

Expository Essay: Moral Norms From The Writings Of The Apostle Paul (NIV based)

The epistles of the Apostle Paul contain references relating to the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament. He expands and broadens these commandments into moral norms that include many other areas of sin and behavior. Even though Paul is addressing believers in many references, the moral norms in his writings are applicable to all people. This paper will briefly describe and summarize the moral norms that are written in the Word of God by Paul pertaining to each of the Ten Commandments.

COMMANDMENT # 1 - Have no other gods before the Lord (Exodus 20:3):

Paul writes that those who break this commandment have become lovers of themselves, or of money, or of pleasure, and they delight in false humility, pride, and idle notion, thus losing connection with God (2 Timothy 3:2,4; Colossians 2:18,19). Paul gives an example as those who worship angels (Colossians 2:18). In effect, the norm is that humans should not love or cherish anything more than God and that humans are to serve the living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

COMMANDMENT # 2 - Do not make nor worship idols (Exodus 20:4):

Paul forcefully warns against idolatry and witchcraft, stating that idolaters are immoral, impure, and greedy (Ephesians 5:5). They "exchange the glory of the immortal God for images", worshiping and serving "created things rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:22,25). When humans sacrifice to idols, they are really offering to and participating with demons and risk arousing the Lord's jealousy (1 Corinthians 10:20,22). This norm seems to be that humans should worship nothing physical or made by humans.

COMMANDMENT # 3 - Do not misuse the name of the Lord (Exodus 20:7):

Paul seems to broaden the meaning of this commandment as including obscenity, foolish talk, coarse joking, and filthy language (Ephesians 5:4; Colossians 3:8). Also, he seems to consider bitterness, rage, and anger as being linked with cursing and suggests that these may give the devil an opportunity to gain a foothold into a person's life (Ephesians 4:31,27). This norm seems to be that humans should neither grieve the Holy Spirit, which includes by using unwholesome talk, but instead we should speak with a forgiving attitude in a manner that builds up others for their benefit (Ephesians 4:29,30,32).

COMMANDMENT # 4 - Keep the Sabbath holy (Exodus 20:8):

Even though Paul does not directly address this commandment, Paul seems to apply Galatians 5:1 as the norm that "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free... do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" to legalism. This does not suggest that keeping the Sabbath is to be completely ignored, but that in Christ, believers are free to observe and keep the Sabbath in varying ways (cf. Colossians 2:16).

COMMANDMENT # 5 - Honor your father and mother (Exodus 20:12):

Paul clearly states that children are to obey and honor their father and mother (Ephesians 6:1-2). He adds that this pleases the Lord who will bless the obedient children with a promise of long life (Colossians 3:20; Ephesians 6:2). This norm seems to be honor your parents as you would the Lord and it will go well with you.

COMMANDMENT # 6 - Do not murder (Exodus 20:13):

Paul briefly touches on this topic when he mentions "those who kill their fathers or mothers" in 1 Timothy 1:9. Furthermore, Paul's moral norm for this commandment may include those who are brutal, treacherous, and intensely hating one another (2 Timothy 3:3; Titus 3:3). A broader interpretation of this norm would be that humans should not murder or treat others with little or no regard for their dignity or right to live as fellow human beings.

COMMANDMENT # 7 - Do not commit adultery (Exodus 20:14):

Paul seems to broaden this commandment to encompass all kinds of sexual immorality and he extensively addresses this type of sin in his epistles. Paul characterizes sexually immoral people, male prostitutes, homosexual offenders, and perverts as being those who degrade their bodies with one another and who test the Lord (Romans 1:24; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 10:9; 1 Timothy 1:9). He says these people commit "indecent acts" or exchange "natural relations for unnatural ones", and that they may be engaged in debauchery or extreme sensuality such as orgies (Romans 1:26-27; Galatians 5:19). Paul gives specifics that anyone who unites with a prostitute becomes one with her in body, and also that a person is bound to his or her spouse as long as the spouse is alive (1 Corinthians 6:16; Romans 7:2). Paul explains that sexual immorality is sin against one's own body and that believers sin additionally against God's temple (1 Corinthians 6:18-19). Those who indulge in impurity, lose sensitivity, and lust for more (Ephesians 4:19). This norm can be summed up in his imperative statements "Flee from sexual immorality" and "Therefore honor God with your body" (1 Corinthians 6:18a,20b).

COMMANDMENT # 8 - Do not steal (Exodus 20:15):

Paul labels those who steal as being swindlers and thieves, and he characterizes them as being lazy [parasites] who cheat others (1 Corinthians 5:10; 6:8,10; Ephesians 4:28). This sounds like an extreme form of selfishness. He states this norm as being that humans should not take from others but should work to support themselves in order to share with others in need (Ephesians 4:28).

COMMANDMENT # 9 - Do not give false testimony (Exodus 20:16):

Paul identifies perjurers, slanderers, and malicious talkers as people who lie, spread evil suspicions, and try to (verbally) bite or devour others (1 Timothy 1:10; 1 Corinthians 5:11; 1 Timothy 3:11; 6:4; Colossians 3:9; Galatians 5:15). The root causes for this behavior are when people who are idle and have nothing to do, they may become arrogant, hateful, and desire to destroy others or cause disorder (2 Thessalonians 3:11; 2 Corinthians 12:20; Galatians 5:15,20). Seemingly, the results of this activity are division, dissension, and disunity. Paul sums up this norm when he exhorts to "put off falsehood and speak truthfully to [your] neighbor" (Ephesians 4:25).

COMMANDMENT # 10 - Do not covet (Exodus 20:17):

Paul clearly expands this commandment to mean "every kind of covetous desire" (Romans 7:8c). This includes jealousy, lust, evil desires, and conceit - which may provoke others to envy (Romans 13:13; Colossians 3:5; Galatians 5:26). Paul nicely summarizes this norm as "learn to be content whatever the circumstances" (Philippians 4:11).

CLOSURE:

In conclusion, the Apostle Paul has expanded and clarified the Ten Commandments in many references in his epistles. When pieced together, these references form broad moral norms. Believers in particular should pay close and serious attention to these norms that need to be followed today just as much as in Paul's day nearly 2,000 years ago. Paul devoted considerable attention to and emphasis on sexual immorality, idolatry, and lying / gossiping. All of these 10 norms may be condensed to mean that those who break the law dishonor God, and "Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." (Romans 2:23; 13:10).

Works Cited:

Bible. "The Holy Bible: New International Version." *The Bible Library CD-ROM*. Oklahoma City, OK: Ellis Enterprises, 1988.

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