



ONE LORD, ONE HEART

SERIES: RESTORING THE ANCIENT BOUNDARIES

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Introductory Observations to the Ten Commandments

I was eight years old when I was first instructed in the Ten Commandments. Up to that point I had my own ethical standards about swearing. One day I was playing basketball with a friend, and after he had missed a shot, he used bad language. I said to him, "Russell, you've got a foul mouth!" He said, "You're worse than me. You take God's name in vain! And you know what the Scripture says? 'He will not leave you unpunished!'" From that day on my view of swearing was radically changed! Never underestimate the word of God uttered out of the mouth of a youth.

In our studies in the Ten Commandments, I want to say three introductory words, concerning their structure, focus, and application.

(a) Their Structure

The first four commandments are addressed to God (they instruct us how to love God); and the last six are addressed to man (they instruct us how to love man); And they have a rationale stated to provide a motivation behind the commandment, while the last six do not. According to my friend, Dr. Bruce Waltke, this is because the first four commandments were unique in the Ancient Near East, while the remaining six were found in other Ancient Near Eastern law codes.

(b) Their Focus: Outward not Inward

The United States Constitution states that all citizens have certain inalienable rights. This notion is gathered up in the phrase, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Society today has assessed those words as a singular focus to protect rights, while at the same time it feels no responsibility to care for the rights of others. So we hear people say things like, "This is a free country. I can do what I please. It doesn't matter whose rights I infringe upon in the process."

The Ten Commandments take the opposite point of view. They hold that we are entrusted with certain inalienable responsibilities both to God and our neighbor. The commandments, "You shall not murder...commit adultery...steal...bear false witness..." imply that all men have a right to life, home, possessions, and their reputation, but the focus is on man's responsibility to not cross these sacred boundaries.

The grammatical form of the commandments emphasizes how serious God is about this. There are two ways to express a prohibition in Hebrew, and each uses a dif-

ferent tense and a different article of negation. The form used here is the most emphatic. It "corresponds to our Thou shalt not do it! with the strongest expectation of obedience."¹ What this tells us is that we become fully human when we take responsibility to care for others. So the focus of the Ten Commandments is outward, not inward.

(c) Their Application

Though it is stated in the form of the negative, "You shall not..." , each commandment is given a positive application in Deuteronomy. Thus, to rightfully fulfill these words we must be actively loving toward God and our neighbor. Jesus himself summarized the commandments in Matthew's gospel, when he 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 great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matt 22:37-39, NASB).

Thus the nature of spirituality begins with a "no," followed by a "yes." The no's create sacred boundaries that must never be crossed. The holy boundaries having been established, we are then to set our focus to cultivate life in loving others. The metaphor can be applied to landscaping. If you want to create a beautiful garden, first you must engage in the toilsome work of clearing the land of weeds and rocks and establishing boundaries. Only then can you begin to plant the flowers and shrubs that will beautify the garden. Deuteronomy says that it is not enough merely not to steal. That does not fulfill the commandment. We have to work hard, making more money than we need, so we can care for others, providing for the orphan, the widow and the alien. (These first three commandments will find their positive application in Deut 6:4-11.)

Now we come to God's first commandment to Israel.

I. The First Word: Guarding Our Affections Against Idolatry (Deut 5:6-7)

"I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery. You shall not have for yourself another god in preference to me."

(a) The basis for the Commandment

The first word begins with an emphatic "I." It describes the act of salvation by which the Lord delivered

Israel from the house of slavery. The first word God speaks to the heart is a word of love. Love is always demonstrated by God through his saving acts, which are imbedded in history. Israel's motivation to love God stems from the fact that he first loved Israel by saving her. In spirituality, grace precedes law, and obedience is always to be rooted in appreciation.

(b) The first word stated in the negative

“You shall not have for yourself another god in preference to me.” Literally, the word says, “before my face.”² This expression may be a reference to setting up an idol in the temple area right in Yahweh's presence. This is what Manasseh had the audacity to do (2 Kgs 21:7). Like any righteous husband who is zealous for his wife, Yahweh has absolutely no tolerance for other gods; therefore he warns Israel to guard her affections carefully.

(c) The first word applied in the positive: Deut. 6:4-5

“Hear O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is One! And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” Oxford scholar Tom Wright sees this text as stating two great foundational doctrines of Judaism, namely, monotheism and election: “There is one God, and Israel is His people” (one God and one people of God). The expression that the Lord is one means there is no internal division in Him, He is a God of integrity.³ Therefore, God demands to be loved with the whole heart, in return.

Israel found this a difficult assignment. Even in response to God's grace, the nation failed to give her whole heart to him. Every time God turned to love Israel, she responded by turning away. But the prophet Jeremiah looked forward to a day when God would make a new covenant in Israel, such that the nation would love him with the whole heart: “And they shall be My people, and I will be their God; and I will give them *one heart* and *one way*...And I will make an everlasting covenant with them...and I will faithfully plant them in this land with *all My heart* and with *all My soul*” (Jer 32:38-41).

Jesus was the inaugurator of this new covenant. He took on man's role to love God with his whole heart. God, by the Holy Spirit, places believers in Christ so we can love him with a whole heart. This is what the New Testament is referring to when it says we have been “sealed” by the Holy Spirit. No matter how far we drift away, God always pursues us and woos us back so that he can be loved with the whole heart.

The hymn puts this beautifully:

*O to grace, how great a debtor,
Daily I'm constrained to be.
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord I feel it,*

*Prone to leave the one I love,
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above!*

In Christ, therefore, our hearts have been sealed by the Holy Spirit so that we can love God with our whole hearts.

So the first commandment deals with the affections of the heart.

The second commandment deals with the actions of our hands.

**II. The Second Word: Guarding Our Actions
Against Idolatry (Deut 5:8-10)**

(a) The prohibition against idolatry

“You shall not make for yourself an image of any likeness of that which is of the heavens above, or that which is on the earth beneath, or that which is in the waters under the earth.”

Orthodox Jews take this text to mean “an image *or* any likeness.” They hold that this commandment prohibits all image making, i.e. that it is a proscription against all art—even photography. While that interpretation is possible grammatically, we must remember that in Exodus, God commanded the making of images from the creation to be placed in the tabernacle. Thus it is better to read the text as “an image of any likeness,” thereby interpreting the commandment as a prohibition against the making of images specifically for idolatry.

We know that the land of Canaan was replete with idols. That entire society was given over to the manufacture and sale of images for worship. The foundational belief in the Ancient Near East was that the gods held the keys to life, and what drove them was sex. People believed the notion that if they could capture the image of the god in stone, they would possess the life of the god and could manipulate it to their own ends. The thrust of that kind of system of belief is that it is up to man to initiate and manufacture life. What a tremendous burden to carry!

Things have changed very little in our day. When I was in Malaysia, I noticed a little statue outside my hotel bedroom door, with a dish of food left there to feed the idol. How absurd, I thought to myself, that people made an image and then fed it in a futile attempt to gain life. But America, our own nation, is the most idolatrous nation on earth! Whole industries and technologies are given over to image making so that we might find life in idols. We are “hard-wired” for idolatry! But God says we must not enter into this process.

The reason is, idolatry is dangerous.

(b) The dangers of idolatry

“You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons and upon the

third and fourth generations to those hating me, but showing (literally: doing) loyal-love to the thousandth generation to those loving me and to those keeping my commandments.”

1. On the individual: An escalation of enslavement

Idols are not static objects that we can control within fixed boundaries. The escalation of the activity of idols can be seen by the verbs used in the text. We think we can control the idol, set up boundaries and worship it in the privacy of our own hearts—when we are offstage, when its late and dark, and we are alone. But the idol gains entrance into the recesses of our hearts and feeds the affections. Our appetite becomes enlarged and it begins to impact our actions. We actually become involved in the idol-making process. We give it worth, something that is reserved only for God (we “bow down”); then we serve the idol (it consumes us night and day). At last we awaken to find our idol has consumed us and we are addicted to it.

2. On future generations: The perversions escalate

But not only does the idol affect the individual, it impacts future generations. Idolatry is very contagious; its perversions escalate from one generation to the next. This is what happened in the Ancient Near East, where the goddess Asherah was worshipped. Altars erected on the high places were surrounded by naked female images carved on poles. The thinking of that generation was that the gods needed to be incited by lust. The next generation had as their sex goddess Astarte, the goddess of war. She is depicted naked, riding into battle on horseback, blood flowing up to her knees, with decapitated heads of men tied around her waist. Following the battle, she goes into her powder room and, according to the text, cleanses her hands. Remarkably, she “feels nothing.” The first generation arouses life through lust, but the second generation creates life through violence, and creates a society whose hearts are so hardened they are incapable of feeling emotions.

This has application for us today. In the '50's, society opened the door to pornography, and the world was motivated through lust. People responded by saying it was harmless. Then my generation took out into the streets what the world was doing privately. But in today's movies, perverted or illicit sex is not enough. Now it always leads to pillage, rape, death, and souls that have no feelings.

The question is, what does God do in the face of all this? The text tells us, “God visits the iniquity (or guilt) of the fathers on the sons to the third and fourth generations.” The verb “to visit” has a wide range of meanings, from the passive notion of “watching with care, overseeing,” to a more active sense of stepping into an existing situation to bring about a great change for good or evil. Traditionally, the Jews applied this text in this more active sense, so much so they interpreted it to be equivalent to fatalism. Thus this word became a prov-

erb in Israel,

“The fathers eat the sour grapes,
But the children's teeth are set on edge” (lit. become dull) (Ezek 18:2).

The fathers sin, but the children pay. It is consequential and inevitable. Fatalism rules the day, and God does not care. That is how our generation interprets the verse as well: the children are punished for the sins of the fathers.

But the prophet Ezekiel wrote an entire chapter of 32 verses to correct this erroneous view:

“What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel saying,

The fathers eat the sour grapes,

But the children's teeth are set on edge?

As I live, declares the Lord God, “you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel anymore. Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die” (Ezek 18:2-3).

Ezekiel then describes a scenario of several generations of sons. The first involves a righteous man who lives because of his righteousness. Yet, says Ezekiel, through no fault of his own, he has a violent son who soon breaks all the commandments. That son is an idol worshipper who oppresses the poor and takes bribes. Ezekiel says that this man will die for his own sins. Yet he in turn may have a son who witnessed all the violent and idolatrous deeds of his father, but chooses to break the cycle. He repents, and loves God with his whole heart. This son will not pay for his father's sins. We are absolutely responsible for our own sins, no matter what kind of upbringing we had.

The consistent attitude that God displays is one of care: “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked. I hold out repentance to every individual in every generation, so none has to die.” Idolatry is dangerous. If you choose to embrace it, God will allow you to have your idol (cf. Rom 1:18ff). He will watch in pain, waiting for you to repent. He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He holds out repentance to every generation.

This commandment is not teaching fatalism, or that God does not care. Rather, it teaches that God is so caring he is constantly “watching” from heaven as the idolatry is passed like a contagious disease from one generation to the next. (This view is supported by Exodus 34:12-16⁴). As it grows, God attempts to get the attention of the fathers to repent, because he is zealous for us. At any time they can break the cycle. If no one does, God is still gracious. He will intervene in the fourth generation to cut off the effect of idolatry. Why? Because the grandfather is dead by this time, and the chance for him to repent has passed.

(c) The impact of God's loyal-love

Yet, by contrast, if the father is faithful to do right-

eousness in the home, God rewards with an infinite blessing: “He does loyal-love for a thousand generations. The verb “to do” or “make” frames the commandment: If we are faithful to *not make* idols, God will do (*make*) loyal-love for a thousand generations.” We are required to do little, while God is willing to do so much. Instead of endangering your children and grandchildren with idolatry, teach them the commandments (the positive application in Deut 6:6-7). Fear motivates us to purge our homes of idols, but love prompts us to teach our children. God invites us to be part of something infinitely bigger than a puny idol. If we accept his invitation, the impact of our choice will go on forever.

So we are to guard our hearts against idolatry, and guard our actions.

Finally, we are to guard our speech.

III. The Third Word: Guarding Our Speech Against Idolatry (Deut 5:11)

“You shall not lift up (in an oath) the name of Yahweh your God unto vanity, for Yahweh shall not leave him unpunished who lifts his name unto vanity.”

The word “vanity” means that which is empty, groundless and worthless. The word became a designation for idols. Attaching God’s holy name to a worthless cause, therefore, is equivalent to idolatry. This would involve lying under oath, false visions (for instance, saying that the Lord has healed someone when it is mere “positive thinking” versus the authentic word of the Lord), swearing, or even the more common use God’s name to back something you have a personal interest in, even if it is a good cause. Do not say that the Lord has led you to do something when it is merely personal ambition. In Matthew 5:33-37, Jesus said to not use God’s name in an oath, because we don’t know if we’ll even be around tomorrow.

If we violate the second commandment, God “visits the iniquity upon the sons,” but if we violate this commandment, God pays us back to our face! God is very zealous for his holy name. This was his word to the false prophets of Ezekiel’s day: “So My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations. They will have no place in the council of My people, nor will they be written down in the register of the house of Israel, nor will they enter the land of Israel, that you may know that I am the Lord GOD. It is definitely because they have misled My people by saying, ‘Peace!’ when there is no peace” (Ezek 13:9-10).

King Saul is another example of one who took the Lord’s name in vain. Twice he said of David, even while he was planning his death, “As the Lord lives, he shall not die!” Worse yet, he uttered an oath to a witch that she would live, contrary to what God had spoken.

After that seedy encounter with the witch of Endor, the very next day, God paid Saul back to his face. He met his bloody end on the hill of Gilboa, his body beheaded, dismembered and desecrated in a Philistine temple.

Instead of desecrating and profaning the name of God, what we should do is place his holy name in the community by evangelizing (“write these words on the doorposts of your city gates,” Deut 6:9). So let us lift up the standard of these Ten Words in the world. When we do this, we will have a sense of holiness and life.

So let us not take God’s name in vain, but rather, let us take his name into the community and evangelize.

God has not left us without answers as to how he wants to be loved. He desires to be loved wholeheartedly (with the whole heart); in purity (with no idols); and in holiness (giving his name due honor). Despite our sin and waywardness, he keeps on winning. He breaks in again and again to render powerless the perversions of sin passed on from one generation to the next; then he faithfully woos us back when we wander, until love seals our hearts. What wondrous love is this!

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¹ E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, Translated by A. E. Cowly, 2nd Edition, Oxford, 1910, pg. 317

² The prepositional phrase, “before me” has a wide range of meanings, as Brevard Childs shows in his commentary of Exodus: “A wide variety of translations have suggested in addition to the traditional rendering ‘beside me’ in the AV: ‘in defiance of me’, ‘to my disadvantage’, ‘over against me’... The preposition has such a wide use that almost every suggested translation can find some biblical warrant. Even the translation of Rashi, ‘so long as I exist’, which at first sight appears completely arbitrary, has striking support in such verses as Num. 3.4. The fact that the preposition can often carry a hostile tone (Gen. 16.12) has been noted in several of the renderings. Some commentators continue to stress the literal meaning ‘before my face’ as providing the original setting which prohibited setting up idols in the presence of Yahweh. Perhaps the somewhat neutral rendering ‘before me’ remains the most useful one in light of the above difficulties.” (Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, Old Testament Library, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974, 402-403).

³ See the excellent article on the meaning of this phrase “one” in *Theology Today*, Vol. 1.

⁴ “Watch yourself that you make no covenant with the inhabitants of the land into which you are going, lest it become a snare in your midst. But rather, you are to tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and cut down their Asherim—for you shall not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God—lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and they play the harlot with their gods, and sacrifice to their gods, and someone invite you to eat of his sacrifice; and you take some of his daughters for you sons, and his daughters play the harlot with their gods, and cause your sons also to play the harlot with their gods” (Exod 34:12-16).