The Ten Blessings

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These days, the Ten Commandments God gave Moses on Mount Sinai are sometimes seen as burdensome and irrelevant. Not so, says Indian Christian scholar Vishal Mangalwadi: they are Ten Blessings. We should not lightly discard them.

In 1977 a group of "low caste", "untouchable" young people asked me for help. A minor flood in their village had washed away their homes and cattle.

My friends showed me the pride of their village – a temple in the middle of the river, built 1000 years ago. I said, "Our forefathers had the ability to build this temple in the middle of a river. It has withstood hundreds of floods. Why didn't they use that ability to build houses on the banks of the river that could withstand floods?



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"Why did they make a temple instead of a dam? Did they make a temple because our ancestors feared and worshipped the river?"

My friends replied that the river was indeed their mother and goddess.

Over a period of time, I helped them consider whether their poverty could be related to their beliefs and cultural values. I told them how God used Moses to transform a bunch of slaves into a mighty and prosperous nation we know as Israel. The God who set the Jews free from the slavery of Egypt also told them how they could both maintain this freedom and turn it into prosperity:

So be careful to do what the Lord your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or the left. Walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess. (Deut. 5:32-33)

1. Worshipping in truth

Why did the first commandment focus on worshiping in truth?

As God was leading the Israelites out of the grinding poverty of their slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land, he spoke to them on Mount Sinai:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. (Exod. 20:2-3)

God was merely reminding the Israelites that they had experienced God. They already knew some truth about him, and therefore needed to believe and worship the Truth. Believing what is not true, following false gods, would lead them back into slavery.

God, who redeemed the Israelites from oppressive slavery, who was taking them into a land flowing with milk and honey, told them that he is a moral God of justice and righteousness. False gods are different.

From 1972 to 1974, I traced the footsteps of many Americans and Europeans who had enthusiastically followed Hindu god-men. I wrote a book, *The World of the Gurus*, describing my discovery that many followers of these false gods and gurus found themselves trapped in immorality, slavery, and exploitation. Some were put off by what they saw; others joined the cults and learned the art of peddling occult knowledge, Tantra, meditation, and deceptive "enlightenment" to acquire power over their followers' fortunes and bodies.

The first commandment also reminded the Hebrews that God is not an abstract principle or impersonal force. He is a personal being, seeking to relate to human beings as precious persons – his own image. Those who do not know the truth about God cannot know the truth about man. Those who reject God as the Creator are now forced to define human beings with reference to an ape or simply as a complex collection of molecules. They have no rational basis for treating humans differently than animals or machines. As Western culture moves farther away from the Ten Commandments, this will only get worse. What happened to the God-denying nations of Germany and Russia in the twentieth century, could happen to Australians in the twenty-first century, because now some Australians do not want to humbly rely on the blessing of Almighty God. They have to invent their own gods – the points of reference that will give meaning and moral values to them – which is exactly what God forbade in the second commandment.

2. Worship of creation

God commanded the liberated slaves:

You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exod. 20:4-6)

My friends who worshiped the river made themselves incapable of establishing dominion over it – they did not build canals and dams to prevent flood damage. They worshipped the cow and became incapable of manipulating or improving its breed. Some of them worshipped the "mountain god"; therefore they never looked under the mountain to see if there was copper or iron that they could mine, refine and sell. No wonder they lived under poverty. The tragic consequences of these sins last for generations.[2] The tragedy is that now the advocates of "deep ecology" are urging Australians to worship Mother Earth as Gaia to save the Earth goddess.

God tells us not to worship nature because even though we are a part of creation, we are created in God's image to govern and manage the earth. Science and technology developed in the West because faith in a personal Creator established the philosophical framework for belief in an objective, rational creation, whose laws could be discovered and harnessed by human rationality. Now Hollywood is replacing faith in a personal Creator with

faith in chance or an impersonal "Force" (e.g., in Star Wars or Harry Potter), and the West is losing a concept of rational creation. The logic of such presuppositions forces people to worship nature, seek magical powers and consider the objective world as unreal, merely a projection of consciousness (*maya*).

Once upon a time, India made significant advances in science, mathematics, astronomy, architecture, arts, and grammar. But after it accepted the philosophy of non-dualism, or monism, called Advaita Vedanta, it began to look upon the world of science – of diversity or plurality – as the world of illusory *maya*, as a dream of Brahma (Universal Consciousness), a mirage from which we needed to be delivered.

Whoever makes your gods will also make your morality. He will then legislate a morality for you that suits his interests. Now this is happening in the radical feminist movement. Clever women are creating imaginary goddesses for women and are harvesting worship, wealth and sex for themselves.

God tells us not to make his image because he has already made his image, and that is your neighbour. If you want to love and serve God's image, it is your neighbour that you must love. Of course, that image of God has been marred by sin. That is why Jesus came as the visible image of the invisible God.

After my intervention in that village, my friends obtained bank loans and installed a lift-irrigation system. But once they had developed previously uncultivated lands, the upper-caste men beat them up and took over their lands! That is why the third commandment teaches us the fear of God.

3. The fear of God

My friends and I discussed why our culture did not develop a humane justice system; why wealth accrued in the hands of the powerful instead of those who worked creatively and diligently. Our consensus was that our culture lacked the third commandment.

Why do you think the Governor-General of Australia usually takes his or her oath in the name of God? And why do you think Australians usually testify in their secular courts in the name of God? Most people have forgotten the answer: because of the third commandment.

You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. (Exod. 20:7)

As the West ceases fearing God, they no longer keep their vows and promises. Secular Australia is becoming a costly litigious society because godless people are also becoming unworthy of trust. In a society that does not fear God, the only way to establish justice will be to put everyone under constant surveillance. God watched over earlier generations; the godless generations will have to have Big Brother watching over them.

Whoever makes your gods will also make your morality.

Unlike made-up gods and goddesses, the Christian God is not an impersonal, magical power that humans can manipulate for their advantages through sorcery, rituals, offerings, or sacrifices. His name is not a mantra like that of the demons, to be chanted for occult power or mystical experiences. The living God is a person. He is a holy God, a judge. Therefore, he is to be feared, respected, worshipped and obeyed.

The Proverbs say, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (9:10). A mind that fears God stays away from evil and loves truth and righteousness. Because it fears God, it ceases to fear man and the kingdoms of man. It also ceases to fear nature, but sees it as a mission field.

Not taking the name of the Lord in vain implies a deep commitment to walk in integrity, with a sense of personal responsibility for our thoughts, words and actions. The truth is that we are morally responsible creatures, thereby accountable to God. This fact demands that we should build our lives on the foundation of the fear of God.

Why did atheism in the twentieth century lead to political totalitarianism, oppression and poverty?

Why did atheism in the twentieth century lead to political totalitarianism, oppression and poverty? Because, if there is no God, man is not accountable; he is not a sinner.

Societies that worship make-believe gods or refuse to worship the living God cannot have moral order and discipline that come from within. Order and discipline must be imposed by force. However, a free society must free up the time to cultivate inner moral discipline, which comes from the fear of God. That is the point of the fourth commandment.

4. The blessing of Sabbath

My friends in the village worked practically every day. They had festivals but no tradition of a weekly day of rest, when they could enjoy growing together as a family and community in their knowledge, love, and fear of God.

Liberty had tangible meaning for the Hebrew ex-slaves mainly because of the fourth commandment:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. (Exod. 20:8 -10)

Sabbath means to take time away from work to build a godly community with your family and neighbours. Obviously, an individual or a nuclear family cannot harness the power of a river. That has to be a community effort, but community development fails unless cultures invest the time regularly to create community and keep it oiled and functioning. My friends had a temple, but a Hindu temple is very different from a church. It does not require people to observe Sabbath on a weekly basis to seek God together. Community comes into existence when people choose to put aside work, leisure, and private interests on a regular basis to gather together as whole families for worship, fellowship, and breaking bread.

Some people sin by not working diligently for six days, whereas others – because of greed, unbelief, or powerlessness – sin by working also on the day of rest and worship. Either way of breaking this command results in poverty. The necessity of work flows out of man's special position in the world as God's vice-regent, implied in the first three commandments. It is not enough to refrain from the worship of creation; the point is to establish wise and caring dominion over it. God put Adam in the Garden to "till it and keep it". Human fulfilment comes from work that is balanced by rest. Not to work is sin, but to be controlled by work is slavery.

My Indian culture had a different attitude toward work than the biblical cultures because our worldview made no distinction between creation and the Creator. On the one hand, this led to the worship of creation (e.g., the river), but on the other hand, if everything is divine, then in some way creation is unreal (*maya*) and a life of work is bondage.

Work ceases to be meaningful and fulfilling if it is not seen as a part of the overall purpose of human life in relation to both creation and the Creator. If work is to be a vocation, a "call" that transcends drudgery, then it has to be seasoned with Sabbath rest. The Sabbath is not merely a physical or mental rejuvenation. The Sabbath is holy, and it is meant to service our hearts and minds with the divine perspective on life. Therefore, it is primarily a spiritual rejuvenation.

Some people destroy the source of the community life in the West – the church – because they are opposed to "organised religion". They have little use for institutionalised Sabbath. It doesn't take much time to learn that those who cannot keep the Sabbath are not able to keep their families together either. That is the subject of the fifth commandment.

5. Honouring parents

Community and economy depend upon the family. Given the fact that human beings are fallen, there are no perfect children and no perfect parents. Every child has plenty to complain about regarding his or her parents, but for good reasons morality often requires us to go against our fallen nature and do what we do not want to do. God commands:

Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. (Exod. 20:12)

Israel was a patriarchal, tribal society. The family was not merely a social unit but was also a civic, economic, military and political entity. Therefore, this command implies that we honour our fathers and mothers and also that we learn to be law-abiding citizens, respecting all those in authority. We cannot exercise authority over creation without learning to honour those in authority over us.

The apostle Paul taught Christians living in Rome to pay taxes and to respect civic and political authorities,[3] even though he knew that the Roman Empire was the fourth beast of Daniel 7:7. As per Nebuchadnezzar's dream, it was the empire of iron that was to be smashed to pieces by the stone of the kingdom of God.[4] Paul asked Christians to honour those in authority because he had learned from experience that the grace of God was not absent from wicked, totalitarian kingdoms. The Jews would have killed Paul, had it not been for the Roman law which held that an accused had the right to defend himself before a judge as well as to make an appeal to higher authorities, up to the supreme court of Caesar himself. It is only by a life of consistent obedience that we earn the right to disobey human authority when such has to be done to obey the higher authority of God.

When family is the business enterprise, it does not require any imagination to see how breaking the fifth commandment results in poverty. No enterprise can be profitable that does not cultivate respect for and obedience to superiors.

God says we must honour and obey those over us so that we "may live long in the land". One very important cause of the relative weakness of the economic life of socialist economies is that family-owned economic enterprises are seen as suspect, whereas artificial cooperatives or state-controlled public sector companies are promoted. More often than not, these latter ventures fail because they do not do justice to human factors in economic life. In contrast, even large multinational companies do better if a family spirit is injected into management.

A society that cannot put the security of human life as its top priority cannot hope to rise above poverty.

But the command to "honour your father and mother" is not to be obeyed primarily because of its economic benefits. In fact, it is sinful to respect only those who have economic or intellectual power. Children may well have more knowledge or money than their parents, but that does not justify disrespect for poor or illiterate parents. A society that does not care for parents will soon lose the rationale for caring for children too.

6. Murder

In a nonbiblical system, say under a Pharaoh, an Israelite lived at the pleasure of the government. A Pharaoh could ask a midwife to kill a boy just because he was Hebrew, and it would be "moral" for her to obey her king. In biblical political philosophy, the government exists to protect a citizen's right to life. It is God who commanded:

You shall not murder. (Exod. 20:13)

This sixth commandment meant that even though David was a divinely anointed king, he had no right to take Uriah's life. Every human being has a God-given right to life, of which he or she cannot be unjustly deprived.[5] God is pro-life. Jesus said he came to give abundant life.



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Satan, however, is a murderer.[6] If Australia becomes a kingdom of Satan, its government will assert ultimate authority over everyone's life. It has already given to parents the right to decide which child will live and which will be killed. As care for the elderly becomes costly, the government will give to children the right to determine which parent will live and which must die. In a culture driven by money, it will be easy to forget that a human being is infinitely more important than capital.

I went to the village to serve the poor, but *why* were my people so poor? It didn't take me long to learn that our area was ruled by dacoits (armed gangs of bandits). To have wealth meant to invite robbers. Our people preferred either to remain poor or to move out of the villages to more secure cities. Those who saved a little chose not to invest it in a rural-based enterprise. Likewise, the commercial banks were reluctant to invest in perfectly viable projects in villages, because villages lacked the security of law and order.

A society that cannot put the security of human life as its top priority cannot hope to rise above poverty. Therefore the commandment not to commit murder is fundamental for prosperity.

God's law offers protection not only for our life but also for our families. That is the purpose of the seventh commandment.

7. Adultery

While on a visit to Jamaica, I was told that this paradise lived in perpetual poverty because 85 per cent of its children did not have legitimate fathers, and that this was a legacy of slavery. British slave owners encouraged their slaves to pursue sex, not love. The male slaves became stud bulls, breeding more slaves. They took no responsibility for the women they impregnated or the children they fathered. When sex is required to be an aid to love, a child has both his mother and father. The parents make sacrifices to ensure that their child does not suffer as a slave. That is one reason why God commanded the slaves he had liberated:

You shall not commit adultery. (Exod. 20:14)

My friends who lived in poverty agreed that rampant sexual immorality was the main reason for women's enslavement: "We cannot send our girls to the high school in the next village because we cannot trust our men to leave them alone. That's why they remain uneducated and unskilled. It takes a big dowry to marry them because they are economic liabilities."

Australians have become bolder about committing adultery because contraceptives and abortions are easily available. Does that mean the sexual revolution will not take its economic toll in the West? Women who are not sure of their husband's faithfulness and commitment do not want to have children. Who will then pay for the Social Security checks and Medicare bills of the retired Australians?

God's commandments protect our property just as they protect our life and our family.

8. Theft

My lower-caste friends created wealth, but not for themselves or their children. Just growing fruit trees could have eradicated their poverty. But it is not worth growing fruit if you cannot protect it from the upper castes, the feudal lords, or the bandits. And that is a form of slavery.

God delivered the Israelites from the slavery of Egypt and taught them that the only way to get out of the clutches of poverty was to obey the command:

You shall not steal. (Exod. 20:15)

This commandment implies that people have a right to the wealth they inherit or create. Security of life, family, and property creates the context in which economic development takes place. Citizens have a motivation to invent and create when they know that their state exists to protect their wealth for them and their children, and that their state will not rob them through unjust taxes. Citizens weaken their state's capacity to serve and protect them when they steal the taxes that belong to the community.



We thrive when we follow the Ten Commandments God gave us for our wellbeing

One of the ways in which the business community stole the wealth of the ordinary people in biblical days was through "unjust weights and measures". Moses prohibited such theft in his law. The prophets denounced it as sin. But today many economies lower the value of their currency – in the name of "development" – as the simplest way of stealing the wealth of the people. Ultimately when people lose faith in the government's paper money, the country goes through the upheavals of bankruptcy. This practice of stealing by devaluing currency is the modern equivalent of using changeable weights and measures. It deters saving, and seriously hinders progress in poor countries.

Let us go on to notice that refraining from stealing is not enough: God told the Hebrews that their witness would have to be honest if they wanted to build a prosperous society.

9. Truth in witness

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour. (Exod. 20:16)

My friends – whose lands were taken away by upper-caste men – did not go to the courts because they knew that while the feudal lords would have no problem getting witnesses, they themselves could not get one neighbour to witness truthfully.

I had farmer friends who cried to me that the railway system in their district had been so manipulated by unscrupulous merchants that they were being forced to sell their potatoes at a price that did not cover even the cost of harvesting. Some of us finally enabled the farmers to solar-dry potatoes into wafers – a profitable business for the snack-food industry.

In theory, this venture, which eliminated packing, transporting and warehousing costs, would make it possible for us to sell potato powder at a cheaper price than anyone else in the world. However, the temptation to add much cheaper wheat flour into the potato powder was huge. Dishonesty, litigation, corrupt courts and untrustworthy witnesses drove business costs so high that the West was able to sell the powder to us at a much cheaper cost!

Atheist dictators such as Stalin made a mockery of justice by eliminating millions of opponents through sham judicial trials. In Hindu/secular countries such as India, which inherited a fair and independent judiciary from the British but not a culture built on the Ten Commandments, the ruling powers have used the judiciary to protect criminals by resorting to false witness. It is common for the state to arrest social workers on trumped-up charges. This destroys the legitimacy of the state itself.

The ninth commandment is the branch on which the Australian judiciary is seated, and it is blindly sawing off that branch.

The tenth commandment takes the previous nine from the external sphere – idolatry, murder, theft, adultery etc – to our inner attitude.

10. Content or covetous

You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour. (Exod. 20:17)

Our faith in God's goodness and love for us must result in contentment and thankfulness. Our respect for our neighbours and their property must mean that we work for what we want and need to have, instead of coveting what our neighbours have. I must create a house I can be proud of instead of coveting my neighbour's. I must work at loving my own wife to have happiness in my home.

Under the impact of socialist thinking, many leaders in India and in some other third world countries told us that we were poor because the Western world was exploiting us. The way out of poverty, therefore, was for us to get the West's money. All exploitation by the West, of course, must cease.

But gradually I came to see that our own leaders were the greatest exploiters of our countries. Coveting our neighbour's wealth is an attitude that does not help. If I have a right to enjoy the wealth I create, so does my neighbour. **Exploitation is a result of covetousness**.

Not having a covetous disposition means contentment, thankfulness and industriousness to earn what we want. Contentment means loving our neighbours enough to serve them and give to them. Covetousness results from a lack of faith in God and a lack of love for our neighbours. It robs us of contentment, peace and social harmony – virtues that create the climate of a community's development.

To be content also means to be thankful enough to worship the good God. The tenth commandment therefore takes us back to the first commandment – worshipping the God who has given us life and liberty; who has been kind enough to become our covenant King, revealing to us his laws of liberty and prosperity.

In a situation where you are not able to trust anyone, knowing that God is good becomes an enormous source of inner power – the power of faith, joy, contentment, thankfulness and worship.

Conclusion

As a result of our conversations, my friends realised that God's law was a blessing needed to revolutionise our culture. Of course, they also realised that each one of them was guilty of breaking practically every one of the Ten Commandments. The realisation that we are all sinners makes it possible for us to receive the transforming power of the gospel of God's forgiveness.

References

1. Mangalwadi, Vishal, *Truth and Transformation: a Manifesto for Ailing Nations*, 2009 (YWAM Publishing), Ch 9.
2. I have discussed some of these consequences in a chapter "Idolatry – Essence and Consequence" in my book *Missionary Conspiracy: Letters to a Post-modern Hindu*, 1996 (New Delhi: Nivedit Good Books).
3. Romans 13:1-7.
4. Daniel 2:34, 44-45.
5. This principle is recognised in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Article 6(1): "Every human being has the inherent right to life. This right shall be protected by law. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his life..."
6. John 8:44.