



The Ten Commandments

Sermon Transcript
April 10, 2016

The One True God
Exodus 20:1-3

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Sermon Text
Exodus 20:1-3

¹ And God spoke all these words, saying. ² “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ³ You shall have no other gods before me.”

The Ten Commandments

You shall have no other gods before me.
You shall not make for yourself any idols.
You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.
Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
Honor you father and your mother.
You shall not murder.
You shall not commit adultery.
You shall not steal.
You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
You shall not covet.

Introduction

What comes into your mind when you think about God? A. W. Tozer wrote, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”¹ There is no greater thought that can occupy the mind than to think about God. But the challenge before us is to make sure that we are thinking rightly about God. How we think about God is going to impact how we worship God and how we live out our faith.

David Wells says of the church today, “at the heart of the church’s weakness today—is a deficient knowledge and shallow experience of God. He’s lost his ‘weight’ for us.”² Or, as Harry Kraus puts it, “I’ve domesticated the Almighty. Tamed him. Advised him. Put him in a box. Fenced him into a safe pasture. Expected him to function like a divine vending machine. I like that because I get to be in control, or at least sit on a deluded cushion of mental comfort where I’ve convinced myself that I’m in the driver’s seat. The truth is, every time I come face-to-face with just a fraction of the reality of who Jesus is, I realize just how horribly weak my version of him has become.”³

In Exodus 19, God comes down from heaven to Mt. Sinai, where he gives to Israel the Ten Commandments. The revelation we have of God from this scene is anything but a tame and domesticated God. It is a rather awesome and fearsome sight. As God comes down to Mt. Sinai we see fire, lightning, darkness and smoke billowing from the top of the mountain. There is thunder and a very loud trumpet blast and the mountain shook. In Exodus 20:18, after the listing of the Ten Commandments, it says “*Now when all the peoples saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking the people were afraid and trembled and they stood far off.*” Some forty years later, in Deuteronomy 4, looking back on this event in Exodus 19, the people of Israel were told that the reason they heard the voice of God from the fire on top of the mountain was so that “*you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him . . . Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments.*”

When you come to the New Testament, the book of Hebrews looks back to this awesome scene as well. The point of the book of Hebrews is that Jesus is better than what we had in the Old Testament. This awesome and fearsome scene from Mt. Sinai portrays God as somewhat distant and unapproachable. In fact, the instructions for that day was to tell the people of Israel to not come too close to the mountain. But now with Jesus, we have a better covenant and we are now encouraged to come boldly before the throne of God. Because of the blood of Jesus, we now have a mediator of a better covenant. In fact, we have a better mountain. He says in Hebrews 12:22, “*But you have come to Mt. Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.*” In contrast to

what we see in Exodus 19, because of Jesus there is now “a mountain of joyful celebration, community and relational closeness to God.”⁴ But this does not diminish in any sense, God’s absolute awesomeness and the call to worship God. Quite the contrary.

In fact, the writer to the Hebrews immediately follows with his final warning in the book of Hebrews. It is a call to take seriously the worship of God. He argues from the lesser to the greater. He basically says, if there were consequences in the Old Testament to not listening to the voice of God, “*how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?*” We have been given a greater revelation in Jesus. And furthermore, there is coming a day when God will not just shake a mountain. It says in Hebrews 12:26, “*Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.*” He is speaking of the final day of judgment. He goes on to say, that if you are in Christ, you are in a kingdom that cannot be shaken on that day. “The way to be ready for that day is to be in right relationship to Jesus, for he is the one who laid the earth’s foundations in the beginning and who will remain.”⁵ And so here is how Hebrews 12 ends, “*Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.*”

In a few moments, we are going to look at the first of the Ten Commandments: “*You shall have no other gods before me.*” It is a command that highlights the exclusive nature of God. There is no room for anyone else or anything else to occupy the place God is to occupy in our lives. It is a commandment that calls us to worship God. The other nine commandments flow from this first commandment. The worship of God is the most central issue of life. The Westminster Shorter Catechism says it this way; “What is the chief end of man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” It is the first request of the Lord’s Prayer, “*Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name . . .*” The worship of God through Jesus Christ is not some trivial side issue of life. It is the most fundamental issue of life.

As we consider this first commandment this morning, “*You shall have no other gods before me*”, I want to consider three questions.

- Who is this God we are to worship?
- Who are these others gods who compete for our worship?
- Who is the one who worships the one true God?

“Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”

Who is this God we are to worship?

So, who is this God we are to worship? What do we know of him? Tozer says, "Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God."⁶ In other words, how we think about God impacts how we worship God. We need to have great thoughts of God. So, what do we know about this God we are to worship?

In Exodus 20:1-2, we find the preamble to the Ten Commandments, "*And God spoke all these words, saying. 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.'*" From these two verses, we learn three things about God that lead us to worship him.

Lord of heaven and earth: The first thing we discover about God is that he is "*the LORD.*" I mentioned last week that this name for God comes from Exodus 3, where we learn that God is the "self-existing God." Nothing caused God to be. He is independent. We, on the other hand, are completely dependent upon God for everything. D. A. Carson says of God, "As the Creator, he is the God to whom we give an account, the God on whom we are dependent, the God who gives us life and breath and health and strength and everything else."⁷ That alone should cause us to worship God. "*For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.*"

We read in Psalm 24:1, "*The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.*" In Deuteronomy 10:14 it says, "*Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it.*" The fact that God is the Creator of all things is reason enough to recognize that he deserves our worship. In Revelation 4:11 this call to worship is tied to the fact that God is Creator of all things. "*Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.*"

I once preached a sermon with this title: "Are you a dog worshiper or a cat worshiper." When you feed a dog, the dog looks at you and says, "You feed me, you must be God." When you feed a cat, the cat looks at you and says, "You feed me, I must be God." Is that not the essence of the first sin? The issue of the first sin was "who is going to be God?" How arrogant of us, who are here for but a short breath, to say to the one who is from everlasting to everlasting, to the one to whom we depend upon for our very breath, that we know what is best and that we can shake ourselves free from God. At the heart of this rebellion is the dethroning of God. "*He who sits in the heavens laughs*" at such a foolish notion. D. A. Carson muses, "The very nature of the first rebellion was idolatry. What is God supposed to say? 'Ah, make up your own spirituality as you go along.

Invent your own god, I don't really care.' That sort of response would deny who he is. It denies his role as Creator; it denies his exclusive function as sovereign sustainer of all of life."⁸ Because he is *the LORD your God . . . you shall have no other gods before me.*" God alone is worthy of our worship.

Liberator: God is also our "Liberator." He goes on to say in Exodus 20:2, "*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*" These commandments that are given at Mt. Sinai, are given to a people who have already been redeemed and delivered from bondage in the land of Egypt. God had made covenant with their fathers—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—to bless them and to bring them into the promised land. And so based on the goodness of the promise of God, God turned with compassion on his people. He heard their cries and he delivered them. They sure didn't deserve or earn this favor from God. Moses says of them in Deuteronomy 9:24, "*You have been rebellious against the LORD from the day that I knew you.*" And yet, God is the one who saves and delivers and liberates his people, not because of anything we have done. It is all based on the goodness and grace of God towards us.

Is that not what we have in Jesus Christ? Based on the love and promise of God found all the way back in Genesis 3, we are promised that from the offspring of the woman will come one who will crush the head of the serpent. It is at the cross where Satan is defeated. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, took on human flesh and out of love for us paid the penalty for our sin. He died for us and three days later rose from the dead. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we are set free from the penalty for our sin. Paul writes of Jesus in Colossians 1:13-14, "*He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*" And so our worship of God is filled with joy. We come every Sunday and we say, "look what our God has done for us!" Based on God's grace and love extended to a bunch of sinners like us, we are told "*you shall have no other gods before me.*" But why would we want any other gods? God has been so good to us in Jesus Christ. It is only fitting for us to respond with joyful worship and to say "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.*" We worship God because he is our Liberator!

Law-Giver: The final thing we discover about God in this preamble is that God is the "Law-giver." In Exodus 20:1 it says, "*And God spoke all these words, saying . . .*" These commandments and laws come from God. God is the "Law-giver." When these commandments are given, God has already demonstrated his love by keeping his promise and delivering the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. Now, as he makes them his people, God shares with them what it looks like to live and look like God's

people. Here is the irony in all of this. Douma puts it this way, “God demands the whole person, but in this total commitment of the person to this one God lies his greatest freedom.”⁹ Freedom and limits go together. Like a fish who is free as long as it stays in the water, “people are free . . . only when they listen to God’s law.”¹⁰ And so when God says “*you shall have no other gods before me*”, “this God-centeredness that God insists upon is for our good. It is in fact an act of love, of great generosity.”¹¹

So who is this God who demands exclusive worship? Who is this God who says, “*you shall have no other gods before me?*” He is the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth. This world belongs to him and you are completely dependent upon him for everything. He is the Liberator, who based on his promise and love for you, sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for you and to set you free from the penalty of sin and the power of death. He is the good Law-giver, who has set out for us a way of life that leads to blessing. God’s way for us is not trouble-free or absent of suffering. But it is a God-centered life. It saves you from a self-centered, self-focused and self-absorbed life that leads to greater bondage. But where God is the center of life and where love for God drives your life, it casts out all fear. Because, like fish who were created to enjoy the freedom in the confines of the water, we were created to enjoy the freedom that comes when God is at the center of our lives. “*You shall have no other gods before me!*” This is the command that ultimately leads to joy in life.

Who are these other gods who compete for our worship?

This leads us to our second question, this morning. The first commandment tells us that we are not to worship any other gods. So who are these “other gods?” Are there really other deities that rival “our God?” We read in the Old Testament about other gods, like Baal. There is that great showdown between God’s prophet, Elijah and the prophets of Baal on top of Mount Carmel. Each of them erected an altar with a sacrificial bull laid on top of it. Each of them would cry out to their “God” and whichever God would bring fire from heaven and light the altar, that is the one who would show himself to be the true God. And so the prophets of Baal go first and all day they cry out to their god to light their altar. And nothing happens. The text tells us “*but there was no voice, no one answered, no one paid attention.*” But then, Elijah, having soaked his altar with water, cried out to the living God and fire consumed the entire altar and the people could be heard saying, “*The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God!*” But what about Baal? Was there really a rival god—a real deity—by the name of Baal?

Well we know the testimony from the Scriptures that there is really only one true God. In Deuteronomy 4:39 it says, “*know therefore today, and lay it on your heart, that the*

LORD is God in heaven above and the earth beneath; there is no other.” Paul also says in 1 Corinthians 8:4, *“we know that an idol has no real existence, and that there is no God but one.”* That being the case, what then is this command to not worship other gods if “other gods” don’t really exist?

These “other gods” were idols that were made by man. For example, Baal was a “god of rain and thunder and fertility.” Being that we are dependent upon rain for the growth of crops, man *“exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.”* In other words, through Baal, they were really worshiping the rain. Isn’t it interesting that when Elijah had this confrontation with the prophets of Baal that there was an extreme drought in the land. There was no rain. And immediately after this duel on Mount Carmel, God sends the rain. So who really is “the Lord of the rain?” God is the one who causes it to rain on the just and unjust.

But don’t be fooled into thinking that we don’t have our own collection of idols laying around. Ken Sande writes, “an idol is not simply a statute of wood, stone or metal; it is anything we love and pursue in place of God . . . It is something other than God that we set our hearts on, that motivates us, that masters or rules us, or that we serve.”¹² In fact, “idolatry is the most discussed problem in the Bible.”¹³ I wonder how good we are at recognizing the idols that draw us away from worshiping God. They are not always bad things. They are simply the things we trust more than God. We trust in our own strength. We can make an idol of money or success or our jobs or even our marriages. Sex and leisure and nature and tradition; you name it, everyday common things can get a person in their grasp. John Calvin said that our hearts are idol factories. There is a constant production line of things that compete with God in our lives. In fact, Calvin said the evil is not found in what we want, but that we want it too much.¹⁴ So an idol can be a good thing that has become an obsession. It is anything that we trust or want more than God. The Heidelberg Catechism says to make an idol is “to devise or have something else in which to place our trust.”

Martin Luther argued that the fundamental motivation behind law-breaking is idolatry. We never break the other commandments without breaking the first one. Why do we ever fail to love or keep promises or live unselfishly . . . It is because there is something you feel you must have to be happy, that is more important to your heart than God himself. “We would not lie,” Tim Keller says, “unless first we had made something—human approval, reputation, power over others, financial advantage—more important and valuable to our hearts than the grace and favor of God.”¹⁵ The question is not so much, “Do we have rival gods to contend with?” The assumption is that we all struggle with this. So how can you identify these gods? John warns us in 1 John 5:21, “Dear

children, keep yourself from idols.” But how do you know who these rival gods are?

Here are four questions Keller encourages you to ask of yourself to help you discover your idols.

1. Your religion is what you do with your solitude. What occupies your mind when you have nothing else to think about?
2. How do you spend your money? Jesus said that your treasure reveals where your heart is.
3. What are you living for? For example, when God doesn't answer your prayers, how do you respond? Do you get angry or sink into despair? How you respond when you don't get what you want tells you what you worship.
4. Look to your most uncontrollable emotions. Are there things that are driving you that you feel you need to have in order to be fulfilled but when you don't have them you are angry or despondent or you feel insignificant? That may tell you what you are trusting more than God.¹⁶

When you think of it this way, this temptation towards idolatry is a constant pull on our hearts. Which leads us to our final question. Who is the one who worships this true God?

Who is the one who worships this true God?

The command before us is “*you shall have no other gods before me.*” So once we identify our idols how do we replace them with worship for the one true God?

First of all, to worship God is to love God. Everyday in the temple and later in the synagogue, before the Jewish worshiper would recite the Ten Commandments, he would recite Deuteronomy 6:4-5, “*Hear, O Israel, The LORD our God, The LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might.*” Then they would recite the Ten Commandments, capturing what it looked like to love God. Of course, this is how Jesus summed up the meaning of the law as well. But by loving God, we are not just talking about emotion or sentiment. Rather, we are setting our minds and our hearts on the things of God.

When it comes to replacing the idols that are in your life, Tim Keller says you need to know what idolatry really is. “Idolatry is not just a failure to obey God, it is a setting of the whole heart on something besides God.”¹⁷ It is loving something more than God. Therefore the remedy of replacing the idol is not found in simply repenting of your sin.

Paul gives us the remedy in Colossian 3:1-3 where we are told to “*Set your mind on things above*” where “*your life is hidden with Christ.*” Keller says, “Jesus must become more beautiful to your imagination, more attractive to your heart, than your idol. . . If you uproot the idol and fail to “plant” the love of Christ in its place, the idol will grow back.”¹⁸ So living out this command means that you are pursuing God. The way you replace an idol is by growing in your love for God. As the hymn says, when God becomes bigger in your life, “the things of earth grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace.” So . . . Turn your eyes upon Jesus.

The second thing that replaces the idols of our heart is the constant rehearsal of the gospel. It is the reminder that because of Jesus I am fully accepted and loved by God. Only Jesus can satisfy the longing of my heart. But you need to think rightly about the gospel to rest in it. I am going to challenge your thinking about the gospel this morning. The gospel is not that “God accepts you the way you are.” That actually leads to idolatry because it diminishes your need to change. C. J Mahaney says, “the gospel is better than unconditional love. God has ‘contraconditional’ love for you. Christ bears the curse you deserve. Christ is fully pleasing to the Father and gives you his own perfect goodness. Christ reigns in power, making you the Father’s child and coming close to you to begin to change what is unacceptable to God about you. God never accepts me ‘as I am.’ He accepts me ‘as I am in Jesus Christ.’¹⁹ God’s love is more than unconditional. “Unconditional often connotes you’re okay. But you are not okay. There is something wrong with you.”²⁰ The word “unconditional” may tell you that God welcomes you but it doesn’t convey that the point of his welcome is to change you. By keeping the gospel in front of you, you have the power “*to put to death what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry.*”

A mature Christian is not someone who no longer wrestles with idols. You will wrestle with idols until you die. You might think that you have plumbed the depths of your heart, only to discover that there is still more digging to do. But by setting your mind on things above and by keeping the gospel before you, you are free to keep on drilling into the bedrock of your heart knowing that God is conforming you more and more into the his image. God is patient with us. We get rid of idols by growing in our love for Jesus. Jesus said, “*Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added to you.*” Or as John the Baptist said, “*He must increase but I must decrease.*” That is how you get rid of idols in your life. Or as Deuteronomy 6 puts it, we are to love God with all of our “*might.*”

Conclusion

“You shall have no other gods before me.” The question is not whether or not God is worthy of worship. He is the Lord of all. He has liberated us from sin and death and has given us his perfect law. *“Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”* But our sinful hearts are drawn to love other things more than God, only to find out that in the end they are empty. What should I do? Set your heart and mind on Jesus and as he increases in your life, these other things will diminish. “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”

¹A.W. Tozer *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1961) 1

²Matt Smethurst “Holy-Love Wins: David Wells on the Story of the Bible and the Meaning of Life” January 13, 2014 www.thegospelcoalition.org

³Harry L. Krause, Jr., “Domesticating the Lord of the Universe” March 13, 2012 www.christianitytoday.com

⁴George H. Guthrie “Hebrews” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* editors, G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) 988

⁵*Ibid.*, 991

⁶Tozer, 1

⁷D. A. Carson *The God Who is There* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010) 60

⁸*Ibid.*, 60

⁹J. Douma *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life* (Phillippsburg: P&R Publishing, 1992) 31

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 4

¹¹Carson, 61

¹²Ken Sande *The Peacemaker* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991)

¹³Os Guinness and John Seel *No God But God* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992)

¹⁴McNeill, John T., *Calvin Institutes of Christian Religion 1* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960)

¹⁵Tim Keller “How to find your rival gods” October 20, 2009, www.christiantytoday.com

¹⁶*Ibid*

¹⁷*Ibid*

¹⁸*Ibid*

¹⁹C. J. Mahaney “The Idol Factory” www.sovereigngraceministries.org 2001

²⁰Justin Taylor “Why we shouldn’t settle for God’s unconditional love” www.thegospelcoalition.org April 15, 2013

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Would you rather go back in time one thousand years—Or—into the future one thousand years? Why?
2. Spend some time as a group reciting the Ten Commandments together and rehearsing the Q & A catechism for this week. Open with a time of prayer. Reflecting on the first commandment and the catechism for this week, what do you want to thank God for? What do you want to confess? What do you want to ask God to help you with in living out this commandment?
3. Share what you learned about the first commandment this week.

Diving Into The Word

4. Read Exodus 20:1-2. What does God say about himself before he gives the Ten Commandments? Discuss how this introduction naturally leads into the command to worship God. What does this tell us about the connection between knowing God and worshiping God? What comes to your mind when you think about God?
5. Read Exodus 20:3. Why do you think this is the first of the Ten Commandments? Read Romans 1:18-25 and discuss how idolatry—the issue of what we worship—is the root of our sin. Based on this passage, how would you define idolatry? Read Romans 1:24-25. What is the result of idolatry?
6. Read 1 John 5:20-21. How relevant in our lives is the warning in verse 21? Discuss the following quotes: “Idolatry is the most discussed problem in the Bible.” “Our hearts are idol factories.” Reflecting on the four questions on page 9, what are some of the idols that compete with our worship of God?
7. Read Colossians 3:1-5. What is the strategy for getting rid of idols? Discuss the following quote: “If you uproot the idol and fail to “plant” the love of Christ in its place, the idol will grow back.” Read John 3:30 and discuss how this helps us understand how to address the idols in our lives.

Taking It Home

8. Can you identify an idol in your life, something that you want and love more than God? How do you serve it and how does it control you?
9. “He must increase, but I must decrease.” How do you want this verse to shape your week?