

The Ten Commandments are over three thousand years old. The original laws were written on stone and they were kept in the Ark of the Covenant which accompanied the Hebrew tribes on their wanderings through the wilderness.

The Hebrew slaves had escaped from Egypt and they entered into a covenant with God which was given through their leader, the prophet Moses, on Mount Sinai. The first five books of the Jewish Scriptures contain the Torah, the Law which was given to Moses and which the Hebrews promised to keep as their side of the agreement. The Ten Commandments (the Decalogue) are part of the Law.

The first four rules are about the way the people should behave towards God and the last six are about the behaviour of people to each other.

Jews try to keep these laws to the present day. Christians also show respect for these rules but, at the same time, they try to keep to the principles that Jesus explained when he was talking about these commandments in the Sermon on the Mount.

THINKING POINT

Check that you understand what all the words in the Ten Commandments mean.

Jews follow a lunar calendar. The day begins at sunset so the Jewish Sabbath begins on Friday sunset and finishes on Saturday sunset. Sabbath means resting day. Christians follow a solar calendar, so each day starts at 12 midnight and their holy day is Sunday but they treat it as their holy Sabbath (see page 53).

Why were the people expected to keep the Ten Commandments? Look again at the first commandment.

THE CHRISTIAN IDEAL

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT, MATTHEW 5-7

Jesus was said to be a good teacher. It is unlikely that Jesus sat on a mountain and delivered these three chapters all at once.

THINKING POINT

These three chapters are a block of teaching. If you had such a collection to place in a book about Jesus how would you arrange them?

Would you:

- Scatter the sayings throughout the book?
- Try to place each one near a relevant incident?
- Put them all together in any order and let the reader sort it out?
- Keep them together but try to structure them so particular themes could be developed?

Think of the advantages and disadvantages in each case.

Matthew included the material near the beginning of the ministry of Jesus and set the scene on a mountain. Luke used the same collection of sayings but he set the sermon on a plain (Luke 6:7-49) and used 34 verses elsewhere in his gospel.

Matthew's gospel was written for Jewish Christians. They would be familiar with the idea of Moses being given the Law on Mount Sinai. Matthew had more sayings besides these. He put them in five blocks throughout the gospel. Sometimes the Sermon on the Mount is called the new law. Every time in this Sermon that Jesus says 'But I tell you' he is claiming special authority.

MATTHEW CHAPTER 5

Matthew 5:1-12

The sermon begins with the beatitudes which are a list of eight kinds of people who are blessed in God's eyes. (Beatitude is from the Latin for blessing.)

The blessed are not the people you would expect to describe as happy or contented. They are:

- The poor in spirit – the humble, those who know their need of God.
- Those who mourn – the sorrowful, the bereaved, the repentant.
- The meek – of a gentle disposition – not pushy, not proud, not arrogant.
- Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, they want to do God's will.
- The merciful – those who show compassion, pity, love and forgiveness.
- The pure in heart – their religion is sincere; their motives are not selfish.
- The peacemakers – they work to solve conflict fairly between individuals and in society.
- Those who are persecuted because of righteousness; they suffer persecution for a righteous cause, not for their own wrongdoing.

The passage promises that 'Theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven' now, not only in the future, because people with spiritual values have a clear conscience and peace with God.

Two verses are added after the beatitudes which are more sayings of Jesus about persecution. At the time Matthew wrote the gospel the early church was suffering persecution and some Christians were facing death for their beliefs.

FOR DISCUSSION

Take two beatitudes and consider:

- exactly what they mean
- how Christians might put them into practice
- why each one might result in happiness (each beatitude has a promise attached).

Compare your ideas with those of other people.

Matthew 5:13-16

Christians are called the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Salt purifies, preserves and adds flavour; light drives away darkness and shines so people can see clearly.

These metaphors challenge Christians to show their faith in the world. If they are the sort of people

described in the beatitudes they will do so; Christians are supposed to be an influence for good wherever they go and they are expected to spread the light of the gospel throughout the world.

Matthew 5:17-19

There is an incident later in the life of Jesus which is called the Transfiguration. Three of his disciples, Peter, James and John, saw Jesus transfigured, as if he was bathed in white light, talking to two people whom they knew instinctively were Moses and Elijah. The meaning is clear. It is the same as these words of Jesus. Moses represented the Law and Elijah represented the Prophets. The Law and the Prophets are two main parts of the Jewish Scriptures. Jesus did not come to destroy the Old Testament but to fulfil it.

Each paragraph begins 'You have heard ...' and gives an example of a command from the Jewish law. Then Jesus reinterprets it.

Matthew 5:21-26 Murder

According to Jesus it is not enough simply not to murder. The anger which might lead to murder must also be controlled. If there was no hatred there would be no murder. Jesus warns against using insults such as the Aramaic word 'Raca' – traitor. Even calling someone names shows lack of respect. Jesus emphasises this point in verse 22: 'anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.'

Jesus warns his audience that religious practices are hypocrisy unless people sort out their differences first before going to worship God. There is no point offering gifts to God otherwise. Nor should there be any delay in making reconciliation. It is as urgent as sorting out legal matters in everyday life before the case against you gets out of control.

Matthew 5:27-30 Adultery

Adultery, having sex with someone else's wife or husband, was a serious matter and the penalties were severe. Guilty women could be stoned to death.

According to Jesus, however, the thoughts that lead to sinful actions must also be controlled: