

One!

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[0 : 0 0] Now, look us to look this evening at the first commandment. I probably should have done an introductory sermon first before plunging into the commands, but we're going to look this evening at the first commandment. So on page 77, Exodus 20, and God spoke all these words. 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. Now, law is a very interesting concept, and we tend to, or a lot of people tend to, recoil at the idea of laws. And particularly people want to recoil from the idea of God's laws as being very repressive and keeping us in check as it were. But really these are simply 10 words. We often call the 10 words, the 10 words of God. And what they are, they are an unpacking of the nature of God. That's what they are. They're telling us about who God is, and they're telling us about who we are. And they're telling us the kind of relationship that God wants with his people. And he's explaining who he is and how we should treat him and how we should treat one another. So they reflect the character of God. They reflect what it means to be us, who are made in God's image. But most importantly, well, they do two things, I guess, and maybe many, many more. They point us towards God and tell us, show us, expose that we fall far short of his expectations. And it's like they are laws, they are revelations of God that drive us to himself to seek forgiveness and to seek grace. They're the school master that draws us towards Christ, our Redeemer. But they're also patterns for living for us as

Christians. That we can't keep them. Nobody can keep God's laws in the sense of, I want to do this to please God, and then he'll accept me. We can't do that. But as believers, we're empowered to live the way he wants us to live. And this is his fundamental and basic way that he unpacks. The passage we read this morning was a further unfolding of that in the New Testament on the Sermon and the Mount. And the New Testament goes on to unpack several layers of God's guidance and God's leadership for us in our lives. But we live, we need this governance in our lives. We need this direction. We need these parameters in our lives. We need to be guided in this way because all of life is like that. We can't help but being living under the reality of law at one level or another, even though we would possibly regard ourselves as anarchic or rebellious or different, we all live under the reality, under the umbrella of law. And, you know, anytime that someone says, well, I believe this is what life's about, they're stating their own law of the universe. They're stating their own governance policy. They're saying, this is what I believe. It may be what nobody else believes, but it's still, it's still a declaration of commandment. It's saying, this is who I am, and this is what I believe. People will often reject the idea of authority or governance and might even reject formal declarations of law, but possibly until somebody rapes their daughter, they might recognize the significance and the importance of justice and of evil being dealt with.

I'm glad that if I'm standing under a suspended grand piano, that there's a law of gravity. We keep that from falling on my head. The whole world in which we live is governed by laws, laws of nature, laws of humanity, laws of reality, because that is the world in which we live. Even the anarchist movement, probably, I would imagine, have rules of engagement, because that's what we are. We are people who recognize and need the structure and governance in our lives, because they're reflections of who we are. They're reflections of the one in whose image we are made. So we have God's words here, which are given to His people in the Old Testament. And I'll come back to this, but I just want to say, by way of introduction, that these are a revelation of God, which we'll always point forward to Jesus, but which are given in the context of relationship. These laws were not given to the Old Testament people to say, you fulfill them, you'll get to heaven. I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. These are the words of an already redeeming

God. He's a God who's already saved them. He's already done for them what they couldn't do for themselves. They were enslaved in Egypt. And we know that's a great picture, isn't it, of what the New Testament goes on to speak about our own nature and our own natural condition before God that we are enslaved to sin. And it's God who redeems us through Christ. It's Christ who comes and speaks into our lives and redeems us fully and freely by His grace.

[6 : 29] And this is as true in the Old Testament as it is in the New, that we have a God who is our relational God, who's a God who has already redeemed His people, who's already shown them grace, who already loves them and who is already their God, and He is the great God who has done this for them. And so it's in that context that we see the commands not given to somehow say, well, if you keep all these, you'll get into the promised land, you'll get into heaven. But rather in the reality that they are already a people who need forgiveness, who need redeemed, who need to be taken into relationship with them and who have a sacrificial system that reminds them of a life for life and reminds them that they need forgiven. So He's revealing in these commands His own character and our relationship with them. So they remain hugely significant and relevant for us. I, and the Lord your

God, who's brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery, you shall have no other gods before me. It's an outrageous statement for God to make, for anyone to make. You shall have no other gods before me. He is in this one statement setting a foundation for Himself in relation to people, but also in relation to the universe in which we live. He says He is the only God. You shall have no other gods before me. He's saying He is supreme, He is Lord, He is sovereign, He is ruler, He is king of king. He is reminding ourselves that we are a people under God and we are to live our lives as Christians in the church and in the world with that recognition that we live in the shadow of the character of this great God. I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me. It's really a declaration of His glory. He's not saying I'm God and there's lots of other gods, but

I'm preeminent. He's not saying I'm first among other gods. He's simply using that language to recognize the situation of the world around Him, particularly in the context of His own people coming out of Egypt where there was a multiplicity of idols, of false gods, but God's for everything that people worship. God's for everything and therefore God's for nothing. But He is saying I am the only God and He is declaring even very potentially in the use of I am what He says that I am the Lord your God, taking that great name of Himself which is the Jehovah God. I am the redeeming God who is in relationship with His people. There is no other God and no one should replace Him. No one can replace Him. He is overall. He is sovereign. He covers everything and this is the only God. There's only one God. Now I know you know that. I know you know that. But it's very important, isn't it, that we are all accountable to this one God. What's the great sin from the very beginning is you surp us. Can you imagine us? You surp that God. I say we don't need

Him anymore. Isn't the marvel of God that He didn't at any point just completely wipe us out and do something else in His grace and in His favour and His patience and in His longing and His love. He has allowed people to live and to live out that independence and choose that path because we are not automations. We are not robots. And yet this great God will one day make clear to us all that He is God if we don't know that through grace and if we don't follow Him in our lives. So He is bigger than anything we can ever imagine.

We live our lives and we often think we are very big, don't we? We are very important. We are not good at self-forgetfulness. We find that hard because right from the beginning we have wanted to be on the throne. We have wanted to be number one. We have wanted to be God but we can't be God because God is God. And God, even in this part where the first four speak about Himself and we are not going to unpack any of them obviously.

[11 : 45] And the second table of the law really speaks to how we treat one another. Even with that He is revealing to us the kind of lives He wants us to live with another. Not just outwardly.

And sometimes we think this about the laws of God. This is the only laws as far as I can think or find out. It is the only law ever that deals also with the thoughts and intentions of our heart. Particularly in the last commandment. Sharnok Kovit. And he is just saying that I am the God who knows not, it is not just about that I can examine how you live outwardly and the way that we examine ourselves and the way we examine and judge other people. But he says I am the one who has this great knowledge, the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. How big does that make him? As we sit here this evening we can fool some of the people some of the time and so on but ultimately we can never pull the wool over God's eyes because not only does he know how we act but he knows the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. And he declares that he wants these to be pure as well as our outward living. And so he is this God who has such a great way of glory that nobody can touch that. Nobody can come near that. Nobody can read our minds or know our minds or know our thoughts or not even our minds but our intentions. But God. And God reminds us that he has great way, you know, there is no other God is there? This is the one ultimate being. Bigger than modernity, bigger than secular thinking, bigger than science, bigger than any intellect, bigger than history, bigger than the past, bigger than the future.

This is the God who subsumes all of this in his being, who has revealed himself in his Word. He has given us his Word, who has chosen to show himself through his ten words but more significantly in the person of Jesus. So what is this great God before whom there are no other Gods? We see him in the light of Jesus Christ. And that is what he has given us. You know, it is important that we know his Word. Why? Because it is progressive revelation about who God is. And it all fits in well. And we see right from the very beginning as he tells us who he is and then he reveals the problem and then he talks about covenant and he reveals more about himself eventually leading to Jesus and then to his work and then to his church. And what he wants for his church is this tremendously sovereign, beautiful Word over many centuries which is revealing the character of God himself. And yet many Christians in many churches are spending all their energy and all their time dismantling the Bible. I say, well, you can't believe this part. And this is no longer relevant.

There is no serious thought going into it being a revelation of God that as God he is well able surely to give us. This is what he has chosen, not only the written Word but the word incarnate Jesus Christ. Do you need to spend a lot of time reinterpreting it?

Do you need to be molding it so that it is acceptable for today's living and today's society? Do we need to be cutting out bits that are a bit awkward or difficult? No, I don't think so. We don't need to do that. God hasn't made mistakes when he's given us his word. Oops, shouldn't have done that. That doesn't apply anymore. Sorry, it's not like that, is it? No, it's the sovereign Word of God. This is the great God. He said, you shall know that God's before me. Don't make up God's. Don't make different God's that are much less graceful, much less demanding. God's that make no challenges over us. Don't do that because they ultimately say they're idols. And what he reminds us of is that we are not, because he is glorious, we are not to usurp him, put other God's before him.

[16 : 14] We don't need to be, we don't need to think in an unsophisticated manner about this as if it's idols of wood and stone, which we think we've moved beyond. You know that, don't you? And I don't need to repeat that. But it is, we aren't, when he says you shall have no other God's before me, he's not saying you can have lots of other God's, but I just want to be first. You can have lots of things that are important to you, but I just want to be the most important. He's saying you shall have nothing. Don't parade anything in front of me that is an idol. That's what he said. When he says don't have anything before me, he says before my presence. He says don't come into my presence and you know, with his presence all the time with idols that you're worshiping. Don't worship in other words.

He says anything other than me, whatever. Don't replace me. And how do we most often do that? We almost often do that by being silent before him, by not coming into his presence at all really, by forgetting his omnipotence and omnipresence and omnipotence and his glory and by regarding as more important our decisions, our life, our choices, our career or anything that usurps him of his place of worship. What is it that we worship?

That is what he is forbidding here. He's forbidding that we ignore him, that we leave him out of our thinking. It's a divine banning order. I don't want showmanship. I don't want hypocrisy.

I don't want you to be acting as if you're, God's very important, maybe when other people are around, but only when we can be seen to be making God to be very important. He says I don't want any no entry signs in our lives for the presence and the Lordship and the sovereignty of God. He says I don't want God for my soul kind of thinking, for the religious bit, for my spiritual security, but I have many no entry signs for this sovereign, glorious God.

I don't want him as Lord in my relationships, my morality, my ethics, my day to day living. I'm quite happy for him to be my God here in St. Columbus when I'm in church, because that just seems right. This is a kind of religious place. And when I come in here, well I feel religious, I feel spiritual. This is what I'm always singing and reading the Bible and praying and I can be God for God here, but don't be crazy. Don't make me follow and serve and witness for and obey Jesus Christ in these no entry signs of my life. These places where God is so, you know how it is sometimes with us if we've got a lot of different friends and we can be very, very happy in the company of one of our friends, a very close friend, but it's always in certain type of environment that we're friendly with them. It's the same kind of place, whatever it might be. And if we take that friendship sometimes into another set of friendship relationships we have, it can feel awkward. They don't know anyone.

[20 : 04] They may be of the same kind of likes or dislikes, may come from a different background and we feel a bit awkward with them in this company. And so generally never the two shall meet.

We have certain company, certain friendships for certain ways we feel, maybe certain company, certain friendships for other ways we feel. I'm not saying that should be the case in the Christian church. I certainly don't think it should be the case in our lives generally because we should be honest and open and be aware that we have many different friendship circles that can interact. But I can think we can often think like that with God. We're quite happy for him to be our God here or when I'm around others who sympathise with us but I have no time to share him or for his lordship when the atmosphere and when the company is different. We divide our lives into pie charts, different types with God in one section, career in another section, relationships in another section. However we divide it out because he's sovereign over all of that. It should be in every section of our lives. We don't want to say, he doesn't want to have our life divided into component parts where he is irrelevant. This is a great Calvinistic interpretation of God and of his word that all of the world is God's, belongs to God and as believers we take him into all that we are. Therefore we don't go and we don't live and we don't think and we don't move in ways that are anti-God, in ways that God is grieved by or God hates. So the key to understanding this is you shall have no other gods before me is very much relational, very much relational. In Deuteronomy, the fifth book, Deuteronomy chapter 6, just after the second rendering of the biblical commands that were given in Deuteronomy 5, in Deuteronomy 6 we're told these great words which really sum up at least the first tablet of the law, the first section of the law of God and which are very relevant even to what we were saying this morning in baptism.

Here was the Lord our God, the Lord is one. So it's going back to that really, that first fundamental command, says love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Isn't that great? Can I just take straight from the Sermon in the Mount, straight from the words of Jesus, harsh, oppressive, difficult Old Testament? No. Let's look at it in the light of salvation and redemption that he has given us. Write these commandments on your hearts, impress them on your children, talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down, when you gap, tie them as symbols in your hands and bind them on your foreheads, write them on the door frames of your houses and on your gates. Isn't that a great pictorial way of describing that he is God and he wants us to soak our lives in him, whether it's walking in and out of our houses, whether it's with our children, whether it's whatever it is we're doing, that we have this great recognition of his love and of his redemption and of his greatness and of his good. So it's all based, the context is all based in his redemptive love. And here is this great God, he speaks. God spoke all these words and that's the great God that we have. He has spoken in our situation and Jesus is this great Word who comes and who expresses our situation, our lostness, our need and who comes and who puts that right and who says, who says it is finished on the cross. I've done it. Not mine, but your will be done.

There's nothing, there's nothing that could stop Jesus Christ fulfilling his Father's will and redeeming us in his great love, in his great glory. And so his desire for us is to worship him as Lord and God, but in that relationship of great love and of a changed and a renewed heart, isn't that the key to it all? Have you ever tried to fulfill these commands even as a Christian just merely by dint of the will? It's impossible unless we have a changed heart and we're looking to God to give us that changed heart all the time. So our desire, the commands drive us to desire God and drive us to recognize we don't desire God if that doesn't sound paradoxical and a bit stupid. You know, it's because we lack desire. The commands are given and they're there to drive us to desire him more.

In the book you can change, as I quote on one of the pages, it's not usually the things we want that are wrong, but that we want them more than God. God's given us many things to enjoy, many things that are absolutely legitimate and good. And it's not so much often that these things are wrong in and of themselves morally, ethically, but it's so we want them more than God. It's about our desire. It's about where we place God. It's about what we treasure most. What you treasure most, what I treasure most has our heart and controls our life. So you know that, don't you? We know that, don't we? That is what controls our life, what we desire most, what captures our heart and God is saying that He wants nothing and nobody in that place where He ought to be. And that my friends for us as believers is about choices and about recognizing our need to choose God and choose relationship with Him and choose prayer and choose dependence and choose forgiveness and choose an ability and go to Him. It does involve these things. It does involve making the right choices and seeking God to transform our hearts. See when we are in Christ, when we are dependent on Christ, we see God here not as the key to a good life like some lucky charm. You know

[27 : 58] I think sometimes we think that, well if I stay close, if I do my prayers, if I try and obey then it will be great. It will be like, it will be, I'll have a great lucky charm and God will give me a good life that I want. But it's not so much that He is the key to a good life. He is the good life. The good life is the relationship with Him, not what the relationship can give us. Do you see the difference? As the goodness, the blessing is in and of itself in the relationship, not in what the God of the relationship can give us. Although He chooses to give us many things because He loves us and He blesses us. But the contentment, the peace, the satisfaction, the joy, the meaning is in the relationship per se, is in being in relationship with God. I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me. Everything else will leave us dissatisfied and will become cancerous because it's replacing what we were created to be in relationship with, in relationship with God. So it's very important for us to live a life of repentance and faith. Because the gospel, the danger of looking at the commandments is to think that somehow being a Christian is about changing our behaviour. For example, according to the commandments, that's what it's all about. It's about a change of behaviour. It's not about a change primarily of behaviour. It's about a change of person. It's about being changed from the inside out to be a different type of person. The same individual, unique individual but

Christ-like and redeemed and forgiven. It's about turning to God. And that must be for us a daily, if the commands do anything, they should be for us that daily recognition of our need of Christ Jesus in our lives. To progress, I've got a quote here and I have no idea what I took it from, but it's a good one. To progress is always to be born again. It's always recognising that need, that the moral law helps us, ensures us, reminds us that we are being born anew, born afresh in Christ. And we live our life of repentance, turning to Him, but also a life of great faith. We entrust ourselves to Him. And we believe that He is great grace and that it is a great thing to obey Him. If you love me, He says, you will obey my commands. That is a gift of God and it's hugely, hugely impossible.

Can you get hugely impossible? You can't really, can you? Because impossible is impossible but it's hugely or small. But anyway, it is hugely impossible. It's like saying 110%, it's a daft thing to say, isn't it? But it's impossible. 110% impossible. You can't do it. We need faith. We need to go to God and we need to look to God in our lives and accept what He has done for us. And the 10 words, these 10 commands encapsulate the character of God and our relationship to Him and our relationship to one another. Please don't settle for less. Don't settle for a lie. Recognise Jesus Christ and recognise this wonderful unfolding of the nature of God and what He expects of us, what Christ lived because we can't. But then through Christ what we are able to seek to live like in His strength and by the power of the Holy Spirit because that is recreating us in His image as His kingdom for glory. May it be that we can think about this series. I've encouraged the young people on their question form for tonight to pick a good book on the 10 commandments and read it. Don't know if any people read much books about the Bible these days. Genmo good, that's right, that's good. But make sure that you take, you know, don't read more.

There's fantastic books, there's some listed on that. I'll maybe make it more generally available but read good books about the 10 commandments. Think about them and particularly remember that passage in Deuteronomy. So you would take that with you out of church and out of the context of church and remember these tremendous realities of impressing God on your heart. Talk about them with your children at home, sitting along the road lying down and getting up. We were talking earlier on about our older, younger people, the group of impact and the various things that we want to do in terms of developing social intercourse between them and also developing teaching. But really we want to get to the place where we talk about Jesus naturally. Yeah, I know we need to be intentional in terms of our structures and our leadership but we should be people who formally or informally when we get together talk about Jesus and talk about his nature and his character and his law. We're very bad, we're very poor at that I think, maybe particularly in our context, I don't know if that's the case or not. But let us be people who encourage one another and talk to one another and share with one another about Jesus Christ and about his character and about his laws and may we put into practice this loving our neighbour as ourself in that way.

Let's bow our heads briefly and pray. Father God help us to recognise your character. Forgive me Lord if it's been such a shallow exposition on such an unbelievably great command as it reflects the nature and character of God. How can we do justice to your nature and character that there is no one else, that there is no other God, that there is no other hope, there's no other source of life or love or goodness, that there is no other source of morality of law and of creativity. All stem from you, everything stems from you, the eternal God who didn't begin, who will not end, who is not bound by time, who is bigger than our small minds could even begin to measure. Lord help us to begin to appreciate and understand what that means that this great God became flesh and saw that flesh turn asunder on the cross in order that we might be taken from the darkness of our own rebellion and sin into his glorious light again. So help us to worship you as we sing, help us to worship you as we walk from this church, help us to worship you tomorrow whether we're on our own or with other Christians. By our attitudes, our thinking, our not placing any other idols before you by recognizing the relationship and the redemption that you've given us.

[35 : 58] And if anyone here this evening doesn't know you and hasn't come to faith in Jesus, may tonight be a radical point, changing point, turning point in their lives, we pray that and ask that your spirit would speak powerfully to them. So help us Lord we pray and bless the young people as they will discuss later on. May they help one another, encourage one another and build each other up and be a real force for good for Christ in his strength and by his power. For Jesus' sake, amen.