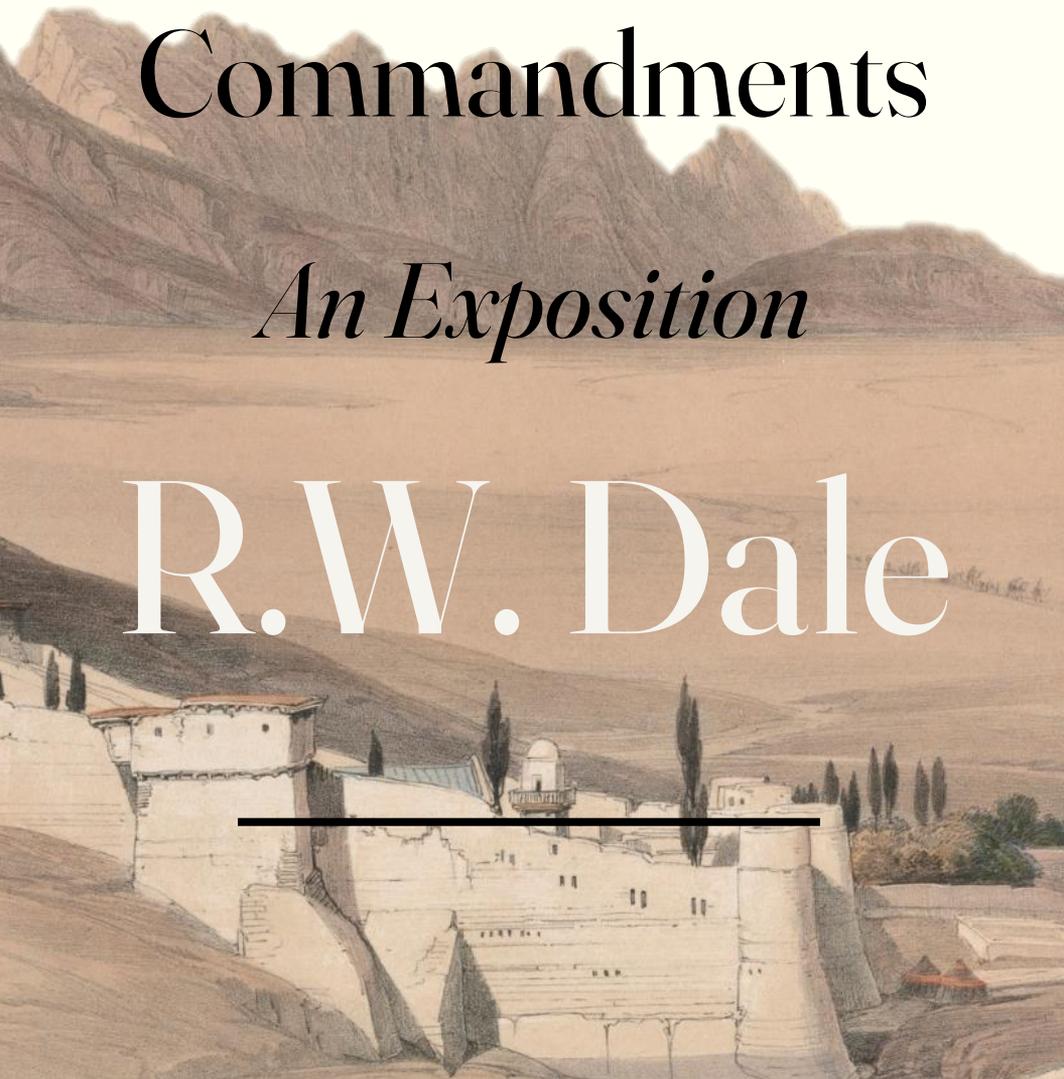


The Ten

Commandments

An Exposition

R.W. Dale



**The Ten Commandments:
An Exposition**

The Ten Commandments

An Exposition

by

R.W. Dale

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The Ten Commandments: An Exposition

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“To assist the intellect is much; to quicken the conscience and confirm the righteous will is more.”

-Robert William Dale

This edition remains true to its original version. It retains its original British spelling and notation employed at the time of its initial publication.

Footnotes have been added to aid contemporary readers in identifying individuals referenced by the author.

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Preface

The Discourses published in this volume were delivered in Carrs Lane Chapel, Birmingham, on successive Sunday Evenings, at the close of 1870.

The practical illustrations of the eternal principles of morality which constitute the basis of the Decalogue, were suggested by the circumstances of the congregation, which contains very few professional men, not many manufacturers, but a large number of retail tradesmen, a large number of young men and women employed in retail shops, and a still larger number of working people.

It has always seemed to me to be a principal part of the work of a Christian Minister not only to insist on the duty of “repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ,” but to illustrate in detail the obligations both of private and public morality; and I have felt it right to discuss in the pulpit on Sunday, the questions affecting the moral life of individuals or of nations, which I knew were being discussed in workshops and

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at dinner tables during the week.

I have also endeavoured to encourage and strengthen the interest of my congregation in municipal and national politics. It has been justly said that in a free country, the public business of the nation is the private business of every citizen; and I cannot see that the will of God is ever likely to be done on earth as it is done in Heaven, if Christian men do not consider how the law of Christ is to be illustrated in the legislation and policy of the State.

-Birmingham

Introduction

And God spake all these words, saying, I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. (Exodus 20:1-2)

Most Evangelical Christians, I imagine, fail to appreciate the greatness of the contrast between the ancient revelation of God to the Jewish people and His revelation to ourselves through the Lord Jesus Christ. The law of Moses and the writings of the Prophets are bound up in one volume with the four Gospels and the writings of the Apostles, and many people forget that the Bible is not a single book but a Library. It is the habit of theologians to draw proofs of great Christian doctrines - often with a most unscientific want of discrimination - from the Jewish as well as from the Christian Scriptures. We have become so accustomed to trace the faint anticipations in the Old Testament of the glorious revelations in the New, that many of us seem to have the impression that the coming of Christ made very little

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difference either to the spiritual knowledge or to the spiritual life of mankind, and our Lord's declaration that the weakest and obscurest Christian man, "the least in the Kingdom of Heaven," is greater than John the Baptist, although John was as great as the greatest of the Prophets, is almost unintelligible to us.

There are two opposite errors to be avoided; it is hard to say which is the more mischievous. To refuse to recognise in the Old Testament the record of a true, though elementary and imperfect revelation of God, is to lose a vast amount of most valuable religious teaching. To exalt the Old Testament to the level of the New, is to run the risk of misunderstanding both Moses and Christ; and this is the danger to which most Evangelical Christians in this country are exposed.

It will assist us to escape this danger if we remember constantly that the various books which have been brought together in the Bible, were written at different times, by different men, for different people, and with different purposes, and that the Divine revelations which they contain became gradually clearer and fuller. Above all, we should remember that the whole relationship between God and man has been changed by the Incarnation, and the coming of the Holy Ghost. The Apostles, we may be quite sure, were not disposed to undervalue the revelations which God had made to their fathers. Until they became followers of Christ, St. John, St. Peter, and St. Paul had been devout Jews. They had worshipped in the Temple, and listened to the exposition of Moses in the synagogue. From their childhood they had been taught to keep the ancient law. The atmosphere which they breathed was filled with the spirit of the Old Testament. Their religious

faith had been formed, and their religious life developed by the history of the patriarchs, of the judges, of the kings of Israel and Judah, by the Psalms of David and the writings of the Prophets. Notwithstanding all the troubles which had come upon the Jewish people, it seemed to every one of the Apostles sufficient glory to belong to a race to which God had so wonderfully manifested Himself, and they would not have exchanged the great traditions and greater hopes of the descendants of Abraham, for all the power and splendour of Imperial Rome. And yet they all felt that through Christ they had passed into a new world. They had known Moses, David, and Isaiah before; but when they came to know Christ, they exclaimed, "the true light now shineth." What the ancient saints had only hoped for, they actually possessed. The Christian faith may be spoken of as, in some sense, the development of Judaism, but it was infinitely more than a development. To the Apostles who had been Jews themselves, old things had passed away, and all things had become new. The kingdom of heaven had at last been established upon earth, and they knew that they had entered into it. They had been born again; they belonged to a new race, which had received a supernatural life; they had been made partakers of the Divine nature.

On the other hand they knew, and we should not forget, that God did not begin to reveal Himself in supernatural ways when Christ came. His government of the Jewish people, the miracles which He wrought when He delivered them from slavery in Egypt, the chastisements which he inflicted on them for their crimes, belong to the history of His relations to mankind. They reveal His character, and have, therefore, an indestructible

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interest.

In natural science, the investigation of the structure and laws of the higher types of organic life is greatly assisted by the investigation of the simpler organization of inferior types of life; and our knowledge of the richer and more complex revelation given to ourselves, may be assisted by considering the more rudimentary revelations which God made to the Jews.

It is not the custom of Nonconformists to paint the Ten Commandments on the walls of their churches. The practice would be most admirable if Christian congregations could be made to remember that these Commandments represent the claims of God, not on ourselves, but on a comparatively barbarous people; a people whose morality had been corrupted by habitual contact, for several generations, with the vices of a great heathen State, and whose religious thought had been degraded by its superstitions and idolatry; that to us to whom God has made far nobler revelations and manifested an infinitely greater love, He has given precepts requiring a far loftier perfection. If we fail to keep these ancient laws - laws so elementary, laws adapted to the human race in almost its lowest and weakest condition - how grievously must we fail to keep those higher laws which are the rule of our higher life, and by which we must at last be judged!

But these Commandments, as I have already reminded you, hold a conspicuous position in that prolonged revelation of Himself, of His Character, His Will, and His Relations to mankind, which God made to the Jewish people. They can, therefore, never become obsolete. The changing circumstances of the human race cannot destroy the significance and worth of any institutions or

facts which reveal the life of God.

I. The Ten Commandments rest on the principle that God claims authority over the moral life of man. He claimed that authority in the earliest times; He claims it still. We all confess that God is the moral Ruler of our race, but the confession is lightly made, and does not come from the depths of our moral and religious nature.

Our highest religious conceptions are moulded in part, by our commonest human experiences. Social and political influences largely determine the development both of religious thought and religious life. In this country there is hardly anything to remind most of us of the majesty and power of Law. We are never confronted by it. We never feel its pressure. It is an idea - not an irresistible Force before which we are compelled to bow. Still less are we disciplined to the conception of a supreme and august Authority - the Fountain of Law - an Authority, awful, stern, secure from all disturbance by the passions of common men, and infinitely beyond their judgment and control. We are always discussing the acts and policy of the highest personages in the State, striving to pass new laws and to get old laws amended. The most ancient and powerful institutions are no longer sacred. The reverence with which it is natural for the legislative assembly of a great country to be regarded by the mass of the people is hardly possible to a generation which has grown up amidst cries for Parliamentary Reform. Who can regard with veneration and awe an institution whose imperfections he has heard attacked on a hundred platforms, sometimes with bitter sarcasm, sometimes with indignation, sometimes with contemptuous ridicule, and

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which has reformed itself at last as the result of popular agitation? Royal princes have no political power, and when we see them, we find that they are young men who wear shooting jackets and smoke cigars like the rest of mankind. Prime Ministers write novels and articles in popular magazines. There is nothing in our political life to develop the spirit of reverence and the habit of submission to authority.

Even in the Family there is reason to fear that the old traditions which invested parents with the right to govern their children, and made Obedience the capital virtue of childhood, have begun to disappear. There was a theory promulgated early in this century which taught that a child's own conscience and reason should be regarded as the sufficient rule of his conduct, and that a parent of forty should never require a baby of four to do anything which the baby itself did not recognise as expedient and right. I doubt whether anybody was ever foolish enough to try how the theory would work, but it is certain that there is a general indisposition, or inability, to assert and maintain parental power. The early age at which the children of working people, in most manufacturing towns, are able to earn considerable wages, encourages a spirit of rude independence and insubordination. Prosperous tradesmen and manufacturers generally try to give to their children better education than they received themselves and their children, in the conceit of their superficial acquirements, often treat their fathers and mothers with contempt.

This social disorganization produces disastrous results on our religious life. We are not trained to obedience and reverence, and the conception of God's *Authority* appears to have no real and

effective hold on the intellect and heart even of religious men. From our thoughts of God, the recognition of Him as the Moral Governor of our race is almost excluded. God built the world to be our home, and furnished it with comfort and luxury. He ripens our corn and fruit. By day He defends us from harm while we are at work, and at night He watches over us while we sleep. In times of trouble and fear we entreat Him to deliver us, or to give us consolation and strength. We have been taught to think of the universe chiefly in its relation to ourselves; and while the ancient Psalmist exclaimed, "The heavens declare Thy glory, and the firmament showeth Thy handiwork," it is our habit to dwell upon the prodigality with which God has provided for the happiness of mankind. We think of God rather as our servant than our governor. Even in our theology - in our orthodox Evangelical theology - God's authority has no adequate place. What Fichte said of the religious temper of Germany at the beginning of this century, is true of the religious temper of very many of ourselves; our real conviction is that "the only necessity for a God is that He may look after our interests."

These Commandments recall to us the better faith of earlier times. It is not God's highest function to maintain the order of the material universe, to provide for the physical wants of His creatures, for their ease, safety, and happiness. It belongs to Him to assert and vindicate the universal authority of the eternal law of righteousness. He has therefore given laws which it is the supreme duty of all His moral creatures to obey. These laws are not arbitrary, but in relation to us they are absolute. Righteousness is not right because He commands it; but everything that He

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commands is right. Sin is not sinful because he forbids it; but everything that He forbids is sinful. Whatever sanctity, whatever majesty, belongs to the eternal law of righteousness, belongs to Him. Of that law, His will is the perfect expression. Only in thought can we separate the moral law from God Himself, of whose throne it is the strong foundation, and in whose nature and acts it is perfectly and gloriously illustrated. All the obligations which rest upon us to do right, oblige us to obey Him.

But it may be asked, does not Conscience render definite Divine precepts unnecessary? Is there not an inner voice, which to every man is absolutely supreme; and an inner light, in which every man is bound to walk? What have I to do with outward commandments, if I have a direct intuition of the eternal law itself?

There is one very obvious reply to this objection to the external revelation of moral law. Men do not come into the world with a clear and perfect intuition of all moral obligations; and it would be utterly anomalous if the moral faculty alone, of all the powers of our nature, were developed solely from within, and could achieve its perfection independently of all external conditions. Those of us who have the deepest reverence for the human conscience, are constantly trying to develop it by appeals and discipline addressed to man's moral nature from without. The whole work of moralists, preachers, and reformers, rests on the hypothesis that although men have a faculty for recognising what is right, the faculty requires training and cultivation. Parents authoritatively tell their children that they must not lie or steal. They inflict chastisement for the vices of childhood.

Parental commands and parental discipline are of the nature of an external revelation of moral law. We may acknowledge this at least – that the commandments of God are among the agencies by which the moral faculty is educated and perfected.

It must further be remembered that the moral development of the race has been seriously disturbed by sin. Our very conception of Duty is obscured and degraded. It is only the virtuous man who knows what is virtuous. We must obey the moral law to have a true apprehension of it. To perfect light a perfect life is necessary. Supernatural revelation assists man to recover the lost ideal of moral perfection, and that ideal ceases to be supernatural - in the sense of resting for its authority upon any external proofs that it came from God - exactly as we more nearly approach it. What was a mere parental law to a child of ten, comes, through the child's obedience to it, to shine in its own light, and to carry with it its own authority by the time the child is fifteen; and in the same way, laws which, at first, good men tried to obey, only because God gave them, are at last seen to be so right that if His direct and supernatural sanction were obscured they would be still obeyed.

But the complete reply to this objection lies in the fact that we do not know God truly unless we know Him as our moral ruler. This Divine relationship we are in constant danger of ignoring. We prefer, in every province of our life, abstract law to the living God. Such commandments as these are intended, not merely to train the conscience to a higher conception of righteousness, but to reveal to us that in doing right we are obeying the holy will of a personal God, and that in doing wrong we are disobeying Him.

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Our unwillingness to receive an external revelation of moral laws arises partly from this: that we resent the authority of a will which claims to be above our own, even though that will is the will of God. We can endure the supremacy of an ideal law, but not of a person. But there can be no true worship of God until His moral authority is acknowledged. The confession that He has a right to command us, that it is His function to control and direct our moral life, lies very near the root of a true relationship between ourselves and Him.

II. There can be no doubt that God intended that these Commandments should be kept. This may seem to be a very unnecessary observation; but it is my conviction that there are many religious people who have quite a different theory from this about the intention of Divine laws. They suppose that the Commandments of God are principally intended to bring us to a sense of our guilt, and to suggest to us the sins for which we have to ask God's forgiveness. The thought of actually obeying them, and obeying them perfectly, scarcely ever occurs to them.

That the laws given to the Jewish nation at Sinai, were really meant to rule their life is indisputable; the people were not to worship false gods; they were not to make any graven image of the true God; they were not to work on the Sabbath; they were not to commit adultery or murder. The Commandments required obedience, not merely repentance for disobedience. God has ended as He began. The laws of the New Testament, like the laws of the Old, are given to be obeyed. "If any man love Me, He will keep My words;" some persons seem to suppose that it is enough if we are sorry that we cannot keep them.

III. These Commandments deal chiefly with actions, not with mere thought or emotion. Man is not a pure intellect or a disembodied passion. God's laws, therefore, which deal with man as he is, take large account of his external conduct. It is true that one of the characteristic elements of the teaching of Christ consists in the energy and emphasis with which it insists on the wise government of the thoughts, and a right condition of the heart; but the tendency which has revealed itself, more than once, in the evil times of the Church, to separate inward perfection from outward practice, and to declare that for the spiritual man all external actions are indifferent, is destructive alike of morality and religion. That tendency in its wilder and more profligate results is altogether suppressed among ourselves, but I am not quite sure whether its subtle influence may not be detected in all Evangelical Churches. Evangelical Christians rather resent sermons on the moral virtues, and greatly prefer to be preached to about the spiritual affections. They know that they must watch against sins of the heart, but appear to imagine that the outward conduct may be left to look after itself. There are, I believe, many good people who when they are betrayed by a hasty temper into speaking harshly, unjustly, and cruelly, are very much more troubled about the sinfulness of their "state of mind," than about the wickedness of their words. They seem to suppose that our external conduct is an outlying province over which God does not much care about exercising any strong control; that in claiming authority over the heart He has implicitly surrendered His authority over the outward life. The laws which affect our words and actions belong to the sphere of what they

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call "mere morality," with which they have a secret feeling that spiritual men have no great concern. They forget that the nature of man is an organic unity. His actions are as truly part of his life as his thoughts and passions, his faith or his unbelief, or his sorrow for sin, and his joy in the infinite of God. Lust is a crime as well as adultery; but our Lord did not teach that the act is indifferent, and that only the passion is criminal. He did not repeal any outward law when he required purity of heart and inward righteousness; the new Commandment was an addition to the old, perfecting not repealing it.

IV. Before God gave these Commandments to the Jewish people, He wrought a magnificent series of miracles to effect their emancipation from miserable slavery, and to punish their oppressors. He first made them free and then gave them the law.

I do not say that this is a type of God's method of dealing with ourselves, because to very many minds a Jewish type suggests a merely artificial and mechanical anticipation of a Christian fact. But it is a type in the true and noble sense of the word. God always acts like Himself. The principles of His government of mankind are unchanging; if they changed, these old Jewish histories would have long ago become worthless. He is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever.

It might not have been absolutely impossible for the Jews to have kept these commandments even in Egypt, but the difficulties would have been almost invincible. The people were in no condition to receive a Divine revelation. Oppression had broken their spirit, and crushed all the nobler elements of their nature. In the atmosphere which they breathed, purity and virtue could

hardly live. They had been degraded by the heathenism, and by the vices, as well as by the severity of their masters. It was impossible for such a race as the Jews seem to have been at this period of their history to have any vigorous faith in the greatness of the God who had revealed Himself to their fathers. The wealth, the glory, the power of the world belonged to the Egyptians; contempt and wretchedness to the descendants of Abraham and the heirs of the promises. The God of their fathers was either not strong enough to defend them from intolerable evils, or else was indifferent to their distresses.

God did not begin by commanding them to acknowledge His greatness and authority, and to show fidelity to Himself, and to break at once with the vices to which their external condition almost bound them as with fetters of iron. He began by manifesting His greatness in acts which must have appealed most powerfully to their imagination, and made even their passions - which seem to have been almost the only elements of energy left in them - take the side of faith in Himself. There was the wild exultation of satisfied revenge in thousands of Jewish hearts, as terror after terror descended upon the mighty race which had wronged them. Why He had slumbered so long they could not tell, but He had awoke at last, and the basest among them was prepared to listen to a God whose thunders and lightnings, and destroying angel, had brought ruin and destruction on their enemies - tears, and agony, and death, into the proudest palaces of Egypt

He led them across the sea into the vast solitudes of the desert, and when they were alone with Himself, separated for ever

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from the idols and temples of Egypt, from its superstitions and vices, He gave them these Commandments. Is not this the way in which He deals with us all? His Gospel comes to us even before His law. Our whole life rests on the supreme manifestation of His love. If He asks us for an impossible perfection, it is only that He may lead us to the great discovery that the ideal of human holiness is beyond our reach even in its first elements, until He has redeemed us from the world and from ourselves, given us His own life and made us one with Himself in Christ. "This is the work of God" - the earliest work, the great work - that we receive His love and His law together in Jesus Christ our Lord. He gives us freedom before He tells us to be free.

It is more than three thousand years since these laws were given to the Jews, and a new period began in the history of God's relations to our race. Through all these centuries God has been increasingly struggling with our sin and the sin of fathers. In that struggle, which reached its critical moment in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, lies for us the great interest of the universe, for it reveals, as nothing else has revealed, the very mystery and glory of the life of God. Not in the pleasant sunshine, or in the distant stars, or in the beauty of flowers, or in the yellow wealth of the harvest, or in the music of winds and streams, or in the majesty of mountains, or in the peace of silent valleys hidden among the hills, is God's love for mankind most perfectly revealed; but in the sternness and in the generosity, the anger and the mercy, with which He has striven to win or to terrify us from sin, and to discipline us to perfection. Three thousand years have gone, and He fainteth not, neither is

He weary, although even He might long to be released from the burden of the folly, the madness, the perversity, the ingratitude of our race. It is wonderful how His love clings to us. *We* grow impatient if we do not succeed in reclaiming the vicious by a few months' intermittent effort. If at the end of a few years a good work achieves no success, we are ready to abandon it. But God loves us too well to abandon us, even though our recovery from evil seems so slow at the best, and sometimes appears to make no progress at all.

His great end is our perfection. For that end He has permitted the sharpest troubles to come upon individual men, and appalling calamities, famine, plague, anarchy, and war, to come upon nations. Our present happiness is to Him of subordinate importance. It was to secure human perfection that prophets received their inspiration, and that God Himself was manifest in the flesh. Nothing can satisfy Him but this; and between us and Him no true reconciliation is possible till we accept His great end as ours, and believe in our very hearts that apart from our restoration to the image of God there can be no true blessedness and no enduring glory.

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Mission

The Greater Heritage equips Christians for an abundant life of service, personal spiritual growth and character development through the study of God's Word and the contributions of His people in the fields of art, literature and music throughout history.

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“The changing circumstances of the human race cannot destroy the significance and worth of any institutions or facts which reveal the life of God.”

In this brilliant exposition, the great diplomat and preacher R.W. Dale brings theological clarity to the Ten Commandments as he teaches what they mean for individuals, societies, and nations.

Dale’s passion for politics and social reform are showcased to great effect throughout the study, as is his knowledge of Jewish law and history.

While Dale spoke to the needs and spirit of late Victorian Era British Christians, his insights are equally valuable for contemporary believers, especially those who desire a well-rounded understanding of Jewish history, and how God’s Ten Commandments apply to their lives.

Robert William Dale, D.D. (1829-95) was an influential English Congregational Nonconformist minister, theologian, and writer. He attended Spring Hill College, and the University of London. He earned a D.D. from Yale and honorary L.L.D. from the University of Glasgow. He pastored in Birmingham at Carr’s Lane Church and was highly involved in the city. He helped found Mansfield College, Oxford, was Chairman of the Congregational Union of England and Wales, and President of the International Congregational Council. He supported the Civic Gospel, advocated for social improvements, and applied Christian ethics to contemporary society.

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