

# The Ten Commandments Of A Marriage Covenant

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Both the covenant between God and His people and the covenant between marital partners entail privileges and obligations. The privileges of the old covenant included God's choice of the Israelites as His special people, His promise to bless them, to give them the land of Canaan, to send them a Redeemer, to reveal to them His will and to make them His chosen instruments for the conversion of the world. The obligations consisted of the commitment of the people to obey the principles of conduct God gave to them in the form of commandments (Exod. 24:3). God's choice of the Hebrew slaves as His own people was unconditional: "The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the people that are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it was because the Lord loves you..." (Deut 7:6-8)

While God's covenantal commitment to Israel was unconditional, the blessings of the covenant were conditional. If the people obeyed God's commandments, then "the Lord your God will keep with you the covenant... he will love you, bless you, and multiply you..." (Deut. 7:12-13). God spelled out the obligations of the covenant in terms of commandments. These included the Ten Commandments as well as other regulations governing their social and religious life.

**Sinai Covenant and Marriage Covenant.** It is an enlightening exercise to compare the Sinai covenant with the marriage covenant by interpreting the Ten Commandments as ten principles of conduct for married people. Paul Stevens has produced a most perceptive comparison between the two covenants by means of the following table:

<b>Covenant Between Israel and Yahweh</b>	<b>Covenant Between Wife and Husband</b>
1. No other Gods	1. Exclusive loyalty to my spouse
2. No graven image	2. Truthfulness and faithfulness
3. Not taking the Lord's name in vain	3. Honoring my spouse in public and private
4. Remembering the sabbath day	4. Giving my spouse time and rest
5. Honoring father and mother	5. Rightly relating to parents and parents-in-law
6. No murder	6. Freedom from hatred, destructive anger and uncontrolled emotions
7. No adultery	7. Sexual faithfulness; controlled appetites

8. No stealing	8. True community of property with the gift of privacy
9. No false testimony	9. Truthful communication
10. No coveting	10. Contentment: freedom from demands

This table shows that the implications of the Ten Commandments for the marriage covenant are profound. To appreciate these more fully, we shall briefly reflect on how each of the Ten Commandments apply to the marriage covenant. These reflections are an expansion and modification of Paul Steven's exercise called "marital meditations based on the commandments."

**The First Commandment** of the Sinai covenant summons the Israelite to worship only Yahweh who delivered them from Egyptian bondage: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3). In this commandment God appeals to us to put Him first in our affections, in harmony with Christ's injunction to seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness (Matt. 6:33). We can violate the spirit of the first commandment by putting our trust and confidence in such human resources as knowledge, wealth, position and people.

Applied to the marriage covenant, the first commandment calls us to give exclusive loyalty to our spouse. In practice, this means making our spouse the most important person in our life after God. It means not allowing such matters as professional pursuits, parents, children, friends, hobbies, and possessions to become our first love and thus take the first place in our affections which is to be reserved for our spouse. It also means not amending the commandment by making our loyalty to our spouse contingent on other factors, as when people say: "I am prepared to give priority to my spouse as long as it does not hinder my professional pursuits." The first commandment, then, calls us to give unconditional and exclusive loyalty to our spouse.

**The Second Commandment** of the Sinai covenant emphasizes God's spiritual nature (John 4:24) by prohibiting idolatry: "You shall not make for yourself a graven image . . . you shall not bow down to them or serve them" (Exod. 20:4-5). The commandment does not necessarily prohibit the use of illustrative material for religious instruction. Pictorial representations were employed in the sanctuary (Exod. 25:17-22), in Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 6:23-26) and in the "brass serpent" (Num 21:8,9; 2 Kings 18:4). What the commandment condemns is the veneration or adoration of religious images or pictures since these are human creations and not the Divine Creator.

Applied to the marriage covenant, the second commandment enjoins us to be truthful and faithful to our spouse. Just as we can be unfaithful to God, we can also be unfaithful to our spouse by having false image of her/him in our mind. In practice, this may mean trying to shape our partner into our own image of an "ideal spouse" by nagging or manipulating threats or rewards. It may mean clinging to false images of love relationships with real or fantasy partners. It may also mean making an idol of social relationships outside marriage. This would include forming relationships with friends or relatives that are closer than those with one's spouse. The second

commandment, then, summons us to be truthful and faithful to our spouse by not making idols of anything that can weaken our marriage covenant.

**The Third Commandment** builds upon the preceding two commandments by inculcating reverence for God: "You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain" (Exod. 20:7). Those who serve only the true God and serve Him not through false images or idols but in spirit and truth will show reverence to God by avoiding any careless or unnecessary use of His holy name.

Applied to the marriage covenant, the third commandment summons us to respect and honor our spouses in public and private. In practice, this means respecting our spouses by showing them deference and courtesy both in public and private. It means avoiding belittling our spouses, or cutting them off before the children or on social occasions. It also means not taking our spouses' presence for granted as though they were just another person. The third commandment, then, enjoins us to show respect toward our spouses by avoiding words or actions that can belittle them and thus weaken our marriage covenants.

**The Fourth Commandment** calls us to honor God by consecrating the Sabbath time to Him: "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God" (Exod. 20:8-10). The first three commandments are designed to remove obstacles to the true worship of God: the worship of other gods, the worship of God through false images, and the lack of reverence for God. Now that the obstacles have been removed, the fourth commandment invites us to truly worship God, not through the veneration or adoration of objects, but through the consecration of the Sabbath time to God. Time is the essence of our lives. The way we use our time is indicative of our priorities. By consecrating our Sabbath time to God we show that our covenant commitment to Him is for real. We are willing to offer Him not mere lip-service, but the service of our total being.

Applied to the marriage covenant, the fourth commandment invites us to show our love to our spouses by setting aside a regular and special time for them. In practice, this means learning to put aside our work or personal pleasures on a regular basis, in order to listen to, to enjoy, to celebrate and to cultivate the friendship of our spouses. It means, especially, using the climate of peace and tranquillity of the Sabbath day as an opportunity to draw closer to God and to our marital partners. It means taking time, especially on the Sabbath, to walk together, to relax together, to read together, to appreciate good music together, to meditate together, to pray together, to visit together, to bless our spouses in every way their need to be blessed.

The celebration of the Sabbath, the sign of our covenant commitment to God (Exod. 31:13; Ezek. 20:12), can strengthen the marriage covenant in two ways: theologically and practically. Theologically, the Sabbath being a sign of our sacred covenantal commitment to God, serves to remind us as marital partners of the sanctity of our covenant commitment to our spouses. Practically, the Sabbath offers time and

opportunities to Christian couples to strengthen their marriage covenants by coming closer to one another. The Fourth Commandment, then, calls us to show in a concrete way our covenantal commitment to our marriage partners by setting aside a regular and special time for them.

**The Fifth Commandment** enjoins us to honor and respect our parents: "Honor your father and your mother" (Exod. 20:12). The first four commandments tell us how to show our covenantal commitment to God while the last six commandments teach us how to love our fellow beings. Since parents stand as the representatives of God to their children, it is logical and fitting that the second table of the law begins with our duties toward our parents. The way we respect and obey our parents is indicative of our obedience and respect for God and for those placed in authority over us.

Applied to the marriage covenant, the fifth commandment calls us to rightly relate to our parents and to our spouses' parents. We do not evade our responsibility toward our parents as they grow old. As married persons, we assume responsibility for our parents rather than to them. In practice, this involves welcoming our respective parents to our home without allowing them to control our home. It involves working out with our spouse how to honor our respective parents in their old age or when ill. It involves seeking our parents' counsel, without allowing them to dictate their ideas. It involves honoring our spouse's parents by not making constant jokes about our in-laws. The fifth commandment, then, enjoins us to rightly relate to the parents of each spouse by respecting and supporting them without allowing them to interfere in our marital relationship and thus weaken our marriage covenant.

**The Sixth Commandment** orders us to respect others by not taking their lives: "You shall not kill" (Exod. 20:13). Jesus magnified the meaning of this commandment to include anger and hate (Matt 5:21,22; cf. 1 John 3:14,15). This commandment forbids not only physical violence to the body, but also moral injury to the soul. We break it when, by our example, words, or actions, we lead others to sin, thus contributing to the destruction of their souls (Matt 10:28).

Applied to the marriage covenant, the sixth commandment calls us to renounce hatred and destructive anger. In practice, this commandment forbids abusing our spouses verbally or physically. It forbids provoking our spouses to anger by criticising their appearance, speech, actions, or decisions. It forbids nourishing hostile feelings toward our spouses and attempting through words or actions to destroy their integrity. It forbids harping on at past offenses which have been confessed and forgiven. It challenges us to offer our spouses constructive and not destructive criticism. The sixth commandment, then, calls us to renounce any form of hatred or hostility that can hurt our spouse and thus weaken our marriage covenants.

**The Seventh Commandment** explicitly enjoins sexual faithfulness: "You shall not commit adultery" (Exod. 20:14). Jesus magnified this commandment to include not only the physical act of adultery but also any kind of impure act, word or thought (Matt

5:27,28). The seventh commandment summons us to be faithful to our marriage covenant by refraining from illicit sexual acts or thoughts.

In practice, this commandment calls us to be faithful to our spouse in our body as well as in our mind (Matt. 5:27-30). Such fidelity involves among other things: not seeking sexual experiences outside marriage; not allowing the attractiveness of members of the opposite sex to become deliberate fantasy of intimacy in our mind; repulsing thoughts of sexual lust or perversion and refusing to be sexually stimulated by erotic books, films or magazines; treating our spouse as the object of our love and romance rather than as the means of sexual gratification; viewing sex as a good gift of our Creator and as an expression of mutual and total self-giving to a love relationship. The seventh commandment, then, calls us to honor our marriage covenant by being sexually faithful to our spouse both mentally and physically.

**The Eighth Commandment** enjoins us to respect others by not stealing what rightfully belongs to them: "You shall not steal" (Exod. 20:15). This commandment forbids any act by which we dishonestly obtain the goods or services of others. We may steal from others in many subtle ways: withholding or appropriating what rightfully belongs to others, taking credit for the work done by others, robbing others of their reputation through slanderous gossip, or by depriving others of the remuneration or consideration they have a right to expect.

Applied to the marriage covenant, the eighth commandment summons us to live in true community, without taking from our partners the right of privacy and self-determination. In practice, this means that we must not deprive our spouses of the right to make their decisions in demanding a complete community of property. It means that one spouse must not control the finances so that the other feels dispossessed. It means that we must not hold back any security from our partner as a safety measure or bargaining chip. It means that no sacrificial demands must be made of our partners in order to please our personal desires or whims. It means that we must not "steal" the individuality, dignity, and power of our spouses, by making decisions for them. It means that, like Zacchaeus, we must be willing to give back what we have taken from our spouse: freedom, money, dignity, power, goods. The eighth commandment, then, calls us to honor our marriage covenants by living in a true community, without "stealing" from our partners their freedom, dignity, money, power, or goods.

**The Ninth Commandment** enjoins us to respect others by speaking truthfully about them: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exod. 20:16). This commandment is violated by speaking evil of others, misrepresenting their motives, misquoting their words, judging their motives, and criticising their efforts. This commandment may also be broken by remaining silent when hearing an innocent person unjustly maligned. We are guilty of bearing "false witness" whenever we tamper with truth in order to benefit ourselves or a cause that we espouse.

Applied to the marriage covenant, the ninth commandment enjoins us to be faithful communicators with our spouses. In practice, this involves respecting our spouses'

integrity by not "hitting them below the belt," or by not exaggerating the truth about them, saying, for example, "You never take my feelings in consideration ... You always do what you like ...."It involves learning to understand not only the words but also the feelings behind the words of our spouse. This enables us to interpret their thoughts and feelings more accurately. We can bear false witness against our spouses by projecting on them what we think they say or mean by certain actions. We can bear false witness also by quoting our spouses out of context or by suppressing information that would give more accurate pictures of them. The ninth commandment, then, enjoins us to be faithful communicators with our spouses by learning to accurately understand, interpret and represent their words, actions and feelings.

**The Tenth Commandment** supplements the eighth by attacking the root from which theft grows, namely, covetousness: "You shall not covet..."(Exod. 20:17). This commandment differs from the other nine by prohibiting not only the outward act but also the inner thought from which the action springs. It establishes the important principle that we are accountable before God not only for our actions but also for our intentions. It also reveals the profound truth that we need not be controlled by our natural desire to covet what belongs to others, because by divine grace we can control our unlawful desires and passions (Phil. 2:13).

Applied to the marriage covenant, the tenth commandment enjoins us to be content and grateful for our spouses. In practice, this contentment is expressed in different ways: refraining from comparing our spouses' talents or performances with those of other spouses; welcoming and rejoicing over our spouses' achievements, gifts, and experiences without coveting them for ourselves; learning to express gratitude to God every day for giving us the spouses we have; maintaining the proper reserve toward persons of the opposite sex and reserving expressions of special affections for our spouses; avoiding making unreasonable demands on our spouses to force them to become like real or fictitious spouses we covet. The tenth commandment, then, enjoins us to be content with and for our spouses, by resisting the temptation to look for "greener grass over the other side of the fence."