

A God who Speaks: The First Commandment

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[0 : 00] My hope today is that you will all want to fear God by the end of the sermon.

My hope to you, my prayer this week as I was working on my sermon, is that by the end of the sermon, one of the regular features of your prayer life would be, Father, teach me to fear you, a fan and a flame within me, a deep longing and yearning to fear you.

You know, it's funny. Many Christians don't desire to fear the Lord. In fact, in a very, very odd way, one of the things which almost unites evangelicals, charismatics, traditionalists, and liberals is that often none of them encourage people to fear the Lord anymore or to fear God.

Traditionalists like, well, they like tradition and they like hymns and they like things to be comfortable. When traditionalism gets sort of sick, its motto is, all I'd like on a Sunday morning is an hour of peace and quiet and to be left alone.

And evangelicalism and charismatics, when they become sick, their desire is just to have Jesus as their buddy and to, in a sense, have the Holy Spirit lead and guide whatever it is that they happen to want to do all by themselves anyway.

[1 : 32] And liberals, often, liberals, they don't like the idea of the fear of God because, of course, fear is an unhealthy emotion, a sign of somebody being infantile.

And, of course, if God does exist in some form or another, it's more a sense of, well, sort of more a sense of inwardness or something like that.

Something sort of very, very vague and general that has to do with a sentiment. But the Bible constantly tells us that we are to learn to fear the Lord.

And today is the first sermon in a series of ten sermons on the Ten Commandments. Every week, from this week on, there'll only be one first reading.

And some weeks it might be the Deuteronomy version of the Ten Commandments, and some weeks it might be the Exodus version, but every week we will read the Ten Commandments. And you can pray for me, and you can pray for Desiree, and you can pray for David as we try to week by week unfold and open up to us one of the Ten Commandments.

[2 : 40] So I invite you now to take your Bibles and turn there to Exodus chapter 20. I've read for us the Deuteronomy version of the Ten Commandments, and I'm going to read on page 65 in your pew Bibles, Exodus chapter 20.

I'm just going to read three verses. And 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 bondage.

You shall have no other gods before me. And my prayer is, Lord, have mercy upon me, and incline my heart to keep that law. Lord, have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law.

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 bondage. You shall have no other gods before me. You know, it's, the first thing that we see in this text is that God speaks and says, I am the Lord.

God speaks and says, I am the Lord. You know, one of the things which is really funny and odd about modern spirituality and about much of liberal theology is that we want God, modern spirituality wants God to be less than a chimp, less than a dolphin, and less than a baby.

[4 : 07] You think about it for a second, we have two women who are a regular part of our congregation who are pregnant. I think Lisa's and Anne's babies are both coming around the end of September, early October, or something like this.

And, you know, once the babies, once these wonderful babies will be born, and we pray that they'll be born safely, you know, parents delight to see their baby smile, and they delight when they can hold their head up, and they delight when they can turn over, and they delight when they can sit up, and they delight when they can do this and this and this.

And parents always have a huge delight when the baby says its first word. I mean, that's a really exciting moment. You know, people will wish that they were able to be there to hear very clearly the first time that the baby is able to speak.

And there's lots of talk that goes on in the press or in scientific literature as to whether or not, obviously, a dolphin or a chimp can't speak a word, but whether, in fact, they know words and are able to communicate.

And there's people who try to teach them to communicate through words. And there's debate as to whether or not they really are using words the way human beings use words and what that might possibly mean.

[5 : 21] And there's excitement in some quarters that something like a dolphin or something like a chimp would be able to communicate with words. And yet, in modern spirituality, by and large, and in liberal theology, by and large, we want a God who doesn't speak.

I mean, you think about it for a second. We want a God that is less than a dolphin. We want a God that is less than a chimp. We want a God that is less than a baby. It's maybe one of the reasons why so many people in our culture find the God of, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of the Bible, to be, well, you know, not just to adorn our lives with the type of accessories that we would like to have our lives accessorized with.

Because the God of the Bible, the God who truly does exist, is a God who speaks. Look again at verse 1. And God spoke all these words, saying.

The whole text emphasizes the fact that this particular revelation isn't just God speaking to the prophet, but that God himself actually speaks.

And in the rest of the Old Testament, what we refer to as the Ten Commandments is literally the ten words. That's literally what Decalogue means. It means the ten words.

[6 : 50] And that very, very name emphasizes the fact that what God does here is something which is verbal. And that each one of the commandments, what we call a commandment, the Bible calls a word, emphasizing that that verbal revelation is complete in and of itself in each of the individual words.

And at the same time, that all ten of the words together are a whole. That we are not to subtract from them, nor are we to add to them.

And that these words clarify each other so that we can understand each of them more deeply. We don't need feminism. We don't need Marxism.

We don't need psychology. We don't need science. We don't need literature. We don't need romanticism. We don't need any of these things to clarify these Ten Commandments.

We are to, in a sense, look at them and read them. And they are to clarify each other and draw by looking at one and reading one beside the other. They are to draw us deeper into the mystery of God, into the mystery of what it means for us to be a human being, and into the mystery of what it means to live free as God's child.

[8 : 05] And so the text emphasized that God speaks and says that I am the Lord. God takes the initiative.

He introduces himself. Many of us have hints and longings for God. We have senses of God's presence.

We can look at nature or listen to music or just have human experiences which make us think and suspect that there is something divine which is bigger than us.

And in the midst of such longings and hints and insights, God speaks. To clarify, a mountain can teach us that God is distant, that God is cold, that God is inaccessible.

But when we hear God speaking that I am the Lord, you shall have none other gods before me, we can look at a mountain and know something about the majesty and the greatness and the strength and enduring power of God.

[9 : 15] Nature by itself gives us hints but does not teach. And in the midst of hints, God speaks. He takes the initiative. And one of the things which is so striking about these ten words which come from God is that they are all in the form of I and you.

Look again at verse 1 and 2. And 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 bondage.

And then in each case now there will be ten words. Each word begins with a U. And the U is singular. It means that God speaks as an I and he speaks to you, George Sinclair.

He speaks to you and you and you and you. He doesn't speak to humanity as an abstraction. He doesn't speak to collectives.

He doesn't speak just to black people or white people or to Canadians. He says, I am the Lord your God. And then he speaks to you. Personal and singular.

[10 : 26] Once again the text says, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me. Lord have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law.

Secondly, we see that God redeems his people from bondage. Listen again. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

You shall have no other gods before me. On Thursday nights, we've been watching a series of videos from Willow Creek on different topics to do with leadership.

And last Thursday night, we had one which many people who saw it found very, very meaningful. And in a sense, the entire leadership video was an extended meditation and challenge upon Paul's words in 1 Timothy, I am the chief of sinners.

And the question that the speaker was trying to get us to enter into is that if Paul, a great apostle, a great church planter, missionary, and evangelist, one that God used to actually write God's word written, if he can say publicly that he is the chief of sinners, then those of us in Christian leadership can't be sort of always putting up masks and fronts and stuff like that and always pretending that we're completely and utterly perfect.

[11 : 56] And it led to a very, very helpful discussion after the video was over about confession and acknowledging our sin. And the question was put, isn't it just simple enough to merely confess our sins to God?

Is there ever a need for us to confess our sins to God in the company of another person, being specifically, you know, very specific with God about the things that it is that we have done wrong?

And I tell you this, I think there are times in our lives and there are sins in our lives that sometimes the only way that we can, that God can start to work a victory in our lives over that sin is when we are willing to confess that sin to God in the presence of one of God's people.

It is so easy for us to have, in a sense, an imaginary repentance, a notional repentance, an emotional, just something very, very fleeting.

But to actually say that which we've done wrong in the presence of another person can be very, very, very hard. And I know from my own life and I know from the lives of many people that evil, the evil in us, lies.

[13 : 18] Evil always is deceptive and will always lie to us. And there are sins in our lives and the evil in our life will say, no, George, you can't say that in front of another person because if you say that in another person, it'll almost be as if your entire life is unmade.

It will be as if, you know, people won't like you, they will hate you, only bad things will come if you actually bring that evil out to the light so that not only God can see it but one of God's people can hear that that is within you and that you are confessing that to God.

And that is always a lie. That is always a lie. To bring the sin of our lives to God with reality and with power is a key step in being delivered from the bondage to that sin.

Sin wants us to keep it dark and hidden. There is a need, then, to be able to speak clearly to God in the presence of another person.

We notice here that at the very beginning is God is introducing himself to us to give us these ten words that God first reminds us that he has first redeemed his people and then he gives them the law.

[14 : 44] Listen again to verse 2. I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. The ten commandments are part of God making a covenant with the people of Israel.

It takes place after he has delivered them by mighty acts from bondage and slavery in the land of Egypt. It takes place on the way to the promised land where God will be their God and they will be God's people and he, they will learn or try to learn to have God rule over them.

The ten words are not given by God to the people so that if they happened, if they're able to follow them really, really, really well, then he'll like them and accept them as his children.

God doesn't give us the ten commandments with the hope that if we just can be really, really, really, really good and keep them as well as we possibly can, then God will finally love us and accept us as his child.

The scriptures are clear time and time and time again that God does not weigh our merits but pardons our offenses, that there is no way that we can become God's children unless God does a mighty act and we Christians believe that God has done a mighty act, a mighty intervention, that he has triumphed over sin and death and hell and hostile spiritual powers when his son hung upon the cross bearing the penalty for our sins, the very sins themselves, he tastes all there is to taste of death, all there is to taste of sin, and on the third day he rises triumphant over sin, death, hell, hostile spiritual powers and we become God's children when we say, Jesus, have mercy upon me, may I be yours and then we share in Christ's victory.

[16 : 41] It is the cross that makes us God's children, not the Ten Commandments but once we have become God's child, Jesus not only adopts us as his child, he wants us to start to learn to live in the freedom that comes from being God's child and the Ten Commandments are an outline of sanity.

They are the door to liberty and to wholeness and to freedom. It is a picture of our sanctification and how we can become more like Jesus.

Before our conversion, the Ten Commandments become a means by which we can understand our need for a Savior. You know, just think of this very first commandment, you shall have no other gods before me.

You know, it might be that we've been very successful in our lives, maybe we've never done drugs, you know, we've had an unbelievably pure thought life, we've never coveted, we've always just worked hard, we've done everything perfect, now we have a successful job, a successful marriage, successful children, and we can look through that list and we can say, oh, I've never coveted, I've never murdered, I've never stolen, I've always kept the Sabbath, and we can go down and down and down and down, I've done this, I've done that, I've done that, and as we go down that list, I've done this, I've done this, I've done this, we realize that with every time we've said that we're violating the first commandment, which is putting God first.

And so the commandments before our conversion exist to help to convict us of our need for a Savior, but after we have come to Christ it becomes, as I said, an outline of sanity, a description of liberty and freedom and wholeness.

[18 : 39] and so it is that sin will regularly say, George, you just have to make your peace with me. You know, you can't, you know, if you let go of me, things in your life will get out of control.

And Jesus, the Ten Commandments remind us that God exists not to put us into slavery, not to bind us or to oppress us, he has come to make us free and whole.

and so to live the Ten Commandments is to know wholeness and freedom. I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

You shall have no other gods before me. Lord, have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law. You know, some of you might be wondering where I get this response if you're not long-time Anglicans.

This is a little bit of a side in the sermon. Do you know that if those of you who just maybe have come to the 915 service or those of you who aren't cradle Anglicans, if you want to know what Anglicans believe, there's a little red book in your pews.

[19 : 50] It's called the Book of Common Prayer. And that's the basis of Anglican belief and doctrine and practice. And since 1552, for over, for 454 years, as a description of what Anglican worship is to be like, the worship is to begin with us saying this prayer.

This is, in a sense, the model of Anglican worship, the model of worship as envisioned by the English reformers. We pray, Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee and worthily magnify thy holy name.

Isn't that a wonderful thing to pray to God for? And then to put meat on that, in the heart, the model of Anglican worship, you immediately go to the Ten Commandments. And after every commandment is read, we say, Lord, have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law.

If you go back to the Catechism of the Anglican Church, which is in the Book of Common Prayer, it focuses on three things. The Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments.

In other words, the Apostles' Creed, what a Christian is to believe. The Lord's Prayer, how is a Christian to pray? And the Ten Commandments, how is a Christian to live?

[21 : 16] It is at the very heart of historic, Orthodox, biblical Anglicanism. And so that's why you're going to hear me time after time as I say, you shall have no other gods before me.

I will say, Lord, have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law. So, God speaks and says, I am the Lord.

God redeems his people from bondage, and so his commands and words will never lead us into bondage, but only lead us to freedom. And finally, the true God tells us to have no other gods but him.

The true God tells us to have no other gods but him. I'm not a dog person. I've married a dog person. And so, I love Louise.

Louise loves dogs. We have dogs. I have two dogs. A great big English lab named Ernie. I think he's 100 pounds and counting, I don't know, just lots to love.

[22 : 18] And a little tiny white dog called Pixie, which weighs about three or four pounds. It's small enough so that my youngest daughter can dress Pixie in clothes and dresses and sweaters and stuff like that.

But not only am I not a dog person, I don't really like dog movies that much, but on Friday night we rented a dog movie, Eight Below. And it's actually a pretty good movie. I watched the movie thinking, oh, it's a dog movie, but my wife and my children will like this.

We'll watch it. And it was actually a pretty good movie. If you're a dog lover, you'll love the movie. But there's this one very powerful scene in the movie. It's about eight sled dogs in the Antarctica.

And so the person who is the guide is taking a scientist on an expedition. And they come to an area where there are crevices covered with snow.

And the guide is walking ahead with a stick trying to find the crevice. He finds the crevice, but the scientists lose control of the dog sled and the dog sled, the dogs start going and the sled falls into a crevice.

[23 : 26] And there's this moment of terror as the sled starts to go down into the crevice. And the scientist starts to try to let go of the sled and grab onto the ice so he won't fall.

And the guide says to him, let go of the ice. Grip the sled. And he has to say it to him about three or four times with great force. You have to let go of the edge.

You have to hold onto the sled. And the scientist had to trust that the dogs, if he held onto the sled, the dogs would be able to pull him out.

But if he held onto the ice, he would almost definitely fall to his death. It's very, very counterintuitive. And so he has to argue to the man. He yells at the man and convinces the man.

And the man lets go of the edge, grips the sled and the dogs, I hope I haven't ruined the movie for you, but it's early on and the dogs are able to pull the man out of the crevice.

[24 : 26] And it's the same type of image which is here before us in this first of the commandments. God is saying to us, George, don't cling to anything other than me.

Don't cling to yourself. Don't cling to ideology. Don't cling to your wealth. Don't cling to your own view of spirituality. Don't cling to your power. Don't cling to any other god.

Don't cling to any other type of system of spirituality. Don't cling to anything that will only lead you to harm. If you want to know freedom, cling only to me.

That's what the commandment is saying. don't think that images will help you.

Don't think that the bottle will help you. Don't think that drugs will help you. Don't think the lottery will help you. Don't think that Ouija boards will help you.

[25 : 27] Don't think that anything will help you other than me. And we can, any, there are no other gods. This commandment, when the commandment says you shall have no other gods before me, God isn't saying that there are any other gods.

There are no other gods. But there are powerful illusions and there are demons and idols which have a powerful effect upon us and make us clutch to the ice which means that we will plunge to our death in a crevice.

So while there are no other gods, there are demons, and there are powerful illusions which will only hurt us. And this commandment is telling us don't cling to these things, they will only do us harm.

Cling only to me, God says. And we notice as well as this that the wonderful thing about this commandment is it says you shall have no other gods before me. It's a negative.

You know, in negative commands there is great freedom. It doesn't say, it means that I can have a wife, I can have friends, I can have children, I can honor elected officials, I can look at mountains and think how beautiful and wonderful they are, and I can look at the ocean and just think how peaceful, well, just how it speaks to me.

[26 : 47] I can do all of these things as long as they aren't gods. See, there's actually, in a negative command, there's profound freedom. freedom. It's like, it's like in the Garden of Eden, God said, you can't eat from this one tree.

It implied you can eat from everything else. It's this, God is ushering into this world of freedom. Do not be afraid. Jesus is constantly saying, come to me and learn from me and you will not be afraid and you can go through this world not living in fear because the world, in a sense, is open to us.

We are to see Canada as a profound mission field. We are not to be afraid in our culture, in our country. It is a wonderful mission field and we are to go free and we can do many, many things and love many, many things.

We can have no other gods but God but we can do many other wonderful things. This commandment is an interior commandment. It is speaking of our interior life that we are not to look for final help or final strength or inwardly worship or inwardly bow down to anything other than God himself.

And this, in conclusion, brings us to why I want you to learn to fear God. Turn your Bibles with me to Deuteronomy chapter 5 verse 29.

[28 : 08] Deuteronomy 5 verse 29. And if you are using the Pew Bibles, it is on page 161. And this is Moses recounting just before the people of Israel going to the promised land, he recounts.

In a sense, Deuteronomy is like a long sermon recounting what has happened and the terms of the covenant. And he reminds the people of how when God gave his ten words, there was lightning and thunder and all of the things that went on.

And early on, you see how the people of Israel were frightened by what was seen. But here, verse 29, this is what God says. Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear me and always keep all my commandments that it might be well with them and with their children forever.

You know, God desires us. What is that? Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear me and always keep all my commandments that it might be well with them and with their children forever.

After God gives the Ten Commandments, his hope is that his people would learn to fear him. Now, just turn to one other passage, Psalm 33. There's many examples of this type of oddness, at least from our modern years, but it's just helpful to see it, to help get a bit of a sense as to what the fear of God is.

[29 : 33] Psalm 33, verse 18. And it's on page 483. 483. Psalm 33, verse 18.

Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his mercy, to deliver their soul from death and to keep them alive in famine.

Our soul waits for the Lord. He is our help and our shield, for our heart shall rejoice in him because we have trusted in his holy name. Let your mercy, O Lord, be upon us just as we hope in you.

Look at verse 18 again. Isn't it odd? It says that the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his mercy. That there's no contradiction between fearing God and wanting to know more and more and more of God's mercy.

And this is what it is. The fear of God is a deep sense of God's difference from us.

[30 : 34] It is a deep sense of how close God is to us. I mean, God is closer to us than our breath is to us. He is closer to us than we are to ourselves.

It is both a deep sense of how close God is to us, yet it is also at the same time a deep sense of how God is different than us and God is separate than us.

To learn to fear God is to begin to know where I begin and where I end and where God begins and where God ends and to know that this difference is good.

It is very easy for us, since this first commandment is an interior commandment, to mistake our wishes for God's wishes. To mistake a time when we've just had a really good cup of coffee and a really good breakfast for somehow or another being God's presence when all it is is us feeling full and happy and content.

It's very easy for us to mistake our will for God's will. And so, to ask for the fear of God is to ask not necessarily for a particular experience, but we are asking that God would grant us a very and ever-growing clarity as to who He is and who we are and where God begins and ends and where we begin and end so that we never think that we are God, but we always know that God is God, that He is different from us, and that this is very good.

[32 : 15] The Bible says we shall have no other gods. God says you shall have no other gods before me. And our prayer should be Lord have mercy upon us and incline our heart to keep this law.

Let's bow our heads in prayer. Father, we ask that you would fan into flame within us a deep longing and yearning to know you.

Not just to know about you, but to know you. Not just to hear about you, but to know you. Father, fan into flame within us a deep longing and yearning to know you.

And fan into flame within us a deep desire and a deep ability to fear you, to know that you are God, that we are not God, that this is good.

To know who you are and to know who we are and to know that this is good. To know you with appropriate fear, with awe, with reverence, with the appropriate yearning and love and desires.

[33 : 29] Father, fan into flame within us a deep longing and yearning to fear you. And Father, in fearing you, may we have no other gods before us. Incline our hearts to keep this law.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.