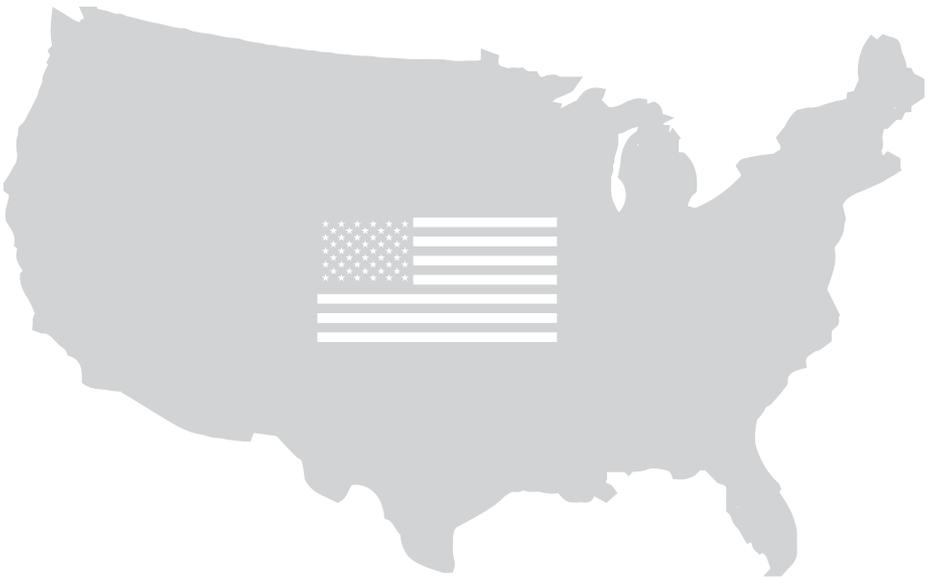




HOW DOES GOD SEE

America?



Dr. Jim Denison

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“Blessed are the people whose God is the LORD!”
(Psalm 144:15, all references ESV).

America is changing in unprecedented ways.

On everyone’s mind is the fact that we now have our first president who comes to the Oval Office directly from the Corner Office. *Politico* called Donald Trump’s election the “biggest upset in U.S. history.”¹ Mr. Trump is the first commander-in-chief to have served neither in the military nor in political office. The fact that he is new to politics was a significant factor in his successful campaign.

The Pew Research Center reports that the Hispanic share of the US population more than quadrupled over the last fifty years. Asians rose six-fold in that time. Non-Hispanic whites will become less than half of the US population by 2055. The American population will grow by another 100 million over the next fifty years, 88 percent of whom will be future immigrants and their descendants.²

Our changing culture is impacting not just our politics and demographics, but also our families. According to Pew Research Center, fewer than half of US children under eighteen years of age are living in a home with two married heterosexual parents in their first marriage. In 1960, 73 percent of children fit this description; in 1980, 61 percent did. The share of children born outside of marriage stands today at 41 percent, up from 5 percent in 1960. Thirty-four percent of children today are living with an unmarried parent, up from 9 percent in 1960 and 19 percent in 1980.³

In the midst of such seismic shifts, this fact remains constant: neither divine nor human nature changes.

Jesus is “the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). God testified, “I the LORD do not change” (Malachi 3:6). Scripture is clear: with God “there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17).

People are still by nature what we have been across our history as well. From the first humans to today, we are made in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26–27). We face the same temptation to be our own god as Adam and Eve faced (Genesis 3:5). We hold the same aspirations for ourselves and our children. While culture and technology change, the essential facts of human nature remain the same.

Here's the point: Behavior that pleased or displeased God in the biblical era still pleases or displeases him today. Sins that tempted them tempt us. Obedience that blessed them blesses us. Scripture is clear: "Blessed is he whose help is in the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God" (Psalm 146:5).

Here's the question: How does our unchanging God see our changing nation?

We can answer this question by examining what behavior he was able to bless in Scripture and what behavior he was forced to judge. We can measure ourselves by the standards he set in the Bible, since these standards have not changed.

When we see ourselves as God sees us, we learn how to be a nation he can bless today.

What follows is divided into two sections. The first examines the founding covenants in our history that positioned us to receive what divine grace intends to give all peoples. It explores the ways God has made America an exceptional nation and ways America in turn has blessed the world.

On this foundation, we turn to the second part, an examination of contemporary America in light of God's Ten Commandments. With them as the lens by which to inspect our culture, we will discover obedience God can bless and sins he must judge.

At the conclusion, we will assess our nation in light of God's word. It is my sincere prayer that this booklet will help you join a growing movement of Christians who seek to be catalysts for moral and spiritual awakening in our nation, while time remains.

PART ONE

How America Sees God

“A watchful eye must be kept on ourselves lest while we are building ideal monuments of Renown and Bliss here we neglect to have our names enrolled in the Annals of Heaven.”⁴ This was how James Madison, our nation’s fourth president, urged a friend to order his priorities.

How did the earliest founders and pioneers in American history view their relationship with God? How did he respond? What have been the results for our nation and the world?

AMERICA'S COVENANT WITH GOD

A scholar from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences told a group of Westerners in 2002 that his group was “asked to look into . . . what accounted for the success, in fact, the pre-eminence of the West all over the world.” After dismissing views that our success was tied to our military, politics, or economic system, they concluded:

The heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. That is why the West has been so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the successful transition to democratic politics. We don't have any doubt about this.⁵

The point of this section is *not* that God loves America more than he loves other nations. It is not that all of America's founders were godly Christians. And it is not that our founding covenants with God earned his favor and blessing on our nation.

Rather, it is to explore the degree to which these covenants positioned our people to receive what God's grace wants to give *all* peoples. Some of the blessings we will discuss in the following section, such as natural resources, were obviously bestowed on our continent before the first Christians arrived. But others may have been his response to covenants of commitment to him.

Let's explore these covenants, then we'll discover ways they relate to our nation at her founding and today.

The earliest governing document in North America was the Iroquois Constitution, adopted by the five tribes that constituted the Iroquois Confederacy. Historians date it as early as 1142 and as late as 1525. They credit this Constitution, along with the Mayflower Compact and the Fundamental Orders (1639) as “the most important New World governing documents.”⁶

The Iroquois Constitution obviously predated the introduction of Christianity to Native Americans. However, it recognizes the right of each person and tribe to exercise religious convictions as they choose: “The rites and festivals of each nation shall remain undisturbed and shall continue as before because they were given by the people of old times as useful and necessary for the good of men.” The document then lists nine “festivals of Thanksgiving” that were held through the year.⁷

The first set of written laws for the New World was the Mayflower Compact, ratified in 1620. Some have called it “the first American Constitution.” John Quincy Adams called it the foundation of the US Constitution.

The Compact states:

Having undertaken for the Glory of God, and Advancement of the Christian Faith, and the Honour of our King and Country, a Voyage to plant the first Colony in the northern Parts of *Virginia*; Do by these Presents, solemnly and mutually, in the Presence of God and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick.⁸

Note that they sailed “for the Glory of God, and Advancement of the Christian Faith.” They made their covenant “in the Presence of God.” According to William Bradford, their governor, when they came ashore “they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of Heaven who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean.”

Next came the “Fundamental Orders” of 1639, the first written Constitution in the New World. Its preamble stated the colonists’ purpose: “To maintain and preserve the liberty and purity of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus which we now profess.”⁹

America’s Founders, whatever their personal faith might have been, were convinced that Christian morality was essential to the nation they

began. In his *Farewell Address* (September 19, 1796), President George Washington declared to the nation:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. . . . Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle. . . . Virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government.¹⁰

John Adams likewise warned:

We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge or gallantry would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.

He stated that the “good order and preservation of civil government essentially depend(s) upon piety, religion, and morality . . . by the institution of public worship of God and of the public instructions in piety, religion, and morality” among the people.¹¹

Again, my point is not that all the Founding Fathers were godly Christians or that the American people were uniformly committed to Christ as their Lord. It is to suggest that those who first established governance in this land did so in a way that positioned the new country to receive the grace God intends for all people. Obedience does not earn God’s favor (this would be legalism). Rather, it enables and positions us to receive what God wishes to grant by his own grace and mercy.¹²

GOD'S GIFTS TO AMERICA

We sing “God Bless America” each Independence Day. How has God responded to the covenant commitments of our earliest founders? How has he blessed America?

Charles Murray holds a BA in history from Harvard and a PhD in political science from MIT. A scholar with the American Enterprise Institute, he is author of *Exceptionalism: An Experiment in History*.¹³ Murray is convinced that America is a truly exceptional nation in world history and highlights four factors that contributed to our uniqueness.

One: *Geography.*

Colonial Americans were separated from European conflict by the Atlantic, with rich soil for agrarian development and a frontier to encourage immigration. The United States comprises the fourth-largest country on earth. Extensive woodlands have produced lumber sufficient for building houses and cities across the country. Rich top soil enables a thriving agricultural industry that produces food not just for our citizens but for the world.

America is wealthy in minerals. We are the largest oil and gas producer in the world. Mining provides billions of dollars and millions of jobs throughout North America. We are a leading producer of coal, bauxite (used to create aluminum), nickel (used to create steel), diamonds, gold, and silver. Our river systems cross the continent and enable shipping, irrigation, and agriculture. Unlike many countries, our climate is livable and productive across our entire nation.

Of course, these natural blessings predated covenants with God made by those who first enjoyed them. But it is interesting that the Lord led pilgrims and pioneers who were so zealous to establish God-honoring communities to a land that would provide so bountifully for them.

Two: *People.*

The harsh life of a pioneer attracted courageous, honest, hardworking settlers who formed close-knit families. America has become the third-most populous nation on earth, with more than 300 million people, and home to nearly every race and religion on earth. As a melting pot of nations, we have been able to synthesize the attributes and contributions of cultures from around the world.

Our earliest settlers came to what is now New England, where they encountered a difficult environment. From there, pioneers pushed further west into the frontier. Their challenges forged a culture of individualism and self-reliance. Rejecting the class system they left in Europe, they argued for equality of opportunity.

There is no uniquely American culture such as we find in so many other countries. Our nation welcomes all people of all cultures. Forty-five million people living in the US today were born in another country, a population four times higher than the next nation.¹⁴ The diversity of the American population is one of our most unique strengths.

Three: *Ideology.*

America was founded on the belief that human beings possess natural rights which the state cannot bestow or withhold. Our founding document is clear: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” As a result, our leaders are chosen by the people they serve rather than as part of an entitled class: “Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

British author G. K. Chesterton observed that “America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed.” This creed is both simple and inspirational. As President Harry Truman described it

in 1948, “Being an American is more than a matter of where you or your parents came from. It is a belief that all men are created free and equal.”¹⁵ While much more progress is needed, the US has forged a culture in which millions of people have experienced significant economic advancement and social standing.

Four: *Religiosity.*

By separating church and state, early Americans formed congregations made of those who were committed to their faith, not just those who were born into it. Churches with no state funding were forced to compete for support from the public, strengthening both.

The corollary to our church-state separation is our commitment to religious freedom for all. The US welcomes those of all faiths and those of none. At the same time, we are among the most religious of all nations. For instance, 60 percent of Americans say that religion is “very important” to them; only 21 percent of Western Europeans agree.¹⁶

America’s religious commitment can be traced to four spiritual awakenings that dramatically transformed our culture. Typically dated at 1734, 1792, 1858, and 1904–5, these movements changed both people and society. Divorce rates went down; alcoholism plunged; church attendance grew significantly. These “Great Awakenings” have been a vital part of the American story across our history.¹⁷

Our geography, people, ideology, and religiosity have combined to produce the wealthiest, most powerful nation the world has ever seen. While all nations and culture possess unique features and attributes, America has been blessed in remarkable ways.

AMERICA'S GIFTS TO THE WORLD

What has America done with these blessings?

We helped save the world from tyranny during World War I, World War II, and the Cold War. We are the world's oldest continuous republic and have been instrumental in spreading democracy around the globe.

We are the world's only superpower, but we have never used our military might to conquer other lands. We didn't invade Europe after World War II—we used the Marshall Plan to help rebuild it.

We give a greater amount of money to charity than any other nation on earth. Last year we gave \$31 billion to the world in foreign aid. This was nearly double the UK, the second-place nation, which gave \$18.7 billion. And a recent survey ranked us number one in the world in helping strangers.¹⁸

Our medical industry provides the bulk of the world's research and development, saving the lives of millions with improvements in medicines and foods. Of the nine largest technology companies in the world, eight are based in the US. America is the world's number one producer of oil and natural gas.

On the spiritual front: nearly a third of the world's Christian missionaries are Americans. In a recent year, the US sent 127,000 missionaries into the world, compared to 34,000 sent by Brazil, the second-place nation.¹⁹

A Cuban pastor once told me that he had studied American history and knew why God had blessed America. His explanation was both clear and compelling: “So America’s churches could bless the world.”

PART TWO

How God Sees America

America's original covenants may have positioned our nation to experience grace God intends to give to all who will receive it, while America's blessings and subsequent gifts to the world are remarkable. With these factors in mind, now we must ask the relevant question: How does God see America today?

There are many ways to address this question, of course, but I have chosen to focus on the Ten Commandments, the foundational principles renewed across God's word and human history. These constitute the normative moral code of Scripture. Each commandment is renewed in the New Testament, demonstrating its abiding authority and significance for all peoples across all time.

The Ten Commandments are not only essential for understanding our Judeo-Christian heritage, they are vital to understanding our national history and worldview. A depiction of Moses and these Ten Commandments adorns the courtroom where the Justices of the Supreme Court meet, deliberate, and lead our nation's legal system. These ten principles are still the foundation stones for moral and legal systems the world over.

In the study that follows, we will explore these commandments in their biblical and historical context. We will seek to understand how God assessed nations in the biblical era in light of these abiding principles. Then we will examine contemporary American society to see where he must judge and where he can bless today.

GOD'S CONCERN FOR AMERICA

Before we can examine American culture in light of God's word, however, we must ask whether the two subjects are directly related. The Jewish nation is often called God's "chosen people." The Bible is filled with references to Israel, both positive and negative. He commends them when they are faithful and warns them when they are sinful.

Obviously, the United States did not exist for seventeen centuries after the biblical era ended. Why, then, can we apply what the Bible says about Israel two millennia ago to America today? Consider three facts.

One: *God's heart is for all nations and peoples.*

God is the creator of all people and nations. His nature does not change (Hebrews 13:8). He warned us through the prophet, "If any nation will not listen, then I will utterly pluck it up and destroy it, declares the LORD" (Jeremiah 12:17). His word is clear: "In anger and wrath I will execute vengeance on the nations that did not obey" (Micah 5:15); "The wicked shall return to Sheol, all the nations that forget God" (Psalm 9:17); "Put them in fear, O LORD! Let the nations know that they are but men!" (Psalm 9:20).

He testified through the prophet: "I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me" (Isaiah 65:1). This fact was made clear in the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 11) and the progress of the Kingdom to Rome itself (Acts 28:17-31). Now, in Christ "there is neither Jew nor

Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

The cycle of prophetic oracles in Amos is one example of our Lord’s concern for all peoples. He calls out sins in Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab before turning to Judah and Israel (Amos 1–2). God chose Israel to be a conduit of his work, not a container of his blessings. He cares for all nations in all times, including America.

Two: *God’s holiness requires him to judge sinful nations.*

In Ezekiel 30, the Lord states, “They will know that I am the LORD, when I have set fire to Egypt, and all her helpers are broken” (v. 8). Egypt was the great superpower of their day. If God judged them for their sins, his nature requires him to judge America for ours.

Two verses later, God warns: “I will put an end to the wealth of Egypt, by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. He and his people with him, the most ruthless of nations, shall be brought in to destroy the land, and they shall draw their swords against Egypt and fill the land with the slain” (vv. 10–11). If he could use foreign nations to judge Egypt, he can use foreign nations to judge America.

His purpose in all such geopolitical judgment is clear: “I will strengthen the arms of the king of Babylon, but the arms of Pharaoh shall fall. Then they shall know that I am the LORD” (v. 25).

The fall of Judea was a direct result of their rejection of God: “For our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and your people have become a byword among all who are around us” (Daniel 9:16). Their confidence that God would not judge them was evidence that he would have to: “All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword, who say, ‘Disaster shall not overtake us’” (Amos 9:10).

Three: *Ignorance of God’s law does not forestall his wrath.*

The Jewish people were recipients of the Ten Commandments and the Laws of Moses, the books of history and wisdom, and the prophetic warnings and writings. The first century Roman world experienced the earthly ministry of Jesus, missionary expansion of the church, and gift of the New Testament.

Americans have even more unprecedented access to the word of God. Every Internet-enabled device can enable us to read Scripture and download more Christian content than ever before in history. We of all people can least claim ignorance of God's word and ways.

In addition, ignorance of God's law does not prevent his judgment.

King Josiah ruled Judah from 640 to 609 BC. This righteous king had no idea his nation was facing divine judgment. But when the high priest discovered the "Book of the Law in the house of the LORD" (2 Kings 22:8, most likely the Book of Deuteronomy), the king heard its words and "tore his clothes" (v. 11). He realized that "great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us" (v. 13). Even though their king was godly, the people were not. Even though the times seemed prosperous, judgment was at hand.

Is the same true of America?

**THE FIRST COMMANDMENT:
HAVE NO GOD BUT GOD (EXODUS 20:3)**

Travel with me thirty-four centuries into the past and stand with ancient Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai. We are on a sandy plateau some four thousand feet above the Mediterranean Sea. This is a plain roughly two miles long and half a mile wide, with enough room for two million people to stand together. Towering 2,200 feet overhead is a huge granite mountain peak, altar-shaped and awesome. This is the mountain of God's law, the throne from which the King of Kings proclaimed his Ten Commandments.

These words were inscribed by the finger of God on two tablets, written on both sides of each. If these tablets were twenty-seven inches long by eighteen inches wide, the 172 Hebrew words of these Ten Commandments could easily have been inscribed on them.

Moses shattered them in rage when he descended from the mountain and confronted the idolatry of the people. God made them again. Moses eventually laid them in the Ark of the Covenant, the sacred box carried before the people for centuries and eventually stored in Solomon's Temple. When the Babylonians destroyed this Temple in 586 BC, the ark was lost to history.

But the words it contained are not. Imagine it: an obscure tribe of Egyptian slaves plunges into the desert to hide from pursuit and emerges with a code of ten "words" which is still authoritative thirty-four centuries later.

The foundational command

You shall have no other gods before me (Exodus 20:3).

Why not? Because “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (v. 2). He is the “LORD,” the Hebrew word YHWH. This is the holiest name of God, meaning the One who was, is, and ever shall be (Exodus 3:14).

He is also “God,” the Hebrew word “Elohim,” the typical name for God. And he is “your” God—this God is personal. No Buddhist would say “Your Buddha”; no Muslim would say “Your Allah”; no Greek would say “Your Zeus.” But YHWH calls himself “your God.” We can know him personally, as you would know “your wife” or “your husband” or “your friend.”

He is the holy YHWH who is yet our personal God.

Because of who he is and what he has done to liberate his people from Egyptian slavery, he has every right to command them, “You shall have no other gods before me.” The Hebrews have just come from Egypt, where the people worshiped Ra, Phthah, Osiris, Isis, Horus, the animals, and the pharaohs. They were going into polytheistic Canaan, the land of Baal, Ashtoreth, Asherah, Molech, and Dagon.

Their own ancestors had made the Tower of Babel to make themselves God. Joshua warned them, “Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods” (Joshua 24:3). This would be their tendency as well. In fact, they would make and worship the golden calf even as YHWH was giving this command to Moses on the mountain above.

So God says, “Have no other gods before me.” “Before me” means “against my face,” and requires absolute and unconditional allegiance to God and worship of him alone. Joy Davidman (who later married C. S. Lewis) describes the setting:

Everyone knew that the universe was a wild and chaotic thing, a jungle of warring powers: wind against water, sun against moon, male against female, life against death. There was a god of the spring planting and another god of the harvest, a spirit

who put fish into fishermen's nets and a being who specialized in caring for women in childbirth; and at best there was an uneasy truce among all these, at worst a battle. Now along comes a fool, from an insignificant band of desert wanderers, and shouts that all these processes are one process from a single source, that the obvious many are the unthinkable One. . . .

He shouted it so loud that it has echoed down all time. . . It was the greatest discovery ever made.²⁰

How well is America keeping this command to have no God but God?

The foundational human sin

If we do not make the Lord our God, we are likely to deify ourselves. When we trust ourselves more than we trust the Lord who made us, we violate the First Commandment and incur his wrath rather than his favor.

Self-sufficiency is at the heart of all temptation. Satan's lie to Eve is his lie to us: "You will be like God" (Genesis 3:5). Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was right: the "will to power" is the basic drive in all human nature.²¹

The prophet warned us: "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land" (Jeremiah 17:5–6).

Conversely, "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is in the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit" (Jeremiah 17:7–8).

We must beware of trusting men more than we trust God: "They made kings, but not through me. They set up princes, but I knew it not. With their silver and gold they made idols for their own destruction" (Hosea 8:4). When we worship God in name but ourselves in self-reliance, it can be said of us as it was said of ancient Israel, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6).

The First Commandment and America

Self-reliance is not only the foundational human sin, it is the foundational American sin as well.

As we noted earlier, Americans are among the most religious people in the Western world. Our Founders were consistent in their belief that religion-based morality was indispensable to their democratic experiment.

However, our culture is now dominated by what philosophers call “postmodernism.” In summary, this is the belief that all truth claims are personal and subjective. The reasoning is that our minds interpret our senses, but no two people sense the world or process their senses in precisely the same way. As a result, there can be no such thing as “objective” truth or morality. Such a culture is forced to tolerate all truth claims that do not obviously harm others, since no truth claim is inherently superior to any other.

The consequences of this worldview for Christianity in America are clear and tragic. In this view, the Bible cannot be an objective authority for our lives; rather, it is seen as a diary of religious experience containing only relative truth. Churches no longer offer objective truth or consensual morality. At their best, they provide social services such as feeding the hungry; at their worst, they seek to force their subjective beliefs on the rest of us.

It is not surprising that a majority of Americans today say it is not necessary to believe in God to be moral. It is also unsurprising that the percentage of Americans who profess atheistic or agnostic religious beliefs continues to escalate.

According to Pew Research Center, the share of atheists in America has doubled in recent years.²² The number of Americans who are unaffiliated with any religion is now second only to evangelical Protestants, significantly exceeding Catholics and mainline Protestants. Their size has nearly doubled in the last seven years.²³

In addition, a growing number of Americans now view religion as dangerous to society. There was a time when the church was seen as the moral gatekeeper of the culture, an institution central to society. With the rise of postmodernism in the 1960s, the church became peripheral to culture, a weekend hobby for those who chose to follow its teachings.

Now an increasing number of critics claim that religion is harmful to culture. In their view, religion is responsible for 9/11 and radical Islam, clergy abuse scandals, homophobia, and all manner of bigotry. They believe that religion spends money on buildings rather than people and heaven rather than earth.

Richard Dawkins calls religion “the root of all evil” and describes it as “a virus in the software of humanity that must be expunged.” Christopher Hitchens’s international bestseller, *god is Not Good*, states in its subtitle that “religion poisons everything.” Sam Harris claims that “science must destroy religion.”²⁴

Roman Catholic Cardinal Francis George of Chicago stated in 2010:

I expect to die in bed, my successor will die in prison and his successor will die a martyr in the public square. His successor will pick up the shards of a ruined society and slowly help rebuild civilization, as the church has done so often in human history.²⁵

Our culture is witnessing an increase in non-Christian religions as well. The percentage of Muslims and Hindus, while small, has doubled in recent years. More than one in ten immigrants identify with a non-Christian faith.²⁶

Our nation has become more self-reliant and less God-reliant than ever before. We have witnessed a dramatic rise in the number of non-Christians among us. Critics claim that our faith is not just irrelevant but immoral and dangerous to society. As the percentage of Christians declines, the percentage of non-Christians increases.

To be a nation our Lord can bless, we must have no God but God. Can God bless America?

**THE SECOND COMMANDMENT:
WORSHIP NOTHING YOU MAKE**

(EXODUS 20:4-6)

We all have an innate need to worship something or someone. The oldest art in the world is composed of figures used in worship. Bob Dylan's old song is right: "You gotta serve somebody."

But we don't like worshipping what we cannot see. So, we make physical images for a spiritual God, then we worship them. And whenever we worship anything or anyone that is not God, this by definition is idolatry.

Is this a problem for America?

What God says about idolatry

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments (Exodus 20:4-6).

"You" is plural, applying to every one of them and every one of us. "Shall not" is a command. If you and I find that we have an idol in our lives, we *must* get rid of it, right now.

“Make for yourself” points to a basic principle for life: if you can make it, don’t worship it. If you can buy it, or sell it, or destroy it, don’t worship it. I would rephrase this for our culture as well: “You shall not make *of* yourself” an idol. Anything we make *for* ourselves or *of* ourselves must not have first place in our lives, or it becomes an idol.

The phrase, “a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth,” refers to ancient Canaanite worship. They made their idols of wood, sometimes of stone, often covered with some kind of precious metal. They made them in all sorts of forms, which is why the Second Commandment prohibits forms from the sky, the earth, or the seas—thus, everything.

Here’s God’s verdict on such practices: “You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God.” Idolatry was a major problem in the ancient world. As we have seen, the Egyptians worshiped idols, as did the Canaanites and the Jews’ own forefathers. The ancient Greeks, the most brilliant civilization of all time, also worshiped gods such as Athena and Zeus—so many, in fact, that Paul commented on the number of idols he found in Athens (Acts 17:22–23).

Idolatry was such a problem, there are fourteen different synonyms and words for “idol” in the Old Testament. The Hebrew Scriptures say more about this commandment than any of the other nine.

Why was idolatry so common? As noted above, every human being is created with a need to worship God. As St. Augustine said, we all have a “God-shaped emptiness” inside us, and our hearts are restless until they rest in him.

But it’s hard to worship something you cannot see. So the ancients would make physical images for spiritual gods, seeking to portray divine characteristics such as power, fertility, or glory. But in time the means became the ends, and they began worshiping the idols themselves.

This God cannot allow, for he is a “jealous” God. The word is better translated “zealous” and points to God’s desire for an exclusive relationship with us. Just as no husband who truly loves his wife could

endure to share her with another man, so will God not share us with another god. The term also shows that God truly cares for us, for we cannot be “jealous” or “zealous” about someone unless they matter to us.

The next phrase seems problematic: “Visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.” Actually, this is a Hebrew idiom, not a mathematical statement. The Bible teaches repeatedly that we must pay for our own sins, not those of others (Deuteronomy 24:16; Jeremiah 31:29, 30; Ezekiel 18:1–4).

God is saying that our present-day idolatry has consequences for those who come after us, since they will likely follow in our footsteps. If I worship money, my children probably will, too. If I love Jesus, my family probably will as well.

This is why God says that he shows “steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.” “Love” is the Hebrew word *hesed*, similar to *agape* love in the Greek—God’s unconditional, unbreakable commitment.

God is not saying that we *earn* his love when we worship him alone. He is saying that we put ourselves in position to *receive* this love by his grace. Then we respond by keeping his commandments. Jesus said, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love” (John 15:10). His disciple John added, “By this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments” (1 John 2:3).

Scripture consistently and steadfastly forbids us to worship anything and anyone but the one true God. There is no surer path to divine judgment than this: “I will declare my judgments against them, for all their evil in forsaking me. They have made offerings to other gods and worshiped the works of their own hands” (Jeremiah 1:16).

The people were urged to say to God: “Take away all iniquity; accept what is good, and we will pay with bulls the vows of our lips. Assyria shall not save us; we will not ride on horses, and we will say no more, ‘Our God,’ to the work of our hands” (Hosea 14:2–3).

If we worship what we make rather than the One who makes us, we force God to bring judgment against us. God cannot permit idolatry or he commits idolatry as well.

The Second Commandment and America

How is God's rejection of idolatry relevant to our culture today?

One: *The idolatry of materialism.*

There is nothing inherently wrong with material possessions, a nice car, house, or clothes. God's word does not say that "money is the root of all evil," but that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10).

American culture is especially susceptible to this temptation. Psychologists say that the free-market competition upon which our economic system is based encourages materialistic greed as our measure of success. Other forms of capitalism such as those in Austria, Germany, and Norway rely on strategic cooperation among the various sectors of the economy and focus less on individual success. It is also the case that the more we care about money, the less we care about community and relationships.²⁷

Paradoxically, as our nation has become richer over recent decades, we have become less happy. Psychologist David Myers: "Compared with their grandparents, today's young adults have grown up with much more affluence, slightly less happiness and much greater risk of depression and assorted social pathology." Research shows that life satisfaction is correlated with having less-materialistic values.²⁸

Money becomes my idol whenever it is the end, not the means. I am in danger of materialistic idolatry when I work simply to make more money, not to accomplish something of significance for which I am paid money. I invite this sin when I want money for the sake of money, rather than for what I can do with money for God and others.

If I take money from God or his work to buy possessions, if I consider myself better than others because I have them, or if I measure my life significance by them, I'm in danger. Possessions possess me and become my idols. Is this a problem in America?

Two: *The idolatry of religion.*

Idolatry is common across many of the world's religions today. Hindus have images of their thousands of gods. The Buddhists venerate their images of the Buddha. Hare Krishnas have their idols as well.

Do Christians have idols? We do whenever we make the means of our faith into the ends of our faith. If we refuse to change the methods so as to communicate the message; if we make our buildings or programs or leaders more important than the God they serve; then we commit religious idolatry.

Three: *The idolatry of immorality.*

Listen to Colossians 3:5: "Put to death, therefore, whatever is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." Ephesians 5:5 warns us that "everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God."

Any time we intentionally break the will and word of God, we put our own desires ahead of God and make them our idols.

Four: *The idolatry of self.*

Bestsellers tell us to "pull your own strings," and "look out for number one." Frank Sinatra sang the theme song of our culture: "I did it my way."

As we have seen, our postmodern culture says there's no such thing as "absolute truth," only "your truth" and "my truth." We don't apply this subjective view of truth to our car keys (any one would then work), to our food (any quality or sanitation would then be acceptable), or to our history (any leader would then be effective). But we apply it to our selfish ambitions and choices.

It is clear that America suffers from the idolatry of materialism, religion, immorality, and self. To be a nation God can bless, we must value the Creator before his creation. Can God bless America?

THE THIRD COMMANDMENT: DO NOT MISUSE GOD'S NAME

(EXODUS 20:7)

The Jewish culture was fascinated with words, even to the point of veneration. They knew the power of words. Once spoken, they can never be taken back. They have the ability to injure, to bless, to condemn, or to save.

And they knew that no word is as powerful as the name of God.

What God says about his name

You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain (Exodus 20:7).

As with the second commandment, “you” is plural in the Hebrew, so that this commandment applies to every one of us, with no exceptions. “Shall not” shows that this is a commandment, not just a suggestion or principle for life. It is as important to God as the commandments not to murder or commit adultery. This issue is crucial to God.

“In vain” translates a Hebrew word meaning “groundlessly, empty, without basis,” and includes frivolous, insincere, or unjustified use of the name of God. The original context was legal in nature. When a person testified before the elders or council, he was to speak “in the name of God.” This was something like our oath “to tell the truth,

the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.” The commandment was not to promise truth “in God’s name” and then lie or deceive.

“The name of the LORD your God” is the central phrase of the third commandment. Jewish people associated the “name” of a person with his or her basic identity. For this reason, biblical characters were often assigned names to describe them (“Esau” means red, because he was red-headed; “Isaac” means laughter, because Sarah laughed when God said she would have a son).

The “name of God,” therefore, describes his basic character and identity. To speak of the “name of God” was to deal with his very nature, being, and person. For this reason, the names of God in the original biblical languages were sacred to the Jewish people. Each of them said something important about God.

YHWH meant “the One who was, is, and ever shall be” (Exodus 3:14). This name showed that God is eternally the Lord.

“God” in this text is “Elohim,” literally “the God of gods.” This name signifies that he alone is God, above all other deities worshipped around the world. In a day of polytheism and henotheism (each country had their own god), he alone is the God of the universe.

Here are some other names for God in the Hebrew Bible:

- “El-Elyon” (Genesis 14:22, Deuteronomy 32:8–9) means “God most high,” showing that God rules the world today.
- “El Shaddai” (Exodus 6:3) means “God Almighty,” and shows that he has all the power of the universe, and we have none.
- “Pahad” means “the One to be feared” (Genesis 31:42; 1 Samuel 11:7).
- “Adonai” (Isaiah 6:1) means “Lord of all,” the one who reigns.
- “Jehovah-Jireh” (Genesis 21:22; 22:14) means “the Lord who provides” for our every need.
- “Jehovah-Tsidkenu” (Jeremiah 23:6) means “the Lord is our righteousness,” so that we can be holy and righteous only as he makes us so.
- “Jehovah-Shalom” means “the Lord is peace” (Judges 6:24).

These are just some of God's names in the Scriptures. As you can see, the "name of God" describes his character, identity, person. In other words, the name of God means God himself. Consider to some examples:

- "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Psalm 8:1).
- "May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble! May the name of the God of Jacob protect you!" (Psalm 20:1).
- "Sing to God, sing praises to his name; lift up a song to him who rides through the deserts; his name is the LORD; exult before him!" (Psalm 68:4).
- "He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name!" (Psalm 111:9).
- "The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe" (Proverbs 18:10).
- "Those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the Lord and esteemed his name" (Malachi 3:16).
- "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" (Matthew 6:9).
- "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me" (Matthew 18:5).
- "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Matthew 18:20).
- "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19).
- "'Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven: 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again'" (John 12:28).
- "These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).
- "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).
- The apostles "left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name" (Acts 5:41).

- “The Lord said to [Ananias], ‘Go, for [Saul] is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name’” (Acts 9:15–16).
- “God has highly exalted [Jesus] and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9–11).
- “Whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17).
- “Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads” (Revelation 14:1).
- “On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords” (Revelation 19:16).

Here’s the point: to misuse God’s name is to misuse God, to abuse him, to slander his character and reputation. This issue was so important that the third commandment is the only one of the ten with an immediate threat of punishment.

The Third Commandment and America

How do we break this commandment in our culture?

One: *We mock God.*

How often do our movies, television shows, and musical shows denigrate the Lord or his people? Warden Samuel Norton in *The Shawshank Redemption* quoted Bible verses while mistreating his inmates and stealing money. Like him, Christians in the media are often portrayed as white, prudish, anti-intellectuals.²⁹ Fringe groups such as Westboro Baptist Church are frequently reported without noting that nearly all Christians oppose what they do. Faith-based nonprofits such as International Justice Mission seldom get the same media coverage as extremist groups receive.

Hacksaw Ridge was an exception this year. Mel Gibson’s movie presented what I believe to be the most positive depiction of a Christian

in film since *Chariots of Fire*. But it was made by a Christian for the explicit purpose of telling this story to advance the gospel.

Would you say that our culture is more or less respectful of God than in generations past?

Two: *We use God for ourselves.*

In biblical days, people would swear falsehood in court, in the name of God. They made business deals or personal promises in his name, then broke those contracts. They used God's name in a profane way, to curse someone or to express anger.

We obviously break this commandment today if we use God's name in profanity. Such language has no place in Christian character or conduct. And when we use God's name in swearing or cursing, we dishonor his character. We abuse his reputation. We use him for ourselves.

We also use God's name when we manipulate others with it. The preacher who says, "God told me you need to give money to this ministry." The husband who says, "God told me to divorce you." The parent who says, "God will punish you if you don't do as I say." We take his name "in vain," for our own purposes. We use God for ourselves. This, the Lord of the universe will not allow.

Three: *We trivialize the Lord.*

Many Christians compartmentalize God so that he is only one part of our lives. We know we're going to heaven, that we have our "fire insurance," so we come to church to pay our religious dues. But we don't let our religion affect our lives.

This approach explains the fact that many ethical patterns are the same inside and outside the church today. We make sure we don't misuse the name of God, we make him a part of our lives, and think that's all he wants. But it's not.

Ultimately, to keep the third commandment means to *honor God with our lives*. To live so that we bring glory to God's name, character, and reputation, in all we do. Billy Graham said, "We take the name of God in vain when we accept it and allow ourselves to be called Christians, but do not live godly lives."

To be a nation God can bless, we must honor his name and character.
Can God bless America?

The Fourth Commandment: Honor the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8–11)

Studies show that Americans work more than any other culture in the industrialized world—more than the British, the French, the Germans, the Norwegians, or even the Japanese. We take less vacation, work longer days, and retire later.³⁰ Twenty percent of all American meals are eaten in the car.³¹ Personal digital assistants such as Siri, Cortana, Google, or Alexa are ubiquitous.

Does any nation need a Sabbath more than Americans do?

What God says about the Sabbath

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, 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, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy (Exodus 20:8–11).

“Shabbat” transliterates the Hebrew word “Sabbath” and is the word used in Israel and increasingly among contemplative Christians in America as well. It is central to the longest of the Ten Commandments (forty-eight words in Hebrew by my count).

Here we are told to “remember the Sabbath day.” “Remember” means to observe, to venerate, like “Remember the Alamo.” This is something we choose to do, intentionally and consciously. “Keep it holy” means to make it separate, distinct, a day different than the rest of the week.

The Hebrews worked “six days,” from sunrise to sunset, thus a typical seventy-hour work week. Labor was part of God’s will for us in the Garden, before the Fall, and it will be as we worship God forever in heaven. But on the Shabbat we are not to work at all—nor is anyone else. Everything alive, even animals, need a Sabbath.

This fact is so important to God that he set the model for us. The God who “neither slumbers nor sleeps” (Psalm 121:3, NIV) didn’t need a day off. He observed a Sabbath to teach us to do the same. This is the only commandment of the ten for which God has set a personal example.

What the Sabbath is not

What does the fourth commandment not mean?

One: *The Sabbath is not a legalistic religious requirement.*

The ancient Hebrews were so concerned with the Shabbat that they devised thirty-nine ways of breaching it, each divided into thirty-nine ways, for 1,521 different Sabbath rules. Among them: A scribe could not carry a pen; a person could not kill a flea; people could not wear clothing it was possible to carry (because we might get hot and carry it).

Two: *The Sabbath is not church attendance.*

The first Christians worshiped God on Sunday. This was the day Jesus rose from the dead, and the day Pentecost birthed the church. Jesus chose to rise on Sunday; the Spirit chose to fall on Sunday. This is the “Lord’s Day” (cf. Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Revelation 1:10).

But the Roman Empire did not observe Sunday as special in any way. And so the Christians would worship, then go to work. This was a normal day for their culture. They would observe a Shabbat, a day or time of rest with God, separate from their church attendance.

Things began to change with Constantine in AD 321, who laid down the first law that work in the cities must stop on the Lord’s Day. In 585, the Council of Macon forbade all work on Sunday. Alcuin (d. 804) and Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) erroneously identified the Lord’s Day with the Sabbath. The Reformers separated them; in fact, Luther (in his *Larger Catechism*) and Calvin (in the *Institutes* 2.8.32,34) were very adamant that they are two completely different concepts. They were right.

Going to church is not keeping a Sabbath. You may make this your Shabbat, your day to be alone with God. But church attendance is not the same thing as the Sabbath.

The Fourth Commandment and America

As we have seen, church attendance is not automatically equivalent to keeping a Sabbath. However, it is a good indicator of spiritual commitment in our culture. If a person does not seek to worship God publicly once a week, it is unlikely that he or she is giving the Lord an entire day for rest, reflection, and communion with the Creator.

By this measure, how is America doing with the fourth commandment?

According to a recent Pew Forum report, 27 percent of those surveyed said they're attending services more often than they did in the past. Another 23 percent say they've always attended regularly; 27 percent have always attended rarely; and 22 percent attend less now than in the past. This means that the nation is split between 49 percent who attend worship "regularly" and those who do not. Of course, "regularly" must be defined—in the survey, it equates to once or twice a month.³²

Another Pew survey found that 55 percent of Americans say they pray every day; 21 percent say they pray weekly or monthly; 23 percent say they seldom or never pray. Among the religiously unaffiliated, 20 percent say they pray daily. Women (64 percent) are more likely to pray daily than men (46 percent). Americans over the age of sixty-five are far more likely to pray daily (65 percent) than those under thirty (41 percent).³³

Evangelical Christians apparently struggle with making time for God as well. In a recent survey, 90 percent said they read the Bible regularly, but only 31 percent said they set aside a substantial period of time each day to pray. Forty-two percent admitted that they find it difficult to find time on a regular disciplined basis to read Scripture and pray; 63 percent said they were easily distracted when spending time with God. Evangelicals were three times more likely to identify with the busy Martha than with her contemplative sister, Mary.³⁴

Abraham Ibn Ezra said in the twelfth century, "I keep the Sabbath, God keeps me: a covenant eternally!" To be a nation God can bless, we must keep the Sabbath. Can God bless America?

THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT: HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER

(EXODUS 20:12)

Consider the following facts regarding America today:

- Every day, 2989 children see their parents divorced.
- Every 26 seconds, a child runs away from home.
- Every 47 seconds, a child is abused or neglected.
- Every 7 minutes, a child is killed or injured by guns.
- Every day, 100,000 children are homeless.
- Every day, 6 teenagers commit suicide.³⁵

Clearly, our families need help. Fortunately, God cares. That's why he gave us the fifth commandment.

What God says about honoring our parents

Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you (Exodus 20:12).

“Honor” in the Hebrew original means to respect or venerate. “Your father and mother” breaks new ground by including the mother as worthy of respect. In a world that relegated women to inferior status as the possession of their husbands, this inclusion is highly significant. Leviticus 19:3 restates the command in even stronger terms, placing the

mother first in priority: “Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father.”

“That your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you” points to the security Israel would experience in her land if she kept this commandment. But the promise extends to other relationships as well, as we will see.

God’s word makes this a binding commandment for all time. As noted, Leviticus 19:3 requires “every one of you” to respect mother and father, regardless of person or circumstances. Proverbs 20:20 adds, “If one curses his father or his mother, his lamp will be put out in utter darkness.” The book also provides this gruesome hyperbole: “The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be picked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures” (Proverbs 30:17). In other words, this commandment is important!

The New Testament agrees. Jesus renewed this commandment when he told the Rich Young Ruler to “honor your father and mother” (Matthew 19:19). He severely criticized the religious leaders of his day for not honoring and supporting their parents (Mark 7:9–13).

Paul was clear as well: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’ (this is the first commandment with a promise)” (Ephesians 6:1–2). He repeated his emphasis: “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord” (Colossians 3:20).

The Fifth Commandment and America

The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers.

An angry letter to the editor in today’s paper? Actually, this complaint was made by Socrates, four centuries before the time of Christ.³⁶ But it feels familiar to our culture today.

A Harris poll asked 2,250 adults to compare their memory of school dynamics when they were students with today. The percentage who agreed with the statement, “students respect teachers,” dropped from 79 percent when they were students to 31 percent today.³⁷

Symptomatic of our day are articles such as “Are We Raising An Ungrateful Generation?”³⁸ and “Why kids today are out of shape, disrespectful—and in charge.”³⁹ Experts blame technology, which encourages short, abrupt messages and allows for rude, impersonal interactions. Digital devices also allow parents and children to be together but ignore each other by focusing on their technology.⁴⁰

To be a nation God can bless, we must respect our parents. Can God bless America?

**THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT:
DO NOT MURDER (EXODUS 20:13)**

Crime in America is the proverbial “tale of two cities.”

On the positive: According to the FBI, violent crime in the US is lower than it has been in twenty years. The rates of murder, robbery, aggravated assault, property crime, and burglary have all plummeted over that time, some to half their levels in 1995.⁴¹

On the negative: The FBI says that murder rates increased between 2014 and 2015 at their fastest pace in a quarter-century and have risen to their highest level in seven years.⁴² In 2016, murders in San Antonio rose 61 percent, 59 percent in Chicago, 44 percent in Louisville, 36 percent in Phoenix, and 31 percent in Las Vegas.⁴³

As we will see in this section, God’s prohibition of murder applies not only to the crime associated with that term, but also to a much broader range of sins. Here we find an especially urgent reason to pray for repentance and spiritual awakening in our nation.

What God says about murder

You shall not murder (Exodus 20:13).

The Hebrew text consists of two words: “No murder.” The word translated “murder” is *ratzah*, which appears forty-seven times in the Old Testament. Each time it refers to premeditated and intentional taking of human life.

It does not forbid self-defense (Exodus 22:2), accidental killing (Deuteronomy 19:5), involvement in war (Deuteronomy 13:15), or capital punishment (Genesis 9:6). But it prohibits all other killing for any other reason.

God values life so highly that he exiled the nation of Judah “for the innocent blood that [Manasseh] shed. For he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the LORD would not pardon” (2 Kings 24:4).

In addition to the crime our society identifies as “murder,” I believe there are at least two other examples of “premeditated and intentional taking of human life” in our culture: abortion and euthanasia. Neither is specifically characterized as murder by the Bible, but I believe this is because the Judeo-Christian cultures already knew them to be forbidden.

The Sixth Commandment and America

As we have seen, the murder rate is a significant problem in America. After years of decline, it has started to rise again. Comparing murder in the US to other nations is instructive as well. According to the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime, here were the number of murders for the most recent year in:

- The United Kingdom: 602
- Denmark: 58
- Finland: 89
- Greece: 107
- Italy: 475
- Germany: 716
- France: 792
- Turkey: 3,216
- Australia: 238

For the US, the number is 12,253.

Of course, some nations have even more murders, such as Venezuela at 19,030 and Brazil at 50,674. But our murder rate (3.9) is far higher than it is for Western European countries such as Denmark (1.0), Finland (1.6), Iceland (0.3), Ireland (1.1), Norway (0.6), Sweden (0.9), or the UK (0.9).⁴⁴

Now let’s consider two other areas of relevant concern.

One: Murder and abortion.

In my view, the Bible teaches that life begins at conception. Rebekah's unborn twins, Jacob and Esau, are called "children" by the text (Genesis 25:21–22). "Children" translates *banim*, the typical word for children after they are born, a term often translated as "sons." Similarly, the unborn John the Baptist is described as a *brephos*, the Greek word for "baby" (Luke 1:41–44).

All the DNA coding needed for human life is present from the moment the egg is fertilized. The fetus is a human and will never be anything but a human. Left unharmed, it will always produce a baby boy or girl. To end the life of a human at any stage in its development through premeditated, intentional, non-warfare action constitutes *ratzah*, an act prohibited by the Sixth Commandment.

Early Christian writings left no question on this subject: "You shall not slay a child by abortion" (*Epistle of Barnabas* 19.5); "Do not murder a child by abortion" (*Didache* 2.2); "The fetus in the womb is a living being and therefore the object of God's care" (Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians*, 35.6).

I believe that the ancient sin of child sacrifice is relevant to this discussion. God consistently warned the Jews against the worship of Molech, a god of the Ammonites often worshiped through child sacrifice. Consider Leviticus 20: "Any one of the people of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn in Israel who gives any of his children to Molech shall surely be put to death. The people of the land shall stone him with stones" (v. 2). Their practice of this horrific sin was one reason the people of Judah fell to Babylon under the judgment of God (Jeremiah 32:35–36).

Since *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion, the number of babies aborted in America exceeds fifty-eight million. This is a number larger than the populations of Kentucky, Oregon, Oklahoma, Connecticut, Iowa, Mississippi, Arkansas, Kansas, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, West Virginia, Nebraska, Idaho, Maine, New Hampshire, Hawaii, Rhode Island, Montana, Delaware, South Dakota, Alaska, North Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming—combined.

For much more on this issue, please see my *Abortion and the Mercy of God*.⁴⁵ If God considers life sacred from birth, how does he judge America's practice of abortion in light of the Sixth Commandment?

Two: Murder and euthanasia.

“Physician-assisted Dying” (PAD) is the contemporary term for the practice historically known as “euthanasia.” According to Compassion & Choices, a national PAD advocacy group, PAD is now accessible to one in six terminally-ill Americans. California's recent adoption of legislation approving PAD joined similar legislation already in effect in Oregon, Washington, and Vermont.

A recent Gallup Poll found that nearly seven in ten Americans (68 percent) say “doctors should be legally allowed to assist terminally ill patients in committing suicide.” Support for euthanasia has risen nearly twenty points in the last two years.⁴⁶

It is my belief that God views life as sacred from conception to natural death. While we can certainly enlist medical care to ease suffering at the end of life, we should not employ such care for the express purpose of ending life.

In my view, removing life support is not contrary to God's will if all medical options have been exhausted. The Lord can still intervene miraculously if he wishes (cf. the raising of Lazarus in John 11). But any interventional measures, physician-assisted or not, that are intended to shorten life are contrary to God's will. For much more on this, please see my *Euthanasia and the Will of God*.⁴⁷

If God considers life sacred until natural death, how does he view America's growing acceptance of euthanasia in light of the Sixth Commandment? To be a nation God can bless, we must value life as he does. Can God bless America?

The Seventh Commandment: Refuse adultery (Exodus 20:14)

Studies indicate that 22 percent of married men in America have committed an adulterous act at least once in their lives. Fourteen percent of married women have done the same. Infidelity with co-workers and on business trips is especially common.⁴⁸ A recent survey

confirmed the same results: 21 percent of men and 19 percent of women admitted that they had cheated on their partners.⁴⁹

When we expand the definition of adultery beyond the legal to the moral, we find that the problem of sexual sin in America escalates to epidemic proportions. In this section, we will apply the Seventh Commandment to our culture. And we will discover yet more reason to pray for repentance and spiritual awakening in our land.

What God says about sexual sin

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

There are four categories of sexual immorality described in Scripture.

One: *Adultery.*

Jewish law defined adultery as voluntary sexual relations between a married person and someone other than the lawful spouse. Scripture clearly and consistently forbids such immorality (Deuteronomy 22:22; Proverbs 2:16–19; Luke 18:20). Hebrews 13:4 is especially potent: “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.”

Two: *Lust.*

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned us that “everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). “With lustful intent” translates the Greek *epithymesai*, meaning to “desire” or “covet.”

Three: *Pre-marital sex.*

God made the male and female for sexual relations only within the bond of marriage (Matthew 19:4–5), which is why Paul warned against engaging in relations with a prostitute (1 Corinthians 6:16). He also prescribed marriage before sexual relations (1 Corinthians 7:2).

Any sexual relations outside of marriage are described by Scripture as “sexual immorality” (*porneia* in the Greek). They are consistently forbidden, as God’s word makes clear (Acts 15:20; 1 Corinthians 5:1;

6:13, 18; 10:8; 2 Corinthians 12:21; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 5:3; Colossians 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; Jude 7).

Four: *Rape and incest.*

Scripture clearly and consistently forbids rape. When Dinah was violated by the son of a neighboring ruler, her brothers murdered him, his father, and all the men of his city (Genesis 34). After an unnamed concubine was gang-raped and left for dead by men in the tribe of Benjamin, the other tribes went to war against them (Judges 19–21).

Deuteronomy 22:25–27 safeguarded the rights of a rape victim. Her attacker was to be executed, while she was to be protected from all social recourse. Incest is uniformly forbidden as well (Leviticus 18:6–18; Deuteronomy 27:20–23; Ezekiel 22:9–10; 1 Corinthians 5:1).

The Seventh Commandment and America

How does America measure up to God’s standards for sexual morality? Let’s consider the four categories surveyed above.

One: *Adultery.*

As we have seen, marital adultery is tragically common in America today. In addition, the Supreme Court decision to legalize same-sex marriage brings an entirely new dimension to this issue. However, this subject is far too extensive to explore in detail here. For my thoughts on this issue, please see my *How to Defend Biblical Marriage*.⁵⁰

It is clear to me that the Bible defines marriage as a monogamous covenant relationship between one man and one woman (Genesis 2:18–24; Matthew 19:4–6). As a result, all same-sex marriages are outside his intention and a violation of the Seventh Commandment.

Two: *Lust.*

Here we must face the scourge of pornography, an epidemic that is poisoning minds and families across our land. Consider the following facts.

Internet pornography:

- There are 4.2 million porn websites currently in operation (12 percent of all websites).
- Search engines receive 68 million requests for porn every day (25 percent of total search engine requests).
- Of all Internet users, 42.7 percent view porn.
- More than 100,000 websites offer illegal child pornography.⁵¹
- 20 percent of men admit to accessing a porn website at work.
- 40 percent of adults in the US regularly visit porn websites.
- Of college and graduate students (ages 18 to 26), 69 percent of men and 10 percent of women view pornography more than once a month.
- The United States has 244,661,900 porn web pages. The next highest contributor to Internet porn is Germany, with 10,030,200 web pages.⁵²

Pornography on mobile devices:

- 1 in 5 mobile searches are for pornography.
- 24 percent of smartphone owners admit to having pornographic material on their mobile device.

Pornography in video:

- Americans rent upwards of 800 million porn videos and DVDs each year.
- Of all rented movies, one in five is pornographic.
- The 11,000 porn films produced each year far outpace Hollywood's annual output of 400.⁵³
- Every 39 minutes, a new pornographic video is created in the US.
- The number of hard-core porn videos and DVD titles in the US grew tenfold between 1988 and 2005.⁵⁴

Pornography and children:

- The average age for a child to be exposed to pornography is 11 years old. This usually happens while they are doing homework.
- 90 percent of 8- to 16-year-olds have been to a porn site.

- According to a global survey of 19,000 parents, children as young as 6 are accessing porn.
- The largest age group of porn users is 12- to 17-year olds.
- 70 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds visit porn sites monthly.⁵⁵

Pornography has been linked directly to neurological damage in men, the degrading and brutalizing of women, prostitution, child trafficking and prostitution, and organized crime. It has been called “more addictive than crack cocaine.”⁵⁶

Three: Premarital sex.

By the time they reach twenty years of age, more than 70 percent of men and women in America say they have had sexual relations. More than 50 percent of eighteen-year-olds say they have been sexually active.⁵⁷ Acceptance of premarital sex has risen from 29 percent in the early 1970s to 58 percent today.⁵⁸

How is this unbiblical morality working for us?

A recent study showed that women who have no sexual relations before marriage have a 5 percent chance of divorcing after five years of marriage. By contrast, those with ten or more partners have a 33 percent chance of divorcing after that length of time. Even those with one sexual partner before marriage have a 20 percent chance of divorce.⁵⁹

There are approximately three million unintended pregnancies each year in the US, along with 1.2 million abortions. Single adults account for all most all of these abortions; 54 percent were using some form of contraception. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there are about nineteen million new cases of sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs) in the US each year. STDs would be virtually non-existent apart from sex outside of marriage.⁶⁰

Four: Rape and incest.

According to RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), an American is sexually assaulted every ninety-eight seconds. The age demographics of sexual violence victims:

- 15 percent are ages 12–17
- 54 percent are ages 18–34
- 28 percent are ages 35–64
- 3 percent are age 65 and older.

One in six women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime. However, one out of every ten rape victims is male. The damage caused by sexual violence is horrific:

- 94 percent of women who are raped experience post-traumatic stress disorder.
- 33 percent of women who are raped contemplate suicide; 13 percent attempt suicide.
- Sexual assault victims are ten times more likely to use drugs.⁶¹

God warned his people that their sexual immorality would force his judgment and wrath (Ezekiel 16:15–58; Jeremiah 5:7–9). Baal worship and the sexual immorality it entailed led to divine judgment on the people and the death of twenty-four thousand Israelites (Numbers 25:1–9). Paul warned that we must refuse sexual sin, lest we face God's judgment as well (1 Corinthians 10:8).

To be a nation God can bless, we must value sexual morality as he does. Can God bless America?

**THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT:
DO NOT STEAL (EXODUS 20:15)**

In September 2016, the FBI has released its report on crime in America for 2015. Among the findings:

- There were 327,374 robberies, accounting for \$390 million in losses.
- Property crimes resulting in \$14.3 billion in losses.
- Property was stolen with a total value of \$12,420,364,454.
- Larceny accounted for 71 percent of property crime; burglary for 19.8 percent, and motor vehicle theft for 8.9 percent.⁶²

Think how different our nation would be if we obeyed the Eighth Commandment.

What God says about stealing

You shall not steal (Exodus 20:15).

The Bible uniformly condemns theft (cf. Leviticus 19:11; Deuteronomy 5:19; Proverbs 30:8–9; Romans 13:9; Ephesians 4:28). But property theft is not the only way we break the Eighth Commandment.

The Eighth Commandment and America

One third of Americans who punch in at work admit that they are untruthful with their employer regarding the time clock. They neglect to clock out for lunch or breaks, have someone else clock them in or out, or add time to timesheets.⁶³

According to *Forbes*, 89 percent of Americans workers admit that they waste time at work. Half of the wasted time is spent talking on the cell phone and texting.⁶⁴ It is estimated that 1,625,000 Americans cheat on their taxes each year, costing our country \$270 billion.⁶⁵

According to the International Center for Academic Integrity, 43 percent of graduate students and 68 percent of undergraduate students admit to having cheated on tests or written assignments. Ninety-five percent of high school students said they cheated in some form.⁶⁶

God says that when his people do not tithe to his Kingdom, they rob from him (Malachi 3:8–9). Yet only 5 percent of Americans tithe; 80 percent give only 2 percent of their income to religious or charitable causes. Christians give at 2.5 percent per capita. According to *Relevant* magazine, if America’s Christians were to tithe, there would be an addition \$165 billion for churches to use and distribute. What could be done with this funding?

- \$25 billion could relieve global hunger, starvation, and deaths from preventable diseases—within five years.
- \$12 billion could eliminate illiteracy in five years.
- \$15 billion could solve the world’s water and sanitation issues.
- \$1 billion could fully fund all overseas mission activities.

There would still be \$100 billion left for additional ministry expansion.⁶⁷

To be a nation God can bless, we must value financial integrity as he does. Can God bless America?

The Ninth Commandment: Do not lie (Exodus 20:16)

According to biblical commentaries, the Ninth Commandment is the one we break most often. Think about it—when last did you break any of the others? When last were you deceptive in some way?

King David lamented that “the faithful have vanished from among the children of man. Everyone utters lies to his neighbor; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak” (Psalm 12:1–2). Then he prayed, “May the LORD cut off all flattering lips” (v. 3).

Will God do this? What does he think about lying?

What God says about lying

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor
(Exodus 20:16).

“You shall not bear” translates Hebrew meaning “you must not give evidence, answer, reply, or testify.” “False witness” refers to deceptive testimony or witness. Your “neighbor” is your “companion, friend, lover, beloved.”

God consistently forbids such deception, warning that “lying lips are an abomination to the LORD” (Proverbs 12:22; cf. Leviticus 19:11; Psalm 34:13; 101:7; Proverbs 24:28; Matthew 15:18–20; Ephesians 4:25; Colossians 3:9–10).

However, his word forbids more than false words:

- False appearances are lies: “They take pleasure in falsehood. They bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse” (Psalm 62:4).
- Withholding the truth is a lie: “If anyone sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify, and though he is a witness, whether he has seen or come to know the matter, yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity” (Leviticus 5:1).
- Deception is a lie. The first sin in the Bible, Satan’s claim that Adam and Eve would not die if they ate the forbidden fruit, was a lie (Genesis 3:4).
- The last sinners named in the Bible are liars: “Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood” (Revelation 22:15).

David, who had great personal experience with deception, noted, “The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies” (Psalm 58:3).

God grieves when we violate the Ninth Commandment (Jeremiah 9:3–6). His holy character causes him to judge such sin: “You have plowed iniquity; you have reaped injustice; you have eaten the fruit of lies” (Hosea 10:13a).

When we sin in this way, even our military might cannot protect us: “Because you trusted in your own way and in the multitude of your warriors, therefore the tumult of war shall arise among your people, and all your fortresses shall be destroyed” (vv. 13b–14).

The Ninth Commandment and America

By the age of four, 90 percent of children have grasped the concept of lying.⁶⁸ It shows.

Studies indicate that 60 percent of Americans lie at least once during a ten-minute conversation. Thirty-one percent admit they lied on their resumes.⁶⁹ One report indicates that we deceive 30 percent of the people we interact with one-on-one.⁷⁰

As we have noted, postmodernism is the dominant worldview of our culture. This construct claims that since our minds interpret our senses, our knowledge must be personal and subjective.

Of course, to claim that there is no such thing as objective truth is to make an objective truth claim. This is an assertion we make in no other area of life. If all morals were subjective, for instance, how could we condemn the Holocaust or 9/11? If all language is subjective, how could we communicate such a reality objectively to others?

The internal contradictions inherent in the postmodern denial of truth have not, however, minimized its popularity. It is conventional wisdom today that there’s no “right” or “wrong,” just what’s right or wrong for you. It is no wonder that lying is so pervasive today.

To be a nation God can bless, we must value truth as he does. Can God bless America today?

The Tenth Commandment: Do not covet (Exodus 20:17)

The American economic system is driven by consumers on a level unprecedented in history. Personal consumption and expenditures account for 71 percent of our total economy, a figure higher than ever and higher than any other nation.⁷¹

Of course, a consumer-based economy needs us to continue to consume. The more we buy, the better for our nation—and of course, for those who make what we buy. Thus, we are exposed to as many as 5,000 ads every day.⁷² Most want us to buy something we don't have and may not need.

In other words, coveting is central to our culture. Is this a problem?

What God says about coveting

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's (Exodus 20:17).

The key word here is “covet” (*tahmod*). This word simply means to take pleasure in, long after, or desire earnestly. Interestingly, the word itself is neutral. The question is not whether or not we will have desires, but what we desire, and at what price.

Some things we “covet” are good, as in wishing to emulate the great qualities of someone we admire. Some things we desire are natural, such as good appearance, a nice car, or the ability to perform our job well.

So, what is “coveting” in the wrong sense?

The Tenth Commandment specifically prohibits two kinds of desires: To want something I should not possess, and to want something which belongs to someone else. These can be material things, such as “your neighbor's house,” ox, or donkey.

This can be the wrong desire for status, as in coveting your neighbor's manservant or maidservant, ancient symbols of place and status. This can be the wrong desire for people, as with “your neighbor's wife.” It is wrong to want what I shouldn't have or to covet what belongs to you.

This commandment is crucial. If we keep it, we will keep the other nine. If we don't covet status or power above God, we will worship him, refuse idols, honor his name, and keep his day. If we don't covet status or power with others, we will honor our parents and refuse to hurt people. If we don't covet people, we'll refuse adultery. If we don't covet things, we'll not steal or lie.

Breaking this commandment is at the root of all our troubles. So, why do we?

The Tenth Commandment in America

As we have seen, coveting what we don't have is at the heart of the American economy and consumer culture. This is not bad so long as our wants and needs, along with the means we choose to fulfill them, do not contradict God's word and will. Tragically, this is not the case for most of us. We can admit with Paul that sin "produced in me all kinds of covetousness" (Romans 7:8).

We covet things because we think they will bring us happiness. Writing for *The New York Times*, David Brooks noted that in 1966, only 42 percent of college freshmen said being well-off financially was an essential or very important life goal. By 2005, the number had risen to 75 percent. In 1966, 86 percent of college freshmen said that developing a meaningful philosophy of life was essential or very important. Today, less than half agree.⁷³

A man on television interviewed people who had become instant lottery millionaires. He asked, "How many of you are happier today?" Not a single person raised his or her hand. One of the winners replied, "How many new suits can you buy? How many cars can you drive? Every time you get something nicer, it isn't good enough, because you see and want something even nicer."⁷⁴ It's never enough.

Martin Buber, the Jewish poet and philosopher, suggested that only two kinds of relationships exist: I-you and I-it. We should have I-you relationships with each other, and I-it relationships with things. When we reverse them, everyone loses. As Rabbi Stewart Vogel notes, "Who is wealthy? The one who is content with his life."⁷⁵

To be a nation God can bless, we must value contentment as he does. Can God bless America?

CONCLUSION

We have noted God's desire to bless any people who position themselves to receive what his grace intends to give. The founding covenants in American history indicated a desire to do just this. As a result, it is no surprise that he led those who made these covenants to a land with exceptional natural resources and capacities, and that he used them to forge an exceptional nation.

Whatever our view of our history in the context of divine providence, here is the operative question: Can God bless America today?

We have measured our culture by the Ten Commandments, the foundational statements of biblical morality. We have discovered urgent reasons to pray and work for repentance and spiritual awakening in our land while there is still time.

The next step is ours.

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