

# Ten Rules for a Successful Life

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If you visit a bookstore today, you will inevitably find the “self-help” section filled with hundreds of books on how to be fit, friendly, and fabulous. In other words, people are earnestly searching for ways to be successful in every area of their lives—work, family, friends—the topics are too numerous to mention on how to be both effectual and content. If you are looking for the road-map to success, you do not need to go any further than God’s set of rules He gave to the children of Israel. They are:

## 1. The Fundamental Rule (Exodus 20:1-3)

I call the first of the Ten Commandments the Fundamental Rule—not just because it’s the first in the list but because it is the foundation of the other commandments. God’s love is evident from the beginning: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” Even before giving the commandments to Moses, His love had been evident as He bore the Israelites out of Egypt “on eagles’ wings” and brought them to Himself (Exodus 19:3-4). The commandments were a continuation of a love that began with God’s promises to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3).

Egypt was an idolatrous nation, and the Hebrew slaves were heading for Canaan, an even more idolatrous nation. But this first commandment is a message that the Israelites could have *the* one true God if they would embrace Him. But they would have to choose to put God first in their life. God doesn’t want to be the first among all the gods. He wants to be the only God in your life.

## 2. The Focus Rule (Exodus 20:4-6)

I call the second commandment the Focus Rule. The first commandment says we have to worship the right God, and the second says we have to worship the right God in the right way. We have to focus our attention upon Him by hearing His Word, not by seeing an image of Him: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image . . . ; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them” (verses 4-5). Idols were forbidden!

“God is Spirit” (John 4:24). It would be impossible to create a physical image of something that has no physical existence. He has revealed Himself by words and actions. If He had wanted us to have an image of Himself, He could certainly have provided it, but He didn’t. Why? Because our perception of God would be immediately tied to, and limited by, that image.

Idols are not just images of gods. They are anything on which we focus attention and emotion that rightfully belongs to God alone. And there are plenty of those things in the materialistic culture in which we live.

### **3. The “Frivolous” Rule (Exodus 20:7)**

There are no frivolous commandments, of course. I use that word to describe how some people use God’s name—in a frivolous manner. Taking God’s name “in vain”—using Jesus’ name as an exclamation or God’s name as part of a curse—is so commonplace in our modern world that we hardly notice when we hear it.

Besides those kinds of uses, the best modern equivalent to the original intent of the third commandment is when, in a courtroom, a witness promises to tell the truth “so help me God.” The witness is calling on God to give credibility to the witness’ testimony. But if he then lies under oath, he has taken God’s name in vain; he has used God’s name for false purposes, to further his own agenda, not God’s.

God is saying, “I love you enough not to let you involve me in your duplicity. Not only do you hurt Me (My name), you hurt yourself by trying to appear righteous if you have no intention of being righteous.”

### **4. The Frailty Rule (Exodus 20:8-11)**

The fourth commandment—the Frailty Rule—is a fascinating one. By the time of Jesus’ ministry on earth, Jewish leaders had compiled a list of 1,521 things you couldn’t do on the Sabbath as a way of expanding on God’s fourth commandment. They turned the Sabbath into a burden instead of a blessing. And part of that legalist attitude remains today in some Christian circles.

The word “sabbath” means rest. The Jews were to work hard for six days and rest on the seventh. Shortly after Jesus’ ascension to heaven the followers of Christ moved the meeting day of the Church to the first day of the week—the day after the Sabbath, which was the seventh day. We are not bound by the fourth commandment to treat it as a “Christian Sabbath.” But the principle of taking a day to rest—one day out of seven—was established in the beginning (Genesis 2:2) and still has relevance today. There are no rules about what you can and can’t do on Sunday. It’s a day to enjoy as a gift from God—rest, refreshment, service, worship—a day unlike any other in the week.

### **5. The Family Rule (Exodus 20:12)**

The first four commandments were oriented vertically, guiding us in our relationship with God. But the last six have a horizontal perspective, guiding us in our relationship with others. And we begin with the Family Rule—commandment number five: “Honor your father and your mother . . .” (verse 12).

This commandment, and Paul’s repetition of it in Ephesians 6:1-3, is of-

ten used to teach children to honor *their* parents. But the command was given to the adults of Israel—to honor their parents. Any generation that doesn't honor its parents is likely to be dishonored by their own children.

This commandment is the only one with a promise: “that your days may be long.” It's a general principle, not an iron-clad promise. It's a way of saying that as the current generation honors the preceding generation it adds to the longevity of every generation. Honor as a virtue suggests the presence of other virtues that lead to stability and the blessing of God. Even after our parents are gone, we can still honor their memory by living in a manner that reflects what they did for us.

## **6. The Felony Rule (Exodus 20:13)**

Murder is a felony in today's legal system, so I call the command not to murder the Felony Rule: “You shall not murder” (verse 13).

Murder is not the killing that armies do in battle. Murder is the taking of another's life with malice or for selfish reasons. And that happens a lot in our culture. Man is created in God's image, so to destroy the image of God on earth is to put yourself in God's place as the Lord of life. Murder is an act against God as much as against a human being.

Jesus revealed just how serious this commandment is by saying it's possible to murder someone in your heart as well as in their body (Matthew 5:21-26). Murder begins with the heart and ends, sometimes, with the hand. But the murderous heart is just as guilty as the murderous hand. God's love for those He created is so deep that He doesn't want evil thoughts, much less evil actions like murder, extended toward them.

## **7. The Fidelity Rule (Exodus 20:14)**

The same heart and hand rule applies to the seventh commandment—the Fidelity Rule—that outlaws the practice of adultery: “You shall not commit adultery” (verse 14).

Adultery is consensual sexual intercourse between a married woman and a man who is not her husband or a married man and a woman who is not his wife. It's not hard to see how this commandment springs out of a motivation of love from God to us. God does not want individuals, spouses, children, or extended family members to go through the fallout from adultery. There is nothing as hurtful as marital infidelity—it is a crushing event from which God wants to spare us.

The flip side of the command might be, “You shall love your spouse with a pure and faithful love.” Forbidding one encourages the other—or at least gives love a chance.

### **8. The Fraud Rule (Exodus 20:15)**

The Fraud Rule is what I call commandment number eight: “You shall not steal” (verse 15).

This seems to be a simple commandment, yet the fallen creativity of man comes up with all kinds of reasons to justify taking something that isn't theirs, or failing to give something to someone that belongs to him—like taxes to the government. Property theft occurs in the United States every three seconds.

Imagine a world without stealing or fraud of any kind. We could leave our houses and cars unlocked and trust the people where we invest our savings. God loves us enough to want us to be free of the guilt and punishment associated with stealing and fraud. And He loves everyone enough not to want them to be defrauded of what is rightfully theirs. God wants every human being to look to Him as their provider, not to use devious and fraudulent means to get what they need.

### **9. The False-Witness Rule (Exodus 20:16)**

The ninth commandment's language, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor,” is familiar. But what exactly does it mean? The meaning is short and pointed: “You shall not lie.”

God loves us enough to want us to have the same relationship with each other that we have with Him—relationships based on honesty and transparency. Those who lie cannot enjoy relationships built on trust—it is foundational in our relationships with others to tell the truth.

### **10. The Final Rule (Exodus 20:17)**

The Final Rule is a commandment to keep us from being discontent: “You shall not covet [that which belongs to another person]” (verse 17).

The reason this commandment is the final commandment is because it covers all the other nine. If you commit adultery, or steal, or lie, or worship an idol, you are coveting—you are saying to God, “I am not happy with the provision You have made for me and I am going to seek satisfaction elsewhere.” It is no doubt the most frequently violated commandment because it happens in the mind; it's a sin no one else sees and so we feel free to engage in it.

God's Ten Commandments (or Rules for Living)—four vertical, six horizontal—are words of love, carved in stone. Obeying them is an expression of our love for Him—and are key to living a successful life.