



TEN WORDS,
TWO SIGNS,
ONE PRAYER

Core Practices of the Christian Faith

Timothy C. Tennent

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Introduction

Catechesis, or the oral instruction that a new Christian receives, is sometimes wrongly understood as only focused on the key doctrines or beliefs of the church. However, while it is true that it is essential that the church protect itself against false teachings and preserve the apostolic witness, this is not the sole function of catechesis. Historic catechesis has always been like a three-legged stool; the loss of any part results in the collapse of the whole. The three “legs” of catechesis are *doctrine*, *holiness*, and *practice*. In other words, the church has not been satisfied that the faith has been “passed on” until the new believer is shaped and formed in what he or she believes (doctrine), how he or she lives (moral/holiness), and what he or she practices (spiritual disciplines).

A survey of catechesis over the centuries shows a remarkable agreement that the core doctrines of the church are best captured in the Apostles’ Creed; the core moral or holiness code is best captured in the Ten Commandments; and the core spiritual disciplines are best captured in the Lord’s Prayer

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and the sacraments. Thus, a common outline for catechesis would look something like this:

Apostolic doctrine:	“What the church believes”	Apostles’ Creed
Christian holiness:	“How the church lives”	Ten Commandments
Spiritual disciplines:	“Core practices of the church”	Lord’s Prayer/ sacraments

This book is a sequel to two previous publications entitled *This We Believe!* and *Thirty Questions*. In *This We Believe!* I dedicated a chapter to a simple, straightforward explanation of each phrase of the Apostles’ Creed. It is being used by churches around the country (and, indeed, all over the world, as it has now been translated into several languages) to assist in the catechesis of the church.

In *Thirty Questions*, I looked at the top thirty questions that every Christian should be able to answer. This book also comes with an explanation that answers each of the thirty questions so that parents or Sunday school teachers can easily use this guide to instruct and to train new Christians in the faith. It is in question-and-answer format because not only has this traditionally been a common catechetical device, but it naturally builds on the innate curiosity children

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have that leads them to ask questions. Both of these previous books can be obtained through [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) or [seedbed.com](https://www.seedbed.com).

This little book, *Ten Words, Two Signs, One Prayer*, is the third and final installment in this catechesis series. It focuses on the Ten Commandments, two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the Lord's Prayer, thereby completing the last two legs of the stool.

TEN WORDS,
TWO SIGNS,
ONE PRAYER

PART I



The Ten Commandments

Introduction: The Ten Commandments and the Moral Code of the Old Testament

The Ten Commandments appear twice in the Old Testament. The first time they appear is when the Israelites have been delivered out of centuries of slavery and brought through the Red Sea. One of the early stops in their wilderness wanderings was Mount Sinai (also called Mount Horeb). It was there that Moses received the Ten Commandments from God.

The Ten Commandments appear a second time in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 5. By this time, a whole new generation stands before Moses, as the previous generation had died in the wilderness because of their unbelief and rebellion against God. Moses is at the end of his life, and the book of Deuteronomy contains five final sermons Moses gives to the people before he dies. The Israelites are all gathered on the plains of Moab and listening to Moses restate the law a second time. This is why the book is called *Deuteronomy*, a

word that means “Second Law,” meaning the Law is being repeated a second time. Thus, in Deuteronomy 5, the Ten Commandments are repeated, as is much of the legislation that appeared earlier in Leviticus.

When Moses originally received the Law from God, it took place on Mount Sinai. Moses ascended the mountain and received the Law through a series of revelations from God over a forty-day period. We do not know precisely how these laws came to Moses, but the New Testament indicates (and it was widely taught in Judaism) that the Law was given to Moses through the mediation of angels (Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19). However, something dramatic happened with the Ten Commandments. These commands were given directly by God to Moses and were actually written on two tablets of stone by the very “finger” of God. Exodus 31:18 says that “he [God] gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God” (ESV).

These commands are actually called the Ten Commandments in several passages of Scripture, including Exodus 34:28, Deuteronomy 4:13, and Deuteronomy 10:4. The phrase can also be translated “Ten Words,” and frequently the Ten Commandments are referred to by Jewish and Christian teachers as the Decalogue, which means the “Ten Words.”

Traditionally, Jewish rabbis, dating back to a third-century rabbi named Simlai, have identified 613 distinct laws

that appear in the Old Testament. Rabbi Simlai identified 248 of these as “positive commands,” namely, commands for us to do something. For example, Leviticus 19:36 commanded the Israelites to use just measurements and weights. It was common at that time for people to sell food in the market by weight. Some merchants would secretly cheat people by using weights that were below the standard weight. This command showed God’s interest in promoting integrity in the marketplace.

Three hundred sixty-five of the commands were “prohibition commands,” telling God’s people to avoid certain things. For example, Leviticus 19:14 commanded them not to put an obstacle in front of a blind man, demonstrating God’s special kindness toward those with special needs.

The 365 “thou shalt nots” and the 248 “thou shalts” add up to the overall number of 613. So, if there are 613 laws, what makes the Ten Commandments so special, and why were they given to us in such a dramatic fashion?

The Ten Commandments are broad, summative commands. This means that all of the 613 laws of the Old Testament will, in one way or another, find their fulfillment and logical expression in one of the ten. Thus, the Ten Commandments are a wonderful way for someone to understand the heart of the Law. They are not simply a set of negative commands. Rather, the Ten Commandments represent the pathway out of our own self-orientation and into a

whole new orientation that puts God, ourselves, and others in their rightful places.

It has been observed that of the 613 laws, only 77 of the positive commands and 194 of the negative commands apply today because quite a few of the laws relate to specific actions around the temple (which no longer exists) and the particular practices related to Israelite worship (which no longer apply to the church). Yet, even those commands, if examined closely, reflect deeper moral concerns of God which find their broad expression in the Ten Commandments. Thus, the Ten Commandments are not bound by any particular time, culture, or covenant. They reflect a timeless moral code that is applicable to all people everywhere. For this reason, the Ten Commandments have been found at the core of Christian catechesis manuals for centuries.

Occasionally some modern Christians will object to any emphasis on the Law on the grounds that we are saved by grace and are, therefore, free from the Law. They sometimes cite Galatians 3:24–25, where Paul says, “So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.” The modern objection is based on several misunderstandings, which can easily be cleared up.

First of all, it is important to understand that this passage is referring to justification, not salvation. Justification is the initial act of being set right with God. This is like the

entrance, or doorway, into the Christian faith. It is absolutely true that no amount of law keeping can ever enable someone to enter heaven or earn salvation through works. The Bible makes this clear in many passages, including Romans 3:24, which says that we are “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

However, salvation is a much bigger concept than justification. When we are forgiven for all of our sins, God no longer sees our sins, but He sees the righteousness of Jesus Christ. This is, of course, the good news of the gospel. However, this is an alien righteousness. In other words, it is a righteousness belonging to Christ, not to us. Thus, justification is followed by sanctification, where we are actually made righteous. John Wesley called this “going on to perfection.” (Christians disagree about how much progress toward righteousness is possible in this life, but all agree on the importance of living righteously.)

Second, it is through sanctification that our lives are formed and shaped by holiness. It is not to earn our justification; it is to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, and become transformed more and more into His likeness. There are dozens of passages that call us to a holy life. For example, 1 Peter calls us to “not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance,” but instead, we are to “be holy” (1:14–16). Paul declares that “it is God’s will that you should be sanctified . . . for God did not call us to be impure, but to

live a holy life” (1 Thess. 4:3, 7). The writer of Hebrews tells us that “without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14).

When Paul wrote in Galatians 3:25 that we were “no longer under the supervision of the law,” it should not be understood that we are free from the moral Law of God. What it means is that the Law was incapable of making us holy, so we needed a better supervisor than a mere command. In short, we need more than a command to make us holy; we need the tutelage of Christ. So Christ is now our new and better “supervisor.” He is our mentor, our guide, our example, and our champion in holiness. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God can transform us in ways that the Law never dreamed of.

But the point is that Christ now enables us to truly become holy, not that Christ’s redemption somehow frees us from all moral obligations and we can live however we want to because we have been “saved by grace.” Paul himself condemns this attitude when he says, “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? (Rom. 6:1–2). In short, we should never, ever confuse justification with salvation, any more than we should confuse the front door of a house for the entire house.

In fact, even justification and sanctification are not the full picture of salvation. Scripture teaches that even after we die we will receive a final glorification whereby we will be fully

transformed into Christ's likeness in even deeper and more profound ways than our sanctification here can accomplish. So, *salvation* is actually a very broad term that encompasses justification, sanctification, and final glorification.

The Ten Commandments, therefore, remain the best summary of God's moral code. They are our initial tutelage into the life of holiness. The presence and power of Christ not only enable us to keep these Ten Commandments, but empower us for the deeper obedience to which these laws ultimately point. The chapters that follow will take each of the commands one by one and give a brief exposition as to what it means and how it may apply to our twenty-first-century context.

COMMANDMENT 1

You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me

This first command, found in Exodus 20:3, stands at the head of the Ten Commandments. It begins in a way that, for some, may seem surprising. One normally thinks about moral commands as relating to our relationship one with another. If the Decalogue had begun with commands such as, “Do not steal,” or, “Do not lie,” and so forth, it would have sounded a lot like an array of moral codes ranging from the Eightfold Path of Buddhism to the Egyptian code of Ma’at to the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi. All of these ancient codes regulate a whole range of outward behavior, from purchasing property, to settling disputes between people, to divorce, but they do not reference any moral obligation toward God. The Ten Commandments, conversely, build all morality on the foundation of our moral obligation toward God. This reinforces the fact that, biblically speaking, there is no such thing as morality that is not theological. In other

words, all morality in our relationships must be first rooted in a right relationship with God.

The first commandment calls us to have no other gods before Him. This command reaches far deeper than merely closing the door on an atheistic worldview. Just because you do not deny the existence of God does not mean that you have kept this commandment. Even if you affirm that God loves you and is the source of your redemption, you may not have fully kept this command. The first commandment is about the whole orientation of our lives. It means the end of a compartmentalized life that gives God a certain portion (like Sunday morning) and then orients the rest of our lives around our own perceived needs and goals.

The New Testament demonstrates the direction of this first command when Jesus Himself is asked, “Which is the greatest commandment?” Jesus replies by saying, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 22:36–40 *ESV*).

No study of the Ten Commandments would be complete without a reflection on this teaching of Jesus. I have already pointed out that the Ten Commandments are a grand summary of the 613 laws of the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Jesus summarizes the Ten Commandments

You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me

even further, as all fall under two general headings: (1) Love God and (2) Love your neighbor. Jesus' words in Matthew are clearly a summary of the Ten Commandments, since they are divided into these two general areas. The first four commandments deal with loving God (no other gods before Me, no idols, do not misuse the name of the Lord your God, and remember the Sabbath Day) and the last six focus on loving your neighbor (honor your father and mother, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, and do not covet).

When Jesus is asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" He begins by saying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment" (vv. 37-38 ESV). Notice that Jesus calls this the "great" and the "first" commandment. It is not just an allusion to the first part of the Ten Commandments (commandments 1-4), but in particular, an exposition of the first of the Ten Commandments. The way we have no other gods before us is to have our whole orientation around the true and living God. We obey this command by loving God with all our hearts, souls, and minds! This means that the whole focus of our lives is on Him. It encompasses our hearts, our minds, our whole strength and will.

Jesus Himself gives us the greatest exposition of the first commandment. His use of words like "heart," "soul," and

“mind” gives us in seed form the full range of human life and activity. When Jesus says we are to love God with our whole hearts, He is not referring primarily to an emotional or privatized love in the way this term is often used to describe our devotion to God. It, of course, does not exclude this. Jesus actually points us to a deeper reality. The first commandment encompasses all of our active energies, our minds, and indeed, the whole orientation of our lives before God. When we roll up our sleeves to serve the poor, we are loving God. When we read the Scriptures and think about the ways of God, we are loving God. When we share our faith with others, we are loving God. The first commandment does not merely happen during a Sunday morning worship service or in our daily times of prayer and devotion. The first commandment is the active God-ward orientation of our whole lives throughout the day. This is the commandment that enables us to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17 *ESV*). It is also the commandment that enables us to not pass the wounded traveler by.

The first commandment is the foundation for our keeping of the whole of the Ten Commandments. It is the most basic reorientation from a life directed toward ourselves to a life directed toward God. Therefore, we should view this first commandment as the doorway into the whole life of faith. It sets our feet on the right path and orients us in the right direction for all that follows.