

No Other Gods + Love the Lord

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Date: 20 September 2026

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at Christchurcheastbay.org. Good morning.

My name is Brian and I am a member of the Alameda Community Group. It's great to see you. And today's scripture passage and lesson is from the Old Testament from the book of Exodus.

A reading from the book of Exodus. You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself.

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

[1:09] These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the Lord descended on it in fire.

The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace and the whole mountain trembled violently. And God spoke all these words. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

You shall have no other gods before me. When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountains in smoke, they trembled with fear.

They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, speak to us yourself and we will listen, but do not have God speak to us or we will die. When the Lord finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant law, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God.

The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever. Good morning. I'm Jonathan, one of the other pastors here.

[2:24] And we've begun a series over the past few weeks on the Ten Commandments. Today we're going to be talking about the first of those ten. And next to Psalm 23, next to the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments are probably the most and best known of all the portions of the Bible.

There are few parts of Scripture that have had such a large role in the life of the church and in public life as these Ten Commandments.

Because here we find a summary statement. Here we find really the embodiment of God's will for all of human life. But immediately we face a big question.

Immediately we face a problem. And why is that? Because the deepest value of Western secular culture is freedom. It's liberty.

Give me liberty or give me death. Right? And we often define freedom or liberty as the absence of constraints. And so many people look at Christianity and they begin to ask themselves, you know, if I get into this, is this going to narrow my options?

[3:41] Is this going to limit my liberty and put constraints on my freedom and basically cramp my style? Here we have Ten Commandments that are absolute truth claims.

That by definition constrain our liberty. So this must be the enemy of our freedom. And our goal over the next ten weeks as we go through the Ten Commandments is to actually try to convince you that these are not the enemy to freedom but actually the basis of true freedom.

That the Ten Commandments are the basis of being a truly free human being. And you got to remember that these commands have a context. They don't come out of nowhere.

They're what God says to his people after he rescues them out of Egypt and brings them to Mount Sinai. And there he said in verse 1, God spoke all these words, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

The first words of the Ten Commandments are not commands at all. The first words of the Ten Commandments are a statement of love and a statement of loyalty and liberation.

[4:53] The first words of the Ten Commandments are a statement of grace and of goodness of God to you. And so we begin with who God is to his people.

And what it says is this family's fundamental identity is that we used to be slaves. But now we've been liberated. Now we're a free people and our liberator is the Lord.

And so really the Ten Commandments are a charter of freedom. They're an ethic of freedom. It's an ethic of people who are wanting to live free. God says to them, if you'll listen to my voice, if you'll keep the terms of my covenant, then I will set you apart as a holy nation.

I'll set you apart as a priestly kingdom. And you will shine my light to all the peoples of the world.

But of course, if you want to be slaves again, if you want to slip back into bondage, just ignore these words and do whatever you like.

So these are ten life-giving words, ten freedom-protecting words that are not given to us as a ladder by which we climb up to secure God's love and his liberation.

[6:01] God's people already have that. It's not obey me so that I can deliver you. It's you've been delivered. So now here's the way to please me. Here's the way to delight me.

Here's the way to say thank you. Does that make sense? Okay, I got to say that every week because we got to get it deep in our heads and our hearts. Now, I want to dive in and I want to talk about the nature of God's law and the substance of God's law and the purpose of God's law today as we get into this first commandment.

And let's start with the nature of God's law. The people have come here to the foot of Mount Sinai to meet with God. And it says that God himself spoke these words to the people.

And it says in verse 19 that they said to Moses, Moses, speak to us yourself and we will listen, but do not have God speak any more to us or we will die.

These 10 commandments that God spoke from the mountain, he didn't speak indirectly through his mediator, Moses. He spoke them directly. He spoke them audibly. And this was such an awesome experience that basically they were overwhelmed.

[7:10] They said, we can't take any more of this. We can't handle any more of the power of the direct voice of God. And you notice there in Exodus 31 verse 18, it says that these are the direct words from God given not only audibly at the mountain, but they were also given legibly.

They were written, it says, by the finger of God. That's the source of these commands. And it also says that they're written on tablets of stone. That's how solid they are. That's how enduring they're going to be.

And they're so important that they're given two times in the Torah. They're given here first at Exodus chapter 20, and they're given again in Deuteronomy chapter five to prepare the people as they enter into the promised land.

So it must be really, really important. And what God is saying is this is the foundational word for your life. And here it is. You shall have no other gods before me.

All you need to know is given to you right here. And what do we need to know? We need to know that humanity was made to worship the living God. We were made to listen to God, to trust God, to love God, to obey God, and to worship God.

[8:25] All the troubles, all the problems, all the trials of our world that persist, the reason that our world is so miserable can be put quite simply.

And it's that human beings are alienated from this God. This God who says you should have no other gods before me. That's what's wrong with our world. That's the cause of all of our troubles from the very, well, back to just after the beginning, I suppose.

It wasn't always that way. But after humanity fell from a very high place, God called out of humanity, and he chose one man, Abraham.

He chose one family, Israel. And he said, I'm going to be your God, and you're going to be my covenant people, and I'm going to liberate you from slavery, and you will enjoy a life of blessing. You will enjoy a life of flourishing. You will enjoy a life of freedom and peace on the condition that you live as I would have you to live. And he puts before his people two possibilities, two

alternatives.

[9 : 31] You can have a life of blessing and doing it my way, or you can have a life of cursing, doing it your way. And that's how it's been since the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were given a choice of how they would exercise their freedom.

And God said to them there, he said, you can either live under me in blessing and peace and joy, or you can live a life of miserable, wretched, cursed existence. And here at Mount Sinai, God is reminding his people that this is just how life in his creation works.

And he puts it in such a clear and simple way that even a child can understand it. These are the conditions upon which you will be blessed, that you have no other gods before me.

But if you don't adhere to that law, you're not going to be blessed. And if you just read the Old Testament for five or ten minutes, you can see that when God's people submit to him, when God's people submit to his law, he blesses them and their life is noble, their life is flourishing, their life is wonderful.

But when they rebel, when they refuse to keep his law, when they turn after other gods, everything invariably goes wrong. Now, why is that? Because the creator God has written into the very structure of his created reality, and he's written into the very fabric of your created self, that he must be first, and he must be the greatest.

[11 : 06] And what happens is when we decide we're going to live and go against the grain of the universe, what happens? We get splinters. Right? When we decide we're going to go against the fabric of who God made me to be, we're going to start to unravel.

When we break God's law, we become broken. And that's why Jesus, when he's talking in the Gospels one afternoon, he's asked this question about, Jesus, what is the first commandment? What's the greatest and most important commandment of all? And what did Jesus answer in Matthew 22? He said, love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.

This is the first and greatest commandment, and the second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. And here Jesus gives us a perfect summary of the Ten Commandments, a perfect summary of God's moral law.

And the way he expounds them is that he says they can be divided into two sections, which we call the two tables of the law. The first table of the law is commands one through four.

[12 : 15] Command one, two, three, and four. And that has to do with our attitude toward God and our relationship with God. And then Jesus says there's the second table of the law that has to do with commands five through ten.

And that has to do with our attitude toward and our relationship with our fellow men and women. And what Jesus is saying is if you look at God's moral law, there's a vertical component that comes first about how we honor God.

And there's a horizontal component that comes second about how we honor our neighbor. And if you follow Jesus' exposition of the law, he says that you've got two divisions, two sections, two tables of commands.

But notice that there's an order. Notice that one comes before the other. The first division is the one in which we are reminded about our relationship with God.

What am I to do in order to have a happy life, a blessed life, a contented life? What has the whole world got to do that it might be delivered from all of its troubles and wars and miseries and calamities?

[13 : 24] The answer comes that the supreme thing in life is to be in a right relationship with God. You should have no other gods before me. You've got to love me. Trust me.

Obey me. Worship me. I am the Lord is how the commandments begin. The law of God, importantly, does not start with me.

It doesn't start with you. I am the Lord is how it starts. It doesn't start with our financial problems. It doesn't start with our psychological problems. It doesn't start with our relational problems or our social problems or our political problems.

No, the first thing, the law is concerned to hold before us is to hold us face to face with God. God first.

Humanity and all of its issues second. And that order is absolutely vital. The most fatal blunder in human thinking is the failure to remember this order.

[14:26] God and our relationship with God comes first before everything else. That is the greatest issue in the world today. Of course, the Ten Commandments are going to deal with all sorts of external, social, horizontal issues like your parents and authorities and murder and adultery and stealing and all these things.

But those are always downstream from this existential, spiritual, vertical concern about our relationship with God. And the point of the Ten Commandments is that you can't regard humanity and its problems rightly and correctly unless you regard human beings in their relationship to God. So, what that means is that we can look around the Bay Area right now and we can think about all of our social divisions and disputes. We can look at our class issues between rich and poor, the haves and the have-nots.

We can look at our work issues between management and employment. We can look at our personal clashes between men and women, husbands and wives, parents and children, neighbor and neighbor.

And people can try to solve those problems by looking to the economists and looking to the psychologists and looking to the sociologists and looking to the philosophers and looking to the politicians.

[15:48] But you won't understand any of that properly. You won't understand any of that holistically until you look at all these people in terms of who? In terms of God.

In terms of their relationship with God. You shall have no other gods before me. That's the first thing he says. Because we've been made by God and we can't truly function as human beings unless and until we are in a right relationship with God.

And when we forget God, when we try to live our lives apart from God, when we try to run our lives without God, we always get into trouble. And you can just look at the world around you.

You can just read the newspaper this morning to see the evidence of that. If I look at myself apart from God and I look at other men and women apart from God, I begin to set myself up as a God. And other people do the same. I want to be first. And they want to be first. I want things the way I want it. They want things the way they want it.

[16:54] I want my sovereign rights as an individual. You want your sovereign rights as an individual. They want their sovereign rights as a nation. And we want our sovereign rights as a nation. And we're all at a war of all against all.

Why is that? Because we're not all on our knees together worshiping the one true living God. But when I'm doing that, when I'm worshiping God rightly, having no other gods before him, I can begin to see myself as a creature made by God, living under God, totally dependent upon God.

And then I begin to see my fellow men and women as creatures just like me. And the order of these commandments is tremendously important because the first table must come before the second table.

When we fail to observe the first things about God, we will inevitably begin to ignore and neglect the second things about people. When we fail in the vertical, we will very soon begin to see the unraveling of the horizontal at the individual level, the familia level, the social level, the national level, and the international level.

And so my first question for you this morning, friends, is do you believe that God is first? Do you believe the order? It's written into the very fabric of the universe, the very fabric of yourself, that God is supposed to be first and greatest and most important than everything else.

[18:21] Do you believe that? And if someone were to come and audit your life and they looked at your calendar and how you spent your time and they looked at your bank account and how you spent your money and they looked at the books and what you read and they look at your priorities and the decisions and choices you make, would it be obvious to them that you believe that?

The nature of God's law. But I want to also talk about the substance of God's law. This is sort of a general overview, but let me get it now down into the specifics about the substance of this first and foundational command by which all the other commands stand or fall.

If you get this first commandment, everything else will just fall in line. If you don't get this thing, everything else is going to fall apart. Verse three, you shall have no other gods before me.

First of all, it's the you there, you shall, the you there is first person singular. The Lord is speaking directly to each individual listener. And he's saying you, Jonathan Berry St.

Claire, I'm looking at you. I'm talking to you. I brought you out of slavery and therefore you, Jonathan, are to have no other gods before me. Secondly, he says you shall, you shall.
[19 : 41] These are not 10 suggestions. They're not 10 recommendations. They are 10 commandments. If your employer says, you shall come work in the office from Monday to Friday, if your government says, you shall pay your taxes on April 15th, you recognize the, and you honor the authority as the one who enjoys the privileges of being a citizen and being an employee and you get in line.

Well, the one who says, you shall here, is the high king of heaven. He's the ultimate authority by which all other authority is derived. And as your creator, he owns you. And if he's redeemed you, he doubly owns you. And that means he can tell you to do things. He can command you. He can direct you. He can say, you shall. And the third thing here is he says, you shall have no, or a lot of them say, you shall not.

Most of these commandments are negative, but they assume the positive. And some of them are positive and they assume the negative. So for example, when you fast forward to the fourth commandment, it says, remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

Or the fifth commandment, honor your father and your mother. Those positive commands assume the negative. The negative commands assume the positive. So for example, in the Garden of Eden, in Genesis chapter two, God says, you shall not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

[21 : 12] And the great temptation there in that moment was to focus on the one negative prohibition about one tree. But that command implied the positive permission about thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands of other fruit trees in the garden to be enjoyed.

And so what we have to remember is that every no, God says, there's many yeses. And every restriction God gives, there's a thousand freedoms and permissions. It says, no other God. That's the negative side of the command. But the positive side is what? You get to have me as your God. You get to have the one true living God as your God.

The fourth thing, you, singular, you shall, command, authority. You shall not, negative but also positive. And then it says, you shall have no other gods.

Now on the one hand, the Bible says that there's only one God. This is a monotheistic book. The other gods of the nations, Egypt, Babylon, Greeks, Romans, those gods don't actually exist.

[22 : 25] They're nothings. There are no other deities or divinities competing to be beside God or before God. They're not there. But on the other hand, God gives us this command knowing the original temptation in Genesis 3, which was what?

You shall be like God. That's the original temptation for the human heart, especially the fallen human heart, is to think that we ourselves can live as lords in the place of God.

that little creatures can trade places with the creator, can play the part of the creator. Little dependent creatures can elevate themselves to a place of power and authority where only the creator God deserves to be.

The biblical record, the historical record, proves that we not only seek to deify ourselves and divinize ourselves, our creaturely selves in many ways, but we also do this with all manner of aspects of God's creation.

And just to give you one example, Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, he says, you cannot serve both God and money. And what Jesus is saying there is that there's something in our human heart that's inclined to take a good part of God's creation like money, like material well-being, like any entity that has the potential to create wealth.

[23 : 52] and we can give that thing such an elevated status, such an ultimate status in the thoughts of our minds and the affections of our hearts that it's no longer a gift from God to get work done.

Money is no longer a gift from God to create a flourishing human community. Now money is money with a capital M. Right? I serve it.

I live for it. I need it. I want it. It's my precious. And if I have more of it, I feel happy. I feel great. I feel secure. And if I have less of it, I feel devastated.

I feel sad. If I lose it, I'm feeling total despair. Martin Luther, who wrote that first song we sang today, he also wrote this in the 16th century.

He said, what does it mean to have a God? And his answer was this. A God means that from which we are to expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress.

[24 : 54] A God is that upon which you set your heart and put your trust. That is properly your God. And what he's saying is that we can set our heart and we can put our trust and we can pledge our loyalty to many finite and created things and we can give it ultimate value, ultimate meaning, and ultimate power and we can say to that thing instead of saying to God, God, you are my life, you are my security, you are my hope.

The scriptures are full of examples of this. Job 31 says we can put our trust in gold and we can say to gold, you are my security and my confidence. Psalm 146 says that we can put our trust in princes and in human beings who cannot save us.

Habakkuk 1 says that our strength can become our God. Philippians 3 says that our stomach can become our God. 2 Timothy 3 says that we can be lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God. When we set our heart on and put our trust in things that are not worthy of our ultimate loyalty and allegiance, they will eventually take the place of God and in that place, because they're not God, they will enslave us and they will dehumanize us and they'll do the same thing to all the people around us, whether it's money, whether it's sex, whether it's power, whether you live for your work and your career and your status and your success, whether you live for romance or for children or for family, if you make anything other than God God in your life, when these gifts that are meant to be means to the end of glorifying God actually become the ends in themselves, it will lead to your enslavement and your destruction.

Because these are wonderful servants but they're terrible masters. They're wonderful gifts but they're terrible gods. And I want you to look at the last phrase in this command which it says, you shall have no other gods where?

[26 : 55] Before me. The Hebrew literally here says, there will not be for you any other gods before my face or in my presence.

And what that means is that your chief end, your highest good as a human being is to live before the face of God. It's to live in the presence of God.

And remember, verse 2 doesn't say, I am a God or I am the God. What does it say? It says, I am the Lord, your God. And so when he liberated you and he brought you into a covenant relationship with him and he said, I, the absolute, transcendent and holy God am your God and you are my people.

You belong to me. This is language very much like the song of songs. I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine. And that's why the scriptures talk about the relationship between God and his people like a marriage.

That we're bonded to God. We're wedded to our covenant God in an exclusive and permanent and intimate personal relationship.

[28 : 09] So what does it mean then to bring other alternative substitute gods before the face of the real God into the presence of the living God?

I hope we can all agree that cheating on your spouse is bad. Right? It's wrong. It's an injustice. Adultery is a terrible betrayal of trust and a form of treachery and an expression of deep dishonor. And while cheating on your spouse is bad God is more than our spouse. God is our king. And so to bring an alternative substitute God before his face and into his presence is basically saying to him I would like this thing to sit on your eternal throne.

I would like this thing to be my God instead. And that's not just adultery. That's not just betrayal. That's high treason.

He's the king. God looks and says you want to put that little unworthy thing on my eternal throne? You want me to share my sovereignty and my supremacy with that little person?

[29 : 30] That little project? That little thing? It's offensive to him. But you see the positive of this law is there in Deuteronomy 6 and Jesus quotes it when he says what this means is that you're to love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul with all your mind and with all your strength.

God wants your undivided heart and allegiance to be given wholly to him. He does not want to share you with another would-be king or lord or master.

He wants to have you absolutely without any conditions without any exceptions under all circumstances always and everywhere. He wants every part of you.

He wants everything you are. He wants everything you have. He wants your total and complete commitment of trust and obedience that is unreserved and unwavering in whatever the

circumstances.

What God is saying here is I want you to depend on me for everything. I want you to come to me with all of your needs. I want you to love me with all of your thinking. I want you to love me with all of your longing.

[30:46] I want you to love me with all of your striving. I want you to make me first. Make me central in your life. And I want you to be willing to give up anything that would go against me and against my will in any way.

Friends, have you put the full weight of your trust on God alone? Is your heart clinging to him and holding fast to him for dear life?

have you put him first above all the other loves? Are you reordering and rearranging all your other loves under this supreme love? And are you giving thanks to him in all things?

That's the substance of this law. But let me move from the nature of God's law and the substance of God's law finally to the purpose of God's law.

As I've been reading about this law all week, I've been thinking about people in the Bible that actually obeyed this command. Who can you think of that put God first and had God central in their loves?

[31:56] I think about Abraham who was willing to give up the best gift that God had given him. He was willing to give up his own treasured son out of love for God.

I think about David who said who loved God so much he said I thirst for you God. You and you alone are my rock and my salvation.

You are my refuge and my strength. You are my good. I have no other good apart from you. I think about Daniel who loved God so much he would rather be thrown to the lions.

He would rather die than to stop getting on his knees three times a day to pray to God, to thank God, to call on God for help.

And I think about these people in the Bible who love God, Abraham and David and Daniel, and I look at my life next to them and it feels like I barely love God at all.

[32:59] And I don't just compare my life with them, but I begin to look into the mirror of God's law of love and when I look closely into this mirror, you shall have no other gods before me, I begin to see there's a lot of dirt on my face.

There's quite a number of flaws that from a distance you couldn't really see, but now I can see there's some serious problems. I fall so far short of the standard of humanity for which God made me and when I look into the law, I can see, oh my goodness, I need to be cleansed.

Oh my goodness, there's something broken in me that needs to be healed. There's something deeply wrong in me that needs to be forgiven and that's the first purpose of God's law is to show us our sin and our need for God.

But the second purpose of God's law is to drive me to Jesus. It's to drive me to Jesus because Jesus is this God of Mount Sinai who came down from the mountain in the flesh and he's the only person in the Bible and in history who embodied God's commands and obeyed God's commands wholly and consistently every day, all day, his whole life.

He succeeded in God's law at every point where we fail. He perfectly, think about that, he perfectly fulfilled God's law, not only by the active obedience of his life, but also in the passive obedience of giving up his life to death on the cross.

[34:41] When he did that, he took all of our sins on his shoulders, all the ways that we fall short of God's design and desires for our life, all the ways that we take his commands and we just trespass them and do what we want anyway, all the ways that we subvert his moral order, Jesus absorbed all of those failures in his body on his cross.

And we know from psychologists, psychologists tell us that the worst thing that can happen to you is to be forsaken by someone that you love. That's the worst thing that can happen to you is to be forsaken by somebody that you love.

And yet on the cross, Jesus, as he was shedding his blood for us, he cried out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Now, why did he say that on the cross?

We forsaken God and therefore we deserve to be forsaken by God. Jesus never forsook God and yet he's saying, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And you see, when Jesus says that, he's fulfilling God's law by allowing himself to be forsaken in our place. He's taking the penalty for our sins by living the life we should have lived, by dying the

death that we should have died.

[36 : 08] He's fulfilling God's law. He's taking the curse that we deserved and he's giving us the blessing that he deserved. And that's how he loved God with all of his heart and loved his neighbor as himself.

He's cleansing our guilt. He's covering over our shame. He's taking the wages of sin, which is death. And instead of having us have our blood shed, he's having his blood shed so he can deal with the debt of our sin in full.

So the first purpose of the law is to show us our sin and the second purpose of the law is to drive us to Jesus. To drive us to the only one who can deal with our sin.

But the third purpose of the law is to give us a blueprint for our freedom. It's to give us a blueprint for how to live a life of gratitude in response to God's salvation.

When you become a Christian, God gives you a new nature. God unites you to Jesus. God fills you with his Holy Spirit. And from that point on, God expects you by his power to make a moral effort to live out this law of liberty.

[37 : 31] Second Corinthians five says the love of Christ compels us. The love of Christ compels us to live like Christ. When we see what Jesus did for us, when we see what he did in his life that we could not do, when we see what he did in his death in our place, well, we want to please him.

We want to delight him because the love of Christ is compelling us. We want to say with the psalmist in Psalm 119, I run in the path of your commands because you have set my heart free.

And so we say to Jesus, Lord, thank you so much for setting me free. Now let me run in the path of your commands. I want to have no other God before the living God.

I want to love the Lord my God with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my mind, and with all my strength. may God enable us to live this way.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.