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# The Ten Plagues

*Scripture: Exodus 7:14-12:32*

**Theme: God is greater than any false god or power**

*High School (Ages 15-18)*

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Free curriculum for small and rural churches

## Lesson Overview

"The Ten Commandments: God's Law as a Mirror of His Nature and Our Depravity" This lesson explores the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) not as abstract rules, but as God's self-revelation, His ethical framework exposing both His holiness and our human failure. Theologians like Augustine and Reformation thinkers argue that while the Law reveals divine standards (e.g., the Decalogue's structure mirrors God's perfect justice), it also uncovers our sinful rebellion, forcing us to rely on Christ's atonement. Real-world application: Like the Israelites, we live under God's unchanging law today, whether in law courts, personal morality, or societal ethics, but only through faith in Jesus do we find fulfillment (Romans 8:2). (Encouragement for teachers: Emphasize that this isn't a "don't list" but a do narrative, God's way leads to freedom through His Word and cross.)

## Bible Story

Title: God's Unwritten Law: The Ten Commandments and the Freedom They Demand

When Moses ascended Mount Sinai, God did not simply hand him a scroll of rules to memorize, He revealed Himself as a God of relationship, not just law. At the heart of Exodus 20:1, 17 lies a radical truth: the Ten Commandments are not arbitrary restrictions but a mirror reflecting the character of God and the design He intended for humanity. God does not demand obedience out of arbitrary authority but because He knows that His people, created in His image, are capable of true freedom only when their lives are governed by His moral order. The first four commands are negative in form but positive in intent: they guard against idolatry, honor God's sovereignty, and respect His role as Creator. They are not meant to be crushed under legalism but to free us from the tyranny of self-centeredness and to align our wills with God's glorious design.

The second half of the Decalogue (Commandments 5, 10) shifts focus to interpersonal relationships, revealing God's heart for justice, dignity, and mercy. These commands are not just about avoiding sin but about cultivating a life of

integrity, whether in marriage, family, work, or community. The commandments on murder, adultery, theft, and coveting expose the root of human brokenness: envy, greed, and a distorted sense of worth. When we violate these, we do not just break rules; we reject the very foundation of human flourishing, a society built on trust, respect, and mutual care. For high school students, this raises profound questions: How do we reconcile the legalistic tone of these commands with a God who is not a cosmic enforcer but a Father who loves us? The answer lies in understanding that these laws are not a prison but a safeguard, a framework that protects us from ourselves so we can experience true freedom.

Theologically, the Ten Commandments serve as both a condemnation and a commission. They expose sin's presence in every heart while simultaneously revealing God's redemptive plan: through Christ, the law is fulfilled (Matthew 5:17). In our age of moral relativism, where "personal freedom" often collides with "moral compromise," the commandments challenge us to ask: What does it mean to live under God's authority when the world demands autonomy? The answer is not found in blind obedience but in humbling ourselves under God's Word, allowing it to shape our desires so we can love others as He loves us.

For high schoolers, the real-world application is this: the Ten Commandments are not just ancient rules but blueprints for a life of integrity in a culture that often glorifies instant gratification, performative justice, or superficial "freedom." Whether in social media, friendships, or decision-making, these commands invite us to ask: Am I treating others with dignity? Am I honoring God in how I spend my time and energy? The freedom they offer is not the absence of rules but the space to love well, serve others, and live in alignment with God's design, a design that is not restrictive but restoring.

This story matters because it reminds us that God's law is not a cage but a ladder. It climbs from our sin up to His grace, from our chaos to His order, and from our brokenness to His healing. In a world that often reduces faith to personal preference, the Ten Commandments are a bold declaration: God's way is the only way that truly sets us free.

## Key Verse

### Exodus 12:12

Exodus 20:20 teaches that God's presence isn't meant to terrify us but to transform us, a divine call to trust His authority over our fear of judgment. The verse connects fear of God (theophobia) with a deeper, sacred awe (theophilia) that guides moral courage and self-control, mirroring how faith often forces us to confront hypocrisy and choose integrity over comfort in real-life struggles. Theological link: It echoes Jesus' warning in Matthew 10:28 ("Do not be afraid; more than that, do not be discouraged"), framing divine scrutiny as a gift that refines character rather than a punishment. Real-world application: Fear of judgment can paralyze; God's presence here offers a paradoxical freedom, like a coach in the weight room: you must fight to grow, but their presence is what lets you do it.

## Activities

### Activity 1:

1. Divide into Groups (3, 5 students): Assign each group one Commandment (e.g., Exodus 20:12, 13, "Honor your father and mother") or a thematic pair (e.g., "No coveting" + "No murder").
2. Preparation (3 min): Each student writes one counterargument (e.g., "Why might society today struggle to honor parents?") and one affirming point (e.g., "How does this commandment protect vulnerable families?") on index cards.
3. Debate (7 min):
4. Groups discuss their Commandment's relevance in today's world.
5. Use the cards to guide debate: One student presents a counterargument; another counters with biblical/theological reasoning.

6. Invite the group to draft a 1-sentence summary of their stance (e.g., "Honoring parents is still vital but must adapt to modern family structures").
7. Wrap-Up (3 min): Groups share their summary with the class. Facilitate a class-wide discussion: Which arguments resonated most? How does the Commandment challenge them personally?
8. Theological Connections:
9. Intellectual Honesty: Forces students to grapple with whether the Commandments are "timeless" or "cultural constructs." (Cf. Exodus 34:6, God's love transcends eras.)
10. Real-World Application: Links to issues like parental authority, economic inequality, or social media pressure. Example: A student might explore how "No coveting" intersects with consumerism.
2. Activity: "Commandment as Law Code: Legal or Ethical?"
12. Analyze Structure (5 min):
13. Have students fold a sheet of paper into three columns with these labels:
14. Legal Commandment? (e.g., "You shall have no other gods" = "You must worship only God.")
15. Ethical Principle? (e.g., "You shall not murder" = "Respect life.")
16. Moral Boundary? (e.g., "You shall not lie" = "Be truthful in all contexts.")
17. Guide them to categorize 3, 4 Commandments and justify their choices with biblical context.
18. Creative Task (5 min):
19. Option A (Legal Reform): Redesign a Commandment as a modern law (e.g., "No hate speech" instead of "You shall not bear false witness").
20. Option B (Ethical Expansion): Expand a Commandment into a principle (e.g., "Honor your elders" "Respect all generations").
21. Option C (Hybrid): Combine both (e.g., "Protect vulnerable communities" to address "No murder").
22. Collage Creation (3, 5 min):
23. Students cut out/glue images from magazines (or draw) that illustrate their Commandment's essence.
24. Write a short caption (1 sentence) explaining their design's theological purpose.
25. Class Showcase (2 min):
26. Groups present their Commandment and why they believe it's either legal/ethical or a hybrid.
27. Discuss: How does the Commandment's form reflect God's nature? Why might people struggle to distinguish between law and principle today?
28. Theological Connections:
29. Law vs. Grace: Explores how the Commandments expose human failure (e.g., Psalm 19:7, 9) and invite repentance (Cf. Romans 10:4).
30. Real-World Application: Relates to debates like "Is 'no murder' just about physical harm, or all life?" or "How does 'honor thy father' apply to workplace mentorship?"
31. Key Considerations for Both Activities:
32. Facilitate Critical
33. Personal Connection: End with reflective questions:
34. "Which Commandment feels hardest to live out? Why?"
35. "How might ignoring one Commandment lead to breaking others?" (Cf. Matthew 5:17, 19).
36. Theological Depth: Use the activities to introduce concepts like moral realism (Is the Commandment objective or subjective?) and covenant theology (How do these laws point to God's redemptive plan?).
37. Adaptations:
38. For anxious students, allow a "safe zone" where they can argue against a Commandment's relevance.
39. For engaged students, extend the debate to explore how societies historically interpreted Commandments (e.g., ancient Near Eastern laws vs. Jewish tradition).

## Discussion Questions

- Here are four intellectually engaging, open-ended discussion questions designed to explore the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) through theological, ethical, and real-world lenses. These prompts encourage critical thinking, personal reflection, and connection to the broader implications of these foundational laws:
- 1. Divine Revelation vs. Human Construct: What Does It Mean for God to Speak Directly to Humanity?
- "God did not just give Moses a set of rules on a mountain, He revealed His character, purpose, and will in the Ten Commandments. These aren't just 'do's and don'ts'; they are reflections of who God is: just, holy, and loving. How might the idea that God's law comes from Him, not human tradition, philosophy, or societal pressure, reshape how you think about morality today? Consider questions like: Why do you think God chose this particular way to communicate (e.g., through a theophany like the burning bush)? How might His commands challenge or affirm your own ethical frameworks? How do you reconcile the idea of absolute law with the complexity of human decision-making?"
- Theological Tie: Explore how these commandments function as both covenant (binding God and humanity) and revelation (showing God's nature). How does this affect modern debates on religious freedom vs. moral absolutes?
- 2. The Commandments as a Reflection of God's Kingdom: How Do They Point to a Higher Good?
- "The Ten Commandments aren't just about breaking bad habits, they're a roadmap to God's kingdom. For example, the first four commands (on God, family, and property) establish relationships of worship, honor, and justice. The last three (on self, others, and creation) call us to stewardship and integrity. If these laws were given to guide Israel in worship and service, how might they still apply to your life today as a way to align with God's purposes? Think about:
- How does 'Honor your father and mother' (Exodus 20:12) still resonate in families, schools, or communities today? What does it look like to 'honor' people who may not always deserve it?
- The commandment 'Do not steal' (Exodus 20:15) is often paired with the idea of social responsibility. How does this intersect with modern debates on wealth, labor rights, or economic inequality? Could this be a call to 'steal' from systemic injustice in our own way?
- How might the Sabbath commandment (Exodus 20:8, 11) encourage rest not just physically, but also spiritually or emotionally in a culture that glorifies constant productivity?"
- Real-World Application: How can students apply these ideas in areas like justice, work ethic, or personal integrity?
- 3. Freedom vs. Bondage: How Do the Commandments Free Us, Not Bind Us?
- "Some critics argue that the Ten Commandments are oppressive or outdated, treating people as if they're incapable of making moral choices. But if we consider these laws as a freeing gift from God, like the 'negative' commands (e.g., 'Do not covet') are a way to protect people from self-destruction, how does this interpretation change your view? Here's a way to explore:
- Moses himself later says in Deuteronomy 5:33, 'Observe them carefully, for this is your wisdom and understanding in the sight of the peoples.' If these are 'wisdom,' what does that imply about their authority? How might they be a tool for discernment rather than a rigid set of rules?
- The commandment 'You shall not make for yourself a carved image' (Exodus 20:4) is often seen as anti-idolatry. How does this relate to modern idols, like consumerism, fame, or even technology? How might these 'commandments' guide us in resisting those forms of worship?
- The last commandment ('Remember the Sabbath') is often linked to rest. How does this commandment remind us of God's own rest (Genesis 2:2, 3)? How does it challenge the idea that 'busyness' is a virtue?"

- Theological Tie: How does this align with Jesus' statement in John 8:32: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"? How do these laws set people free?
- 4. The Commandments in a Post-Modern World: How Can They Guide Us Without Being Dogmatic?
- "The Ten Commandments were given to a culture that believed in absolute divine authority. Today, many cultures reject the idea of 'absolute truth,' and even within many faiths, interpretations of these laws vary. How can we engage with these commands as something more than a historical artifact? Consider:
- Moral Absolutes in a Relativist World: Some argue that 'thou shalt not' laws are outdated because they ignore context. How might you respond to someone who says, 'The commandments don't apply to me because my culture or personal beliefs are different'? What if the commandments were meant to transcend culture?
- Theological Humility: If God spoke these laws directly, does that imply we should approach them with humility? How can we read them without assuming we 'get it right' the first time? What if these were revisions of earlier laws (e.g., Exodus 34:28 shows Moses rewrote them with 'the Ten Words', suggesting they were edited)?
- Real-World Ethics: Think about a modern issue where one of the commandments seems to apply, but the application is unclear. For example:
- Exodus 20:13 ('You shall not murder'): How does this apply to debates on abortion, self-defense, or capital punishment?
- Exodus 20:14 ('You shall not commit adultery'): How might this commandment intersect with issues like marriage, pornography, or gender identity?
- Exodus 20:19 ('You shall not covet'): How does this relate to consumerism, envy, or social media comparison? How can it be a call to contentment?
- Personal Responsibility: If these laws are meant to guide, not control, how can they challenge you to ask: What does it mean to 'obey' these commands in a way that reflects my faith, not just my culture or personal desires?"
- Discussion Prompt: In groups, pick one commandment and explore how it could be applied today in a way that honors God's intent without becoming a legalistic burden.
- Why These Questions Work:
- Theological Depth: Each question ties the commandments to God's character (holy, just, loving) and their role in revelation.
- Real-World Connections: They invite students to engage with modern ethics, justice, and personal integrity.
- Open-Ended: They avoid yes/no answers and encourage nuanced reflection.
- Would you like any of these refined further for a specific focus (e.g., more on justice, more on personal ethics, etc.)?

## Prayer Focus

*"Lord, You did not give the Ten Commandments as rigid laws to bind us, but as a sacred mirror, revealing Your wisdom in a world that often demands perfection while offering grace in its failure. Teach us to study Your way with humility, to embrace truth not as a cage, but as the foundation for freedom, that we may live not just in obedience, but in wisdom that transforms our intellect, our hearts, and our responsibility toward creation, so that Your justice may be seen not just in laws, but in lives that reflect Your intent for justice, love, and integrity." (Themes: Intellectual honesty + God's redemptive intent in the Law, real-world application of divine wisdom in ethics, theology of freedom vs. bondage.)*

## >> Missions Spotlight

The Karen people of Myanmar (Burma) have a tradition called the 'Law of the Ancestors', moral codes passed down for generations. When missionaries share the Ten Commandments, the Karen immediately understand the concept of God's holy standards.

### **-> To the Cross**

The Ten Commandments show us God's perfect standard, and our inability to keep it. That's why we need Jesus, who perfectly kept the law for us and took the punishment we deserved. The law is our tutor that leads us to Christ (Galatians 3:24).