

One!

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[0 : 00] Can you turn with me now to Exodus chapter 20? And we're going to look at the first three... well, we're going to read the first three verses and we're going to look at the first commandment this evening.

Exodus chapter 20, it's on page 61 if you do have the pew, the church Bible. 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.

You shall have no other gods before me. Now I know that Corey introduced the whole of the Ten Commandments series last week and I'll probably go over some of the stuff he said and if I do then please forgive me, but I hope it will still be significant.

Now I'm going to call this series the Ten Words because I know that I think Corey mentioned that last week because that's actually what we have in the original. It's not until later in the Bible that we have them referenced as the Ten Commandments, they're called here the Ten Words.

And I think that's quite good for us because I think it makes it a little bit more fresh and challenges our often I think simplistic understanding of what's revealed here.

[1 : 10] And we often just think of it in maybe legislative or legalistic terms, but primarily what we have here is communication, God speaking and God telling us, God giving us some words, which is right.

And basically it's really, it's very much just about understanding God and us. So it's phenomenally relevant, the Ten Commandments, the Ten Words.

So in reality, when we're coming to this, we should all be sitting bolt upright, already completely to listen and to hear what God is saying as He communicates with us in this remarkable living word that He gives us.

It's weird, isn't it, that we so often battle with making church and the Bible and most importantly, God's really small, very ordinary, but often irrelevant.

And dare I say it, dull. And that would reflect the condition of our hearts sometimes, isn't it? That's what we feel about God. There's other passions that fill our hearts more clearly.

[2 : 25] But let's pray for the Spirit of God as we do to enlighten us and to open our hearts and to challenge us through His Word. Now, by way of introduction, it does seem that these Ten Words are contradictory in many ways.

And I know that Corey spoke a lot last week about the context because we've got these phenomenal words in chapter 19 and verse 4 where we have the description of what God has done for His people.

Remember, He's taken them out of slavery and they're His own people. He's redeemed them. And He says in that glorious verse, You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you or carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself.

Has to be one of the most beautiful verses in the whole Bible. One of the most intimate, certainly, verses in the whole Bible. It's not the Old Testament God that you expect, is it?

This incredibly passionate, intimate God who bore the people on eagles' wings and carried them to Himself in that great picture.

[3 : 35] Now, He speaks there. His first words, of course, were words in Genesis 1. Words of creation, of making from nothing.

But this infinite God who created using these words was always relational, was always creating with a view to making a home for those created in this image.

And so this relational God here comes and speaks with these sweet words of rescue and of redemptive power, words of love to a guilty people before the bar of divine justice.

Really close loving words. But then, and I know that we spoke about this last week, there's a separation, isn't there? It seems contradictory. So you've got this loving, passionate God who carries them.

And then in verse 12 of chapter 19, it says, And You shall set limits for the people all around the mountain. Take care. Whoever touches the mountain will be put to death.

[4 : 37] No hand shall be, shall be stoned or shot. No beaster man shall live. And there's this ongoing picture of a barrier of limits, of smoke, of shrouded, the mountain that Moses was going to climb up to get the 10 words covered in smoke and there's a terror.

Ah, that's more like the Old Testament God, we know. That's more like the Old Testament God that people caricature and misunderstand.

And what we're reminded of, and God is reminding them, that there's still a separation. They still need a mediator. So the people of the Old Testament are both simultaneously carried and confounded.

They're confounded by this God that they're separate from yet who has redeemed them. And the 10 words that we have, the 10 commandments that we have here really expose that in many ways.

They expose the beauty of who God is and the beauty of His way. Yet they also expose the unreachable standard that left their hearts and that leaves our hearts exposed and falling short.

[5 : 49] And the Old Testament, particularly the people lived in the shadow lands. They were being held in the grip of grace because of what God left unpunished because He had promised to redeem them.

Yet it wasn't fully unpacked or revealed. They hadn't met yet the Savior who would come. They were exposed to a God whose character they often failed to understand and who they constantly failed.

But yet in Moses who was their human Savior as it were, who was their mediator, they even in Moses knew that He'd been given a promise of someone greater.

We had to look at that promise a little bit when we looked at the transfiguration a couple of weeks ago where God promises Moses another prophet who would come greater than Him. And they said, listen to Him.

And remember that's exactly the same words that God said on the Mount of Transfiguration about Jesus, listen to Him. So in many ways the Old Testament and the Old Testament message is one of God preparing the way and also God exposing that humanity themselves had no answers and no hope without God's intervention.

[7 : 00] So there's a degree of contradiction and tension in the Old Testament before the coming of Jesus that we sometimes, and I sometimes struggle with. But before we look at this command, can I just introduce another word to be spoken?

I'm getting this in first before we even look at the commandment. There's another word and that is the person of Jesus Himself. See, God spoke directly in creation and then He spoke through these ten monumental words, these ten commands that we have here.

But finally we're told that He speaks in the person of Jesus Christ. Now if you have a Bible and if you can look up Hebrews, it's always quite good to sometimes look up the different passages.

And Hebrews chapter one, we're told these things long ago, at many times in many ways, God spoke to the fathers, to the prophets. But in His last days He has spoken to us through His Son who He appointed the heir of all things, through whom He also created the world.

He is the radiance of the glory of God, the exact imprint of His nature and He upholds the universe by the word of His power. And so we've got this third word that comes from God and it is Jesus Christ.

[8 : 13] Now why do I want to say that at this point? You may say it's not quite relevant. Well, can I just say a few things here? First is the embodiment of the ten words and especially of this first command, this first word.

So when you see Jesus Christ, when you look at Jesus Christ, you see a perfect human being in relationship with His God. And in a sense, it's the only way that we can understand the Ten Commandments and put them in the right place.

We can only understand them when we look at them through the lens of Jesus Christ. And when we put our trust in Jesus Christ, then we can see them in the rightful place.

Otherwise, for you the Ten Commandments, if you don't come at them through the lens of Christ, will just be a set of rules. Negligible rules.

And it will just be very legalistic. You'll have that legalistic mind about the Ten Commandments, the Ten Words of God, rather than seeing them in their redemptive historical place and through the lens of Jesus Christ.

[9 : 22] Jesus is the great lens that we look at the Ten Commandments through. And of course, Jesus Himself, what does He do to these Ten Commandments? Well, He strips them down. And He strips them down simply to two teacher we read in Matthew, which is the greatest commandment in the law.

And He summarizes them. See, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and minds. This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is this, love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these.

So the first commandment is the first table of the law that speak about how we should love God. And the second, how we should love one another. And Jesus summarizes them because He is God.

And He's saying, these commands reveal the heart of God. And they reveal the character of true love and human existence and our deep culpability.

There's one old man in this church who wasn't a Christian 20 years ago and who came to church when we were doing a series 20 years ago on the Ten Commandments.

[10 : 24] And he would come to church looking at the first commandment we were to do and he would say, ah, that's fine. I think I've got that one, okay. And then he would come to church and he would come and say, oh man, I feel miserably.

And he'd come the second week and say, I'm not guilty on this one. I'm pretty innocent on this one. And he went, no. And as we went through all Ten, his heart was exposed. And he saw that he didn't love God and he didn't love his neighbor as God required.

And he came to faith in Jesus Christ. And in many ways, that's what these Ten Commandments do for us. They point us to our need for empowerment and transformation as we are brought to see the nature and character of God.

And Jesus lives out these Ten words because we can't. That's the beautiful message. And it's great to look at the gospel message, these Ten words.

He's the only human being, truly man, truly God, who in his own right as a human being could speak to God the Father and not die instantly.

[11 : 27] He's the only person ever who could speak to God and not die instantly because he was perfect and he had not broken any of God's laws and was not culpable before God.

And he was there doing that in our place. And when he went to the desert, he overcame the temptation of the devil to break the law of love towards God.

And he particularly focused on this First Commandment. Again the devil took him to a very high mountain, showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. All this I will give you. If you bow down and worship me, Jesus set him away from me, Satan, for it is written, tonight's commandment.

Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only. He resisted what we often fail to resist, which is taking the easy way out of suffering.

Now we can't go into what that would have been like, what would have happened? Jesus had given him then. Well, we wouldn't be sitting here tonight for sure. But he didn't. As God, he resisted.

[12 : 34] And he did so on our behalf and continued to put the living God his Father first. Well, as he fulfilled this First Commandment, he also was shrouded in darkness on another hill.

We spoke of the darkness on Sinai. It was another hill, it wasn't a Calvary, where he was shrouded in darkness as he lost sight of the Father's love and felt only his wrath and took on himself the judgment of our failure to fulfill these commandments on himself.

Now think about it just for a moment. He was viewed by the Father as a lawbreaker, as an idolater, as an adulterer, as a breaker of God's rest, as a coveter.

We talk about two thieves on the cross, on Calvary. It was three, because he was seen as a thief on the cross, as one who stole, as a lawbreaker among two thieves, dishonoring to his parents, dishonoring to God, a blasphemer.

Every iota of his being that he wasn't, he took upon himself, because it was our failure that he took upon himself.

[13 : 56] And these ten words reveal both the extent of his suffering and also the glory of God's love as it's revealed to us.

Ten words reveal what coming home through Jesus to God looks like. It's a great old song. Jimmy Levine sung by you two and BB King.

I was there when they crucified the Lord. I held the scabbard when the soldier drew his sword. I threw the dice when they pierced his side, but I've seen love conquer the great divide until we see ourselves in that place and see the cost of what Christ has done.

Corey was talking this morning about the free offer of the gospel and yet the cost of following Jesus. It's only as we begin to unpack these commands that we begin to see that.

So what's the first command particularly saying to us? Probably that was, probably repeated a lot what Corey said, but it's all part of I think, we could probably do this every time we look at the command, each one.

[14 : 59] What is the first command saying to us today? I probably haven't done this in as theological or an exposing way as we should have.

But the reality of what's saying is God is God. That's what we're being told. You shall have no other gods before me. God is unparalleled, God is incompatible, and he brooks no rivals.

He brooks no rivals. It's his right to say this to every single human being, to say, you shall have no other gods before me.

And he is that right to say to every single one of us this evening, as the one who is the source of our lives, the one who is perfectly good, infinite, eternal, just and loving, before whom we will all face to give account of our response to this command that He asks us and this word that He gives us.

Every atom on this universe belongs to Him, and He holds ultimate authority over your life and over my life this evening.

[16 : 12] I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me. And of course it's in the context of rescue, of bringing the people in an Old Testament context to freedom out of the slavery of Egypt and towards the Promised Land, which we know is such a great image and picture of our own salvation.

He says, I came for you. I bore you on eagle's wings to bring you to myself. And every single human being has been enslaved since Adam, and He came to set us free.

And if you're a Christian this evening, it's marvelous to see you here. Excellent that you're here. But the reality is that you have to do business with God, because God says that every single one of us are spiritually imprisoned, spiritually in the dark like I was speaking to the children.

And we need God's eyes, we need God to open our eyes to see His grace and to see our culpability and to see His remarkable rescue that He comes to us on eagle's wings.

And that requires a rethinking of our lives. If you're not a believer, all the things that you trust in, everything that you do to keep God out of your heart, even though He loves you and knows you like no other, is what you have to deal with, because that enslaves you.

[17 : 38] It's the chasing of the wind, and you remain culpable before Him. And the invitation is to receive His rescue and to understand His love and to be transformed by it.

And as Christians, this first word, this first command, reminds us of our debt. It reminds us this evening that we've been carried on eagle's wings to God Himself through the work, finished work of Jesus Christ.

We've been carried back into the presence of God, our Lord and Savior. We have His Word, which becomes a light to guide us, and we have His Holy Spirit to enliven our hearts.

And so maybe, maybe this evening we have a responsibility to repent, I certainly do, for being so thankless or casual or for shrinking God to be so small that He fits into our back pocket.

A sparrow, not an eagle, just a sparrow, insignificant and unimportant.

[18 : 49] And to remind ourselves that this first commandment, this first word is the foundational word, the foundational law of true freedom.

It comes first because it's foundational to all the other commands. Until we get that right, nothing else in our lives are going to be right. Until we recognize His lordship and His right to us and us not having any gods before Him, then we will never find and understand His true beauty.

It's enthroning Christ as Lord, recognizing God's salvation through Him, not an optional thing. And it's expressing the foundational, relational foundation of genuine love with its restrictions.

Of God's demand, God's restrictions over love. And that's where freedom is. He's reminding us that we are in slavery without Him.

But we often think we're enslaved when we follow Him. But true freedom is different from absolute freedom.

[19 : 59] You may have read an illustration of fish. Fish really are only free within the restriction of water.

A fish on dry land, going wherever you want, leaving the river or leaving the sea behind to be truly free will soon die because it can't take and use oxygen in that context.

There's no freedom for a fish out of the water. There's no freedom for a bird that isn't able to use the laws of aerodynamics or a plane for that matter.

Freedom for us is never the absence of restrictions, but it's finding the right ones. Now, maybe you're a first year coming down, you've just left home, and you've finally broken free from the restrictions of your family.

And you think, great, I'm going to go wild. Well, if you're thinking like that, you probably aren't here tonight. You're probably down in the pub somewhere. But it's a challenge, isn't it?

[21 : 04] It's a challenge for us is that when we leave home, we think of it so restrictive. And maybe when you go home after your first summer, and you think, oh my, it's so restrictive being back home after the freedom of just being on your own.

And yet, the reality is that that home environment, with its seeming restrictions, have molded you into the person that you are and that has the parameters that makes you a significant human being.

Any community has these restrictions and these parameters around love which reveals our care and our interest in other people.

This is His call to His beauty, to His exclusivity, and to His loyalty. He's saying, I want you to be first. I want to be first in your heart.

Literally, He says, you shall have no gods before My presence in front of Me. It doesn't mean He can be first and then you've got lots of little gods after that that you just follow.

[22 : 13] You're just saying, you can't have any gods, anything that you put first before Me in My presence. I'm not really going to speak about idolatry because that will be Corey's job next week because it goes on, obviously, to talk about that.

But God, we're remembering, is to be the one who is in our heart as Christians and that we have no part of our life that we close the door on God to our time, our pleasure, our relationships, our sexuality, our finance, our church involvement.

It's all His way. We follow Him. And there's tension in that and there's cost in that which we saw this morning.

But I think if you feel no tension and if you feel no battle about that, then I suspect you're missing out on the beauty altogether, you're missing out on the love and the peace, the shalom that comes from that.

Because idolatry, I'm not really going to speak, I'm just going to speak a wee bit about idolatry. But idolatry is the temptation at one level to avoid suffering at all costs.

[23 : 29] We just want an easy life. How many people choose not to follow Jesus because they just think it's an easier life?

Which is a misunderstanding, of course, but I think it's idolatrous. There's pain in following Jesus Christ. There's cost in following Jesus Christ in submitting to this commandment, by His strength and in His grace and the forgiveness when we fail to do so.

But there is a cost, but it's a healing cost. I'm going to use a pathetic example. But it can't be that pathetic because I remember, I'm nearly sixty and this happened when I was less than ten and I got a poisoned finger and there was a big yellow spot in my finger and the finger was red and solid and it had to be lanced.

It was the only way it could be healed was if this pus was lanced. There was a dear lady in our church at St. Columbus at that time called Peggy McLeod and she was a nurse and she came round very gently one day and took my hand and talked nicely through it.

But it was agony. It was the sorest thing that ever happened to me. What a big wimp. It was only my finger. But honestly, it was the sorest thing ever because she had to pierce it and squeeze it out of the red and it was all swollen and hardened.

[25 : 03] So the relief and the healing was instant and was great. And you know, there's lots of different examples we could use of that, that there is pain and there is different kinds of pain.

But what God is asking us to do is to recognize that the pain that we go through in following Him is the pain of healing. It's the light that shines in the darkest places of your heart that is painful to have them exposed.

But if you're not going to be honest enough to let His light shine into the darkness, you'll never know His healing and His Lordship which He speaks about here, you shall have no other gods before me. And so the question is as we conclude, who is it that we're listening to?

We can't serve two masters. We can't do it. I'm only going to talk about one idol. If you think, there's two ways that you might think this evening and that I might think.

If there's a choice of doing things your way and God's way, and if you think, I'm going to do it this way, and if God says, don't do it that way, that's wrong.

[26 : 12] Don't live that way, that's wrong. Who do you listen to? Whose way do you follow? Is it your own heart? Is sometimes all its kind of bitterness and self and ego, or is it, who do we trust?

There might be lots of things, but ultimately the greatest idol you're challenged with and I'm challenged with is self, is me.

So instead of God becoming the me in the first command, you're the me, or I'm the me. Isn't that the big challenge?

You shall have no other gods before me. The big challenge is that we are on the throne of the universe, that we are central to the whole of life, that it's our will that gets done.

And the greatest challenge, and we were singing it in that song we've learned, is to do His will not alone. And the only way we can do that is we fall on our knees and come at the cross to recognize we can't.

[27 : 18] But He has provided the way for us. So as we just finished, what about this commandment in St. C's? Now, my time here is coming to an end.

And we've got the whole of the second tablet of the Law in the last five commands telling us how we should love one another, but the first command is foundational to that.

It must come from understanding that God says that we are to love Him first, and that we can only do that through coming to Christ.

But as we come and recognize that truth, and we challenge ourselves, I see so much beauty here, so much that's praiseworthy, so much that gives God glory, a beautiful community.

But I also see that God is stirring us, and He's working, the Holy Spirit is working, and people are coming of faith. And where there's beauty, and where there's love, and where people are coming of faith, there's always going to be pain, because His light is shining, isn't it?

[28 : 45] And when His light is shining, some of our ugliness and some of the temptations that we give into will be exposed. So it may be, as the Spirit of God is working in St. Columbus in these days, that there are relationships that need mending, marriages that need rekindled, divisions needing healed, gossip that needs to be quenched, open sin behind closed doors, cliques needing diffused, grumbling self-righteousness, pride, complacency, and a lack of prayer needing to be addressed.

We're all looking around at each other. I won't be speaking about. I can only say it because I know my own heart. I know the temptations that I have, and each of you need to see the same, and see the same, and help one another, protect one another, be honest with one another, and grow together, and disciple together, and disciple those who come among us who are new, and tell them about Jesus, pray for them, love them, do one-to-one Bible studies with them, and we may see many more coming in.

Because we often speak about renewal. We often speak about refreshment and revival. And I genuinely believe that that only will ever happen as we are being revived ourselves first, and that He works in our hearts first.

So never forget, you are carried on eagles' wings. You're carried on eagles' wings to God Himself, so that you can fulfill this great law of love with the power of the Holy Spirit to put Him first.

And as we put Him first, we will be our radical community and radical individuals. Let's pray. Father God, we ask and pray that you would help us to understand and to know and to appreciate who you are.

[30 : 58] Amen.