

Interpreting God's Law

1. The Biblical Rule:

Every commandment must be understood in the context of the entire Bible.

This is simply the Reformation principle that Scripture interprets Scripture. The way to know the full and true meaning of any Bible passage is to know what the rest of the Bible says on the same theme. And this is true of the Ten Commandments. To understand the full implications of each commandment, we need to know what the whole Bible teaches about it, including the teaching of Jesus and His apostles.

2. The Inside/outside Rule:

The Ten Commandments are internal as well as external.

They demand inward integrity as well as outward conformity. God holds us accountable not only for the sins we commit with our bodies, but also for the sins we commit in the privacy of our own hearts, minds, and wills.

3. The Two-sided Rule: (the law of opposites)

Every commandment is both positive and negative.

Where a sin is forbidden, the corresponding duty is required; and where a duty is required, the corresponding sin is forbidden. For example, the third commandment forbids the misuse of God's name. We may not dishonor God by abusing His name. However, by sheer force of logic, this command also requires us to use God's name honorably and reverently.

4. The Rule of Categories:

Each commandment stands for a whole category of sins.

It governs not only the specific sin that is mentioned, but all the sins that lead up to it, and all the supposedly lesser sins of the same kind. Consider the sixth commandment: "You shall not murder." Taken literally, this is a commandment that relatively few people break (although as Jesus explained, since the law is spiritual, it also condemns very common sins such as hatred). But in addition to outright murder, the sixth commandment forbids any form of physical violence. It even condemns fistfights, bodily injury, and domestic violence.

5. The Brother's Keeper Rule:

In addition to keeping the Ten Commandments ourselves, we are required to help others keep them.

It was Cain who asked the famous question: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen. 4:9b). According to the brother's keeper rule, we are not allowed to encourage someone else to do what God has told us not to do. To put it more positively, we must do everything in our power to help other people keep God's law.

6. The Law of the Tables:

The first table of the law always takes precedence over the second.

In other words, our duty to God in the first four commandments always governs our duty to one another in the last six commandments; our love for our neighbor is subject to our love for God. So if a parent tells a child to worship a false god, the child is bound by the first commandment ("no other gods") rather than the fifth commandment ("Honor your father and mother"). This is the principle Peter was applying when he said to the Sanhedrin, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

7. The Rule of Love:

The purpose of every commandment is to show love, especially love for God.

As the Scripture says, "love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13:10). Even the commandments that require love for our neighbor promote love for God. We do not love and serve our neighbor simply for the sake of our neighbor, but ultimately for the sake of God.

Using these principles, even the simplest commandment places overwhelming demands on our obedience.

Some people—including some Christians—might think that interpreting the law too carefully is legalistic. We have enough trouble keeping the easy commandments. So what is the point of looking at God's law in exhaustive detail? Isn't that legalistic? It is actually just the opposite: a low view of law always brings legalism in religion; a high view of law makes a man a seeker after grace."

From the book "Written In Stone," by Philip Graham Ryken