

the first and only commandment

If you have a Bible with you, turn with me to the 20th chapter of book of Exodus. Last Sunday, I introduced a new series within our Exodus study, exploring the 10 Commandments. And so today we are going to talk a little more about the 10 Commandments **as a whole** and then dive into ***the first commandment***.

Let's begin in **PRAYER**...

Now, it's worth acknowledging that the 10 Commandments don't get a lot of mention nowadays. They seem to be regarded as ***something of the past***; as **primitive moral guidelines** that **we've moved well beyond**. Not in society at large, not even in the church (for a number of reasons).

But as I've come back to them again recently, I've been struck with how **needed** they are **today** for how we go about life together...

Think about it with me:

Imagine what our world would be like if everyone fulfilled the 10 Commandments. Imagine what our families and world and lives—in Victoria and the Westshore, in Ethiopia and Venezuela and the Middle East, in the city & the suburbs... Imagine what our world would be like if *everyone around us lived faithfully the life described in the 10 commandments.*

If no one lied, but always told the truth. If no one slandered their parents, but always honored them. If there was no such thing as theft. If no one committed adultery, but honored their marriage vows and that of others (*"to have and to hold from this day forward... to love, honor and cherish, till death us do part"*). **Imagine!** If everyone took a real Sabbath (every week), and no one coveted what others have, but were perfectly content with what they have.

Imagine how different our lives would be... how different our families would be... how different our churches would be.

As J.I. Packer, a trusted Christian theologian, once put it, "community life would be transformed, and massive national [and international] problems would dissolve overnight" (248).

The 10 Commandments are **NOT** *outdated moral laws*.

They map out *a way to keep from destruction... a way that our world desperately needs*.

Or think about it from the other side...

Would you want to live in a world where everyone around you broke the 10 commandments? Where everyone around you lied, coveted, dishonored their parents, murdered, stole, committed adultery, misused the name of the LORD, and never took a Sabbath?

I wouldn't either...!

Sadly, that sounds a lot like our world at times...

Again, as Packer has distilled it, "Where the law's moral absolutes are not respected, people cease to respect either themselves or each other; humanity is deformed, and society slides into the killing decadence of mutual exploitation and self-indulgence" (249).

Packer wrote those words some **40** years ago, but what he describes feels profoundly live today. "people cease to respect either themselves or others; humanity is deformed, and society slides into the killing decadence of mutual exploitation and self-indulgence."

All that to say, the 10 commandments are **NOT** outdated moral laws. We have not **surpassed** our need for them. They map out a *way to keep from destruction... a way that our world desperately needs*. A **needed standard** for our life together today.

Which means, there is **good reason** for us—those of us who follow Jesus, **and** those of us who don't—to take some time to reflect on the 10 Commandments and their implications for our lives...

But as many have pointed out, **the 10 Commandments are merely a base-line description of morality**. Or to use the language of Exodus, a base-line description of **holiness**.

God's call for His people to **be holy as He is holy** involves **MORE than just keeping the 10 Commandments**.

WHICH IS GOOD! Because our hearts and our world long for more than to just what is described in the 10 Commandments. We **NEED** more than this. The 10 Commandments may keep us from destroying one another, but they won't inspire us to build a hospital for another.

I remember when Janet and I were looking to buy our first place (a townhouse), I was talking with the owners and, upon hearing that I was a young Christian pastor, they told me that they were a Christian family, and by that they meant: **they tried to live by the 10 Commandments.**

And remember thinking to myself, "**Really? Is that IT?**"

*Is that all God desires for us? Is this the fullness of life that God created and redeems us for? **No!** The fullness of life is found in **Jesus** – who is both the revelation of **true holiness** (in all of its fullness), *and* the One in whom we can come to experience this fullness.*

So, NO, the 10 Commandments are **just the baseline.**

God's desire and intention for us is not simply that we **wouldn't commit adultery**, *but that we be the kind of people who love our spouses faithfully, joyfully and sacrificially – and who support and honor the marriages of others.* Not simply that we would **not commit murder**, *but that we be the kind of people who forgive others, who*

*care for others, who serve others, who seek reconciliation, and who love our neighbors as ourselves. Not only that we **wouldn't covet** what others have, but that we would be thankful and content with that we have, and generous with others... And so on...*

The 10 Commandments are **basic** to holiness, but they are not **the fullness**. In them, we don't discover the fullness of life. **For that we need the revelation of Jesus.**

Which begs the question then: **WHY study the 10 Commandments?** *Are Christians even called to keep the 10 Commandments? **Didn't Jesus come to do away with the Law?** Doesn't Paul say that because of Christ, we are no longer under the law but under grace? *Isn't there something almost unchristian about doing a study on the 10 Commandments?**

And **it is true** – by his life, death and resurrection, Jesus has **freed** us from the law.

But what does that mean?... Do we just throw them out?

Well, according to the New Testament, and specifically Jesus and the Apostle Paul: **No!** As Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount,

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."
(Matt 5:17)

Or as Paul says in **Romans 3**, Paul, having argued persuasively that (v.28) "*a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law,*" goes on to ask, (v.31) "*Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.*" (Which he goes on to explain further in his letter to the Romans and elsewhere.)

So, it's true that **in Christ** we have been set free from the law. But not in a way that we now *disregard* it, but rather in a way that we are *no longer condemned by it*.

In truth, for those who are in Christ, **the 10 Commandments** are no longer just **commands**. They are **promises!**

*They are a description of the kind of people that God **is** making us **as we follow Jesus by the Spirit**...* They are no longer just what we **must do**, they are what we **WILL do** as we follow Jesus, by the power of His Spirit alive in us.

So, let's turn now to look at the First commandment.

Exodus 20:3, "*You shall have no other gods before me.*"

You shall have no other gods before me.

Why does God start here? **Why** start with **this** commandment?

Why not start with something **simpler**, more **accessible**, more **tangible**? WHY START **HERE**?

Because... in a very real sense, **the first commandment is *the ONLY commandment.*** [And I mean that...]

Although we often talk about them as the **10** Commandments, **there is *really only one***: *You shall have no other gods before me.*

Why? How is this the only commandment?

Because, as John Piper has put it,

"All the rest of the commandments are the kinds of things that we will do from our hearts, if our hearts are truly delighted with and resting in the glory of God's grace" (Desiring God, 231).

Or to put it more simply: All the rest of the commandments are the kinds of things that we will do from our hearts, *if only we would love God with **all** of our heart and soul and mind and strength... if we would have no other gods before Him.*

In a very real sense, the first commandment **is the only commandment.**

For if we would keep the first one, we would keep all of the rest.

If we truly loved God with **all** of our heart and **all** of our soul and **all** of our mind and **all** of our strength, **then we would NOT** bow down to an idol of our making, **we would NOT** misuse the Name of the LORD our God, **we would** remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, **we would** honor our father and mother, and **we would NOT** murder, commit adultery, steal, give false testimony, or covet what is not our own.

Rather, we would love our neighbor as ourselves – because God's love would overflow in us for all that God loves...

And on the flip side: it is the fact that we **break** the first commandment—the fact that we **worship** *other things*, that we have other gods before Him—that leads us to break all the other commandments... As Goran Larsson, an OT scholar has put it,

"every sin emerges from the fact that God is no longer first in our lives..." (144)

"Every sin emerges from the fact that God is no longer first in our lives..."

For when God is **no longer first**, when we trade in the worship of the Living God to worship **lesser things** (pleasure, appearance, comfort, possessions, power, attention, reputation, whatever), we end up destroying ourselves and others. We end up **using** others because we **love** things, instead of using things to love God and others.

To quote Packer again, when we turn from worshiping God to the worship of lesser things, "people cease to respect either themselves or each other; humanity is deformed, and society slides into the killing decadence of mutual exploitation and self-indulgence" (249).

And because of this, **God COMMANDS us to worship Him alone**. He doesn't just **invite** us or **call** us to worship Him alone. No, He **COMMANDS** us to have no other gods before Him... or besides Him. (an equally fitting translation).

Why? Why is God so **jealous** for our devotion and allegiance?

Why does God want and have to be first in our lives and hearts?

Exodus 20:2 tells us. He **commands** that we have no other gods before him because ***He loves us like no other god does.***

Let me say that again and more directly: He commands that **you** have no other gods before him because He loves you like no other god does.

Exodus 20:2, *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me."*

He is not just some God who makes demands of us. He **COMMANDS** our entire allegiance, *not because He is cruel, or power-hungry or selfish*, but because He loves us – **and knows** that when we worship lesser things, ***we become lesser things.***

God commands our utter allegiance because He alone loves us, and **knows that idolatry will always and only ruin us, and others. As the Israelites had experienced at the hands of the idolatrous Egyptians.**

*Why would we **want** to worship and serve any other god besides the Saving God who loves us? Why would we **not want** to bow the whole of our lives to Jesus Christ as Lord?*

Who else knows us and loves us like Him?

Nothing else makes sense.

It doesn't make sense to worship, to run after, to surrender our lives to **lesser things**.

But we do it!

We do it all the time... We run after lesser things – we run after pleasure, appearance, comfort, control, porn, praise, ease, attention, status, being wanted, being needed, whatever...

Why? Why do we do it? Why is it that we continually trade in the worship of the Living God for the worship of lesser things?

Because, underneath it all, **we've come to believe the lies.** The lies of our culture... the lies of the evil one. **Lies about God.** Lies that tell us that God isn't really good. That He's not really trustworthy. That He doesn't really understand the reality of our lives and situation. That He doesn't really have our best interest in mind... that He's holding us back from really experiencing life.

Do you ever think that way?

But it's not just lies about God that we've bought into, it's also lies **about idolatry**... That it's no big deal. That worshiping lesser things or ourselves is where life and fulfillment is really found... that **fulfilling our every desire is the only way to be satisfied** – and isn't that what God wants for us anyways? Anything less would be an **injustice** – to ourselves, or everyone! That if we just get the body, or the guy, or the girl, or the paycheck, or the position, or the sex or

more sexual partners, or we only keep the clothes that spark joy, **then**
– **then** we'll be truly happy and fulfilled. **Then** we'd really be living...

Everywhere we go we are confronted with lies about God and
lies about idolatry.

Which should not surprise us.

Truth is, this is the lie that the serpent spoke to Eve in the
garden of creation. **Genesis 2-3.** God put Adam and Eve in Eden and
told them they could enjoy **everything** in the garden. The only thing
they were not to do **was to eat the fruit** from the tree of the knowledge
of good and evil. **NOTICE: in the beginning, there was only one
commandment.**

*"You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and
evil, for when you eat of it you will certainly die." (Gen 2:16-17)*

And what did the serpent say to Eve? He said,

Go ahead. Eat the forbidden fruit. *"You won't die. God knows
that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like
God, knowing good and evil."*

Do you hear the lies?

"God's keeping something from you. **Go ahead, eat the fruit.**
Forget about what God said. He doesn't know what He's talking about.
It won't destroy you. Just the opposite! The fruit will make you more
alive than you ever thought possible.

God's keeping something from you. Don't trust Him. Go ahead.
Forget what God says and do what you want... **AND LIVE!"**

And what did she do? She believed the lie, she put her trust
in the serpent – *and then in herself* – **and she ate the fruit.**

And what happened? **All hell broke loose.** Life as Adam and Eve knew it was destroyed, and the rest is history.

You see, at the root of all sin is idolatry.

And at the root of all idolatry is a false-view of God.

For if we knew who it was that commands our allegiance, if we knew the truth of the God of Exodus, who has revealed Himself to us in Jesus, ***we would run to Him with abandon.*** *We would throw aside every idol and give ourselves to worshipping Him alone. We would love Him with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength.*

But we don't. We believe the lies and we run after idols – false gods who promise so much and deliver little... we worship lesser things and *end up becoming lesser things ourselves.* *We end up greedy – always needing more. We end up untrustworthy – not even able to trust ourselves. We end up arrogant, or numb, or anxious. We end up angry, hating others and ourselves. We end up depraved. We end up lonely. We end up unable to look at others without lust. We end up abusing others, ourselves and creation. We end up self-centered, self-obsessed... **living as though we are god. Which, obviously, we are not.***

So, what do we do? *What are we to do when we realize that we've believed the lies and our devotion has been compromised?*

When we realize that we love ourselves or other things more than we love God?

Well, let me start by saying that **the answer is not** to just *start LOVING GOD MORE.*

Cause we can't. Why? ***Because we are broken.***

That's what sin has done to us. That's the thing about breaking the commandments: **breaking the commandments breaks us.**

We're broken. Our heart and affections have been bent inward. And no matter how much we try, we can't, on our own, bend them back.

What we need isn't just to **reform** our ways.

What we need is to **be forgiven**, to have **our eyes opened** again (or like never before) to the truth of God, and to be **restored and transformed by God.**

We need God to forgive us. We need to receive the revelation of God. And we need God to do **a radical work of redemption** in us... to recreate us... to give us a new heart... for Him.

And in the grace of God, this is what the gospel is all about.

Listen to the promise of God, spoken **through the prophet** Ezekiel. Speaking of the New Covenant that God would establish through Christ, God says (**Ezekiel 36:25f**),

"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give

you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then... you will be my people, and I will be your God."

In **Exodus 20:3**, God commands us, "*You shall have no other gods before me.*" And then in Christ, God says (through the prophet Ezekiel), "*I will cleanse you from your impurities and idols. [that is, I will forgive you and give you a fresh start] And I will put my Spirit in you [you will know Me] and move you to follow me decrees and... keep my laws [I will empower you to live a new way... to fulfill the law]. Then... you will be my people, and I will be your God."*

So what are we to do?

The one thing we are always called to do – **repent** – in both the Hebrew and Greek sense of the word.

And let me just say, in case, like for many, the word "repentance" is primarily heard as a "bad news" word. ***This couldn't be further from the truth.*** Because the call to repent means that change can happen... that redemptive is possible... that things don't need to stay the way they are. The call to repent is a declaration of the most incredible **good news** – that salvation is available...

And so we need to **repent** – in both the Hebrew and Greek sense of the word.

To **repent** – in the Hebrew sense of coming to God in confession of our sin, asking Him to reveal to us the idol behind it, that we might

turn from idolatry to worship God alone. (That's the Hebrew sense of the word: **turn around!**)

But we need to also **repent** in the Greek sense of the word. **Metanoia** – means to **think again**... (literally: *to think with*)... to embrace a new understanding in the light of new information – **better** information...

We need our vision of God to be **set right!** To turn our eyes from their constant fixation on the idols of our culture **by fixing our eyes on Jesus**... that in Jesus we would come to see and know and delight in the Beauty & Truth of God, and fall in love with Him more and more—*with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength.*

Our rejection of idolatry can never "just" be a matter of **choosing** to turn from our idols to God. It necessitates **the grace of revelation – the revelation of God in Christ** - "*the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ*" (2 Cor 4:6).

This and this alone will expose the lies about God and idolatry, uproot our idolatry and lead us to love God with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength... and with that, to love our neighbor as ourselves... **for we will become like that which we worship.**

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me."
Thank God!

PRAY – Communion Invitation – DIRECTIONS!