

Homiletics Analysis: Exodus 20

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Exodus 20 records the direct speech of God to Israel at Sinai, delivering what have come to be called the Ten Commandments (or the Decalogue). The chapter opens with a brief self-identification by the LORD (v. 2) that functions as the covenantal preamble — the basis on which everything that follows is issued. The commandments themselves fall into two movements: the first four governing Israel's relationship to God (exclusive worship, no idols, reverent use of the divine name, Sabbath observance), and the final six governing Israel's relationship to one another (honoring parents, prohibitions on murder, adultery, theft, false witness, and coveting). The chapter closes (vv. 18–26) with Israel's terrified response to the theophany, Moses's reassurance that the fear is itself purposeful ("that the fear of him may be before you, so that you do not sin," v. 20), and initial altar regulations that anchor the law's application to the specific form of worship the LORD will accept.

The structure is significant: the Decalogue is not issued as a bare list of rules but embedded in narrative — God's redemptive act precedes His covenantal demands, and the terrifying display of His holiness follows them. The law arrives from within a relationship already established by grace (v. 2), not as the means of establishing it.

This Text — Intent

God is not merely informing Israel of ethical obligations. He is forming a people who will live in sustained covenant relationship with Himself — a people whose whole lives (worship, speech, time, family, community, desire) are brought under the Lordship of the One who redeemed them. The intent is transformation at every level: Israel is to look and live differently from every surrounding nation because the God who owns them is unlike every other god. The theophanic terror is not incidental — it is calibrated to produce the precise kind of fear that produces holiness (v. 20). God is using the weight of His own presence to do something in Israel they could not manufacture for themselves: genuine, sustained reverence that shapes behavior from the inside. For the reader of every era, the intent extends: to expose the full scope of what it means to be a human being under the claim of a holy God, and thereby to surface the reader's profound need for the grace that must accomplish what the law itself cannot.

Subject Sentence: The LORD gives redeemed Israel His law as the covenant shape of their life with Him.

Primary Claim: God issues the Decalogue not to earn His people's redemption but to define what redeemed life looks like — so that knowing Him fully and fearing Him rightly, they will not sin.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Preamble as Indicative Foundation (v. 2)

One of the most consequential interpretive questions in Exodus 20 is the function of verse 2: *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."* A common misreading — operating across multiple traditions — treats this verse as throat-clearing before the real content begins. The Reformed reading, supported by the structure of ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties and by Paul's argument in Galatians and Romans, takes this preamble as theologically determinative: the commandments are issued *to* a people already redeemed, not *for* the purpose of achieving redemption. The sequence — redemption first, then law — is not accidental but structural. This forecloses any reading of the Decalogue as a works-righteousness ladder. Lutheran tradition handles this well: the law accuses and drives to the Gospel. The Reformed reading agrees but adds that the law also *shapes* — it is the pattern of life for those already in covenant, not merely a mirror that shows failure.

The Lutheran Law/Gospel Framework

Lutheran hermeneutics tends to read the Decalogue primarily through the lens of its *usus elencticus* — the law's first use as a curb and its second use as a mirror exposing sin and driving the sinner to Christ. This is a genuine and important function of the Decalogue, and Paul's argument in Romans 3 and Galatians 3 corroborates it. The Reformed reading does not dispute this but qualifies it: the Decalogue also has a *third use* (Calvin's primary emphasis), functioning as a guide and delight for the regenerate. Psalm 119's sustained meditation on the law as joy, light, and life — written by and for believers — cannot be reduced to the first or second uses alone. The Lutheran framework is not wrong, it is incomplete: it correctly identifies what the law does to the unbeliever but underweights what the law does *for* the believer. The Reformed reading retains the full three-use structure without collapsing the law into mere accusation.

Dispensational Discontinuity

Dispensational interpreters often argue that the Mosaic law — including the Decalogue — is given specifically to Israel under the Mosaic covenant, is abrogated at the cross, and applies to the church only where individual commands are re-issued in the New Testament. On this reading, the Sabbath commandment in particular does not carry forward to the church in any direct form. The Reformed reading qualifies this at the level of redemptive-historical fulfillment (Christ does fulfill and transform the law, Matthew 5:17) while refuting

its sharp discontinuity: nine of the ten commandments are explicitly re-affirmed in the New Testament, and the moral law embedded in the Decalogue reflects the character of God rather than a provisional covenantal arrangement. The distinction between the moral, ceremonial, and civil aspects of the Mosaic law — while not a wooden grid — helpfully preserves what the Dispensational reading loses: the permanent and binding character of the moral content of the Decalogue, grounded not in the Mosaic covenant but in creation and in the character of God Himself.

The Sabbath Commandment

The fourth commandment is the most exegetically contested in the Decalogue across all traditions. Dispensational interpreters argue for abrogation. Seventh-Day Adventist and some Baptist interpreters argue for strict Saturday observance. The Reformed tradition has consistently argued that the Sabbath principle is rooted in creation (Genesis 2:2–3), expressed in the Mosaic commandment, and transformed rather than abolished by Christ's resurrection — with Sunday as the Lord's Day fulfilling the Sabbath's eschatological intent. This reading accounts for the creation grounding in verse 11, the New Testament's shift of the assembly day (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2), and the Sabbath's ultimate horizon in the rest that remains (Hebrews 4:9). The Sabbath is not abolished — it is *fulfilled forward* into both the Lord's Day pattern and the ultimate eschatological rest. Preachers should not skip the fourth commandment's complexity; it is precisely where the passage's canonical depth is richest.

Moral Law and the Coveting Commandment

The tenth commandment is significant for Interpretive Evaluation because it is the commandment Paul identifies (Romans 7:7–8) as the one that exposed his own sin most devastatingly — “I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’” This commandment reaches beneath behavior to desire and motive — it is the one commandment no one can externally police or externally obey. Jesus extends this logic throughout the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21–48), showing that all ten commandments operate at the level of the heart. The Reformed reading takes this seriously: the Decalogue as a whole is not merely behavioral regulation but a claim on the whole person — mind, affections, and will. Moralizing exposition that reduces the commandments to behavior modification has missed the tenth commandment's function as the key that unlocks the heart-level intent of all the others.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 2:2–3** — The Sabbath commandment in Exodus 20:11 reaches back to creation rest, establishing that the fourth commandment is not arbitrary legislation but a creational rhythm built into the fabric of existence before the fall and before Israel.

- **Deuteronomy 6:4–9 (The Shema)** — The Decalogue’s first commandment finds its positive complement in the Shema: the exclusive worship demanded in Exodus 20:3 flows from the LORD’s uniqueness. Loving God with all heart, soul, and strength is the internal form of the first table’s external commands.
- **Matthew 5:17–48** — Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount is the definitive New Testament interpretation of the Decalogue’s reach: He fulfills rather than abolishes the law and demonstrates that every commandment operates at the level of desire and motive, not merely external behavior (vindicating the tenth commandment’s hermeneutical function for all the others).
- **Romans 3:19–20; 7:7–12** — Paul’s argument that the law brings knowledge of sin and exposes the depth of human corruption corroborates the Decalogue’s *usus elencticus* and establishes that the law, while not a means of justification, is a genuine and holy expression of God’s character (“the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous, and good,” 7:12).
- **Hebrews 8:10; Jeremiah 31:33** — The New Covenant promise that God will write His law on the hearts of His people (rather than stone tablets) does not abolish the Decalogue but internalizes it — the content remains while the mode of its inscription changes. This is the eschatological resolution of Exodus 20’s own intent: a people who do not sin because the fear of God is genuinely before them.

Aim: To show that the Decalogue is the shape of covenant life for a people already redeemed, exposing both the breadth of God’s claim on every dimension of human existence and the depth of human need for the grace that makes genuine obedience possible.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
20:1	God speaks directly — “And God spoke all these words”	The speaker is God Himself; the solemnity of direct divine speech is foregrounded
20:2	Preamble: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”	Redemption precedes command; the indicative establishes the relationship within which the imperatives are given
20:3	First commandment: No other gods before the LORD	Exclusive loyalty — covenantal monotheism,

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
		not merely philosophical monotheism
20:4–6	Second commandment: No carved idols; no bowing or serving them; the LORD is a jealous God	Covers the mode of worship; jealousy is covenant language — God guards the exclusivity of His relationship with His people
20:7	Third commandment: Do not take the LORD’s name in vain	Covers the use of the divine name in speech, oath, and representation; misuse brings certain judgment
20:8–11	Fourth commandment: Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy; grounded in God’s own creation rest	The only commandment expressed as “remember”; the creation grounding (v. 11) ties this to pre-Sinai creational order, not merely Mosaic legislation
20:12	Fifth commandment: Honor father and mother; carries a promise of long life in the land	The hinge between two tables; bridge commandment linking the vertical (reverence for God) and horizontal (community order)
20:13	Sixth commandment: Do not murder	The sanctity of human life rooted in image-bearing (cf. Genesis 9:6)
20:14	Seventh commandment: Do not commit adultery	The sanctity of covenantal marriage; community cohesion depends on its protection
20:15	Eighth commandment: Do not steal	The sanctity of property and the dignity of labor
20:16	Ninth commandment: Do not bear false witness against your neighbor	The sanctity of truth and just testimony; community depends on reliable speech
20:17	Tenth commandment: Do not covet — neighbor’s house, wife, servants, animals, anything	Reaches beneath behavior to desire; the only commandment that cannot be externally policed; exposes the heart-level

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
20:18–19	The people witness the thunder, lightning, trumpet, and smoke; they tremble and keep distance; they ask Moses to speak instead of God	claim of all the others Theophanic terror produces distance and delegation; the people cannot sustain direct encounter with God’s holiness
20:20	Moses reassures: “Do not fear” — but then reframes: the fear IS the point — “that the fear of him may be before you, so that you do not sin”	The most theologically dense verse in the passage after v. 2; fear is the purpose, not the problem; calibrated terror produces lasting holiness
20:21	The people stand far off; Moses draws near to the thick darkness where God is	The mediator enters where the people cannot; foreshadows the priestly and ultimately the Christological mediation to come
20:22–26	The LORD gives Moses instructions for altar construction: no carved images, no hewn stone, no steps that expose nakedness	The law’s first application is worship; how God is approached matters as much as whether He is approached

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	20:1–2	The Foundation: Redemption Precedes Command
2	20:3–11	The First Table: Total Claim on Israel’s Worship of God
3	20:12–17	The Second Table: Total Claim on Israel’s Life with Neighbor
4	20:18–21	The Response: Terror, Mediation, and the Purpose of Fear

Division	Verses	Label
5	20:22–26	The Application: Worship Regulated by the One Who Spoke

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD gives redeemed Israel His law as the covenant shape of their life with Him.

Primary Claim: God issues the Decalogue not to earn His people’s redemption but to define what redeemed life looks like — so that knowing Him fully and fearing Him rightly, they will not sin.

Applications (Five)

1. Stop treating the commandments as entry requirements and receive them as covenant gifts. (*Mind/belief*) The preamble of verse 2 is not decorative — it is definitional. The LORD identifies Himself as the One *who already redeemed you* before issuing a single command. Every time you read the Decalogue as a system you must climb to earn standing with God, you have reversed the logic of the text. The commandments are given to people who are already His. To receive them as covenant gifts rather than entry requirements is to read the passage as God gave it — and to find that His yoke, as Jesus would later say, is actually easy.

2. Let the scope of the Decalogue break open any domesticated picture of God you have constructed. (*Affections/worship*) The God of Exodus 20 will not share His worship with carved wood (vv. 4–6). He will not tolerate the misuse of His name (v. 7). He insists on shaping your time (vv. 8–11). He reaches beneath your behavior into your desires and tells you what you may not even want (v. 17). This is not a manageable deity. The appropriate response to meeting this God is the one the Israelites had at Sinai — trembling. If your picture of God does not regularly produce something like the fear that drove Israel back from the mountain, you have not yet fully encountered the God of Exodus 20. Let this text disturb your comfort before it directs your conduct.

3. Examine your life for the false gods the first two commandments expose. (*Affections/worship*) The first commandment does not merely prohibit formal polytheism — it prohibits anything that functionally occupies the place of ultimate loyalty, trust, and security that belongs to God alone. The second commandment does not merely prohibit stone carvings — it prohibits any self-constructed image of God that reduces Him to something manageable, useful, or familiar on your own terms. The question is not whether you attend church. The question is: what do you turn to when you are afraid? What must you have to feel secure? What would you be devastated to lose? The answers to those

questions will locate your functional gods with more precision than any doctrinal statement.

4. Take the tenth commandment as the diagnostic key for your obedience to all the others. (*Mind/belief*) The prohibition on coveting (v. 17) is the commandment that cannot be faked. You can refrain from murdering while wishing someone were dead. You can refrain from adultery while cultivating lust. You can give generously while resenting every dollar. The tenth commandment, as Paul discovered in Romans 7, unmasks the heart-level claim that runs beneath all the others. Before measuring your obedience to commandments six through nine by your behavior, ask the tenth commandment's diagnostic question: what do you want that God has said you may not have? What do you want so badly that having it feels more real and necessary than His law? That is where your work is.

5. Receive Moses's word in verse 20 as the operating principle for your whole Christian life: the fear of God is not the obstacle to holiness — it is the engine of it. (*Will/behavior*) When Israel recoiled in terror and asked Moses to mediate, their instinct was to get distance from the frightening God. Moses corrects them: the fear is the point. The right response to God's holiness is not to build distance but to let the weight of His presence — His jealousy for exclusive worship, His intolerance of sin, His absolute claim on every dimension of your life — actually govern your daily decisions. Concretely: identify one area of your life where you have been functionally managing your distance from God rather than living under the full weight of His claim. The Sabbath rhythm, the honesty of your speech, the purity of your desire — wherever you have been keeping God at arm's length, let verse 20's word do its work: draw near and fear Him rightly.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Exodus 20 is one of the most theologically foundational chapters in all of Scripture because it establishes the moral character of the God of Israel in its most concentrated form. The Decalogue is not a tribal code or a prudential ethic — it is a direct disclosure of what the holy God values, what He demands, and what He will not tolerate. The preamble of verse 2 establishes the theological architecture that governs all biblical ethics: God's character and redemptive action precede and ground His moral commands. The chapter also discloses the nature of sin in a way that goes beyond behavioral violation: the tenth commandment reveals that God's law reaches into desire and motive, not merely external conduct. The theophanic conclusion (vv. 18–21) establishes a permanent truth about the character of God: His holiness is not an abstraction but a encountered reality that produces appropriate terror in sinful creatures — and Moses's reframing of that terror (v. 20) reveals that fear is not the enemy of covenant relationship but its guardian.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Exodus 20 is decisive for the Reformed tradition's insistence on the third use of the law — not merely as a curb on external behavior or a mirror that drives the sinner to Christ, but as a guide and delight for the regenerate. The preamble's indicative-before-imperative structure is the Old Testament structural proof for the Reformation's doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone: Israel is redeemed before the commandments are issued, and they are issued to the redeemed, not to the unredeemed as a means of redemption. Reformed covenant theology reads the Decalogue as the moral core of the covenant of grace, grounded in God's own character rather than in the temporary Mosaic administration — which is why nine of the ten commandments are explicitly re-affirmed in the New Testament and why the moral law, properly understood, is not abrogated but fulfilled in Christ. The passage also foreshadows the Christological mediation that is central to Reformed soteriology: Moses draws near to the darkness where God is (v. 21) precisely because the people cannot — a pattern that finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ, who enters the holy place not made with hands and opens access for those who could never approach on their own.

Main Takeaway

The Ten Commandments were never meant to earn you a place with God — they were given to people who already had one. The God who says “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt” is the same God who says “you shall have no other gods before me” — and that sequence is everything. But do not let that gospel comfort soften the law's full claim: this God owns your worship, your speech, your time, your family, your body, your honesty, and your desires. All of it. He says so here. The appropriate response to meeting Him in Exodus 20 is what Israel had at Sinai — not a managed, comfortable familiarity, but the kind of fear that actually changes how you live.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Preaching the Decalogue as a works-righteousness system by ignoring verse 2.** The most common and most damaging mishandling of Exodus 20 is beginning the sermon at verse 3 rather than verse 2. When the preamble is omitted or treated as incidental background, every commandment becomes a condition for earning God's favor rather than a covenant gift given to people already redeemed. The sermon becomes moralism — a list of things to do to make God accept you. The entire chapter has to be read from within verse 2, or it cannot be read rightly.

- **Reducing the commandments to behavioral checklists and missing their heart-level claim.** Expository treatments that move through the Decalogue as ten discrete behavioral prohibitions will produce Pharisees, not disciples. Jesus's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21–48) is the interpretive lens the preacher must bring: every commandment reaches beneath behavior to desire, motive, and the orientation of the heart. The tenth commandment is the key that unlocks this reading — preach it last and let it reinterpret everything that preceded it.
- **Treating the theophany in verses 18–21 as mere scene-setting and missing its theological payload.** The terror of Sinai and Moses's reframing in verse 20 ("that the fear of him may be before you, so that you do not sin") are not narrative decoration — they are theological argument. This verse is the passage's own statement of intent: God uses the weight of His holiness to produce the fear that produces holiness. Sermons that end at verse 17 or treat verses 18–21 as transition material have left out the passage's own account of why the law was given and how it works.
- **Over-specifying or under-specifying the Sabbath commandment.** The fourth commandment is the one most likely to produce either legalistic over-application (strict Sabbatarian rules that import Mosaic civil law into contemporary practice) or dismissive under-application (treating Sunday as indistinguishable from any other day because "we're not under the law"). The Reformed reading of the Sabbath as a creation ordinance transformed rather than abolished by Christ's resurrection gives the preacher both exegetical traction and pastoral usefulness. Preach the Sabbath's rhythm as grace — God building rest into the structure of reality — before arriving at its specific application in the Lord's Day.
- **Failing to preach the Decalogue's first table (commandments 1–4) with the same concreteness as the second table (commandments 5–10).** Sermons on the Ten Commandments tend to become vivid and practical in the second table (murder, adultery, theft) and vague and abstract in the first (idolatry, the divine name, the Sabbath). But the first table is where the deepest idolatry diagnosis lives. The preacher who does not help the congregation identify their contemporary functional gods — the things they trust, fear, and love in the place of God — has avoided the commandments' most urgent work. Keller's idol-diagnosis lens is especially productive for commandments one and two.
- **Using Exodus 20 to moralize without grounding applications in the gospel.** The commandments create profound awareness of human inability — which is precisely their intended function (Romans 3:20; 7:7). A sermon on Exodus 20 that ends with "try harder to keep these ten things" has violated the passage's own logic. Every application should land on the grace available in Christ, who kept what we could not keep and mediates for us as Moses could not. The picture of Moses entering the darkness alone (v. 21) is not incidental — it is the Old Testament

silhouette of the One who would enter the darkness of Golgotha so that His people could draw near to God.