



Why are the Ten Commandments so confusing?

I mean, we say that Honor Your Mother and Father is the fourth commandment. Other churches say it's the fifth. What gives?

This question, like last month's, came from a confirmation student, but it's one that I get quite frequently from adults as well.

Not only are the commandments numbered differently by Christian churches, but both Christian numbering systems differ from the Jewish numbering. Here are the commandments according to the three numbering systems:

First Commandment:

Jews: I am the Lord your God who has taken you out of the land of Egypt.

Luth: You shall have no other gods besides me.

Prot: You shall have no other gods besides me.

Second Commandment:

J: You shall have no other gods besides me.

L: You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

P: You shall not make for yourselves any graven image

Third Commandment:

J: You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

L: Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy

P: You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain

Fourth Commandment:

J: You shall remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy

L: You shall honor your father and your mother

P: You shall remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy

Fifth Commandment:

J: You shall honor your father and your mother

L: You shall not murder

P: You shall honor your father and your mother

Sixth Commandment:

J: You shall not murder

L: You shall not commit adultery

P: You shall not murder

Seventh Commandment:

J: You shall not commit adultery

L: You shall not steal

P: You shall not commit adultery

Eighth Commandment:

J: You shall not steal

L: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor

P: You shall not steal

Ninth Commandment:

J: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor

L: You shall not covet your neighbor's wife

P: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor

Tenth Commandment:

J: You shall not covet anything that is your neighbor's

L: You shall not covet your neighbors house... nor anything else

P: You shall not covet anything that is your neighbor's

The basic problem with numbering the commandments is that God didn't assign numbers to the commandments. He actually didn't even refer to them as commandments. In Hebrew they are literally "the ten words". It is also difficult to tell whether certain statements are a new command or simply further details about the previous command e.g. The command to not make any graven images could be viewed (as Lutherans do) as details about the command to not have any other gods. And the command to not covet your neighbor's house could be seen as simply a continuation of the command that began with not coveting his wife.

While the commandment numbering can be confusing, there really is no disagreement on the content. Jews, Lutherans and Protestants all recognize the commandments as what Moses received from God as recorded in Exodus 20:2-17. As followers of God we are responsible for believing and obeying everything that follows within those verses. For example, just because Lutherans don't count the "graven images" verse as a separate commandment doesn't mean we are free to make images of created things for the purpose of worshipping those images.

Thanks for asking,
Pastor David

Send your questions to pastor@livingwordlutheran.net