

Loving God

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[0 : 00] So Exodus 20, it's on page 75. Good. One of the things that my family does quite often is to take our little kids to the local playground.

And my daughter, who's quite sweet, she's of an age now where she walks up to other little girls and just makes friends straight away. You know when kids do that, they do it quite easily, don't they?

It's very sweet. So she says, do you like swings? I like swings. We'll be best friends. Do you think boys are smelly? I think boys are smelly.

We'll be best friends. If you're going to be friends with someone, you need to know their likes and dislikes for the friendship to work. And so I've asked for a couple of volunteers.

So where's Rosie Leong? Rosie, are you happy to stand up? And Jeff Lampard in the front, are you happy to stand up? Let me show you what I mean. Rosie and Jeff, everyone. Now, if Rosie and Jeff are going to be friends, and I'm friends with both of them, and I can tell you they should be friends.

[1 : 07] Let's say that the two families want to go out for a meal. Jeff needs to know that Rosie's, she likes Asian flavors. She loves, she says, especially seafood, lobster noodles with ginger.

Pretty good. Then Rosie said to me, unfortunately, I've not had this dish for a while. So I think that's a hint to her husband, David, to take her out to lunch. Anyway, Jeff, Jeff likes rich food as well.

He says, slow roast lamb, roast potatoes and vegetables. Yes, good one. Rosie, she said she's not a fan, though, of too much red meat. She says, it has to be well done.

She says, I know that's a sin in most people's opinion. As far as watching TV, I don't know if they'd ever watch TV. Rosie likes a bit of reality TV. Jeff hates it.

So the friendship's in trouble. But maybe they can salvage the friendship if the two families go on holidays. Because both Rosie and Jeff, they love to relax, put their feet up and not do anything too hectic.

[2 : 09] So can we give them a clap? We can. Thank you, guys. Being a volunteer. You see, you need to know someone's likes and dislikes for the friendship to work.

And that's exactly the same thing with God in our passage today. Today, we're looking at the Ten Commandments. But they're not just ten rules for life.

They're ten likes and dislikes of God. They're not just ten laws. They're Exodus 20, verse 3 to 17.

We need to read them in the context of the story so far. And the constant beat of Exodus has been that they will know that I am the Lord. You see, God wants everyone to know who he is.

He's rescued Israel for a relationship. He wants to get to know them and be their friends. And like any friendship, they'll need to know his likes and dislikes for the relationship to flourish.

[3 : 07] But that is a tricky thing because Yahweh can't exactly take Israel out for a coffee. He can't sit and watch TV with them.

He can't play with them in the playground like little kids. He's a holy God. He's up there. Israel are unholy. They're down here. They relate to God rightly by obeying his word.

And that principle is exactly the same in the New Testament as well. Jesus says the night before he dies, anyone who loves me will obey my teaching.

My father will love them and we will come to them and make our home with them. He's not giving people a ladder to reach up to the father in heaven. No, he will achieve that for them when he dies and rises for their sins.

But our love for God is shown by the way we obey his word. And if that sounds dry and unfeeling, remember that all relationships require a degree of rules for them to flourish.

[4 : 13] So even in marriage, it's expected that husbands and wives won't sleep with other people. Even in the workplace, it's expected you'll abide by the social norms of the office.

Even in the playground, it's expected that the little children will share their toys. Even with God, it's expected that Israel obeys the Ten Commandments.

And so Mount Sinai is the beginning of a friendship. And it turns out that God, he isn't too fussed about different types of music. But he's really concerned that they honor father and mother.

He isn't too fussed what they do on holidays. But he draws the line at worship of other gods. He's not much into TV. But God is quite interested that Israel don't tell lies.

And as we saw last week, it's the fear of him that will keep them from disobeying. And this is our second point. It's a little bit of a recap on last week.

[5 : 15] But that's because if you look in your Bibles, on either side of the Ten Commandments is a scary picture of God. Chapter 19 and the end of chapter 20 over the page.

It's the same terrifying scene. There's thunder and lightning. Thick cloud. Smoke that rises like a kiln. A trumpet blast that gets louder and louder.

God warns Israel three times, don't come too close. But there's no worries about that because they're too busy being afraid. And they were right to tremble. In fact, the whole mountain was trembling as well.

It's a terrifying picture of God's holiness on either side of the commandments. The point being, chapter 20, verse 20. 20, verse 20.

Moses said to the people, do not be afraid. God has come to test you so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning. In other words, don't be afraid, but do fear God.

[6 : 18] So don't think from the smoke and the thunder and the lightning that God has come to get you. He wants to be your friends, remember? A rescue for relationship.

But a right fear of him will keep you from breaking his laws. That way the relationship can flourish.

And some people say that fearing God means reverence and awe.

Other people say it means love and respect. And I think they're all partially correct. But the immediate context here on either side of the commandments is a trembling picture.

It's trembling and being afraid. Whatever words are used for fearing God, it needs to have trembling. It's a think twice before you sin type of fear.

And maybe the church in previous generations used to emphasize the trembling a bit too much to the point where people used to think that God would smite them if they disobeyed.

[7 : 19] But I wonder if the church in the current generation has gone too far the other way, where we treat God like he's our buddy or our mate, like the big guy upstairs.

A casual approach to God means a casual approach to obedience. Yes, rescued for relationship.

But don't think we can just waltz up to God like he's another kid in the playground.

Andrew described him last week like the sun. We love the sun. We need the sun. It's good and glorious. But it would be terrifying to get too close.

So when God speaks, do we take him at his word? Do we tremble because the God of the universe is speaking to us? Or do we take it lightly like he's our buddy or our mate?

Or he won't mind too much if I get to obedience later in the week? In the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe story, C.S. Lewis describes what it means to fear God when he describes Aslan, the Christ figure.

[8 : 28] Mr. Beaver tells the children that Aslan is in fact a lion. Oh, says Susan, I thought he was a man. Is he safe? I shall feel rather nervous meeting a lion.

Safe, said Mr. Beaver. If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just plain silly. Of course he's not safe.

He's not a tame lion. But he is good. And he is the king, I tell you. King's commands. King's commands. You'll need to know a couple of principles to help you through them.

The first principle is this. We are New Testament Christians, not Old Testament Jews. We're under the covenant of Jesus, not the covenant of Moses.

But that doesn't mean we ignore his commands either. In fact, Jesus restates the commands in a New Testament passage. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

[9 : 31] This is the first and greatest commandment. And that summarizes the commands we're looking at today. And so while we might not obey to the letter of the law, we do keep the spirit of them as followers of Jesus.

They are the same ten likes and dislikes of the same God. The other principle when reading the Ten Commandments is being clear about commandment zero.

Now, I'm not adding another commandment to it, but I'm just calling it commandment zero. It's verse two. Chapter 20, verse two. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

It's really important to remember that Israel was saved first. Their obedience comes after the Ten Commandments. That's chapter 20. That's the relationship.

But it comes after chapters one to 17. The rescue. It's rescue first, obedience, service, relationship afterwards. And that is really important because almost every other religion in the world has it the other way around.

[10:39] You serve and worship your way into God's good books. You obey well enough. Perhaps he will save you. That is a righteousness by works.

That is a performance narrative. But with Yahweh, it's a grace narrative. Israel are already rescued. Remember? Last week, they arrived at the mountain.

Over the in your Bibles, 19, verse four. 19, verse four. You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself.

Rescue first. Relationship, obedience second. We must be clear about the order. We need to read the commandments in light of commandment zero.

That God saved them first. And so I'm going to do the first three today. Andrew will do Sabbath next week. And then we'll come back and do the final six, which is ten in total.

[11:42] Of course, have you heard about the 11th commandment, which is don't get caught? Anyway, that's not in the Bible. Don't worry. Let me read verse one. And God spoke all these words.

I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. Therefore, commandment one, you shall have no other gods before me. And the idea with Yahweh is that he is the only.

Yahweh is the only. It's exclusivity. Having no other gods before him. In fact, it's the same with making idols and Yahweh being jealous.

Yahweh is the only God. He won't tolerate competition. And the logic here is that you worship the one who saves you. You worship the one who saves you.

You need to be clear about commandment zero if you're going to keep commandment one. You see, it would be scandalous if Israel thought that they lent a hand to God when it came to defeating Pharaoh and his chariots.

[12:46] It would be scandalous if they think they played a part in bringing themselves out of Egypt. No, no, no. I rescued you on my own, says God. Miraculous it was.

As if by the wings of an eagle. I carried you. I brought you out. Lent a hand in your salvation. No, no, no. You didn't lift a finger. When it comes to their rescue, if Israel are clear that Yahweh was the only one involved, they won't be tempted to worship other gods because you worship the one who saves you.

In fact, Jesus says something similar to a Pharisee and a sinful woman. He says, whoever is forgiven much loves much. You love the one who saves you, forgives you.

But whoever is forgiven little loves little. And as Christians in the room, we would never admit to having another God before Jesus.

But do we think that our big brain figured out salvation, figured out the Bible? Were we already good people, so didn't need much help from God?

[14:00] Do we have a good enough record of religiousness that just finished off the job? We'd never admit to having other gods before Jesus.

But if we think we lent a hand in our salvation, you'll end up worshipping yourself because of your performance. Because you love the one, you worship the one who saves you.

Commandment zero, you're already saved by God. He was the only one involved. Therefore, commandment one, you shall have no other gods before him.

But that raises a natural question. What do you mean by other gods? And the answer is commandment two. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.

You shall not bow down to them or worship them. And the words here come straight out of Genesis 1 and 2. Making an image, the heavens, the earth, the waters below.

[15 : 04] It's the language of creation. The big idea in Genesis is that God is the only creator. And therefore, an idol is just something that he has made on the other side of the ledger.

The language of creation, it suggests that idols are good things that we've turned into ultimate things. So an idol can be a person, a good thing, a person, a public figure, your spouse.

You can even idolize and worship your children. An idol can be sex or a relationship, money, career, a social cause, political ideology.

It could be beauty. It could be brains, food, alcohol, sport, financial security, your achievements, the affections of the people. A good thing that we've turned into an ultimate God thing.

And the way idolatry works is this. And so taking financial security, if that is your idol, you will look down on and detest people who are less well off than you.

[16 : 13] You will fear and resent people who have more. What's more, if your God is financial security, you will never have enough financial security because of your God-like expectations on money.

Whether it's a person or a thing, an idol will be crushed by your expectations. Because at the end of the day, they're not on the creator side of the ledger.

What's more, you will be crushed when your little gods, your idols, turn out to be less than God.

Only Yahweh can meet our ultimate expectations.

The rescue from Egypt, that is the proof. Only Jesus never disappoints. His death and resurrection, that is the proof. The more you love God with all your mind and heart and strength, the less room you have in here for idols of any kind.

In his excellent book, Counterfeit Gods, Tim Keller, who's a pastor in New York, he says this about counterfeit gods or idols. An idol is anything so central and essential to your life that should you lose it, your life would hardly feel worth living.

[17 : 36] An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources on it without a second thought. An idol is whatever you look at and say in your heart of hearts.

If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning. Then I'll know I'll have value. Then I'll feel significant and secure. There are many ways to describe that kind of relationship to something.

But perhaps the best one is worship. Yahweh says, verse 5, And it might surprise us to think that Yahweh, God, could or would be jealous.

But that's only because we've confused jealousy with envy. You see, envy is where you want something that doesn't belong to you. But jealousy is almost the opposite.

Jealousy is where something that belongs to you is given to someone else and you want it back. So my romantic affections belong to my wife.

[18 : 45] They are hers. I'm not allowed to give them to another woman. If I did, Rachel would rightly be jealous because I'm taking something that belongs to her and giving it to someone else.

To take our love and worship, which rightly belongs to God for all that he has done and give it to something else or some other God. That is a scandal.

So it's easy to see why he attaches punishment to this command. For I, the Lord your God, that is the one who saved you, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

And it's hard to pinpoint exactly what it means when he says punishing the children for the sin of the parents. It could be that God allows the human consequences of idolatry, of mum and dad's idolatry, to play themselves out through the family for a few generations.

Indeed, one of the failures of Israel was that they passed on to their children, their idolatry rather than a love for Yahweh.

[20 : 05] But the big idea, I think, in verse five and six. Love versus his judgment. Did you notice his love? It overtakes his judgment.

The punishing of a children, third and fourth generation, that's overtaken by his love to a thousand generations. And that is what you will see when Israel make an idol of a golden calf.

God is hot with anger. He wants to destroy them. But because he's compassionate and gracious, his abounding love overtakes and he forgives them.

And anyone who uses that as a license to keep on sinning needs to go back to that scary picture of God on either side of the commandments.

It's a warning and not to be too casual with God. He's not our buddy. He's not our mate. He is the Lord. He is Yahweh. Verse seven.

[21 : 04] You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. And I guess I was like you growing up. We were taught that this commandment was about not using God's name as a swear word.

And I think that's still a fine application, by the way. When I used to work in an office, I had a manager who, you know, swore like a sailor and often would come out with the blasphemy. And I said to him once quietly, would you mind, please, not just saying Jesus the way you do? It bothers me a bit. And he was quite all right with it. I think that third commandment, not using it as a swear word, I think it's still a fine application.

But misusing the name of the Lord, I think, is broader than merely swearing. See, we use God's name positively when we proclaim Jesus in our evangelism.

We praise his name in song. We pray for things in Jesus name. Our words and actions represent him to a watching world. And so to use his name in vain or to misuse it, that would be the opposite.

[22 : 11] It would be to speak and act in a way that brings his name into disrepute. Like when people are openly sinful while claiming to be Christians at the same time.

Like when churches attach Jesus name to their teaching or their programs. That are things that Jesus clearly disagrees with.

In the case of Israel, they were to carry Yahweh's name like a light among the nations. Not to make him a laughingstock, which is what they tried to do.

This is not a law about swearing per se, but about having a regard for God's reputation. The constant beat of Exodus, that they will know that I am the Lord.

He cares about his name. He rescued people for the glory of his reputation. And that is the first three commandments. We're not to keep them, you know, by the letter of the law, like Old Testament Israel.

[23 : 14] But we do keep the spirit of them. That is when we love God with all our hearts, all our soul, all our mind and all our strength. If we do that, we've got no problem satisfying their requirements.

And over the next two weeks, we'll look at the remaining commandments. We don't obey our way into heaven. Israel, Christians, we're already saved by grace.

Rescue first, relationship, obedience, service comes next. But these commandments are the beginning of a friendship between a holy God and his unholy people.

They're written so people like us can learn his likes and his dislikes. That way, the relationship can flourish. It's an immense privilege, isn't it?

That we're not left in the dark to guess what God is like. But he's told us, there it is, plainly written, ten words for us to learn. And so let me pray.

[24 : 22] Father God, thank you so much that we don't have to guess what you are like. Thank you that you tell us quite clearly what you like and dislike. Father, thank you that you saved us first.

Father, please, would we show that we love you by the way we keep your word, by the way that we love you with our whole heart, mind, and strength.

And Father, please warn us against being too casual, treating you like a buddy. Help us to tremble when we read your words. And we ask these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.