

Negative Commandments

From the First Hebrew Primer:

Negative commands are expressed by using the imperfect tense with negative words. There are two ways to express a negative command in Hebrew.

- The negative word לֹא (lo) is used with an imperfect tense verb form to express **permanent prohibition**. Sometimes this type of negative command is translated 'Thou shalt not.'
- The negative word אַל (al) is used with an imperfect tense verb form to express **immediate and temporary prohibitions**.

From the Topical Lexicon on Biblehub.com:

Unlike the permanent moral negation expressed by לֹא (lo), אַל usually marks an **immediate, situation-based injunction** voiced in **exhortation, warning, intercession, or consolation**

לֹא (H3808) appears 5,192 times in 3,966 verses in the Tanach (Old Testament), while אַל (H408) appears 725 times in 572 verses.

Temporary Negative Commandment	Exodus 16:29—"See! The LORD has given you the Sabbath; therefore He gives you bread on the sixth day for two days. Let every man remain in his place; let no man go out of his place (אַל-יֵצֵא אִישׁ מִמְּקוֹמוֹ) on the seventh day." Rashi—"The text itself was really spoken about those who gathered the Manna (i.e. it does not constitute a prohibition regarding the Sabbath for all men and at all periods but was intended to forbid anyone to go out into the field to gather the Manna) Matthew 12:1—Yeshua and His disciples went out into the grainfields on the Sabbath. Genesis 26:2—"Then the LORD appeared to him and said: "Do not go down (אַל-תֵּרַד) to Egypt; live in the land of which I shall tell you." Numbers 14:42—"Do not go up (אַל-תַּעֲלוּ), lest you be defeated by your enemies, for the LORD is not among you." Nehemiah 8:11—"So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, 'Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved (וְאַל-תַּעֲצִבוּ).'"
Assurance to Those in Covenant with the LORD	From Topical Lexicon—In the Torah, אַל serves the covenantal dialogue. Moses relays the LORD's compassionate restraints as Israel prepares to enter the land. Such verses reveal the heart of the covenant: prohibition not as restriction alone but as assurance—Israel need not fear because the LORD is present. Because אַל typically precedes a shortened verb, the form adds urgency and pastoral warmth: a father pleading with a child rather than a judge reciting a statute.

	Exodus 20:20—"And Moses said to the people, "Do not fear (אַל-תִּירָאוּ); for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin." Proverbs 3:5—"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not (אַל-תִּשָּׁעֶן) on your own understanding." Isaiah 41:10—"Fear not (אַל-תִּירָא), for I <i>am</i> with you; Be not dismayed (אַל-תִּשְׁתַּחֲעַ), for I <i>am</i> your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.'
Exhortation	From Topical Lexicon—The Torah itself employs אַל, yet immediately afterward אַל colors application scenes. Here, אַל personalizes the unchanging moral core. Where אַל forbids the act, אַל summons the conscience in real time. Exodus 23:1—You shall not circulate (לֹא תִשָּׂא) a false report. Do not put (אַל-תָּשֶׁת) your hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness. Exodus 23:6-7—You shall not pervert (לֹא תִטּוֹה) the judgment of your poor in his dispute. Keep yourself far from a false matter; do not kill (אַל-תִּהַרֵג) the innocent and righteous. For I will not justify (לֹא-אֶצְדִּיק) the wicked. Leviticus 11:43—You shall not make yourselves abominable (אַל-תִּשְׁקֹצוּ אֶתְכֶם) with any creeping thing that creeps; nor shall you make yourselves unclean (וְלֹא תִטְמָאוּ) with them, lest you be defiled by them.
Pleading for Mercy	From Topical Lexicon—Faithful servants employ אַל when pleading for mercy. Genesis 18:30—"Then he said, 'Let not the Lord be angry (אַל-יִחַר לֵאדֹנִי), and I will speak: Suppose thirty should be found there?' So He said, 'I will not do <i>it</i> if I find thirty there.'" Psalms 25:7—"Do not remember (אַל-תִּזְכֹּר) the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions; according to Your mercy remember me, for Your goodness' sake, O LORD.

From Topical Lexicon—"Wherever אַל appears, Scripture conveys an urgent, relational prohibition—guarding, guiding, and comforting the people of God."