel, Moses was on Mount Sinai for forty days talking with God. The Israelites back at the camp grew restless; instead of faith in God, they chose unbelief. Though God had sent them a cloud to lead them by day and a pillar of fire by night to remind them of His presence, the people were faithless and craved a visible God to serve. Their unbelief ended up causing a lot of problems. Unbelief results in the costly consequences of sin.

5. Verse by Verse Commentary

EXODUS 19:20-25

Only Moses and Aaron were permitted on the mountain; the priests and the people were to stand before it. God instructed Moses not to allow the people to try to get a glimpse of God; for if they did, they would perish. No wonder the people trembled at the foot of the mountain before the holy and awesome God.

EXODUS 20:1-17

Let's simplify and look once more at the Ten Commandments.

1. "You shall have no other gods before me." God wants to be first in our hearts. Is there anything more important to you than God? Anything that comes before our desire to love and worship God is an idol.
2. "Worship God only." God wants our complete attention and affection. Our love for Him should affect every area of our life.
3. "Do not take God's name in vain." Do not use God's name in wrong ways. The words we say reflect what is in the heart.—May our words honor God.
4. "Rest on the Sabbath day and think about God." The Sabbath day was a day God set aside for the children of Israel to rest and worship Him. It is similar to Sunday when many families take special time to attend church. When we are in love with our Lord, we will want to go to church and learn about Him. However, we need not just set one day aside to worship the Lord; as a Christian, we will want to continue gathering together, worshipping, and growing throughout the week.
5. "Respect and obey your parents."
6. "You shall not murder."
7. "You shall not commit adultery." Be faithful to your husband or wife.
8. "You shall not steal." Do not take what is not yours. Take care of those things that belong to others.
9. "Do not lie about others."
10. "Do not covet." We should be happy with what God has given us. We should not look at what someone else has and wish it would be ours.

The Ten Commandments show us the perfect way to live. They are "holy, just, and good" (Romans 7:12). They demonstrate the way to live according to God's rules, in harmony with God and in harmony with other people (like your brother or sister). In Psalm 19:7-9 we read, the law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes...the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether." Psalm 19:10 continues, "More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb." God desires the very best for His children and keeping God's rules is the best way, the perfect and complete and blessed way to live, in perfect harmony with God and man.

However, we find a problem, not with God's commandments, but with us. We cannot keep the commandments perfectly. We fail to do what is right. We all have broken and will continue to break God's rules, because we were born that way—with a sinful nature. The Ten Commandments reminded the people of the great gulf that existed between a holy God and man. The Bible says, "...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." (Romans 3:23). Thus, man was separated from God, because of original sin (sin we were born with) and acquired sin (sin we have committed since were born). No matter how hard man tries to live by the Ten Commandments, he will fail, "fall short." Man needs a savior--someone who will bridge the great gulf of sin that has separated man from God. Jesus, God's only Son, became the one to stand in the gap—to bridge the gulf between God and man. He took upon Himself the judgment that was due sinful man when He died on the cross. Now, those who accept God's offer of forgiveness, through faith in the work of Jesus Christ, are made "righteous"—just as if they had never sinned, just as if they had kept God's commandments perfectly.

Have you put your trust in Jesus and received God's free gift of forgiveness? Today would be a good day to take that important step. No matter our past sins, God will forgive us. He promised, "the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out" (John 6:37). Jesus died to forgive our past, present, and future sins. 1 John 1:8,9 says, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Not only did Jesus die that we might be forgiven when we fail, but He now lives to help us to do the right things. Philippians 4:13 states "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Apart from God's help and power, we cannot keep the commandments.

1 John 5:3-5 states, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith." It is in relationship with Jesus Christ that we find the power to do what we could not do by ourselves. Instead of thinking of the Ten Commandments as rules, think of them as a ruler. We use rulers to measure things; the Ten Commandments help us to measure how far short we are of God's perfect requirement. Our failures drive us to Jesus, who not only forgives us, but can do in us and for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

The law also may be pictured as a mirror. A look in the mirror may reveal a dirt smudge on your cheek. The dirt was there before you looked in the mirror, but now you are aware of the dirt and your need to be clean. So the Ten Commandments reveal our sin and failure. Unfortunately, the law can do no more to help us than to reveal our sin. But, the knowledge of our sin, drives us to God to seek forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ and power not to sin.

In John 1:17, we read, "For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Grace works inside out. We, who have put our trust in Jesus, have been given a new nature (2 Corinthians 5:17). Our new nature wants to do the things that please God, to keep His commandments. Keeping God's commandments is no longer something we have to do, but something we want to do. As it was in our old nature to sin, it is in our new nature to obey God out of a heart of love. We need to purpose in our hearts to know God through Jesus and yield our lives into His mighty hand. Let us purpose to love Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength and love others as our self; then, we will be on the road to successfully fulfilling the Ten Commandments.

Exodus 32:7-12

Impatient and full of unbelief, the Israelites had urged Aaron to construct an idol and Aaron foolishly consented. Using the gold and jewelry that God had provided for His people when they left Egypt, Aaron constructed a golden calf. How sad they gave from God's provision the materials to make something that would insult God.

The day after constructing the idol, Aaron blasphemously called for a feast before this heap of gold. This great sin had deadly results. Unbelief and sin always has consequences. [God wants us to worship only Him.](#)

Notice, God said, "your people" to Moses. God did not even claim these people as His own. A holy God could not tolerate sin; instead, God proclaimed His judgment upon this willfully disobedient and defiant people. Moses proceeded to intercede--to stand in the place of His people requesting mercy for them. He did not try to defend their actions or make excuses, but cried out for God's mercy. God heard Moses' cry just as He will hear our cries whether we are asking for mercy for our own sin or interceding for others. Remember, It was God who planted within Moses a great love for His people and called Him to lead them. Moses' intercession provided God, who is holy and must punish sin, with an excuse to show the mercy He desired to show.

EXODUS 32:19-20

Moses was carrying the very Word of God that He had written and engraved Himself. Moses broke these holy tablets when he saw the people's wickedness as they sinned before their idol, breaking God's commandments. The breaking of the tablets revealed in an outward way that the Word of the Lord had been broken by the people in their hearts.

Moses burned the idol revealing its lack of power and made the people drink it demonstrating that the Israelites must face the result of their actions. [God wants us to worship only Him.](#)

EXODUS 32:26-29

Moses called to himself all those that would stand on the side of God. These men and women were repentant (they wanted to turn from their wickedness back to God's way). God spared those who asked for forgiveness, yet those who chose to walk in sin and defy the Creator of the universe were punished and many died. So, we must choose—to serve God or follow our own ways. There is only one choice that leads to salvation and eternal life—faith in Jesus Christ who bore the penalty for our sins. To not choose to follow Jesus Christ (to be a Christian) is to choose a path leading to judgment and eternal separation from God in Hell.

EXODUS 32:33-35

Moses interceded for the people and asked God for mercy for them. God is full of great love and will bestow great grace and forgiveness upon all those who call on Him. Yet, we may still experience the results (the consequences) of our sinful actions. In Hosea we read, "For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind..." (Hosea 8:7a). Our choices are important. The wrong choices can result in tragedy; in fact, a decision not to follow Jesus Christ will result in eternal separation from God. Because the Israelites defied God's ways, many were slain. How much better to obey God and keep our focus on Him! God's intentions for our lives are only good. Psalm 37:3-4 states: "Trust in the Lord and do

good. Dwell in the land and feed on His faithfulness. Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart." [God wants us to worship only Him.](#)

6. Prayer:

Lead the children in a prayer of commitment to follow the Lord and not the world and its idols.

7. Attention Grabbers

Ten Commandment Circle Game

Read the Ten Commandments; then play this circle game: Seat children in a circle; then roll a ball to one child who will say any one of the Ten Commandments then roll the ball back to the teacher. Keep rolling the ball to other children. The following children that are chosen may then say any of the commandments that have not been mentioned (help them out!). Continue as long as you want to, speeding up the game if you would like to. This will hopefully help the children gain familiarity with all of the commandments.

Worship Only God

Talk about worship with your class. Talk about how some countries use bowing as a respectful greeting. Then bow reverently to one of the children and ask how it feels; have children practice bowing to one another and talk about it afterward. Some bowing seems different than other bowing. Sometimes you can tell if a person thinks it is silly to bow, or if they just do not want to bow, or maybe they really like you, and you can tell by their bow. God had done so much for the Israelites. How sad it must have been as God observed His people making a little cow and then bowing down to the cow.

8. Activities:

Limbo

Use a broomstick and let the children line up and go under the stick. No bending forward! Move the stick lower and lower, making it harder to pass under it. This can demonstrate the difference between the world's standard (easy) and God's standard (impossible).

With the stick very close to the ground, it is impossible for us to go under it, just like it is impossible to keep all the commandments, even though we try with all of our might. We need the help of Jesus to do the things God has commanded us to do.

The Commandment Cross

Write the two portions of the memory verse on two strips of paper (Love God on the 8 1/2" x 1" strip of paper and Love Your Neighbor on the 5 1/2" x 1" strip of paper). Staple together to form a cross. Explain that the Ten Commandments represent our relationship with God and our relationships with others and can only be made right through the cross of Jesus.

Thank The Giver

Bring a special box containing small prizes to class. Give out the small prizes, being sure to show the box in the middle of the circle while they enjoy their prizes. Ask them if they think they should thank the box for the prizes or you who brought them. The golden calf, like the box, was just a thing that could be made; but God was the one who had brought the Israelites out of slavery with many miracles.

Standing In The Gap

Moses intercedes for the evil people; he was even willing to have his name blotted out of God's book. Write down some names of people who need to be saved and pray for them as a class. Perhaps the class can pray for them every week for the next few weeks.

9. Bible text (NIV):

19:20 The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up²¹ and the LORD said to him, "Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish."²² Even the priests, who approach the LORD, must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them."

²³ Moses said to the LORD, “The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, because you yourself warned us, ‘Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy.’”

²⁴ The LORD replied, “Go down and bring Aaron up with you. But the priests and the people must not force their way through to come up to the LORD, or he will break out against them.”

²⁵ So Moses went down to the people and told them.

The Ten Commandments

20:1 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^[a] 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.”

The Golden Calf

32:1 When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods^[a] who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.”

² Aaron answered them, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.” ³ So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, “These are your gods,^[b] Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”

⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD.” ⁶ So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.

⁷ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. ⁸ They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, ‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’

⁹ “I have seen these people,” the LORD said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰ Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.”

¹¹ But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God. “LORD,” he said, “why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³ Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.’” ¹⁴ Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

¹⁵ Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. ¹⁶ The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.

¹⁷ When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses, “There is the sound of war in the camp.”

¹⁸ Moses replied:

“It is not the sound of victory,
it is not the sound of defeat;
it is the sound of singing that I hear.”

¹⁹ When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. ²⁰ And he took the calf the people had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it.

²¹ He said to Aaron, “What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?”

²² “Do not be angry, my lord,” Aaron answered. “You know how prone these people are to evil. ²³ They said to me, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.’ ²⁴ So I told them, ‘Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.’ Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!”

²⁵ Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies. ²⁶ So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, “Whoever is for the LORD, come to me.” And all the Levites rallied to him.

²⁷ Then he said to them, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.’” ²⁸ The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. ²⁹ Then Moses said, “You have been set apart to the LORD today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day.”

³⁰ The next day Moses said to the people, “You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.”

³¹ So Moses went back to the LORD and said, “Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. ³² But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.”

³³ The LORD replied to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. ³⁴ Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you. However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin.”

³⁵ And the LORD struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made.