Ten Commandments, zero context

Many lawmakers want to see the commandments displayed in public schools. Are they also interested in the Hebrew Bible's ethical demands?

by Mark Glanville
April 1, 2025

The Texas Senate has approved a bill requiring the Ten Commandments to be displayed in classrooms in public schools. This follows hard on the heels of a similar bill in Louisiana that is presently tied up in the judicial system. These initiatives seem likely to race each other to the US Supreme Court.

It is understandable, in some ways, that many Christian policymakers want this text from the Hebrew Bible displayed in the spaces where their children are educated. And yet it is curious to consider how the text aligns with the MAGA agenda. In their original context, the Ten Commandments are a call to share God's good gifts with one another, instructions for building a society of mutual care. God gives the Ten Commandments as a counterpoint to the oppression of slavery that ancient Israel experienced in ancient Egypt less than three months earlier. These laws are meant to shape ancient Israelite society to be a place where every person can thrive, in contrast to the exploitation that has bound them.

This raises a sharp question for Texas policymakers: Will those Christians who cherish these laws enough to have them displayed in every public classroom also submit to their prophetic call?

The bill's primary author, Senator Phil King, said, "I think kids are just crying out for moral clarity … for a shared heritage." King is surely right to say that the Ten Commandments offer moral clarity. Yet we need to be clear on the nature of this moral clarity. Texas Republicans—and Protestants more broadly—have interpreted the Ten Commandments individualistically, obscuring their original intention. Just think of how these laws are commonly understood in churches today: "You shall not steal," the text says. *I haven't really stolen*, we tend to think to ourselves. *I haven't murdered; and I haven't committed adultery, at least so far*. Individualistic interpretation leaves us thinking: Aren't the Ten Commandments for people who are *really* wicked? In other words, these laws seem to restrain the outer limits of an individual's moral behavior: how to be a good citizen.

But the scriptural context should guide our interpretation of this text. The ancient Israelites arrive at Mt Sinai to receive these ten "words" with raw wounds on their back from the Egyptian whip. Consider what life was like in Egypt before God delivered them. The Hebrews labored in the brick factories of Pharaoh. They built store cities of Pithom and Ramses, we are told in Exodus 1. When brick quotas weren't met, foremen were beaten (Exodus 5). Do you remember when Moses intervened as a Hebrew slave was beaten? That's no children's story. Israelite lives were expendable in the economic expansion of Pharaoh. We might say that economic productivity was god.

God strategically placed one Hebrew, Moses, in the courts of the empire. And one day, via a burning bush, God said to Moses:

> I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:7-8).

God emancipated this enslaved people, bringing them to Mt. Sinai to meet with God. Here, God gives the people laws to form a society that is completely different from their experience of slavery—a society of mutual care. God gives an entire collection of laws, running from Exodus 20:1 to 23:19, beginning with the Ten Commandments. These laws never leave their narrative context (see Deuteronomy 5:15): God is nourishing this new community to live together according to God's own desire, transforming a society of productivity at any cost into a society where every person can thrive.

Broadly speaking, the first few commandments are concerned with loyalty to God, and the remainder are concerned with living in society with others. But these two concepts are intertwined throughout. Let's get specific, briefly unpacking six of the ten commands.

In the fourth commandment, on the sabbath, God says, "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. … You shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female servant, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns" (Exodus 20:8-10).

The sabbath is a Jewish innovation: There was no such thing as a seventh-day rest among Israel's neighbors. Here, for the first time in literary history, the worship of the Divine is brought together with social justice: The vulnerable immigrant, the servant, and even working animals are included in the sabbath rest.

If a person is to thrive, life must consist of more than work. We all need space for rest and for play. And from this day on among the Israelites, no one is to be deprived of this rhythm of work and rest. The sabbath command injects a life-giving pause into the endless cycle of production. This certainly has implications for modern economies. Today, at their worst, Western economies operate as post-care economies. But the sabbath command insists that our systems of production are also systems of care, for humans and for all creation. Living in this way reflects God's own character as Israel's emancipator (Deuteronomy 5:15).

In the sixth commandment, God declares, “You shall not murder.” Typically this is applied individualistically: murder is a crime. At a societal level, it might be applied to capital punishment, war, and, more recently, abortion. However, the rest of the Hebrew Bible makes it clear that “thou shall not murder” is spoken mostly to restrain the excesses of powerful people—would-be pharaohs (Deuteronomy 24:6; Isaiah 58–59). Again, the original context is slavery; in Egypt economic productivity was valued higher than human life. You will remember that Hebrew male babies were put to death to keep the labor force subjugated. What beautiful—and radical—words to offer this nation of bereaved families and endangered brick workers! In most societies economic productivity is valued higher than human life in unspoken ways—think, today, of the recent massive reduction in foreign aid, the gutting of USAID, and plans to slash federal spending on Medicaid.

The eighth commandment, “You shall not steal,” is perhaps the most counterintuitive for Christian Bible readers today. This command used to bring to my mind an image of a thief in a black mask creeping around the house of a wealthy family, someone who looked like the Hamburglar. But from the rest of the Pentateuch, we can see that this commandment is given specifically to restrain the rich.

Land law was the main protection against poverty in ancient Israel. Every Israelite family was to own land that was suitable for agriculture and grazing. And this land ownership could not be revoked: “The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine!” God says (Leviticus 25:23). In other words, God owns the land, and God has given everybody enough land to produce food and to flourish. Followed faithfully, the eight commandment would safeguard Israelite households from permanently falling into poverty. And it would prevent households from accumulating excessively—the accumulation exemplified by Pharaoh was prohibited.

The ninth commandment is about the law courts: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” In practical terms, when disputes were judged at the city gates, the powerful could not bribe witnesses or sweeten judges, depriving the vulnerable of their land or enslaving their family (see Deuteronomy 16:18-20). This commandment insists upon just and fair judicial processes, especially for those with little social power. Today, the ninth commandment should surely inspire Christian policymakers to, among other things, create accessible legal processes for refugee claimants and vulnerable immigrants, so that their claims can be adjudicated fairly (see Deuteronomy 1:16–17).

Finally, the tenth commandment challenges a common misconception people have about the Old Covenant—that it is all rules. “There is no change of heart,” people often think. But the tenth commandment reads: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house … wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” This command calls the Israelites to something higher than rules. It calls them out of an attitude of acquisition—the attitude of Pharaoh—to a spirit of mutual care and of sharing.

We might summarize that the Ten Commandants were forming God’s ancient people as a contrastive community, a society that was to be distinctive by bringing the weakest among them into the center of the community.

This ancient revelation remains deeply relevant, for these laws are nothing less than a call for God’s people to reflect God’s own generosity and tenderness, displayed in the exodus event. And this text also holds out a biblical worldview that is no less true today: the world belongs to God, and God desires that every person and community would share in God’s good gifts and flourish.

So, those of us who cherish the Ten Commandments, in Texas and beyond, ought to seek the flourishing of the weakest among us as our highest priority. We ought not only be generous in sharing our own resources but, reflecting the framework of the text as a vision for community, we should promote policies and institutions that protect, enfold, uplift, and dignify those who experience marginality.

Does this mean that God’s people should insist that our rules are pinned up in every public school classroom? Surely, displaying a sacred text in classrooms is more about ideology than pedagogy. Surely, this is an act of claiming ownership over a classroom, marking it as a Christian space. Displayed in classrooms, the Ten Commandments would be operating at a symbolic level, signifying ownership and identity. In our religiously pluralistic society the generous spirit of the Ten Commandments themselves should make Christ followers wary of centering our own symbols in public spaces at the expense of the cultural symbols of other faiths. The Ten Commandments were intended to invert power and privilege. When Christians display this text publicly and at the same time pursue policies that further marginalize the weakest among us, this does profound damage to the reputation of the church. Indeed, we break the third commandment: “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.” God’s “name” here signifies God’s reputation. To use Jesus’ name to promote policies that fail to uplift marginalized

people is to defame his name.

The Ten Commandments disclose God’s desire for God’s people, and for every human community, to be people who bring the weakest into the center. Will US Christians submit to their demands?