

## *The Big Ten* Introduction & Commandment # 1

### **I. Introduction to *The Big Ten***

#### **A. Need for the commandments**

This morning we begin a mini-series within our study in the Old Testament book of Exodus. In chapter 20, we have the Ten Commandments.

We have a moral crisis today of gigantic proportion. In our culture, we have developed a mindset, a mentality that has moved away from giving credence and submission to what God has said. And we are reaping the consequences.

Not only do we not all agree on what is right and wrong, but there is growing doubt that there are any standards at all. The philosophy of relativism is becoming more and more entrenched. That philosophy says there are no absolutes, no definite rights or wrongs. It all depends on the situation. What's right for you isn't necessarily right for me and vice versa.

In addition, under the banner of pluralism, it is not that we must respect the views of all, but that we must accept all views as equally valid and true.

Exodus, chapter 20, opens with this: "And God spoke all these words." God has spoken! He has given us law in specific terms. We have come to know one part of God's law – his revelation to us – as the Ten Commandments.

At one time they were held in high regard across the spectrum of culture, hailed as guiding principles to right behavior. That has changed significantly. Ted Turner, the creator of CNN, once declared the Ten Commandments to be outmoded. He said they weren't relevant to current global problems such as overpopulation and the arms race. He suggested they be replaced with his own idea: Ten Voluntary Initiatives. Doesn't quite have the same ring as Ten Commandments, does it?

Then there are the novel approaches in legal circles today to not offend people because the commandments do mention God. Robert Knight wrote an editorial last week in the Washington Times. This is part of what he said:

God Almighty needs an editor, according to a federal judge in Virginia. At least, He does when the Ten Commandments are on government property. The American Civil Liberties Union had sued the Giles County school district for posting the Ten Commandments in its public schools, and U.S. District Judge Michael F. Urbanski sent

the case to mediation on Monday, suggesting a compromise: deleting the four commandments that mention God....

He adds later:

It's unclear whether the ACLU will accept the judge's offered compromise because the six remaining commandments came from the God who is not supposed to be mentioned on government property, even though it's part of the universe that He created.

According to a recent Barna survey, sixty percent of those surveyed couldn't name five of the commandments. How would you do? Let's do a little exercise here. Keep your Bibles closed. Scribes come up to the boards.

## List the commandments

### B. Purposes of the commandments

What are the purposes of the commandments? Are they relevant in your life and mine today living under grace in the New Testament age?

Jesus said about the law in Matthew 5:17-18 –

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

Jesus said, "I have not come to do away with the law, but to fulfill it." The word *fulfill* means literally "to give full meaning." Jesus not only adhered to the Ten Commandments; he was the living exposition of them.

Let me give you three pictures to help you see the relevant purposes of the commandment for you today.

#### 1) A compass

The law is like a compass to give us direction. God has given his law to let us know what is right and what is wrong. Stealing is wrong because God says it is wrong. Lying is wrong because God says it is wrong. And adultery is wrong because God says it is wrong.

God didn't look down on the earth one day and say, "I think that these people are far too happy. I think I will give them the Commandments to make their lives miserable." In

reality, God saw that men and women were continually ruining their lives, enslaving themselves to sin and its consequences.

God's laws are not as much prohibitions as they are protections. He gives us direction so that our lives might be lived rightly, with purpose, functioning as he intended us to function.

The Ten Commandments won't take you to heaven but they will point you in the right direction. When you finally come to the place that you see your hopeless and helpless condition as a sinner, the law does not save you; it is that which points us to true north.

## 2) A mirror

The law was not given so by keeping it the Israelites could make themselves acceptable to God. A right standing in the sight of God was then and is now attained through faith in God. The law simply revealed to the Israelites their sinfulness by providing a striking contrast to the standards of a holy God. Paul tells us in Romans 3:19-20:

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

Paul says that the law does not make any one right in God's sight, but that rather "by the law is the knowledge of sin." He is not saying that the law makes us sinners, but that the law reveals our sin. The mirror never makes the pimple on your face. The mirror only reveals to you that there is a pimple.

Remember that the law was given to a redeemed people. They had already been freed from slavery; it was not given in order to get them out of bondage. It was their faith in applying the blood of the Passover lamb that was the only way of escaping the judgment of God.

Likewise, you and I escape God's judgment by accepting the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary. We are not saved by keeping the law, but by applying his blood to our lives through faith in his completed sacrifice.

## 3) Tom-Tom – GPS device

The Law shows us the path we should follow to please God, the path to living a life that demonstrates our faith in God and a path that leads to a proper functioning of life. God's law is the road, the moral path, God has given to direct our lives.

And like that voice that comes out of my tom-tom, when I get off the designated path, it points me back to the way God has designed for me to live.

A couple other thoughts before moving on: God also gave us the commandments to restrain evil. What would society be like without some standard, some law to govern conduct? Anarchy! Imagine the NBA games if the coaches and players were told: “We don’t need any rules. You just play however you would like.”

The Israelites do arrive at this point in their national history at the end of period of the judges. The last words of the book of Judges are: “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

Another thing: the Ten Commandments are to act as a guardian to bring us to Christ. Paul writes in Galatians 3:24, “So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.” J. Vernon McGee says of this word that is often translated “schoolmaster:”

The word ‘schoolmaster’ ... does not mean school teacher. Schoolmaster is a good word, but it meant something quite different back in the days of Paul. It meant a servant or a slave who was part of a Roman household. ... In the homes ... of the rich in the Roman Empire, were slaves who cared for the children. When a child was born into such a home, he was put in the custody of a servant or slave who actually raised him. ... When the little one grew to a certain age and went to school, this servant was the one who ... takes the little one by the hand, leads him to school and turns him over to the school teacher.” [J. Vernon McGee. *Love, Liberation & The Law : The Ten Commandments*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995.) pp. xix - xx.]

The law is not the teacher, but the servant who takes us to the teacher. God uses the law to lead us to Christ and turn us over to him – our Savior.

### **C. Response to the commandments**

Turn in your Bible to the New Testament book of Romans, chapter eight.

#### **Romans 8:1-4**

The key to living according to the Spirit is in this one word: obedience. Obedience is the central theme of our responsibility towards God. Why is this so important?

- Obedience is our way of showing we respect God’s power.
- Obedience is our way of showing God we respect his authority.
- Obedience is our way of showing God we believe what he says.

- Obedience is our way of coming into line with what God has revealed to us, and finding, in so doing, what is the very purpose of our lives.
- And obedience is our way of showing God we love him.

Do we love God enough to obey him? Our response to the Ten Commandments is going to reflect our heart response to God.

So, here's the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me." In other words:

## **II. God is #1**

This is the highest duty of man – have no other gods. The first commandment is basic; it is foundational to the nine that follow. If we get this one right, the others follow almost automatically. It is the fundamental command – first in importance as well as order.

### **A. Who is this God?**

Who is this God who commands: "You shall have no other gods before me?" Listen to Paul's statement in his writing to the church in Corinth:

For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth – as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords" – yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. *I Corinthians 8:5-6*

Our English word *God* comes from a root that means "to call." We are talking about the object of worship – the one whom people call upon. In the Bible, in the Old and New Testaments, we are told that God is a powerful Spirit.

So what does the commandment tell us? This powerful Spirit is the only one we are to call upon in worship. Our religious life must point in only one direction – the biblical God.

This speaks of divine superiority, divine uniqueness, and divine exclusiveness. God is to have absolute priority in your life. He is to be more important than your mate, your children, your parents, your friends, your job, your car, your house, your position your goals in life, your health, etc. He is to be #1.

So what does it mean "no other gods before me?"

### **B. What does the commandment mean?**

Old Testament scholars tell us there are several meanings involved in this word “before.”

1) “Instead of” – no gods instead of me, no substitute for God. Nothing that will replace God as the object of our worship and allegiance. Nothing that takes the place of God.

2) “In front of” – no other gods that are in front of me, that is, before my face. It is said that in the Hebrew culture, if a man wanted to really put down his wife, he would go and bring another woman into her presence and stand with her in front of his wife. It was the ultimate put-down. God says, “I don’t want anything in my presence that will be a personal affront. I want no competition.”

3) “In addition to” – no other gods in addition to me. Here’s a guarantee: those gods will smother, they will crowd out, the true God.

“You shall have no other gods before me:” none instead of me, none in front of me, none in addition to me.

What was wrong with the Israelites? How could they be so dumb? How could they miss it? God delivered them from Egypt – the plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea. The power of God destroyed the army of Pharaoh and even Pharaoh himself. Over and over again the Israelites are told: “One God; one God.” Yet, the chronic sin of Israel was spiritual idolatry – chasing after other gods, giving their allegiance to other things.

Now, lest we injure our arms by patting ourselves on the back for thinking we are above that, let me say we run the same risk today. The New Testament writer, James, has a sober warning: “You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us?” – *James 4:4-5*

### **C. What is a “god” today?**

A god is what you love above all else, what you serve or worship or seek or allow to control you. Martin Luther said, “Whatever then the heart clings to, whatever thy heart relies upon, that is properly thy God.”

Let’s get our scribes up again and let’s list some of those things that become “gods” today.

#### **List on Boards**

Perspective: God isn’t down on any of these things. What he is against is their elevation to the place of worship, allegiance, focus, dependence, priority.

There is but one God. But how do we know him? Listen to John, writing in his first epistle:

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. – *I John 5:20-21*

God wants our lives to be Christo-centric; Christ must be the center of our lives.

#### **D. What should be our response?**

1) Take an inventory. Is it God and God alone who is the focus of your allegiance, your affection, your commitment? Or have other things become substitutes for God, crowding him out, putting him on hold? It might even be that they are good things, worthwhile things.

2) Cultivate your relationship with God. There is a song I often heard in my growing-up years: “Turn your eyes upon Jesus; look full in his wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim; in the light of his glory and grace.”

Robert McCheyne was a brilliant Scottish preacher in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote: “Live near to God, and so all things will appear to you little in comparison with eternal realities.”

3) Obey. It comes down to a choice. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Joshua laid out this challenge to the people at the end of his life, having led the Israelites into the Promised Land: “Choose this day whom you will serve.”

### **III. Final Thoughts**

This commandment today has no meaning until and unless heart and mind are yielded to Jesus Christ. That’s how we keep the first commandment. This obligation grows out of the work of grace. What had God done for the people of Israel? Before he gave them the commandment, he reminded them, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. Because I did that for you, I expect this of you.” That was the situation of the Old Testament Jew.

We obey God because of his work of grace. God brings us into a loving relationship with himself because Christ paid for our sins on the cross. When we put our trust in Christ, God saves us. And he calls us to an exclusive relationship with himself.