The TEN
COMMANDMENTS

12 studies
for individuals or groups

Rob Suggs

With Notes for Leaders
Scripture Union is an international Christian charity working with churches in more than 130 countries providing resources to bring the good news about Jesus Christ to children, young people and families – and to encourage them to develop spiritually through the Bible and prayer. As well as a network of volunteers, staff and associates who run holidays, church-based events and school Christian groups, Scripture Union produces a wide range of publications and supports those who use their resources through training programmes.

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Getting the Most Out of *The Ten Commandments*

In Bill Watterson’s comic strip, Calvin and Hobbes, Calvin challenges Hobbes the tiger to an outdoor game. He hits a grounder, only to find Hobbes has beaten him to first base. Undaunted, the boy turns and sprints for third, or he quickly creates a new base. Maybe he punts. All’s fair in “Calvinball,” a chaotic competition in which rules are spontaneous and unbinding.

Watterson has retired his comic strip. But here in the real world, many of us are playing our own versions of “Calvinball.” Rules are recognized and affirmed—until they become inconvenient. What absolute principles govern business endeavors? Is marriage really “til death do us part”? After a few rounds of the game, we begin to wonder if rules are such a bad thing after all. We begin to yearn for simple, value-enriched guidelines for living. The problem: Who writes the rules and marks the boundaries?

Thousands of years ago, the people of God found themselves at a similar crossroad in the wilderness. Behind them lay slavery and degradation, ahead gleamed the promise of freedom and prosperity. All things seemed possible—including loss of direction, starvation and exposure. Some of them began to have second thoughts about this freedom idea. After all, slavery had its points: security, for one. Freedom, once acquired, can be terrifying.

At this defining moment, Moses climbed a mountain to seek the answers from the God who had provided the freedom. When he descended, he carried in his hands and heart a concise declaration of wisdom for the ages. We know it as the Ten Commandments, though the Old Testament speaks of the “Ten Words.”

Are these the boundaries we crave? Yes, but they are much more
The Ten Commandments

than that. These are rules that restrict, yet give freedom. They are words of prevention, but also protection. They are both fundamental and profound, inner-directed and outward-reaching. God gave us ten words that establish identity: ours and his. The Ten Commandments constitute a “Declaration of Dependence.” They affirm our dependence on God and each other.

Some years ago, a well-known media magnate issued his own update of the commandments. The old, “negative” ones, he declared had become so much religious baggage. He offered the world an alternative list of ten politically correct “affirmations” to replace the dreary old commandments. Cullen Murphy, writing in *The Atlantic Monthly*, observed that “suggestions for replacing the Ten Commandments altogether are, in fact, becoming common” (“Broken Covenant?” November 1996, pp. 22-24). Not too surprisingly, these updates fail to catch on. It turns out that people are drawn to those dusty words engraved on the courthouse door. They are willing to affirm that such acts as killing and stealing are, yes, “negative.”

The commandments retain their power. As a matter of fact, you might be surprised by their everyday relevance. The stones on which God’s finger etched the commandments are lost, but the words live on, for our own hearts bear his fingerprints. Ten words mark the starting point to knowing God and living in society, but they lead us to yet another crossroad, where law ends and grace begins.

On the way, however, there is a mountain to climb. Alongside Moses, we seek God’s face, and our prayer is to receive the Word of Life clearly and eagerly. Like Moses, we will come away from the encounter with glowing faces, and people will know at a glance that we have encountered not just God’s laws but God himself.

Suggestions for Individual Study

1. As you begin each study, pray that God will speak to you through his Word.

2. Read the introduction to the study and respond to the personal reflection question or exercise. This is designed to help you focus on God and on the theme of the study.

3. Each study deals with a particular passage—so that you can
get the most out of the ten commandments

4. This is an inductive Bible study, designed to help you discover for yourself what Scripture is saying. The study includes three types of questions. Observation questions ask about the basic facts: who, what, when, where and how. Interpretation questions delve into the meaning of the passage. Application questions help you discover the implications of the text for growing in Christ. These three keys unlock the treasures of Scripture.

Write your answers to the questions in the spaces provided or in a personal journal. Writing can bring clarity and deeper understanding of yourself and of God’s Word.

5. It might be good to have a Bible dictionary handy. Use it to look up any unfamiliar words, names or places.

6. Use the prayer suggestion to guide you in thanking God for what you have learned and to pray about the applications that have come to mind.

7. You may want to go on to the suggestion under “Now or Later,” or you may want to use that idea for your next study.

Suggestions for Members of a Group Study

1. Come to the study prepared. Follow the suggestions for individual study mentioned above. You will find that careful preparation will greatly enrich your time spent in group discussion.

2. Be willing to participate in the discussion. The leader of your group will not be lecturing. Instead, he or she will be encouraging the members of the group to discuss what they have learned. The leader will be asking the questions that are found in this guide.

3. Stick to the topic being discussed. Your answers should be based on the verses which are the focus of the discussion and not on outside authorities such as commentaries or speakers. These studies focus on a particular passage of Scripture. Only rarely should you refer to other portions of the Bible. This allows for everyone to participate in in-depth study on equal ground.
4. Be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they describe what they have learned. You may be surprised by their insights! Each question assumes a variety of answers. Many questions do not have “right” answers, particularly questions that aim at meaning or application. Instead the questions push us to explore the passage more thoroughly.

When possible, link what you say to the comments of others. Also, be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.

5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to express our thoughts that we leave too little opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to also.

6. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of the group. Pray that you will have an enjoyable and profitable time together, but also that as a result of the study you will find ways that you can take action individually and/or as a group.

7. Remember that anything said in the group is considered confidential and should not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.

8. If you are the group leader, you will find additional suggestions at the back of the guide.
It's tough being a child. At every turn there are new laws: the “law of crossing the street,” the “law of speaking and interrupting.” Then there is the complex maze of the “dinner table law.” Childhood is marked by hearing and understanding instruction. If we accept and follow these customs, we become capable, functioning adults.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Think back to when you were a child or a teen. Give an example of a time you obeyed your parents’ rules, even though your parents weren’t around.

PERSONAL REFLECTION. Why does keeping the commandments of God require faith?

The book of Exodus describes the childhood of Israel. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who settled in Egypt, had become slaves. Under the leadership of Moses and his brother Aaron, and through God's miracles, they managed an escape. The book of Exodus (which means “departure” or “exit”) lays the foundation of God's Old
Testament revelation about himself: his name, his requirements and how he is to be worshiped. The focal point of this revelation is the giving of the law to Moses at Mount Sinai.

We are accustomed to hearing the Ten Commandments in church and seeing them on stone monuments. Perhaps you had to recite them when you were confirmed or joined the church. Read Exodus 19:16-19 to bring the original setting to life.

1. What would you have seen and heard if you had been there?

2. Read Exodus 20. As you hear the law delivered, what stands out to you?

3. How does God establish his right to issue these commands to the Israelites (v. 2)?

4. What is the unifying theme of the first four commands (vv. 3-11)?

5. Why is it appropriate that these four commands should come first?
6. Focus on the picture of God in the first four commandments. How might you need to adjust your image of God to fit with what these commands tell us about who God is?

7. How does the commandment to honor parents (v. 12) serve as a “hinge” between the first four and the final five commandments?

8. What logic do you find in the order of the final five commandments in verses 13-17?

9. The Israelites fall back in fear from the manifestations of God's presence (vv. 18-19). Moses tells them “Do not be afraid,” then goes on to express the hope that the “fear of God” will stay with them (v. 20). How do you resolve the apparent contradiction in Moses’ words?

10. How exactly is God testing the Israelites (v. 20)?

11. Given what the people have experienced, why is a sacrifice appropriate (v. 24)?
12. Which of the Ten Commandments presents the greatest challenge to you right now?

13. Based on these commandments, what is one way in which you sense God calling you to be more obedient in the coming week, and how will you obey?

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9). In a time of quietness, pray for God’s forgiveness in Christ. Ask for grace to keep these laws in your heart as well as externally. Thank God for his mercy.

**Now or Later**
Consider how the Ten Commandments reveal the character of God. Write a psalm of praise for who God is, as these commandments reveal him.

What changes would you like to see in your life as this study of the commandments unfolds? Make this a matter of reflection and prayer.
The One & Only

1 Kings 18:16-39

Which investment strategy is right for me? How can I stay healthy and live a long life? Who has the solution to my emotional problems? Where can I find peace and success? There is no shortage of gurus to advise us in every area of life. We can choose among a vast assortment of health gurus, fitness gurus, investment gurus, technology gurus, self-help gurus and, presumably, gurus of guruism. But sometimes gurus collide: which has the best diet plan or career-path strategy? It's your call.

The first commandment simplifies things. Its message is this: Follow the Leader—the only Leader.

GROUP DISCUSSION. In Exodus 20:3 God says, “You shall have no other gods before me.” The first commandment could not be simpler, and humanity has found a million ways to break it. Almost anything can be a god. From your observation, what gods are the most popular today?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What false gods compete most for your loyalty to the one true God (Exodus 20:3)?
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After King Solomon died, his kingdom split into the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Each had a succession of kings, many of whom rebelled against God and led the people into idolatry. One of the worst was Ahab, king of Israel. The prophet Elijah boldly stood up to Ahab. During a severe drought, Elijah confronted the prophets of the fertility god Baal, who were supported by Ahab’s wife Jezebel. Read 1 Kings 18:16-39.

1. Contrast the general mood and attitude of Elijah with the mood and attitude of the followers of Baal throughout this passage.

2. Ahab calls Elijah “you troubler of Israel” (v. 17). What does that reveal about his frame of mind?

3. For his confrontation, Elijah deliberately chooses Mount Carmel, a location commonly used for the worship of Baal—in other words, Baal’s own “turf” (v. 19). Why is this a strategic choice?

4. What are some possible contexts (“turfs”) in which the gods of this world can be confronted and challenged today?

5. What risks does Elijah take by calling for a public confrontation (vv. 19-20)?
6. The Hebrew term translated “waver” can also mean “to limp” (v. 21). What does Elijah mean by his accusation of wavering?

7. Elijah employs historic symbolism in building an altar (vv. 31-32). Why is this important?

8. How has your own spiritual history given you courage in times of testing?

9. Water would be a precious commodity during a drought. Why would Elijah make a show of pouring it repeatedly over an altar built for fire (vv. 33-34)?

10. How do verses 36 and 37 reveal that this confrontation will not be just a show of power?

11. How does God answer Elijah, and with what results (vv. 38-39)?

12. Humanly speaking, the odds were definitely against Elijah. It was 450 to 1, not to mention 400 others in verse 19, plus Ahab and