

Theological and Ethical Principles in the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount

The Bible, comprising the Old and New Testaments, offers a rich and multifaceted tapestry of theological and ethical teachings that have shaped religious thought, moral philosophy, and societal values across centuries. Among its most foundational and enduring ethical texts are the Ten Commandments, found in Exodus 20, and the Sermon on the Mount, particularly the Beatitudes and moral exhortations of Matthew 5. These passages represent distinct but deeply interconnected expressions of divine revelation: one arising from the covenantal framework of ancient Israel, the other from Jesus' radical reinterpretation of the law within the context of the Kingdom of God.

This essay explores the key theological and ethical principles embedded within these two seminal texts. It aims to demonstrate how both passages, though separated by historical and cultural context, reflect a shared vision of the divine-human relationship, communal responsibility, and moral transformation. By examining the covenantal ethic of the Ten Commandments and the inward-focused righteousness of the Sermon on the Mount, this essay traces both continuity and development within the Judeo-Christian ethical tradition. Central to this analysis are themes of divine authority, grace, obedience, and the formation of a faithful community in response to God's initiative.

The Ten Commandments stand as the cornerstone of Israelite moral and legal identity. Delivered by God to Moses on Mount Sinai, they reflect not only a set of ethical imperatives but also the relational dynamics of covenant theology. Their context is crucial: these commands are not abstract laws but are framed by a narrative of divine deliverance—"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). This opening declaration anchors the commandments in the history of redemption and affirms God's authority not as a distant legislator, but as a liberator and covenant partner. In this light, the commandments are theological before they are ethical, expressing God's desire for a just, worshipful, and morally ordered community formed in response to divine grace.

A key theological principle here is monotheism. The first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me," asserts the uniqueness and exclusivity of Israel's God. This exclusivity is further underlined in the second commandment, which forbids the creation and worship of idols. Together, these prohibitions reflect a central concern in Israelite religion: the proper orientation of worship. Scholars such as Walter Brueggemann argue that these commandments form a radical reordering of social and theological identity, demanding that loyalty to YHWH supersede all other allegiances.¹

The commandments also encompass social ethics, as seen in the prohibitions against murder, adultery, theft, false testimony, and coveting. These laws establish a framework for communal living rooted in justice, honesty, and mutual respect. By forbidding not only actions but also desires (as in the commandment against coveting), the Decalogue anticipates a more interior moral vision, one that will be taken up and expanded in the New Testament.

The Sabbath commandment — to rest on the seventh day — uniquely combines theological and ethical dimensions. It mirrors the divine pattern of creation and rest, emphasizing human dignity

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

through rest and rhythm. As Abraham Joshua Heschel notes, the Sabbath is “a sanctuary in time,” reflecting divine order in human life.²

Another striking feature is the emphasis on honouring one's parents. This commandment bridges the first table of the law (duties toward God) and the second (duties toward others), suggesting that family relationships are integral to both theological and ethical life. In the ancient world, such a command may also have had economic implications, ensuring social care for the elderly. The principle here is clear: the community's wellbeing depends on stable, honourable familial relationships.

Fear and reverence toward God emerge as central ethical themes in Exodus 20. After receiving the Ten Commandments, the people tremble at the divine manifestation, prompting Moses to reassure them: “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning” (Exodus 20:20). Here, *fear* does not imply paralysing terror but rather a profound reverential awe — a recognition of divine holiness, power, and moral authority. This theological fear serves as a moral compass, instilling in the people a sense of accountability before a just and transcendent God. In the Hebrew Bible, the “fear of the Lord” is consistently presented as the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10), a foundational posture from which ethical behaviour naturally arises. It is not merely emotional but covenantal: to fear God is to acknowledge His lordship and to respond in obedient love.

In the Sermon on the Mount, this theme of reverent obedience is neither discarded nor diminished but rather interiorised and transformed. While the dramatic theophany of Sinai — with smoke, thunder, and trembling — communicates divine transcendence, the setting of the Sermon conveys intimacy. Jesus speaks to the gathered crowds not from an unapproachable mountain, but from a hillside, seated among them as a rabbi. The contrast in tone is striking, yet the theological resonance is deliberate. By ascending the mountain, Jesus evokes Moses, positioning Himself as the new and greater lawgiver. However, unlike Moses, who mediates divine instruction, Jesus speaks *with* divine authority: “You have heard it said... but I say to you” (Matthew 5:21–22). This formula signals not an abrogation but a fulfilment of the law — an intensification that shifts ethical obedience from external conformity to internal transformation.

The reverence that motivated Israel's obedience at Sinai finds a parallel in the moral seriousness of Jesus' teaching. His words call for a fear of God that is expressed not in trembling before fire and smoke, but in the inward awe that transforms the heart and aligns the self with the will of the Father. The Beatitudes, which open the Sermon, describe those who are “poor in spirit,” “meek,” and who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” — dispositions that reflect humble dependence and reverent submission. Jesus thus reframes divine encounter not as a moment of overwhelming dread, but as a call to become children of a holy God. The new ethic still arises from the awareness of God's majesty and moral perfection, but this awareness now fosters love, mercy, and imitation rather than fear alone.

In both cases, ethical conduct is the fruit of theological vision. At Sinai, God's holiness commands respect and obedience; on the Mount, God's holiness is made incarnate in Christ, who invites disciples not merely to keep the law, but to become like their Father in heaven. The transformation from fear to filial love does not negate reverence — it fulfills it in a deeper register, as obedience becomes the joyful response of those who know the character of the One they follow.

² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951).

The Beatitudes introduce a radical ethic of reversal that profoundly reorients conventional notions of power, value, and divine favour. In declaring the poor in spirit, the meek, those who mourn, and the persecuted as “blessed,” Jesus elevates precisely those individuals whom the ancient world—and arguably the modern—often marginalised. Rather than affirming societal hierarchies based on wealth, status, or military strength, the Beatitudes subvert them, presenting the Kingdom of God as a realm where humility, suffering, and vulnerability are not only seen but honoured as spiritually significant. This is not simply a rhetorical flourish; it is a theological principle that reflects the upside-down logic of divine grace. The blessing of the poor is not conditional on future wealth but is a present affirmation of their value in God’s eyes. In this vision, mercy, purity of heart, peacemaking, and a hunger and thirst for righteousness become the new criteria for divine approval—virtues oriented toward inner character and the healing of relationships.

The ethical principle here is thus not one of external compliance or ritualistic observance, but of profound inner transformation. Jesus’ reinterpretation of the Mosaic law is not an abrogation but a deepening: anger is equated with murder, and lust with adultery. These redefinitions do not simply raise the bar; they relocate the source of ethical behaviour from action to intention, from legalism to spiritual authenticity. In doing so, Jesus reveals that sin originates not merely in behaviour but in the condition of the heart. This interiorisation of the law represents a significant theological move: righteousness is not about appearing holy, but about being transformed inwardly by God’s Spirit. Stanley Hauerwas sees in this teaching the foundation for what he calls a “community of character”—a body of disciples whose moral lives are not governed by abstract rules, but by their formation in the image of Christ, reflecting the grace and holiness of God in tangible ways.³

This trajectory of inner moral renewal continues in Jesus’ teachings on non-retaliation and love for enemies, which intensify the ethical demands of the Sermon on the Mount. “Do not resist an evildoer,” “turn the other cheek,” “go the extra mile,” and “love your enemies” each express a startling moral vision. These commands challenge the instinctual human desire for revenge and reciprocity, calling instead for a radical vulnerability and active goodwill that disarms hostility. In this ethic, there is no place for hatred or vengeance; instead, there is a theological commitment to a divine justice that operates not on the principle of retribution but on reconciliation and grace. Jesus presents a vision of God’s character as the template for human ethics: God “makes his sun rise on the evil and the good,” demonstrating impartial benevolence and mercy. Disciples, in turn, are called to embody this divine posture toward others, even their enemies.

This summons to radical love reveals a central theological principle known as *imitatio Dei*—the imitation of God. The ethical life is not framed by societal norms, tribal loyalties, or a calculus of fairness, but by divine example. The command to “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48) does not suggest flawlessness in the modern sense, but *teleios*—a completeness or maturity that reflects God’s own integrity. This ideal echoes the Hebrew concept of *shalom*, a holistic peace and wholeness that encompasses right relationships with God, self, and others. The Sermon thus portrays moral perfection as relational and communal rather than individualistic and legalistic.

Another crucial ethical theme is that of integrity in speech, addressed in Jesus’ teaching on oaths. In a cultural context where elaborate oath-making had become a way to manipulate truth or obscure intention, Jesus instructs his followers to speak plainly: “Let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and

³ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

your ‘No,’ ‘No.’” This simplicity reflects an ethic of truthfulness grounded not in external guarantees but in internal honesty. The issue is not oaths per se, but the integrity of the person who speaks. By abolishing the need for swearing elaborate vows, Jesus calls for a radical transparency in which the spoken word aligns with the moral character of the speaker. As such, this teaching mirrors divine faithfulness, where God’s word is unfailing and trustworthy.

Collectively, these teachings in the Sermon on the Mount do not merely propose a new code of conduct; they outline a theological vision of human life as it is meant to be—formed in love, governed by grace, and lived in communion with a just and merciful God. In contrast to externalised and performance-based religiosity, Jesus advocates an ethic of transformation rooted in the heart, where divine presence reshapes not just behaviour but identity. The goal is nothing less than a new humanity, marked by love, peace, justice, and truth—signs of the Kingdom of God breaking into human life.

The Sermon on the Mount also affirms the continuing authority of the Old Testament law. Jesus does not abolish the law but fulfils it. This fulfillment is not merely prophetic but ethical: the law is taken to its deepest intention. As N.T. Wright explains, Jesus’ teachings reveal the telos of the law — not legalism, but love. The theological principle is that law and grace are not opposites but partners in God’s redemptive design.⁴

Both texts affirm that ethics is inseparable from theology. The Decalogue begins with God’s salvific act and flows into ethical command. The Sermon begins with divine blessing and flows into ethical transformation. In both, ethics is covenantal — a response to divine initiative.

A comparison of the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount reveals a significant evolution in ethical emphasis, reflecting both continuity and transformation within the biblical moral vision. The Decalogue lays a foundational framework of divine law, establishing essential theological and communal boundaries for the people of Israel. Its directives are concrete and categorical, oriented around external actions and communal order. In contrast, the Sermon on the Mount radicalises and interiorises these ethical expectations, shifting the focus from mere outward compliance to the transformation of the heart and the cultivation of inner dispositions. Jesus moves beyond the letter of the law to its spirit, linking visible behaviour to invisible motives — anger to murder, lust to adultery, retaliation to self-giving love.

Yet despite these differences, both texts share a common theological and ethical telos: the formation of a holy people, living in right relationship with God and one another. This shared goal finds coherence in the overarching biblical theme of covenant. In Exodus, Israel’s identity is formed through covenantal obedience at Sinai, where the law mediates the relationship between God and His people. The Decalogue serves not only as moral instruction but as a communal charter, structuring a society rooted in justice, fidelity, and reverence for the divine.

In Matthew, Jesus alludes to a new covenant — not in opposition to the old, but as its fulfilment and deepening. The ethical demands of the Sermon point forward to the covenantal promise articulated in the prophets, particularly Jeremiah’s vision that God’s law would be written “on their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:33). Ezekiel similarly envisions a time when God will give His people a new heart and spirit, enabling them to follow His statutes (Ezekiel 36:26–27). Jesus’ ethical teaching realises this promise: the law is no longer merely imposed from without but internalised through grace. As the Epistle to the Hebrews affirms, Christ mediates a better covenant,

⁴ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996).

established on better promises (Hebrews 8:6), in which moral transformation flows from a renewed heart shaped by divine presence.

Both the Decalogue and the Sermon also presume that ethical life is fundamentally communal. The commandments are given to Israel as a people, binding them together as a covenantal society. Similarly, Jesus' Sermon is addressed not to isolated individuals but to a gathered community of disciples, initiating a new people defined by their allegiance to the Kingdom of God. In both cases, personal ethics are inseparable from social solidarity. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer observes, discipleship is never merely private but is lived within and for the community, manifesting the corporate nature of God's redemptive work.⁵ The Sermon thus cultivates not just private virtue but public witness — a community of salt and light (Matthew 5:13–16), embodying God's justice, mercy, and peace in the world.

In conclusion, the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount together articulate a profound and enduring theological-ethical vision. Rooted in divine revelation and covenantal relationship, these texts call believers to a life of worship, justice, integrity, and transformation. Their enduring relevance lies in this synthesis: they offer not merely rules but a vision of human flourishing under God. They remind us that true ethics is inseparable from theology, and that right living flows from the right relationship with the divine.

Bibliography

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⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).