

The Commandments 1-4: Loving God Exodus 20:1-11

Quick. Without looking in your bulletin, how many of the Ten Commandments can you name?

OK. Now name all the ingredients in the Big Mac sold at McDonald's.

According to 2007 survey the Big Mac easily won that memory contest.

- 80% of 1,000 respondents could name the burger's primary ingredient -- two all-beef patties -- but less than 60% knew the commandment "thou shalt not kill."
- Less than half of respondents (45%) could recall the commandment "honor thy father and mother" but 62% percent knew the Big Mac has pickles.
- 25% of Americans could name all seven ingredients of McDonald's Big Mac, while only 14% could accurately name all Ten Commandments. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bible-commandments/americans-know-big-macs-better-than-ten-commandments-idUSN1223894020071012>
- Yet, according to a 2010 USA Today poll, 78% of Americans were in favor of public displays of the Commandments. <https://www.frc.org/booklet/the-ten-commandments-foundation-of-american-society->

Consequently, the greatest tragedy is not that the Ten Commandments are vanishing from public schools, courtrooms and government buildings, but that they are disappearing from the minds, hearts and lives of most Americans even though they remain as the foundational legal code of Western Civilization and the Common Law of the United States.

In truth, the Big Mac does have advantages. There are only seven ingredients to remember and they have a catchy jingle behind them. McDonald's has poured enough money into their commercials, that the decades-old jingle still remains familiar today. But not counting last Sunday, when was the last time you heard or read the Ten Commandments? Even in many Churches, including ours, where can you find the Ten Commandments posted so that someone might learn them?

As I said last week, rebellion against the Ten Commandments is a sure sign of not having a relationship with God, but perhaps even among us who claim to honor God, there has been a long misunderstanding and lack of appreciation for the very nature of the Commandments.

In his book, *The Tender Commandments*, author Ron Mehl writes ...

"Have you ever heard of the Ten Commandments described as a love letter... a tender, heart-felt message from the very hand of God? Perhaps not. Yet, I've become convinced it is one of the most powerful expressions of God's love in all of Scripture... These ten statements are all-encompassing, touching virtually every part of our lives... the truths He knows are going to provide blessing and strength, a future and a hope.

Some people of course imagine it to be the very opposite. They don't hear love in these statements at all. What do they hear? The clank of chains and the rattle of padlocks. They hear God saying, "You mess with Me, you step out of bounds, and I'll fry you like a bug landing on a transformer."

Are the Ten Commandments harsh and negative, narrow and legalistic, cold and confining? Or, could there be a brighter, warmer, more passionate side to this familiar portion of Scripture that we have missed through the years?

It is possible that we've misunderstood the first few pages of God's love letter, the very words that set the Ten Commandments in context. The rightful setting of the Ten Commandments is the boundless, faithful, Father-love of the living God." God gives us rules because He loves us "The Tender Commandments #1: Put God First" by Chris Jordan @ SermonCentral.Com

*"The Lord called to [Moses] from the mountain, saying, 'Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, **you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.** These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.'* (Ex. 19:3-6).

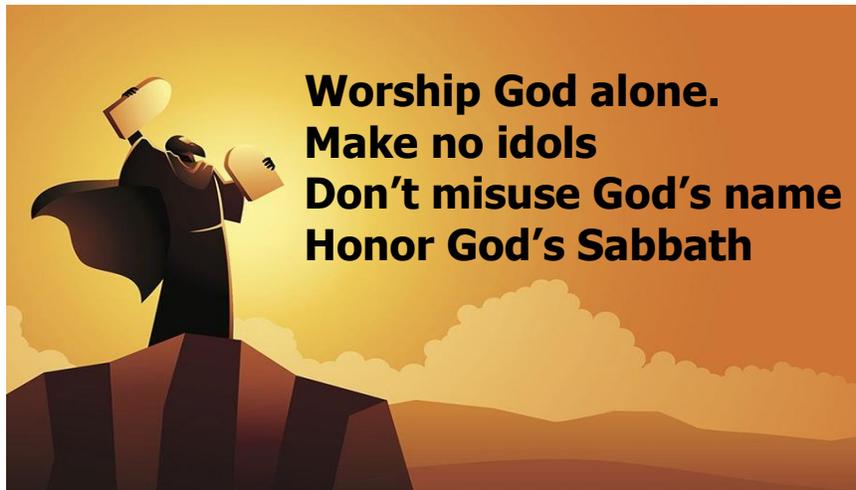
Before giving any of the commandments, God first reminded them of how He lovingly delivered them from slavery in Egypt. How He protected them from the pursuing Egyptian army. How He provided bread from Heaven and water from a rock for them. Then God said, "now I want to live in a lasting and special relationship to you, *If you keep my covenant and you will be my treasured possession.*"

The Commands were then given to help Israel keep their covenant with God, so that they might continue to live in this special relationship with Him. As I noted last week that original purpose of the Law still serves Christians today. Yes, because of Jesus, we can now come directly to God through faith – but having been restored in our relationship with God, the requirements for maintaining that relationship remain the same. Jesus said, "*If you love Me, keep My commandments.*" (John 14:15).

While one intention of the Law – through our inability to keep the Law – is to show our need for a savior (Gal. 3:11-21), the main and continuing intention of the Law is to show us how to love God and live in that special treasured relationship with Him. That is why, when asked to summarize the law, Jesus replied, "*you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*" *This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is*

like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40).

Jesus summed up the entirety of the Old Testament law simply as: **love God and love people**. But how do we love God and love people? By living according to the Ten Commandments!



Today we will look at the first four commandments, which show us how to love God. Next week we will look into the other six commandments to learn how we should show our love for people.

"Then God spoke these words: 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." (Ex. 20:1-3).

The First Commandment tells us to put God first. Jesus said, *"you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."* **This is the greatest and first commandment.**

Why? Because God is passionate about us. Moses explained this first command to the people saying, *"you shall worship no other god, for the Lord ... is a jealous God."* (Exodus 34:14). God's jealousy is not like human jealousy. It is not possessive, it is passionate! God wants to live in a special relationship with us, to treasure our relationship together, but how can He do so if we do not want to live the same way with Him?

Just like marriage and all other relationships, our relationship with God is intended to be a two-way street; if one partner in the relationship fails to return the love and commitment, then the relationship usually dies. Thankfully in some divinely mysterious way God is willing to pursue a relationship with us until we are willing to drop our rebellion and return His love as exemplified in Jesus' story of the prodigal son. But the life of the prodigal was never a life that God wanted for us, as Proverbs would teach us:

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths." (Prov. 3:5-6).

When we put God and His kingdom first, He blesses our lives. As Jesus taught, God knows and wants to supply our needs, but the condition is that we also seek first His kingdom and His righteousness – meaning living the Commandments and working to bring to pass what God wants to bring to pass on this Earth.

Thus, "the first commandment is also a call to repentance on our part, because we are rarely single-minded in our commitment to God." (Klaus Bockmuehl, Christian Way of Living). There are so many false gods and religions in the world to lure us away from our singular relationship with God: wealth, power, toys, security, as well as all the other false paths that lead only to false gods. **The truth is that whatever is most important in your life becomes your god.** Whatever you place your highest value on will rule your life. There is a wise saying, ***when we value things over people, we will begin to treat people like things.*** This also holds true in our relationship with God.

Jesus told many stories about such falsely placed faith: the rich young ruler trusting in his wealth and the foolish farmer who placed his faith in bigger barns. Then there were the Pharisees who placed their faith in keeping the laws rather than trusting in God who originated those laws.

So the first Command calls for us to love God as much as He loves us, and to accept no substitutes for our relationship with God; when we do so He promises not only to forgive our sins, but also to keep and provide for us as His special treasure among all the peoples of the Earth.

Interestingly the **Second Command** is perhaps the most misunderstood.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; (20:4-5).

People often think that this command against "making an idol" means to not worship a false god ... but that was already covered by the First Command.

What is actually being forbidden in the Second Command is any attempt on our part to capture God in a portable image, to diminish God, to reduce Him to a controllable human standard. To say this more simply, **The first command guides us to only worship the one true God. The second command teaches us to only worship God the right way.**

In explaining the second command, Moses told the people

Since you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure ... And when you look up to the

heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them, things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere under heaven (Deuteronomy 4:15-19).

What then is so bad in trying to capture God's image in some humanly recognizable form? The answer is that any idol which we could shape in our attempt to make God more comprehensible to us, will diminish our perception of God. Nothing we can construct comes close to picturing the actual person of God thus anything we can construct will make God seem smaller than He really is. As the Apostle Paul told the leaders of Athens:

The God who made the world and everything in it, He who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is He served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.... [but rather] In Him we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:24-27)

Secondly the only reason why we would make an idol representation of God would be in our attempt to control Him. Speaking for God, the prophet Isaiah mocked the idol makers saying:

To whom will you liken Me or make My equal, and compare [with] Me, as though we were alike? Those who lavish gold from the purse, and weigh out silver in the scales, they hire a goldsmith, who makes it into a god; then they fall down and worship! They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from its place. If one cries out to it, it does not answer or save anyone from trouble.

Remember this and consider, recall it to mind, you transgressors, remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfill my intention.' (Isaiah 46:5-7)

Idols are our attempt to make God into something we can control. Nothing we can craft with our hands or visualize in our mind can come close to the reality of who God is and we certainly can't control Him. Even without physical idols, how many times have we been guilty of mentally trying to reduce God to some convenient controllable size that we can call upon only when needed: such as "**Santa Claus god**" who rewards good little boys and girls, or the "**concierge god**" who waits to answer our every request, or the "**foxhole god**" with whom we can bargain? When, what we really need to do is to come to the Lord God Most High in repentance and childlike faith knowing that He loves us and would give us only the best. As Isaiah told the people,

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways

my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:7-9).

Then, in some ways the **third command** is like the second. If the second Command would keep us from doing anything that would diminish God in our own mind. The third command would keep us from doing anything to diminish the person of God to another: *You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.* (Exodus 20:7)

- Saying something false about God, diminishes respect for God in the eyes of others. This is why the penalty for falsely representing God – for being a false prophet – was death by stoning.
- Similarly making a vow in God's name, when you do not keep that vow diminishes God's reputation to others. That's why Ecclesiastes warns if you make a vow, you had better honor it (5:4); or better still, as James the brother of Jesus advised,
Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation. (James 5:12)
- In the same way, using God's name in a harmful way such as in cursing another person, diminishes God's reputation since you really have no control over what God will or will not do.

So if you truly love God you will only worship God and nothing or no one else, neither will you try to control God, nor will you misrepresent God to anyone else. Which brings us to the **forth command**

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. (Exodus 20: 8-10).

What is really interesting about the fourth commandment is that God explains not only how, but why we should keep this command. The "**HOW**" is easy: on the Sabbath do not work, do not make your servants work, do not make your animals work. Treat this day as different from the other six, where everyone and everything participates in a holy rest. Think of it this way, **OUR SABBATH REST IS AN ACT OF WORSHIP**: resting as a way of giving thanks to and honoring God for His provision in our lives.

I used to think that God gave the People of Israel the Sabbath to prove to them that they were no longer slaves – slaves got no rest – and this is still a good understanding of the fourth commandment. But then God personally explained His intention for the fourth command:

For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it. (20:11)

God was bringing His people back to the Promised Land as a restart of their partnership with Himself in the world creation project, which He had begun with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Having created everything in six days, God used the seventh day to enjoy and appreciate His creation. Then, in blessing the man and the woman to "*be fruitful, multiply, and have dominion,*" God expected them to join with Him in continuing His creative project.

Now the people were returning to the Promised Land to pick that creative project up again, to work in fellowship with God to create a holy nation that would bless the world. Certainly they should continue to follow God's pattern of six days' work followed by one day's rest --- a pattern He had already set for them by not making manna on the seventh and telling them to not go looking for it.

So our very act of participating in a Sabbath rest is our way of showing not only our gratitude for and faith in God's continual provision in our lives, but also our acknowledgement that we are joining with Him in continuing His creation project; our fruitfulness and dominion being lived out while acknowledging God's lordship over all creation.

There you have the first four commandments. Simply put, they were given to us as a way to both acknowledge and return God's love back to Him. As Scripture records, *for God so loved He gave.....* and as Jesus reminds us in return, *If you love me you will keep my commands.*

Thus, the question we each need to ask ourselves, is how much do we really trust and love God?

We will find our answer in how faithfully we keep His commandments, especially the first four. Let's pray about this.