

J. I. PACKER

*Keeping the*

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10  
COMMANDMENTS



*Keeping the Ten Commandments*

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This book was formerly part of *Growing in Christ*, copyright © 1994 by J. I. Packer, originally published under the title *I Want to Be a Christian*.

Published by Crossway Books

a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers

1300 Crescent Street

Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Jessie McGrath

Cover photo: Getty Images

First printing, 2007

Printed in the United States of America

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## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Packer, J. I. (James Innell)

[I want to be a Christian]

Keeping the Ten commandments / J. I. Packer.

p. cm.

“This book was formerly part of *Growing in Christ*, 1994 by J. I. Packer, originally published under the title *I want to be a Christian*”—T. p. verso.

ISBN 13: 978-1-58134-983-2 (tpb)

1. Ten commandments—Criticism, interpretation, etc. I. Title.

BS1285.52.P33 2007

241.5'2—dc22

2007027988

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VP 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08

15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Contents

PREFACE	11
1 THE WAY TO LIFE	15
2 BLUEPRINT FOR BEHAVIOR	23
3 I AND YOU	29
4 LAW AND LOVE	35
5 THE LORD YOUR GOD	41
6 WHO COMES FIRST?	47
7 IMAGINATION	53
8 ARE YOU SERIOUS?	59
9 TAKE MY TIME	65
10 GOD AND THE FAMILY	71
11 LIFE IS SACRED	77
12 SEX IS SACRED	83
13 STOP, THIEF!	89
14 TRUTH IS SACRED	95
15 BE CONTENT	101
16 LEARNING FROM THE LAW	109
17 THE CEMENT OF SOCIETY	117
SCRIPTURE INDEX	123



A decorative title box with the word "PREFACE" in the center. The box is rectangular with rounded corners and a double-line border. It is flanked by ornate, symmetrical scrollwork and floral designs that extend above and below the box.

P R E F A C E

Cars are complex contraptions, and with their thousands of component parts much can go wrong. The maker's handbook, however, tells you how to get from your car a satisfying performance, with minimum wear and tear, and if you mishandle it so that it goes wrong, you cannot say that you were not warned. With the wisdom contained in the repair manual that the manufacturers also issue, the car can be mended, but as long as you pooh-pooh the maker's instructions, trouble is all you can expect.

Our cars are parables of their owners. We too are wonderfully made, complex physically and even more so psychologically and spiritually. For us, too, there is a maker's handbook—namely, God's summary of the way to live that we find in the Ten Commandments. Whether as persons we grow and blossom or shrink and wither, whether in character we become more like God or more like the devil, depends directly on whether we seek to live by what is in the Commandments or not. The rest of the Bible could be called God's repair manual, since it spells out the gospel of grace that restores sin-damaged human nature. But it is the

## Keeping the Ten Commandments

Commandments that crystallize the basic behavior pattern that brings satisfaction and contentment, and it is precisely for this way of living that God's grace rescues and refits us.

Suppose someone says: "I try to take the Ten Commandments seriously and live by them, and they swamp me! Every day I fail somewhere. What am I to do?" The answer is: now that you know your own weakness and sinfulness, turn to God, and to his Son Jesus Christ for pardon and power. Christ will bring you into a new kind of life, in which your heart's deepest desire will be to go God's way, and obedience will be burdensome no longer. That folk who take the law as their rule might find Christ the Savior as their Ruler is something to pray and work for.

God's love gave us the law just as his love gave us the gospel, and as there is no spiritual life for us save through the gospel, which points us to Jesus Christ the Savior, so there is no spiritual health for us save as we seek in Christ's strength to keep the law and practice the love of God and neighbor for which it calls.

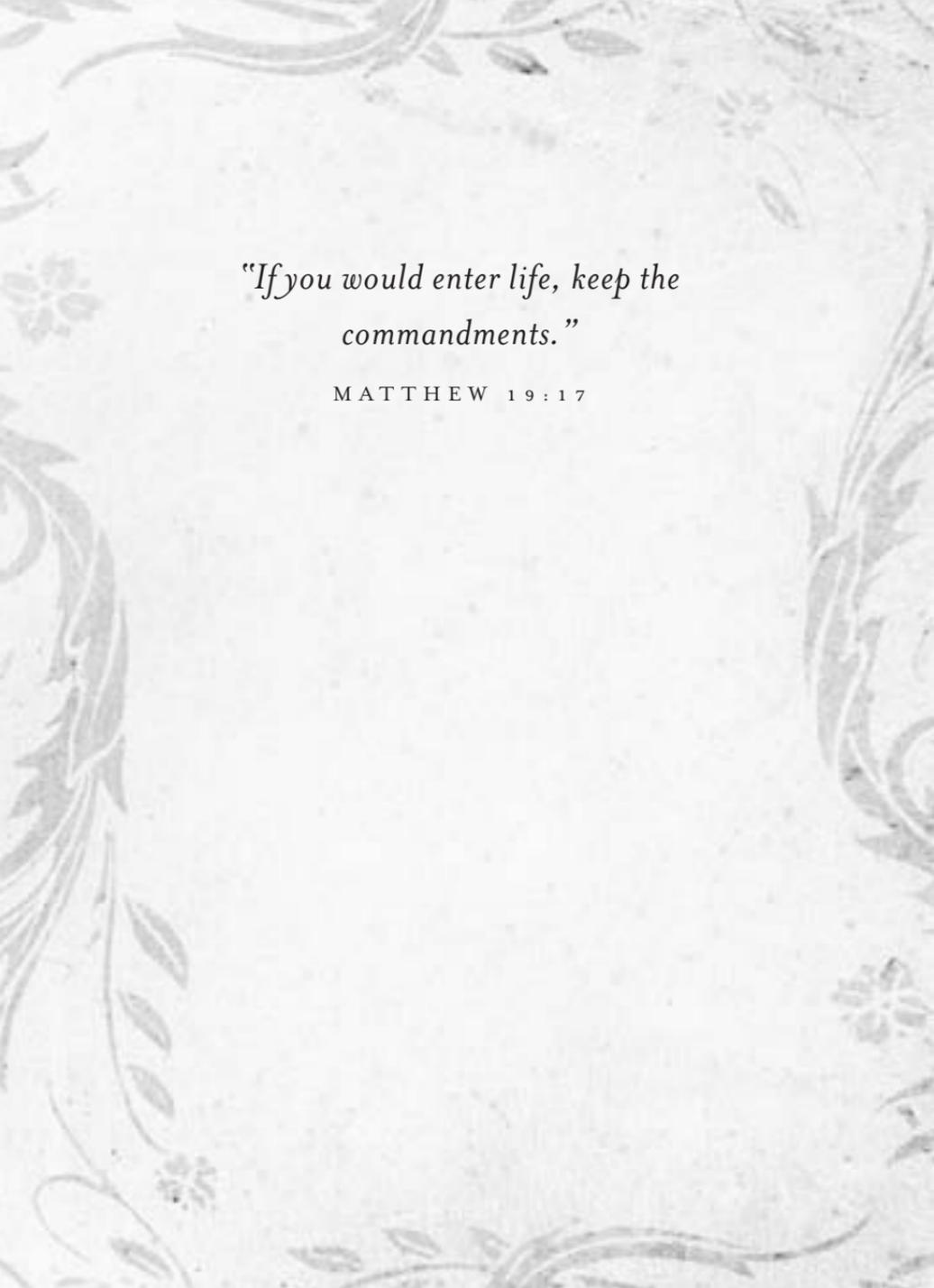
Suppose people generally began to say, "By God's help I will live by the Ten Commandments every day from now on. I will set myself to honor God and obey him. I will take note of all that he says. I will be in church for worship each week. I will not commit adultery or indulge myself in lust or stir up lust in others. I will not steal, nor leave the path of

## *Preface*

total honesty. I will not lie or cheat. I will not envy or covet.” Community life would be transformed, and massive national problems would dissolve overnight. It is something more to pray and work for.

Suppose all churches and congregations were ablaze with zeal for God, and for personal holiness, and for national righteousness—why, that would be revival! Revival is a divine visitation of communities, and its moral force is unrivaled. When God quickens his church, the tremendous purging power that overflows transforms the moral tone of society in a way that nothing else can do. That we need revival is not open to doubt; that this need should drive us to prayer cannot be doubted either.

Where the law’s moral absolutes are not respected, people cease to respect either themselves or each other; humanity is deformed, and society slides into the killing decadence of mutual exploitation and self-indulgence. Living today, we know all about the disease. It is worth considering what it would be like to be cured. Who knows? We might even be given grace to find the prospect attractive.

A decorative border with a repeating floral and vine pattern in a light, muted green color, framing the central text.

*“If you would enter life, keep the  
commandments.”*

MATTHEW 19:17



## The Way to Life

**Y**ou know the commandments,” said Jesus (Mark 10:19). He was talking to a young man (Matthew 19:20) who was wealthy (v. 22) and a ruler (Luke 18:18), evidently a young hopeful among Jewish politicians who had quickly, as we say, got ahead. He was glib, impulsive, pushy, and superficial, with, it seems, a habit of dramatizing himself in public. We might easily dismiss him as a bumptious show-off. Yet according to his lights he was serious and sincere, at least in intention, and Jesus, heart-reader extraordinaire, felt real affection for him (Mark 10:21).

This young man had run up to Jesus, probably elbowing his way through a crowd, dropped to his knees before him, addressed him formally and honorifically as “Good Teacher” (Mark 10:17) and asked him, “What good deed must I do to have eternal life?” (Matthew 19:16). The form

## Keeping the Ten Commandments

of the question showed that he saw himself as a special person, different from the rank and file and entitled therefore to a special personal agenda. Jesus, evidently thinking that his interrogator's youthful mouth was outrunning his youthful mind, countered at once with two questions of his own, both designed to make the speaker think about what he had just said. "Why do you call me good? Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good—God" (Matthew 19:17; Mark 10:18). As if to say, "Surely you don't think I'm God—or do you? (*You should, for I am.*) And surely you don't think you can ever do anything that is good without qualification—or do you? (*You shouldn't, for you can't—no one can—that's why you can only live by being constantly forgiven.*)" Having fired these two piercing verbal arrows, he turned to the young man's inquiry.

"You know the commandments," Jesus began (Mark 10:19), as one stating a fact, and as if to say, here is where everything starts.

"Which ones?" the young man asked (Matthew 19:18). Maybe conceit led him to think this was a sharp question, but actually it was a naive and needless one, for every Jewish boy was taught in the synagogue school to memorize the Ten Commandments—that is, the Decalogue—which God had inscribed on stone tablets for Israel at Sinai. Jesus took the question in stride, citing commandments five to nine—no

murder, no adultery, no theft, no lies, no disrespect to parents—along with what elsewhere he called the second great commandment, active neighbor-love (Mark 10:19; Matthew 19:18–19). Then he paused, waiting to see what the young man's response would be.

And here I pause to ask my readers: do *you* know the Ten Commandments? My guess is that if you are over forty you do, but if you are under forty you don't. About half a century ago churches generally ceased teaching the Commandments, either from the pulpit or in Sunday school or anywhere else. I do not mean that none of the moral and spiritual principles of the Decalogue were taught in any way at all (though it is beyond dispute that churches that have remained strong on the gospel have been comparatively weak on ethics). I mean only that as a unified code of conduct and a grid for behavior the Decalogue dropped out. So I ask: could you repeat the Ten Commandments from memory? Were you ever made to memorize them, as long ago I was, and as the rich young ruler had been? I hope this little book will help you get up to speed at this point. But back now to the rich young ruler.

“All these I have kept from my youth,” said he (Mark 10:20)—and clearly he thought he had. But, like so many, he was living on the surface and was largely out of touch with what was going on inside him. He had not yet become aware that God's law condemns not only lawless acts but also lawless

## Keeping the Ten Commandments

desires and dreams and fantasies of law-breaking. Nor had he realized that real neighbor-love will not depend on whether one likes one's neighbor or not, and grows out of humility and gratitude Godward, and must enlist the imagination and become purposeful and passionate up to the limits of what one is capable of. Anything less falls short of keeping the Commandments as God's servants are all called to do. Jesus himself is in fact the embodiment of the Ten Commandments, and living below the standard of service that his life sets is, quite simply, falling short in neighbor-love. But the ruler had not yet grasped all this, and his claim to have kept all the commandments that Jesus mentioned reveals his ignorance both of real law-keeping and of his own real, wayward self. Here are truths that bear on our lives, no less than they did on that of Jesus' questioner.

"What do I still lack?" asked the ruler (Matthew 19:20). Jesus gave him a double-barreled answer. He must dispose of his wealth that was the idol currently holding his heart captive ("sell what you possess and give to the poor," v. 21), and he must follow Jesus in the most literal sense, not just learning to live by his teaching but actually joining the little band of disciples (followers!) who walked with him in his itinerant ministry, owning nothing and depending on others' generosity for each day's food and each night's shelter ("come, follow me," v. 21).

This would mean for the young plutocrat a totally new way of life externally, and by cleaving to Jesus he would experience change inwardly as well, for he would find his heart reoriented in love and loyalty to Jesus and the Father, and then among other things to the Ten Commandments themselves, now viewed as a gratitude program, a prescription for honoring, pleasing, and glorifying God, a highway to the holy joy of obedience. Thus the reality of repentance, faith, and regeneration (new birth) would be played out in his ex-rich, post-political new life.

Sadly, this did not happen. “When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (Matthew 19:22). He could not contemplate so radical a change; so he ended up forfeiting the eternal life that he had thought he was seeking.

*Living* the Ten Commandments is the theme of this book, and the truth we must learn from the story of the rich young ruler is that only through life-wide repenting for one’s self-serving lifestyle to date and through humbly receiving and trusting Jesus Christ as one’s living Lord and Savior and through heart-changing regeneration by the Holy Spirit will Commandment-keeping ever pass beyond formal outward role-play to become the substantial concern of one’s inward life, stemming from a truly God-fearing, God-honoring heart. We need to be very clear on this before we begin exploring the

## Keeping the Ten Commandments

values, visions, and virtues that living the Commandments involves. The only way into such a life is the way of faith and repentance, according to the New Testament gospel. Let us never forget that.

### FURTHER BIBLE STUDY

*A comparative study:*

- Compare the three parallel accounts of the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16–30; Mark 10:17–31; Luke 18:18–30), and note Jesus' comments on wealth and salvation.

### QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION

- Do you think Christ calls all rich persons to abandon their wealth as a condition of discipleship? If not, what should their attitude toward their wealth be?
- Do you think that people today deceive themselves as to whether they are keeping God's Commandments or not?
- What does following Jesus require of us today? Should more stress be placed on keeping the Commandments or not?



## Blueprint for Behavior

**L**ife means relationships—with God, men, and things. Get your relationships right, and life is joy, but it is a burden otherwise. It is natural to love life, and against nature to want it to stop; yet today, as when Christianity was born, many experience life as such a meaningless misery that their thoughts turn seriously to suicide. What has gone wrong? Probably relationships. Though depression may have physical roots and yield to physical treatment, disordered relationships are usually at least part of the trouble, and for a full cure these have to be put straight.

What does that involve? Social workers know how a lack of meaningful human relations wastes the spirit and try to bring help at this point. That alone, however, is less than half the remedy. True joy comes only through meaningful relations with God, in tasting his love and walking Christ's

## Keeping the Ten Commandments

way. This is the real *dolce vita*, the life that is genuinely sweet and good.

### FORGOTTEN WISDOM

Now the blueprint for this life was set out for all time in the Ten Commandments that God gave the Jews through Moses on Sinai about thirteen centuries before Christ. Yesterday's Christians saw them as (to quote the title of William Barclay's exposition of them) *The Plain Man's Guide to Ethics*. They were right. Today's world, even today's church, has largely forgotten them (could you recite them?). That is our folly and loss. For here, in nugget form, is the wisdom we need.

Because Scripture calls God's Ten Commandments "law" we assume they are like the law of the land, a formal code of dos and don'ts, restricting personal freedom for the sake of public order. But the comparison is wrong. *Torah* (Hebrew for "law") means the sort of instruction a good parent gives his child. Proverbs 1:8 and 6:20 actually use *torah* for parental teaching.

Think of all the wise man's words to his son in Proverbs 1:8–8:36 as addressed to us by our heavenly Father himself (as indeed they are, as in Augustine's true phrase, "what thy Scripture says, thou dost say"). That will give you a right idea of the nature and purpose of God's law. It is there not

to thwart self-expression (though it may sometimes feel like that—for children hate discipline!) but to lead us into those ways that are best for us. God’s parental law expresses God’s parental love.

## SUB-CHRISTIAN?

Some read the Old Testament as so much primitive groping and guesswork, which the New Testament sweeps away. But “God . . . spoke by the prophets” (Hebrews 1:1), of whom Moses was the greatest (see Deuteronomy 34:10–12); and his Commandments, given through Moses, set a moral and spiritual standard for living that is not superseded but carries God’s authority forever. Note that Jesus’ twofold law of love, summarizing the Commandments, comes from Moses’ own God-taught elaboration of them (for that is what the Pentateuchal law-codes are). “Love . . . your God” is from Deuteronomy 6:5, “love your neighbor” from Leviticus 19:18.

It cannot be too much stressed that Old Testament moral teaching (as distinct from the Old Testament revelation of grace) is not inferior to that of the New Testament, let alone the conventional standards of our time. The barbarities of lawless sex, violence, exploitation, cutthroat business methods, class warfare, disregard for one’s family, and the like are sanctioned only by our modern secular society. The

## Keeping the Ten Commandments

supposedly primitive Old Testament, and the 3,000-year-old Commandments in particular, are bulwarks against all these things.



*It cannot be too much stressed that Old Testament moral teaching (as distinct from the Old Testament revelation of grace) is not inferior to that of the New Testament, let alone the conventional standards of our time.*



But (you say) doesn't this sort of talk set the Old Testament above Christ? Can that be right? Surely teaching that antedates him by a millennium and a quarter must be inferior to his? Surely the Commandments are too negative, always and only saying "don't . . ." ? Surely we must look elsewhere for full Christian standards? Fair queries; but there is a twofold answer.

First, Christ said in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:17) that he came not to *abolish* the law but to *fulfill* it; that is, to be, and help others to be, all that God in the Commandments had required. What Jesus destroyed was inadequate expositions of the law, not the law itself (Matthew 5:21–48; 15:1–9; etc.). By giving truer expositions, he actually republished the law. The Sermon on the Mount itself consists of themes from the Decalogue developed in a Christian context.

Second, the negative form of the Commandments has positive implications. “Where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded” (Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 99). The negative form was needed at Sinai (as in the West today) to curb current lawlessness that threatened both godliness and national life. But the positive content pointed out by Christ—loving God with all one’s powers, and one’s neighbor as oneself—is very clearly there, as we shall see.

## FURTHER BIBLE STUDY

*Christ and the law:*

- Matthew 5:17–48; 12:1–14; 15:1–9; 22:34–40

*A new life-style for new people:*

- Ephesians 4:17–5:14

## QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION

- Why are relationships so important in our lives, and where does relationship with God fit in?
- What does Packer mean in saying that Jesus “republished the law”?
- The law takes the form of a series of prohibitions; yet it is held to be positive, not negative, in its content. Explain this.

They're often mistakenly considered God's "rules"—his outdated list of do's and don'ts that add up to a guilt-ridden, legalistic way of life. But as beloved author and Bible scholar J. I. Packer probes the purpose and true meaning of the Ten Commandments, you'll discover that these precepts can aptly be called God's blueprint for the best life possible. They contain the wisdom and priorities everyone needs for relational, spiritual, and societal blessing—and it's all coming from a loving heavenly Father who wants the best for his children.

Not only does Packer deliver these truths in brief, readable segments, but he includes discussion questions and ideas for further study at the end of each chapter. This book will challenge you to view the commandments with new eyes and help you to understand—perhaps for the first time—the health, hope, and heritage you're offered there.

**J. I. PACKER** currently serves as the Board of Governors' professor of theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. Dr. Packer has written a number of books, including *Knowing God*. Most recently, he served as general editor for the English Standard Version of the Bible, published by Crossway.

CHRISTIAN LIFE / PERSONAL GROWTH

ISBN-13: 978-1-58134-983-2

ISBN-10: 1-58134-983-1



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