

We are back today in our Fall sermon series on the Ten Commandments. And I want to encourage you, if you haven't listened to last week's message, to go back and listen to that sermon because it gave an introduction for how we need to look at these "laws" as we have them in the book of Deuteronomy within the ancient context—and to understand how the Israelites would have received these words, which is quite different than how we instinctively read them.

We instinctively look at the 10 Commandments and think that it's a moral code or some kind of legislation that God put in place for the people of Israel. But legislation didn't exist in the ancient world. That's not how people thought. This list of commandments—these words that God gave to the Israelites, along with the rest of the Torah—would have been received as wisdom or principles by which the people could live to mirror the wisdom of their King.

Last week we talked about the reality that this "law" as we have it in Scripture—wisdom that came from God Himself—was an unprecedented thing. Laws in the ancient world were not compiled by the gods. They didn't care about right and wrong in the same way that we see God caring about morality in Scripture.

So what has happened here in the story of Israel is that God has established *Himself* as Israel's King by giving them a way to live. And Moses is now reiterating that wisdom to the people now that they are about to enter into the land of their inheritance.

Because again, it was all about having their identity connected with this God who had redeemed them from slavery. *Remember who I am and remember who you are in me.* That was the whole point. Not for a second was Israel ever meant to separate this wisdom from the character of their God. Everything they did, every way that they related to each other, was meant to demonstrate that they were not slaves to an unknown or vindictive God, but that their God had taken them *out of* slavery and given them a new Hope—an opportunity to live in relationship, in a shared identity, with Him.

And the first commandment makes so much sense, then, with that in mind. **Read Deut. 5.1-7.**

Now, before we immediately apply what we think this commandment means for our own lives, I want to draw your attention to something very significant in the Hebrew that we need to be aware of, that reshapes—perhaps—how we think about this passage, and how the Israelites would've understood it.

Here's the verse as we see it in English: "*You shall have no other gods before me.*" But now, look at this verse in the context of the preceding verses.

*"The LORD spoke to you **face to face** out of the fire on the mountain. (At that time I stood between the LORD and you to declare to you the word of the LORD, because you were afraid **of the** fire and did not go up the mountain.) And he said... "You shall have no other gods **before** me."*

Look at the words in bold. All of them are the same word in Hebrew. How can that be? Not variations of the same word. The exact same word. The Hebrew word, *paneḥ*.

Now, this may not surprise you, but ancient Hebrew has far fewer words than our English language. English is actually one of the most complicated languages in the world in large respect because everything is very specific. Our language is very nuanced.

For example, yesterday my kids were driving me crazy, so I was frustrated. Or was I irritated? Perhaps I was bothered. Those are all words with very similar meanings, and trying to explain the difference to someone whose just learning English is a bit tricky. Because the nuances are so minor.

In Hebrew, there are less words to use, so there's more overlap in word usage.

So here in this passage, the word for *paneḥ* literally means 'face.' So no matter how the word is used, that meaning is going to go with it. The Lord spoke face to face with Moses. Not a literal face, because God does not have a human form, which we'll talk more about next week. But facing one another—however we want to interpret that.

And then Moses says that he had to stand between the Lord and the Israelites because they were afraid *in the face of* the fire. In the presence of the fire; before the fire.

And then God speaks, and he tells the Israelites that they are to have no other gods *where?* 'Before' Him, yes, but meaning what? *In His face*. In front of Him. With Him. Before Him. In His presence. In the Hebrew there's a repetition of meaning.

No other god can be in *this* God's face. No other god can be 'before' Him. In front of Him. Face-to-face with Him.

Now, on one hand this had an obvious meaning in that Israel couldn't be like the other nations in having a whole pantheon of gods, whose gods were 'face-to-face' all the time—because that was definitely the norm. The ancients may not have been specific with their words, but they were very specific with their gods. All the nations; they had gods for everything. Because each god had its own function, and each god was limited to that function.

For example, last week I mentioned the Code of Hammurabi, dating back to 1750 BC. On that statue, in the prologue alone, there are 21 gods mentioned. Enlil, lord of heaven and earth, Marduk, firstborn son of Ea, exalted among the deities, Shamash, the sun-god of justice, Sin, the enricher of the city, Aja, who makes things green.

(Image – tiers of Babylonian gods.)

This was the norm in every ancient society. So there are household gods for smaller needs, then temple gods, city gods, and finally national gods, which of course function in wars and the larger needs of the city. It was like Costco, but for the gods. The options are endless.

So no wonder, then, that it was so tempting for Israel to pursue the gods of the other nations. Doesn't that sound so much more appealing, especially for us consumerists? There were so many to choose from. And they all offered something different.

But the God of Israel had explicitly told them, "No other gods *before* me, in my presence, face-to-face with me. No other gods. Not one. It is to me alone that you are to be devoted."

It was a hard sell, as you can imagine. But God had some very essential reasons for giving them this commandment, and giving it to them as the *first* commandment.

Reason #1: This commandment, in its context, highlights the unprecedented counter-cultural expectation that was on Israel in giving their loyalty to *this* God and to no other. This made Israel stand out—whether they wanted to or not—in the ancient world.

We take this for granted, or assume it as normal, because *we* are so accustomed to understanding our faith as worshipping one God. But it was a dramatic shift for Israel to go from experiencing religion in Egypt—with a plurality of gods—to the worship now of *one* God, and one God alone.

Again, it shouldn't be surprising to us that following *this* command—not the whole law, but specifically this one request—was exactly what Israel consistently failed to do. Whenever we see God lamenting through the prophets in the Old Testament, it's because Israel failed in this area.

There's actually an ancient inscription that suggests that some of the Israelites—when they were in the land of Canaan—came to believe that Asherah was a companion or consort of Yahweh. (The inscription reads: "Yahweh and his Asherah" – 9th century BC). Because she was the wife of the god named El, the chief god, and she was the mother of the other gods.

So you can imagine how the logic went. Hey, we have a chief God too! And He's our 'father'! So the god you're worshipping must be *the same*.

But God had told them, 'No. To turn to any other god is to turn away from me. To go to Asherah, the goddess of fertility, is to go away from My face, because there is no other god in My face.'

To go to Ba'al of the Canaanite is to go away from the face of God. To go to any other god or prophet or priest or authority is to go away from the face of God. To go to any kind of spiritual energy or power or is to go away from the face of God. Because those things *are not* Him.

Now, that isn't to say that we need to take everyone who thinks differently and shove this commandment down their throats. That's not often a very effective tactic.

But in our loyalty to *this* God, we have to recognize that we *do* stand out—whether we want to or not. God has called us—as His people—to be loyal to Him alone.

And our modern-day society makes this commandment even more applicable than we probably realize. Because the pluralism of our western world combined with the impact of secularism tends to do two things: 1) make religion increasingly a private matter, and 2) combine all religious groups together into a melting pot.

The 'coexist' bumper sticker has become very popular. And I think it has good intentions of wanting to see everyone get along and saying that we can all learn from one another. But there's also the agenda of assuming that we're all just about the same thing.

Are we really all just 'about' the same thing? Are all religions virtually the same? Or is there a reason why God told the Israelites to be fiercely loyal to Him alone?

Last week I mentioned this interaction in Mark 12 that Jesus has with a teacher of the Law who asks him what the most important commandment is.

And Jesus responds, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.*" But did you notice what He says just prior to that?

"*The Lord our God, the Lord is one,*" as if that truth is imperative to appropriately loving God.

Reason #2: Why did God give this commandment? Because this commandment, in its context, says something essential about who God is.

Again, all these words here in Deuteronomy speak to identity. Remember who I am and remember who you are in me. Remember who I am and that there is no other authority to go to but me.

Now, if other ancient people groups brought big concerns to big gods and little concerns to little gods, what does that say about *this* God, who wants the people to bring *all of their concerns* to Him?

It means that this God, by nature of His compassionate, all-in character, disempowers every other comfort or coping mechanism that we have by installing Himself as our sole authority in all matters—great or small. Nothing is outside of His purview. Nothing *doesn't* matter to Him.

He is of all and in all things. *Through* Christ, He created it all. How can it *not* matter?

What this means, then, is that that niggling anxiety you have that won't go away can be taken before Him. What this means is that the ache or grief you feel, the fear you have about your future well-being, the concern about whether your needs will be met—even if it feels small or 'not-a-big-deal' to you—you can bring it before Him.

Because there is nothing else 'before' Him. There's nothing in between us and Him—apart from the wonderful mediation of Jesus Christ and the grace-filled presence of the Holy Spirit. He's asking us in this commandment to put nothing else before Him *so that* there is nothing in between us. We don't have to go up some chain of command. We have a direct line.

Remember the story of Jonah. Jonah is asked by God to go to the city of Nineveh and get them to repent. But Jonah doesn't want to, because he knows that God will very likely forgive them. So he runs away. He gets onto a boat. And once they are out at sea, they get caught in a storm and all the other guys on the boat are crying out to their different gods, trying to get some help. Nothing's working. So they cast lots and figure out that it's Jonah who is the problem. So they ask him, "Who are you, where are you from?"

You know how he responds? *"I am a Hebrew, and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."* How do you think these guys are going to respond? They freak out on him. Because Jonah had a direct line to the God who created the land and the sea.

The same is still true today. Because that same God—in this commandment—desires that *all* our prayers, *all* our worries, *all* our fears still be brought before Him, and Him alone.

I'm going to say this a lot in this series, but there has never been anything else like this. Moses said it earlier in Deuteronomy, *"What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him?"* Because this God desires to see His people *flourish* in covenant relationship with Him as their sole authority.

Which leads us into **Reason #3**: Why did God give this commandment? Because this commandment, in its context, tells us something hugely important about how God sees *us*.

I wonder if you noticed this. No other *gods* can be 'face to face' with Him, right? But who *was* face-to-face with him? Moses. What does that tell us about who this God is?

That He wants to be face-to-face with His people. That He wants to be face-to-face, not with any other powers, but with His people. This commandment is saying that when there are no other gods or idols or priorities that get in the way, then it is *we* who get to be before Him.

Darrell Johnson summarizes the purpose of this commandment beautifully. Why are we given this

commandment? *Because God is telling us something about ourselves we would never have figured out on our own.*

What is that? That we were made in such a way that *only His face* can satisfy us. A truly loving God would only ever want our full flourishing. And if only He can provide that, would He not then wish that we would come to Him for it, and to Him alone?

See, like with Israel, God doesn't want us to picture Him as some distant, mighty, and powerful Lord of all the gods—as the President of gods or the Chair of the pantheon.

He wants us to understand Him *only* in light of how He has related to us. To recognize what He has done and let that be enough to prove His authority, yes, but also His deep love for us, who—like Israel—never did anything to deserve His attention.

A love that we see most clearly in the cross of Christ, where the face of God suffers to prove yet again—as our King—what His desires for us are.

“All things have been handed over to me by the Father...,” Jesus said. So then, *“Come to me.”* It's the same invitation. Come to *me*. Put nothing else between us. Don't go to anything else. Don't find your sense of self or truth or identity in anything else. *“Come to me... and you will find rest.”* You will be refreshed.

Why? Because I am the God who made you and who called you out of slavery. Remember who I am and remember who you are in me.

I am the One who has taken on human face so that I might prove to you—yet again—my covenant loyalty and commitment to you to be your God *with* you, face-to-face.

The same question that was asked of the Israelites is now ours also to answer. Are *we* willing to lay down everything that may come between us and Him, or that might tempt us to turn away from His face towards something else, *so that* our God is all in all?

Is His loyalty enough? Is He *alone* enough? Is being face-to-face with Him enough?