

"No Other God"

Exodus 20:1-3

March 16, 2025

Ecc1 5:1-2—“Guard your steps as you go to the house of God, and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil.¹ 2 Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore, let your words be few.”

The Psalmist is not discouraging us from praying—bringing up a matter in the presence of God. He is warning us of a low view of God, treating God like a man.

The church today suffers from a largely unknown malady. That malady is a debilitating casual view of God. On the one hand a casual view of God lacks true intimacy with God that basks in the deep love, security, and favor of our Father. On the other hand, a casual view of God lacks awe and reverence for God’s holiness that walks in the fear of God.

Let me suggest that your depth of intimacy with God will never surpass your grasp of the holiness and greatness of God. Here’s why: A casual view of God may feel comfortable to you, but only because of ignorance. When you begin to pursue God, you will discover a degree of insecurity before God because His holiness threatens your sinfulness. It’s at this point of your journey that you must not stop. The way to deep security in your relationship with God is to discover that you can’t possibly overcome the breach between your sinfulness and God’s holiness, and therefore you must place all of your hope in Jesus to do that for you, so that your security in your relationship with God is based solely on Jesus’ perfect accomplishment of pleasing God rather than your feeble, fallible attempt to please a holy God through sin-tainted efforts.

We’ve become accustomed to a God we are comfortable with. But we need a vision of God that makes us uncomfortable with our sinfulness

¹ Ps 36:1-2: “Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart, there is no fear of God before his eyes, for he flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated.”

because of His holiness. We will never be transformed by a god who is reduced to our likeness. We will not be changed by a god sinners are comfortable with.

This is why the 10 commandments in Exodus 20 are preceded by a display of the greatness and holiness of God in chapter 19. Our hearts need to be awakened from their dull slumber. Broc taught us last week from Exodus 19, but unfortunately, we have had a week-long intermission from last Sunday until today. So I am going to take the time to review chapter 19, to properly set the stage for the law in chapter 20. It’s especially important that the first commandment be understood in the context of God’s holiness in chapter 19.

When the Lord says, “You shall have no other gods before me,” this must be understood in light of two aspects of God’s holiness. First, **God is holy in that He is set apart in a category all His own.** There is no likeness that can be compared to Him. You can never say, “God is like _____,” without reducing God to something He is not. **[Isa 40]** God is holy in the sense that He is *transcendent*, exceedingly surpassing anything created that could be compared to Him.

Second, **God is holy in that He is dangerously pure and purely good.** So holy is God, so dangerously pure is He, that only a divine purifying grace could allow sinful men into His immediate presence without perishing. **[Isa 6]**

Apart from grasping the holiness of God, we cannot have an accurate view of who God is. And if we do not have an accurate view of who God is, we will have an insufficient understanding of the weightiness of His commands and flounder in our obedience to Him. The holiness of God along with the grace of God motivates our obedience. *God’s holiness demands obedience. God’s grace enables obedience.*

And our obedience begins with the first command: *"You shall have no other God's before Me"* (20:3). Now let's take a step back to chapter 19 to see how God prepares His people for this first command.

Vs. 4: *"You yourselves saw what I did to the Egyptians..."* He not only conquered the Egyptians, but also decimated their gods, proving them false. He demonstrated that *Yahweh is the Lord and there is no other. His glory is unrivaled in all the earth.* That is, He is holy, set apart, incomparable, in a category all His own. *"You shall have no other gods before Me!"*

But notice that in overcoming the Egyptians, God was also extending grace to the Israelites. Vs. 4: *"I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself."* This is a picture of God's providential, parental care. Notice that God is the one who initiates the relationship. It begins not with man's effort but with God's grace. It was through the sacrificial death of Lamb—grace—that God redeemed His people, bringing them into a relationship with the one and only God Almighty. **[Eagles' wings]**

Yet this relationship with Yahweh would not be without stipulations. Vs. 5: *"Now therefore, IF you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine."* Notice that the condition of their obedience is not how they *enter into* a relationship with God, but how they *function within* a relationship with God. They have already been redeemed. He has already brought them to Himself on eagle's wings. He has already instituted a covenant through Abraham. Their obedience to Yahweh alone is the stipulation of an intimate, treasured relationship just as a husband and wife have stipulations of exclusive intimacy within the covenant of marriage.

You cannot have an intimate relationship with God apart from careful obedience. Jesus said, *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments"* (Jn 14:15). God is addressing the age-old problem since the Garden of Eden of humanity wanting to rule their own lives. There is only one throne, and it doesn't belong to us. Repentance is giving up our fight for the throne to give God His rightful place of supremacy.

Church, God wants an intimate relationship with you. That's why Peter picks upon this language in 1Pet 2:9: *"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may*

proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul."

God most holy and Almighty is calling you into an intimate relationship with Himself; a relationship of exclusive loyalty—"You shall have no other gods before Me" (20:3).

As God's treasured people, they shall not only know Him intimately and obey Him exclusively, but also represent Him as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation on this earth (vs. 6). And what do priests do? They consecrate themselves. They are set apart for God alone. And so in vs. 10 & 14 the people are commanded to consecrate themselves because they are about to encounter God most holy.

Washing their garments and abstaining from ceremonial uncleanness (14-15) was a way of preparing to approach God. It demonstrated that they were not to approach God casually. *God is dangerously pure.* Therefore, God commanded Moses in vs. 12 to set limits, to establish a boundary around the base of the Mountain upon which God would descend. And the penalty for crossing that boundary was *death*—the same consequence for disobeying God in the Garden of Eden.

Then after 3 days of preparation, God manifested His presence on Mt. Sinai. **[19:16-18]** Consider how God manifested His glory:

- *Thunder & lightning* - He's God of the heavens, sovereign over the elements. In Rev lightning and thunder proceed from God's throne signifying the presence of the unseen One.
- *Thick cloud* - this represents a manifestation of God's presence (pillar of cloud)
- *Trumpet blast* - in Rev the authoritative voice of Jesus is described as the sound of a trumpet. It denotes authority and royalty.
- *Smoke and fire* - "Our God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12:29). At least 8 times in Scripture, God's presence is described as a consuming fire, a jealous God who will not share His glory with another (Dt 4:24). *God is dangerously pure!* In 2Thess 1:7, we are told that Jesus will return with His mighty angels *in flaming fire* to

deal out retribution to those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

- *Earthquake - So great was this display of God's presence that the mountain itself trembled.*

Then the Lord called Moses to come up on the Mountain but twice He warned the people not to cross the boundary lest the Lord break out against them in judgment. If they were to disregard the holiness of God and cross the line, it would cost them their lives. **[21-24]** God is teaching His people to make a distinction between God who is holy, and man who is sinful.

If the people were already trembling with fear at the display of God's holy presence, why would they be tempted to cross the line for the closer look? I would suggest it's because at our deepest core, we are image-bearers of God. In other words, by nature we are worshipers made to know God and to draw near to Him. But our sin has not only made us vulnerable to God's holiness, but has also distorted our hearts to believe that we can come to God on our own terms. If you believe you can come to God on your own terms because you are good enough to meet His holy standards, you do not grasp God's holiness. You do not know God.

Again, by nature we are worshipers made to know God and draw near to Him, but our sin has made us vulnerable to the terrifying purity of His holiness. This is why we need grace. And this is why we need God's law to show us our need for His grace, because sin has diminished and distorted our view of God.

In chapter 20, God speaks His law to His people, summarized in the 10 commandments. We will only touch on the first today. But before we get to the first commandment in 20:3, its essential for us to see how God prefaces the giving of the law in **[vs. 1-2]**.

"I am the Lord your God..." (2). This is a loaded statement given what we have seen so far. *Who is the Lord your God?*

- I am the only God whose glory is unrivaled in all the earth.
- I am God supreme over Egypt's gods and all gods.

- I am your Father who providentially loves and cares for you, bearing you up on eagle's wings.
- I am your Redeemer and Savior who brought you to Myself.
- I am holy, holy, holy; a consuming fire!
- And I am your God of grace—"the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (20:2).

And in light of who I am, "***You shall have no other gods before Me***" (20:3). Don't forget that as they hear God speak these words, the mountain is trembling with earthquake, there's thunder and lightning, and the mountain is smoking from the fire from heaven. Don't treat God as trivial. Don't try to replace Him with something less than He is.

We may be tempted to jump ahead and focus on the first commandment in vs. 3, overlooking vs. 2. But notice the order here. Before God states the first commandment, He reminds them of His *grace* that has established their relationship whereby He is their God, and they are His people. **[vs. 2]** The implications of this are really significant. *The law does not exist to establish a relationship with God through our obedience. The law reveals and governs how a relationship with God is to function once it has been established by God's redeeming grace.* You could write one word beside 20:2—*grace!* **We obey not to be redeemed. We obey because we have been redeemed.**

Now, let's take a closer look at the first commandment in Ex 20:3: "*You shall have no other gods before Me.*"

God is calling us to regard Him as holy, set apart, and unrivaled in our loyalty. Keep in mind that God had just displayed His supremacy over all the gods of Egypt and proven their absolute futility. He had also just displayed His redeeming grace to those He called into a personal relationship with Himself. The message is clear: ***Don't spend your life on false gods which have been proven vain, but give yourself in undivided loyalty to the living God who has extended His grace to you and Who alone can satisfy your soul.***

Keep in mind that the 10 commandments are not just an arbitrary set of rules. They are based on God's own character. So what does this first commandment reveal about God? The first commandment reveals that

God is singular and supreme, demanding our undivided loyalty as a jealous God who will not share His glory with another because He alone has supreme worth to satisfy our souls which were created and redeemed to worship Him.

To have no other god before Yahweh means that every other pursuit in life is subject to honoring God. All of our pursuits, desires, possessions, and relationships (including our children) are subject to the one governing rule of a God-fearing, God-loving person which is to honor the Lord in all things.

Yet the law not only reveals God's character but also our waywardness. Colin Smith says the 10 commandments represent the 10 greatest struggles of the human heart. So what does the first commandment reveal about the greatest battle of our heart? Ever since the fall in Genesis 3, **Our greatest struggle has been a desire to want to rule our own lives.** The temptation was, "You will be like God knowing good and evil," and when Eve saw that the tree was desirable to make her wise in her own eyes, she took and ate the fruit against God's command.

This has become our greatest struggle as well. We want to be our own god. We want to be sovereign over our own lives (and even the lives of others). This is what happens when your kids get into a sibling squabble. They want to be sovereign by getting what they want (serving their own desires as supreme), and they want to exercise sovereignty over their sibling. It's not just a sibling rivalry. It's a worship war with God over who will be the center of their universe. This is why replacing discipline with distraction is so unhelpful. It creates momentary, false peace. Our job as parents is to de-center our kids from themselves so they can learn to center their lives on God.

But it's not just our kids. We want to be ruled by our own desires and opinions. We think too highly of our own thoughts. The greatest and most dangerous false worship is self-rule and self-will. The false god that you are most susceptible to is yourself. That's the bad news—and that's just us. What about other idols of our hearts? "*An idol of the heart is anything that rules me other than God*"² It can be anything from pride to pizza, greed, lust,

materialism, success. And whatever rules your heart will exercise control over your life and behavior.³ There is a worship war going on in your soul—a battle for the control of your heart.

But the good news is that Christ has come to win the war for the throne of our hearts. We have a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who never violated the first commandment by giving anyone or anything precedence over His Father's will. Jesus gave His Father supremacy in His heart and life in all things and at all times—perfect righteousness.

And Jesus came to save us from every sin of false worship, every misplaced desire, every excessive passion, and every shade of apathy that doesn't give Him His rightful place, and every shade of self-absorption that turns our worship hearts inward.

"You shall have no other gods before Me." This is where we have fallen. Not just thousands of times, but continuously before we were saved, because our hearts worship *constantly*—if not God, then something else. And when Jesus saves us, He reconciles us to God so that He once again has His rightful place of supremacy in our lives. This is how Paul described the conversion of the Thessalonian believers: "*You turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.*" (1Thess 1:9-10).

If there is one sin that you need to be saved from, it is this one: giving yourself and other things precedence over God's rightful supremacy in your life as holy and gracious.

So, how do we live with an undivided heart that honors God's supremacy and glory above all else? We need to receive a new heart from Jesus, governed by the Holy Spirit and motivated by loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. What we love, we honor.

² Paul Tripp. Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands. Pg. 66.

³ Ibid., 68.

Lord Jesus, give us new hearts by Your redeeming grace to love You with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength so that You are honored as holy with no other gods before You.

General Principles for Interpreting the 10 Commandments:⁴

1. ***The 10 commandments represent God's moral law and must therefore be interpreted in light of the whole counsel of God (OT & NT).*** The ceremonial law is obsolete in the NT, but God's moral still stands. Every one of the 10 commandments is affirmed in the NT.
2. ***The 10 commandments address both the internal and external nature of sin.*** That is, we are accountable for both our behavior and the desires of our heart. Not only is the 10th commandment (coveting) a sin of the heart, but Jesus made it clear that a heart of anger is to be regarded as murder and a heart of lust is to be regarded as adultery (Mt 5:21-28).
3. ***Each commandment should be applied both positively and negatively.*** The intent of each command is to instruct us both in what to do and what not to do. For example, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Ex 20:3) is stated negatively but should also be applied positively, giving God the sole place of supremacy in our hearts and lives.
4. ***Each commandment represents a broader category of sins.*** For example, the 7th commandment forbids not only adultery, but every form of sexual sin. The 6th commandment forbids not only murder, but any form of unjust physical violence.
5. ***The commandments are fulfilled by loving God wholeheartedly and loving people accordingly.*** Jesus summarized the whole law and prophets in 2 commands: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt 22:37-40).

Gospel principles for interpreting the 10 commandments:⁵

1. *The law reveals the character of God and how to live for His glory.*
2. *The law reveals the greatest struggles of the human heart and our need for a Savior.*
3. *The law points to the full extent of Christ's perfect obedience.*
4. *The law points to the full extent of Christ's atonement.*

⁴ Adapted from Philip Ryken, *Exodus* (Preaching the Word), pg. 506-513.

⁵ Adapted from Philip Ryken, *Exodus* (Preaching the Word), pg. 506-513 and Colin Smith, *Unlocking the Bible Story* (vol. 1), pg. 78-83.