



Catalog No. 1478

Exodus 20:1-3

Thirtieth Message

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July 3rd, 2005

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT: UNDIVIDED DEVOTION

SERIES: HEARING GOD'S VOICE

We come now to that familiar holy ground in the Old Testament known as the Ten Commandments. The commandments are getting a lot of press these days. Last week, the Supreme Court handed down two new rulings on what it considers to be proper and improper displays of the Ten Commandments in the public arena. This issue provokes much controversy, bringing to a head a volatile clash of vastly different core values in our diverse nation. Bruce Waltke sums it up well in his forthcoming book:

Although Israel's moral constitution is unique, through the spread of Christianity the Ten Commandments, which state the essence of the Book of the Covenant, have shaped the fundamental values of cultures and civilizations. This is so because Christianity continues the salvation history of which the Ten Commandments are a critical component. Those modest ten "words" have served as the legal and moral foundation for the Western World and molded its culture. Tragically, formerly Christian nations are running like "hell" away from them to form a more multi-cultured civilization, which by its very nature can only assert the absolute that there are no absolutes.¹

This became evident to me last spring when my wife and I visited many of our national monuments. The Ten Commandments are imbedded everywhere, yet they seem to be acknowledged nowhere. A friend told me that when he visited the Supreme Court, Sandra Day O'Connor told the class of adolescents that she wasn't even certain if the carved relief that sits directly above the chief justice actually depicts Moses holding the Ten Commandments. How far we have drifted in two hundred years.

How should Christians respond to this controversy? Are the Ten Commandments still valid or relevant today? Are they merely meant for religious people, or are they intended for application in the public sphere? Should they be displayed in public buildings and monuments? Are we responsible to place them there? And in light of the most recent rulings, should we disobey the Supreme Court in this matter and face the consequences as those who suffer for righteousness sake, or do we allow the courts of the land to set the agenda for a multi-cultural society?

Happily, today I will end all the controversy! I will tell you *how* and *where* you should display these commandments in both the private and public spheres. If you are interested in being part of God's revolution, unleashing his holiness in the earth, listen well, for you may end up as surprised as Christ's first disciples by God's subversive methods.

But before we explore these questions, Christians must humbly repent first. Few believers have any idea of the supreme value and enduring significance which God has placed upon these words, and therefore we don't take time to learn them. And many of those who do take them to heart have an improper understanding of how to apply them. I had originally intended to spend our final two messages in Exodus expounding all ten of the commandments, but after considering their absolute importance, coupled with our modern ignorance of them, I felt it best to slow down and take as much time as needed;

so we will complete them next fall. This morning we will cover just the first commandment. My prayer is that God will break the fallow ground of our hearts, and then tenderly plant these words, and water them with the Spirit, until they are firmly rooted into the very fabric of our lives.

First, we will look at a number of introductory issues, such as the structure, essence, value and motivation of the commandments; then we will examine the first commandment in its original setting; and finally, their modern application.

I. Introduction to the Ten Commandments

A. Their structure reveals the priority in relationships

Most scholars divide the commandments into two divisions: those that pertain to our relationship with the Lord, and those that pertain to our responsibilities to love our fellow man. Our Lord himself summarized the entire law in two commandments: to love the Lord our God with the whole heart, and one's neighbor as oneself (Matt 22:37-40). Bruce Waltke is sensitive to a third division which links the two categories into one:

The Ten Commandments are divided into three categories. The first three pertain to God and worship; the last six pertain to people and charity; the fourth commandment is a transition. The commandment to keep Sabbath is to the Lord, but for the sake of humanity and the creation. It stands between the two sections. The first four commandments are given with rationale: an explanation of why we should keep them. The last six are stated without rationale. This is because the first four commandments are distinctive, laws unlike any of other nations. They require rationale because these four laws make Israel and her God unique. The last six, with perhaps the exception of the tenth, are found in most cultures. No community that tolerates murder, theft, adultery, et cetera can stand. It is anarchy.²

With profound simplicity these Ten Words cover all our relationships. Yet their order and amplification uncover something about relationships that no other law code has ever addressed. If my count is correct, there are over one hundred words in Hebrew that pertain to our worship of God, and a mere thirty-seven governing our human relationships. This instructs us that worship determines ethics. Cain failed in the field and murdered his brother (ethics), because he failed at the altar and compromised holiness in his worship of God. Eugene Peterson captures this thought well:

If we are going to live in community, dealing with the God whom we cannot see takes priority over dealing with the men and the women we can see. And so that we don't, in our hurry to get on with the really practical things that are on our minds, brush past the invisible, fail to attend to the immense gravity of what is involved, reduce God to mere background, we are slowed down by the strategies of expansion on each word: there are reasons here that you may not have thought of, there are consequences here that

you might not be aware of, there is a context involved that sets this command in a world far larger than what you see around you right now. Here are five God-conditions apart from which you can never have community. Ponder. Realize. Imagine. Embrace. Worship.³

This structure reveals the absolute priority of our relationship to God before we attempt to relate to people. What then is the essence or underlying theme in all these commandments?

B. Their essence: Love that makes us responsible

As Israel stands trembling at the foot of the mountain, she wonders if she will survive the “outbreak” of God’s holiness. But, instead of being struck dead, she is enlisted to serve the King through magisterial command. This highlights our significance as human beings made in God’s image. God addresses the Israelites as people fully capable of making right choices and living on a high moral plane. But we are free. God will neither impose himself on us nor coerce us to do his bidding—conferring on us more dignity than most of us would want.

But when a sovereign highly values a subject and sees him as capable of representing his rule in another realm, he formally commissions him from on high, making him his personal ambassador. This action raises the person’s dignity, calling him to new heights. He is summoned to a much larger purpose than merely making a living, buying a house and raising a family. He is the king’s representative, bearing his image in a foreign land. What a privilege! And how does the ambassador represent this King? He uses his freedom to create a loving and just community.

Reading the Ten Commandments, one senses a different outlook from what we find in our Declaration of Independence. Desiring to be free from political tyranny, our Founding Fathers wrote: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” While these fundamental truths are sound, the focus is on securing and maintaining one’s own rights. Though the founders never envisioned it, we now have a nation that insists on pursuing individual freedoms, with little exercise of responsibility. The Ten Commandments, on the other hand, focus on the responsibility which these liberated slaves had to uphold their neighbor’s fundamental rights. Here responsibilities are explicitly emphasized, while rights are implied. The fact that each command is written in the second person singular places responsibility for their fulfillment squarely on the shoulders of every single Israelite, without exception. We might think of the Ten Commandments as “Love’s Responsibilities.”

Next we ask: What is their enduring value?

C. Their value: The purest reflection of the heart of God

The supreme value of these words is evident on several levels. First, they are the climactic moment to which all of Exodus has been building, being God’s very first words to his people. Second, this is the only revelation that God both spoke and wrote directly to his people. And third, only these commandments were placed in the Ark of the Covenant. As Bruce Waltke comments: “The tent-sanctuary is intended to be a replica of heaven itself so that the people might understand what heaven is like (Exod 25:40; Heb 8:5; 9:23). In the heart of the temple, is the ark. Inside it is the ten ‘words.’ It is thus fair to speak of it as the eternal moral law of God, an expression of God himself. They are part of God’s identity, a central part of God’s self-revelation. God’s moral attributes are summarized in these ten ‘words.’ They give insight to the heart of God and the eternal character of God.”⁴

The Ten Commandments therefore are the purest reflection of the character of God. While some of the application of these commands found in the Book of the Covenant must be reinterpreted in light of the New Covenant for the church, the Ten Commandments remain an eternal expression of God’s unchanging heart. And now that the Spirit of God has inscribed them on our hearts, they are the ultimate expression of our core identity and character.

What is the motivation for Israel to keep these commands?

D. Their motivation: Gratitude and appreciation (20:1-2)

Then 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. (Exod 20:1-2 NASB)

It is significant that the first words that Israel hears from the mountain are “I (with emphatic emphasis) am Yahweh your God.” The name Yahweh, the name that God revealed to Moses (Exod 3-4), speaks of God’s hunger for relationship, evidenced in his resolute faithfulness to his promises. As it is now being addressed to the new nation, it evokes the memory of the Exodus as the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This One is none other than Israel’s God, who continues to be fully present as Israel attempts to carry out these words.

Before God speaks one word concerning Israel’s responsibility, he reminds her of his mighty acts of salvation, which released her from insufferable bondage. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, God’s grace and acts of salvation precede human responsibility. God never makes demands in a relationship without first giving everything he has to give. Before Israel is asked to make this commitment of her will, God wants her rooted in memory. Acts of history are to inform and shape this monumental decision. This makes gratitude and appreciation, not emotion, threat or manipulation, the supreme motivation for entering into a relationship with the Living God. This will be true for the New Covenant as well as the Old. But in the New, it will have even greater force (see Eph 2:1-10), because the cost of our salvation was so much greater.

To summarize, we have uncovered some of the key issues which will help us interpret and apply these Ten Words.

1. Their *structure* reveals the priority of relationships: that the worship of God must precede the practice of ethics.
2. Their *essence* is love. These former slaves are now free to love responsibly.
3. Their supreme *value* is seen in that they are kept in the inner sanctum of the holy of holies, and therefore are the purest expression of the character of God.
4. Their *motivation* is based not on guilt or manipulation, but extreme gratitude and appreciation for the gift of a salvation that has freed them from a tortuous tyranny.

With this context in place we are ready to look at the first commandment.

II. The First Commandment: Undivided Loyalty (20:3)

A. In its original context

“You shall have no other gods before Me.” (20:3)

God’s first demand in light of the Exodus is for undivided loyalty and uncompromising devotion: “You shall have no other gods before Me.” The phrase “before Me” can be literally read as “before my face.” This could have in mind Israel’s future sanctuary and the abhorrence which God would feel if any false god was placed “in his presence.”

The phrase can also carry the sense “over against me,” or “in preference to me,” implying that Israel must not entrust her heart to anything else which purported to offer life, security or significance. The commandment is not making a theological statement that there are in fact other gods, but rather is a commentary on the sad condition of human hearts, which Calvin described as “idol factories.” The Bible “breathes monotheism,” from beginning to end, boldly asserting that there are no other gods but Israel’s Creator (Deut 4:39; Isa 44:6; 45:22). Yet it also documents man’s insatiable drive to create and worship what are in fact “not gods,” investing them with life-giving power which only the Creator possesses. In the end, these powerful forces become demonic (Deut 32:17). Brueggemann writes: “Israel is to mobilize all of its life, in every sphere, around a single loyalty.”⁵ The vow is similar to the vow which every bride is expected to make on her wedding day. What husband, after pledging a lifetime of devotion, would not be outraged if his bride requested that a former boyfriend go along on the honeymoon, or insisted on carrying on intimate phone conversations with old flames?

B. Its theological basis: God’s Oneness

Moses repeats the commandment in Deut 6 in its positive orientation, suggesting that all the commandments are to be applied positively as well. Prior to the command to love God, Moses gives its theological basis as being rooted in the very character of God:

“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” (Deut 6:4-5)

This is a fundamental text of Old Testament theology. Unlike any other god in the Ancient Near East, Israel’s God is uniquely “one.” This phrase is more a description of God’s essential character and integrity than a philosophical statement about the numerical essence within his person. It means that there is absolutely no division in God’s heart.⁶ He is not double-minded, wavering or half-hearted about his commitments. If God speaks a word of promise, that promise will resolutely drive the course of history, no matter what obstacles he must overcome. Like “well-driven nails” (Eccl 12:11), you can hang your life on them. Therefore, because God is one, Israel is to be “one,” mirroring God’s integrity by giving him her whole heart, with nothing held back, trusting him alone for all she needs.

C. Inferences which the Commandment reveals about our humanity

This commandment suggests two things about our humanity. First, a man or woman is most human when he or she possesses a singular love. By contrast, the thing that is most destructive to our humanity is when our affections are divided, which leads to betrayal in relationships. Fidelity and singular devotion make a person most attractive. How easily we are moved to tears when we are privileged to attend a couple’s fiftieth wedding anniversary and behold a tenderness that transcends romance. To an even greater degree, when the focus of a person’s love is not an equal or a lesser object, but someone as grand as Israel’s Creator and Redeemer, the glory of the person becomes so beautiful, it is almost divine. It is raised to a sanctity, something akin to that “fearful” mountain (19:18). This commandment tells us that the human heart is designed to have its affections set on something much larger than itself, infusing it with a quality of life from another time and place. Anything less diminishes its intended glory.

On the other hand, what creates the greatest damage to our humanity is a heart fragmented from divided loyalties. All of you software engineers know that fragmentation leads to disintegration. On a human level, this is why affairs are so destructive. Have you had the

painful privilege of watching someone attempt to live a double life? They mistakenly think they can simultaneously cultivate affections in two opposite directions, one false, one true, and not have their soul blow apart. It takes but little time for the moral force of the individual to be drained dry, as the rival “god” demands more and more attention and the fear of being exposed looms large. As affections are redirected, the soul goes into seismic turmoil, trying feverishly to justify illicit desire with the thought of betrayal. Before long the wayward soul finds that it takes an inexhaustible supply of energy to barely function in the reality of a relational world and maintain a false front of respectability. Faced with ever increasing stress, the person flees into isolation, withdrawing from human contact. But even thick walls of isolation can’t protect a soul from a guilty conscience that screams in the silence, as David describes his own tortured soul in Psalm 32:

**When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away
Through my groaning all day long.
For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me;
My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer.
(Ps 32:2-3)**

Finally and without fail, the whole house of cards comes crashing down. This painful disintegration which happens on the human plane is a visual aid of what occurs spiritually whenever we entrust ourselves to another person or thing (career, status, drugs, money, pornography, power, etc.) for the security or life that only God can give. Like pulling a loose thread from a favorite sweater, we unravel at the seams. No wonder God will brook no rival. The uncompromising standard of this command does not arise because God is cold and demanding, but because he loves us.

D. The hope of one heart in the New Covenant

Deeply moved by this expression of God’s love, and with the enthusiasm of a Pentecostal revival meeting, Israel comes down the aisle exclaiming, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do!” (19:8) That same enthusiasm filled the hearts of the next generation following a string of successful campaigns in the Promised Land. But Joshua was keenly aware of the danger of false gods. In his farewell speech he asked the nation to make a recommitment of their vow to serve the Lord with their whole hearts:

The people answered and said, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for the LORD our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, and who did these great signs in our sight and preserved us through all the way in which we went and among all the peoples through whose midst we passed. The LORD drove out from before us all the peoples, even the Amorites who lived in the land. We also will serve the LORD, for He is our God.” (Josh 24:16-18)

Their response is letter perfect. It has the proper motivation, the right understanding of history, the right theological terms, and a crystal-clear understanding of what God expects in the relationship. It’s enough to make any theologian smile. Yet, Joshua throws cold water on the whole ceremony with a curt, almost shocking retort: “You will not be able to serve the Lord, for He is a holy God” (Josh 24:19). Joshua had the insight to know that even with the best of intentions, Israel would fail, and fail miserably. Despite her initial enthusiasm, the record of history reveals that Israel could never maintain an undivided commitment. What began as innocent compromise, dabbling with false gods, quickly escalated into blatant harlotry, which finally led to an excruciating divorce, and ultimately exile.

Has that been your story? How many times have you attempted to start over? How many false starts have left you weary of falling off the wagon again and again?

Yet, even Israel's legacy of betrayal and pain would not prevent God from completing the work he had begun. During her exile, the prophets foresaw a day when God would gather his people back into the land and reestablish their fractured relationship in a New Covenant. This time when the vows are spoken, God reaffirms his passionate love with renewed hope:

“They shall be my people, and I will be their God; and I will give them one heart and one way.” (Jer 32:38-39a)

“And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God.” (Ezek 11:19-20)

Jeremiah and Ezekiel foresaw a day when God's people would have their hearts remade like God's. Not only are they given the grace of having a second chance, when they approach that altar to recommit their lives to God they will discover that their hearts have been redesigned to factory specifications. In the New Covenant, God's people are miraculously given hearts that, for the first time in human history, are fully capable by the Spirit of Christ to love God with undivided devotion (Acts 2:46; Phil 1:27). We might call it the “operation one heart.” Has God “*one*” your heart? Any Christian who is truly honest will freely admit that the tensions of a “divided heart” still war within, because sin still lives in the body. But whenever they present themselves to “God as those alive from the dead” (Rom 6:13), the Spirit of Christ puts to death the deeds of the flesh and produces the fruit of genuine, unadulterated love (Gal 5:22), fulfilling the law in wondrous ways (Gal 5:14).

III. Where Do We Display the Ten Commandments?

A. Where was Israel to place the Commandments?

We now come to our final question concerning where should we display these commandments. Moses leaves no doubt about where God wants them placed:

“These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” (Deut 6:6-9)

Israel is commanded that the “place” where these commandments are to be deposited is in their hearts. To put something on the heart meant to prize it so highly that one memorized it. Once it was firmly secured in their hearts, they were commanded to deposit these same words in the hearts of their children, diligently teaching⁷ them everywhere and at all times. Finally, there were commanded to create signs on their persons and buildings that would serve as visual reminders that all of life was to be an integrated whole. Thus every action (“the hand”) and every thought (“the forehead”) was to be governed by these words in both the private (“the doorposts of the home”) and the public sector (the “gates” of the city). Israel's life was not to be compartmentalized into religious and secular spheres, but to be totally

integrated into a unified whole. To Moses, the separation of church and state would have been unthinkable.

B. Where are we to place the Commandments?

Yet we don't live in a theocracy, but in a democracy of diverse cultures. Where then should we display the Ten Commandments? The supreme irony of the recent court decisions is that the law of the land will now permit them to be displayed only in contexts that deny the very essence of their proclamation—no little tension for those who love this God who will have no rivals. However, Christians who truly understand the New Covenant should never be threatened by a world that finds our devotion repulsive and wants to remove from sight every last vestige of God's Commandments. Let the world keep their stones. God is through with stones! Consider that the most incisive stone engraving in history never changed one human heart.

Do you think that in the first century, Rome would have permitted stone monuments of the Ten Commandments to be displayed in the empire? The entire government was driven by lascivious lust. Her leaders were pedophiles, and the populace filled stadiums for the sole pleasure of smelling blood. Yet so well taught were these early Christians, they knew that God had inscribed these Ten Words on their hearts, so that everywhere they went they were divine mirrors of beauty and devotion. In thirty years these commandments had penetrated every square inch of the Roman Empire, so that even the emperor's home could not escape their influence, as some had unknowingly enlisted Christian slaves to teach their children. These fearless teachers personally inscribed these Ten Words on the hearts of their children.

So let the world have its stones. Let them take “In God we trust” off our coins. Let them cast all the sacred monuments out of the courts and the schools. God doesn't need them. God doesn't want stones. He wants your hearts. And he wants the hearts of your children. No evil can stand before an undivided heart.

On this Fourth of July, instead of lamenting the deplorable state of the moral fabric of our nation, perhaps we ought to lament the lack of undivided hearts in the church. “For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Gal 5:13).

1. Bruce K. Waltke, “Gift of the Old Covenant,” *An Exegetical Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).
2. Waltke, *An Exegetical Old Testament Theology*.
3. Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays In Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 253.
4. Waltke, *An Exegetical Old Testament Theology*.
5. Walter Brueggemann, “Exodus,” *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:841.
6. For a superb treatment on this idea of God being “one,” see J. G. Janzen, “On the Most Important Word in the *Shema*,” *Vetus Testamentum* 37 (1987), 280-300.
7. “Teach diligently”: the Hebrew verb *shanan* comes from the root *shen* meaning “tooth.” As a verb, it conveys the idea of teaching “incisively,” i.e. “with bite.”

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