

Ten Commandments and Ten Fingers

Notes for a Sermon for Children of All Ages

The Ten Commandments are important as guides for faithful daily living, yet many people cannot remember all ten when asked. Here is a way that children as well as adults can learn the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17), using their ten fingers. The points made can be adapted to the age of the listeners-- from children to adults.

Start with your hands together in prayer. This reminds us that God heard the prayers of the Hebrew people when they were in slavery in Egypt and freed them (Exodus 3:7, 20:2). The commandments are a way for us to show our gratitude for God's love in our lives and to further just and peaceful relationships in God's world.

1. "I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before me." Hold up one index finger for the number one. We worship one God.

2. "You shall not worship idols." Idols, false gods, are not only things like statues, but anything in which we place our ultimate trust and allegiance-- for example, money, possessions or weapons. Hold up two fingers. Should we worship more than one God? No, two is too many! One of them must be an idol, and we should not worship it!

3. "You shall not take the Lord's name in vain." Use three fingers to form the letter "W" which stands for "words." Watch your words! God wants us to use his name in loving, caring ways, as we pray and as we talk about him, not in swearing or in anger.

4. "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy." Hold up four fingers, and fold your thumb under to let it rest. The thumb has the right idea. It's the Sabbath, and the thumb is following the commandment to take a day of rest. God does not want anyone to overwork or be stressed, so we need a day to rest, to be at peace, and to worship with others. God also gave us the Sabbath so that working people would not be taken advantage of by their employers (Deut. 5:14)

5. "Honor your father and your mother." Hold up all five fingers on one hand as if you are taking a pledge, to honor your parents. God wants there to be peace and love in all our family relationships.

6. "You shall not kill." Pretend the index finger on your second hand is a gun, shooting at the first five fingers. God's sixth commandment teaches us not to do anything that would hurt another person unfairly.

7. "You shall not commit adultery." Hold one hand out flat. The five fingers and hand becomes the floor of the church. Two fingers on the other hand are the man and woman to be married, standing in the church,

making promises to each other. This seventh commandment calls for couples to keep the marriage promises they make.

8. "You shall not steal." Hold up four fingers on each hand, for the eighth commandment. If you stretch out your fingers slightly, these become the prison bars, which hold someone who has been arrested for stealing. Our Presbyterian Church (USA)'s Study Catechism says "God forbids all theft and robbery, including schemes, tricks or systems that unjustly take what belongs to someone else." (Question # 112)

9. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Hold up all five fingers on one hand and four on the other. Fold your second thumb under and turn your hand around, so the thumb is hiding. It is secretly going around telling the other four fingers on that hand lies and rumors about the five fingers on the other hand. It is "bearing false witness," as it talks behind people's backs, spreading gossip, criticizing others without talking directly to the people involved. Again, our Study Catechism teaches us "Negative stereotyping is a form of falsehood that invites actions of humiliation, abuse, and violence as forbidden by the commandment against murder." (Question # 115)

10. "Do not covet what belongs to your neighbor." Hold out your hands, palms up, and wiggle all ten fingers to show that they've got the "gimmies." Your fingers are saying, "Gimmie what belongs to my neighbor. I want all those things my neighbor has." This is not the way God wants us to live.

Together may we remember the Ten Commandments' teachings in the light of Jesus' teaching-- that the love of God and neighbor are the two greatest commandments (Mark 12:28-34). John Calvin encouraged Christians in his day to sing the Ten Commandments followed by "Lord, have mercy" after each commandment. **End with your hands together in prayer**, asking that, by God's grace, we may live out these teachings in our everyday lives and expressing thanks that the God of peace is with us all (Philippians 4:9).

This resource was prepared by Bruce & Carolyn Gillette (co-pastors of Overbrook Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, PA) for the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program's packet for World Communion Sunday 2002. This educational resource for remembering the Ten Commandments was adapted with permission from the March 26, 2000 issue of *Homiletics*; it was originally shared by David Sauer. Questions 89-119 in the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s Study Catechism are on the Ten Commandments and their meaning for us today. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/catechismfull1.pdf> *A Christian Primer: The Prayer, the Creed, the Commandments* by Albert Curry Winn is an excellent resource for personal and small group study.

The Ten Commandments

Question 89. What are the Ten Commandments?

The Ten Commandments give a summary of God's law for our lives. They teach us how to live rightly with God and one another.

Question 90. Why did God give this law?

After rescuing the people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt, God led them to Mount Sinai, where they received the law through Moses. It was the great charter of liberty for Israel, a people chosen to live in covenant with God and to serve as a light to the nations. It remains the charter of liberty for all who would love, know and serve the Lord today.

Question 91. Why should you obey this law?

Not to win God's love, for God already loves me. Not to earn my salvation, for Christ has earned it for me. Not to avoid being punished, for then I would obey out of fear. With gladness in my heart I should obey God's law out of gratitude, for God has blessed me by it and given it for my well-being.

Question 92. What are the uses of God's law?

God's law has three uses. First, it shows me how grievously I fail to live according to God's will, driving me to pray for God's mercy. Second, it functions to restrain even the worst of sinners through the fear of punishment. Finally, it teaches me how to live a life which bears witness to the gospel, and spurs me on to do so.

Question 93. What is the first commandment?

"You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3; Deut. 5:7).

Question 94. What do you learn from this commandment?

No loyalty comes before my loyalty to God. I should worship and serve only God, expect all good from God alone, and love, fear and honor God with all my heart.

Question 95. What is the second commandment?

"You shall not make for yourself an idol" (Ex. 20:4; Deut. 5:8).

Question 96. What do you learn from this commandment?

First, when I treat anything other than God as though it were God, I practice idolatry. Second, when I assume that my own interests are more important than anything else, I make them into idols, and in effect make an idol of myself.

Question 97. What is the third commandment?

"You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God" (Ex. 20:7; Deut. 5:11).

Question 98. What do you learn from this commandment?

I should use God's name with reverence and awe. God's name is taken in vain when used to support wrong. It is insulted when used carelessly, as in a curse or a pious cliché.

Question 99. What is the fourth commandment?

"Remember the Sabbath Day, and keep it holy" (Ex. 20:8; Deut. 5:12).

Question 100. What do you learn from this commandment?

God requires a special day to be set apart so that worship can be at the center of my life. It is right to honor God with thanks and praise, and to hear and receive God's Word, so that I may have it in my heart, and on my lips, and put it into practice in my life.

Question 101. Why set aside one day a week as a day of rest?

First, working people should not be taken advantage of by their employers (Deut. 5:14). My job should not be my tyrant, for my life is more than my work. Second, God requires me to put time aside for the regular study of Holy Scripture and for prayer, not only by myself but also with others, not least those in my own household.

Question 102. Why do we Christians usually gather on the first day of the week?

In worshipping together on the first day of the week, we celebrate our Lord's resurrection, so that the new life Christ brought us might begin to fill our whole lives.

Question 103. What is the best summary of the first four commandments?

These teach me how to live rightly with God. Jesus summed them up with the commandment he called the first and greatest: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37; Deut. 6:5).

Question 104. What is the fifth commandment?

"Honor your father and your mother" (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16).

Question 105. What do you learn from this commandment?

Though I owe reverence to God alone, I owe genuine respect to my parents, both my mother and father. God wills me to listen to them, be thankful for the benefits I receive from them, and be considerate of their needs, especially in old age.

Question 106. Are there limits to your obligation to obey them?

Yes. No mere human being is God. Blind obedience is not required, for everything should be tested by loyalty and obedience to God. When it seems as though I should not obey, I should always be alert to possible self-deception on my part, and should pray that we may all walk in the truth of God's will.

Question 107. What is the sixth commandment?

"You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:17).

Question 108. What do you learn from this commandment?

God forbids anything that harms my neighbor unfairly. Murder or injury can be done not only by direct violence but also by an angry word or a clever plan, and not only by an individual but also by unjust social institutions. I should honor every human being, including my enemy, as a person made in God's image.

Question 109. What is the seventh commandment?

"You shall not commit adultery" (Ex. 20:14; Deut. 5:18).

Question 110. What do you learn from this commandment?

God requires fidelity and purity in sexual relations. Since love is God's great gift, God expects me not to corrupt it, or confuse it with momentary desire or the selfish fulfillment of my own pleasures. God forbids all sexual immorality, whether in married or in single life.

Question 111. What is the eighth commandment?

"*You shall not steal*" (Ex. 20:15; Deut. 5:19).

Question 112. What do you learn from this commandment?

God forbids all theft and robbery, including schemes, tricks or systems that unjustly take what belongs to someone else. God requires me not to be driven by greed, not to misuse or waste the gifts I have been given, and not to distrust the promise that God will supply my needs.

Question 113. What is the ninth commandment?

"*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor*" (Ex. 20:16; Deut. 5:20).

Question 114. What do you learn from this commandment?

God forbids me to damage the honor or reputation of my neighbor. I should not say false things against anyone for the sake of money, favor or friendship, for the sake of revenge, or for any other reason. God requires me to speak the truth, to speak well of my neighbor when I can, and to view the faults of my neighbor with tolerance when I cannot.

Question 115. Does this commandment forbid racism and other forms of negative stereotyping?

Yes. In forbidding false witness against my neighbor, God forbids me to be prejudiced against people who belong to any vulnerable, different or disfavored social group. Jews, women, homosexuals, racial and ethnic minorities, and national enemies are among those who have suffered terribly from being subjected to the slurs of social prejudice. Negative stereotyping is a form of falsehood that invites actions of humiliation, abuse, and violence as forbidden by the commandment against murder.

Question 116. What is the tenth commandment?

"*You shall not covet what is your neighbor's*" (Ex. 20:17; Deut. 5:21).

Question 117. What do you learn from this commandment?

My whole heart should belong to God alone, not to money or the things of this world. "Coveting" means desiring something wrongfully. I should not resent the good fortune or success of my neighbor or allow envy to corrupt my heart.

Question 118. What is the best summary of the last six commandments?

These teach me how to live rightly with my neighbor. Jesus summed them up with the commandment which is like the greatest one about loving God: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39; Lev. 19:18).

Question 119. Can you obey these commandments perfectly?

No. I am at once a *forgiven* sinner and a *forgiven sinner*. As a sinner without excuse, I fail to obey these commandments as God requires. "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it" (James 2:10). I should not adjust the law to my failures, nor reduce my failures before God. Yet there is more grace in God than sin in me. While I should not cease to pray to God for mercy, I can be confident that God is forgiving and that I will be set free from all my sins. By grace I can confess my sins, repent of them, and grow in love and knowledge day by day.

"Ten Commandments" is part of the Study Catechism of the Presbyterian Church (USA) that also interprets the individual parts of the Apostles' Creed and Lord's Prayer for today. The full catechism with biblical references can be found online at <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/catechismfull1.pdf>