

First Commandment *The Ten Commandments*

Exodus 20:1-17 (preached on Jan. 20, 2008)

Story Summary: *The Israelites are gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai, trembling in fear as the mountain quakes and thunders. God has come down. Moses, serving as the mediator between God and his people, has been called up to the top of the mountain to meet with God. After the Lord reminds Israel of their story – their deliverance from Egypt and the favor he has shown them – he gives them the terms of his covenant, the law.*

READ Exodus 20:1-17 (focusing on v. 3)

REVIEW Key Points

- ▶ The point of God's moral law is to liberate: the law helps us to stay free rather than drift back into our slavery to sin. And to be free is to be like God, using freedom to love (Gal. 5:13-14).
- ▶ Behind the law is always a law-giver; thus, God's laws are extensions of his character. The first commandment shows that God is (1) a jealous God, and (2) a compassionate God.
- ▶ God is "jealous" over us; the root of his jealousy is a desire for an exclusive relationship—something all of us want. It shows us his personal nature and his desire to have a unique relationship with us.
- ▶ God commands us to have "no other gods" because he is compassionate. He is preserving us from the suicidal pursuit of false gods, "idols."
- ▶ This commandment doesn't assume that some worship gods and others don't. All of us worship and serve someone or something—whatever captures our imagination and loyalty. What gives us hope, power joy, the things we turn to when we're weak, the things we live on, love for, and if lost it, we'd wonder if we'd live. Striving characterizes this relationship; only the Christian God promises, "I will strive for you."
- ▶ This commandment also delivers us from the degradation of idols. Idols always reduce you to themselves, make you into a half-person.

REFLECT

1. Consider the statement: *The point of God's moral law is to liberate: the law helps us to stay free rather than drift back into our slavery to sin.* (Consider also: James 2:12b; Gal. 5:13-14; Psalm 119:10-1120-21, 32, 92-93.) Have you experienced this freedom-giving function of God's commandments? How does this challenge our typical notion of God's laws as being restrictive and enslaving?

2. Name some appropriate forms of "jealousy" that we're familiar with. How does this first commandment reflect God's "jealousy" over us as our Creator and Redeemer? How do the phrases "your God" and "before me" relate to this (v. 3; cf. Exod. 34:14)? How does this "jealousy" of God reflect his *personal* nature?

3. Consider the way you typically relate to God throughout the day, when you think about God, pray to him, complain to him, etc. What are some ways that you treat him as something *less* than a real person? Do you ever process your sin and idolatry "before God" – that is, seeing God as a living, personal being who is jealous for you? Consider the metaphor of our relationship with God as a marriage and our sin against him as adultery, found in Jeremiah 3:1-14; Ezekiel 16:1-34.

4. How does this commandment address religious pluralism (i.e., all religions are to be embraced equally). If you're a Christian, how would you answer someone who believes that it's illogical or immoral or intellectually primitive to require someone to believe in and worship one God ("no other gods")? How does religious pluralism require us to accept a deity who is impersonal and distant (i.e., not "jealous")?
5. Explain in your own words the Bible's proposal that everyone, both religious and non-religious people alike, "worship" or "serve" something or someone (cf. Rom. 1:18-25; Gal. 4:8).
6. What are some "other gods" that you "worship"? Consider what typically angers you, most frightens you, most gives you happiness, things to which you go for comfort in times of insecurity. The following definition of "idolatry" may help: *An idol is anything we believe we need, apart from Jesus, to make us happy, satisfied, or fulfilled. We serve, love, desire, trust, fear, and worship other things apart from God to give us love, joy, peace, freedom, status, identity, control, happiness, security, fulfillment, health, pleasure, significance, acceptance, and respect. Sometimes our idols are obviously unhealthy; at other times, the things we desire are often good in themselves, but when it becomes an inordinate desire, it begins to rule our lives.*
7. What are ways that you demand that others treat *you* as god? The signs of this may be subtle, but consider ways we expect people to serving our every need, ways we create unhealthy dependencies and loyalties, etc.
8. While "striving without ceasing" characterizes our relationship to false gods, how is the relationship that is offered by God through Jesus different (Matt. 11:28-29; Rom. 10:3-4; Gal. 5:1; Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 3:7-9)? How can it heal us of our idolatries and set us free?
9. Read Psalm 115:3-9 and discuss the idea that idols always reduce you to themselves, making you into its image. In what ways have you seen your pursuit of false gods begin to reduce you to a "half-person"?
10. In your own words, how does this first commandment reveal the *compassion* of God?

BACKGROUND NOTES

Narrative Outline:

Moses Born to Deliver (1:1–2:10)

Moses Called to Deliver (2:11–4:31)

Moses Successful in Deliverance (5:1–15:21)

Moses Mediates God's Covenant with His People (19:1–24:18)

Moses leads the Israelites to Mount Sinai, where God commands them to prepare themselves to meet with Him (19:1-25).

God tells Moses the stipulations of the covenant, the moral law summarized in the Ten Commandments (20:1-17)

Key Words & Phrases:

The Ten Commandments. More commonly referred to as “The Ten Commandments” (not explicitly referred to as such until later: Exod. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4), this passage contains elements that are also found in ancient Near-Eastern covenants (i.e., treaties) made between a powerful king (suzerain) and a less powerful king or nation that serve him (vassal). These elements include the following. First is the *preamble*, which introduced the parties between whom the covenant was made (“I am the Lord your God”). Next is the *historical prologue*, which recalled the good things the powerful king had done for his servant nation—in this case, Yahweh for the nation of Israel (“...who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” Next come the *stipulations* of the covenant, those things the vassal are expected to do/fulfill in order to obtain the benefits of the covenant and avoid its penalties; the commandments themselves serve as the covenant stipulations. Often times, ancient covenants would also detail the *blessings and curses* that would come upon those who obey the terms of the covenant, or disobey them.

The Ten Commandments are expressions of the eternal moral law of God that transcend all cultures and times. Traditionally, theologians have taught that the first *four* commandments describe how people are to relate to God: They are to serve him alone with idols, reverence his name and keep his Sabbath holy. The remaining commandments describe how God's people are to relate to one another: They are to respect parents, life, the marriage relationship, property and another's good name, living in contentment. Jesus taught that the whole of God's law could be summarized in the command to love God and love your neighbor (Matt. 22:36-40; see also John 14:15, 23-24; Rom. 13:9-10; Gal. 5:14; James 2:8-11; 1 John 5:3)..