

Loving God

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[0 : 00] If you get your Bibles open, page 75, which is Exodus 20, that would really help you as well this morning.

And of course, there's an outline there in your bulletin showing you where we're going to go today. Good. One of the things that we do quite often is to take our little kids to the playground down at Ruffy Lake Park and things like that.

And our daughter, she's only four, but she's at the age where she just walks up to other little girls and just makes friends straight away. You know, when kids do that in the playground, it's quite sweet, isn't it?

And so, you know, she says things like, you like swings? I like swings. We can be best friends. You think boys are smelly? I think boys are smelly.

We're going to be best friends. You see, if you're going to be best friends with someone, you need to know their likes and their dislikes. And so to help me prove this point, I've asked, I've got a couple of volunteers.

[1 : 02] So where's Ross? Ross, are you happy to stand up? And Kingsley, where's Kingsley? Kingsley, Ross, been here for ages. Kingsley, new member of the church family. They're offering to be good sports today.

So if Ross and Kingsley want to be friends, Ross needs to know that Kingsley likes a lot of Asian food. So Vietnamese, Po, Indonesian flavours, Korean barbecue.

But he dislikes too much sugary food. That's going to be a problem because Ross's favourite food is donuts. I think this friendship could be salvageable though because they both seem to hate reality TV.

Have I got that right? Good. Kingsley said he likes streaming romantic Korean dramas. Kingsley, that's very niche. Ross, do you like streaming romantic Korean drama?

I can't play on. No. I, I, I, I hold stuff. That's right. Good, good. Ross loves his cars.

[2 : 09] So if he picked up Kingsley and took them for a drive somewhere, Kingsley would look for the 90s trance music, dance music, trance music in his car, which I like. But it's okay because Ross, you're pretty easy going with music.

I've got that right. As long as it's not heavy metal, which I think that's probably everyone in the room. Kingsley, you don't like heavy metal? No, good. Ross's idea of a great holiday is going camping with his friends, sitting around the fire.

Kingsley, that's kind of, is that similar to you? You like to go exploring? Yep, catching up on some books. Both of them don't seem to like overly touristy places. Have I got that correct?

Good. See, I think you two could be friends. Lots of similar likes and dislikes. Can we give the guys a clap for being good sports? You see, the same thing is true about God in our passage today.

We're looking at the Ten Commandments, but they're not just ten rules for life. They're actually ten likes and dislikes of Yahweh. They're not just ten laws, but Exodus chapter 20, verse 3 to 17.

[3 : 17] We need to read them in the context of the story so far. And the constant beat of the story has been that you will know that I am the Lord. You see, God wants everyone to know what he's like.

He rescued Israel for a relationship so they can be friends. And like any friendship, Israel will need to know that his likes and his dislikes for the relationship to flourish.

But that's going to be tricky because Yahweh can't exactly take Israel out for a coffee. They can't drive in a car together or play like little kids in the playground.

He's a holy God. He's up there. Israel are unholy and they're down here. They'll relate to him rightly by obeying his word.

And that principle is just as true in the New Testament as well. Jesus said the night before he died, anyone who loves me will obey my teaching.

[4 : 19] My father will love them and we will come and make our home with them. He's not giving disciples a ladder to reach the father in heaven. He'll do 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 most relationships operate in that sort of way with rules and boundaries attached.

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 follow the social dynamics of the office.

Even in the playground, actually, it's expected that you will share your toys. Even with God, it's expected that Israel will obey the Ten Commandments.

And so Mount Sinai is the beginning of a friendship between a holy God and his unholy people. And it turns out that God isn't too fussed about what type of music they like, but he's really concerned that they honor their father and mother.

[5 : 29] He isn't too fussed what they do on their holidays, but he draws the line at worshipping other gods. As we saw last week, it's the fear of him that will keep them obeying.

And this is our second point. It's a bit of a recap of last week because on either side of the Ten Commandments in your Bibles is a very terrifying picture of God.

It's the picture in chapter 19 and the end of verse 20. Either side of the Ten Commandments is the same terrifying picture. There's thunder and lightning, smoke rising like a kiln, a trumpet that gets louder and louder.

And there's God warning them three times, don't come too close. But that's no worries because they're too busy being scared. They were right to tremble. In fact, the whole mountain is trembling.

It's a terrifying picture of God's holiness on either side of the commandments. The point being, chapter 20, verse 20, if you can see it in your Bibles, 20, verse 20.

[6 : 35] Moses said to the people, don't 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.

Don't think from the trumpet, the smoke, the lightning, the thunder that God has come to get you. He's rescued you for relationship. But a right fear of him will keep you from breaking his laws.

That way, the friendship 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 correct. But the immediate context of the Ten Commandments is a trembling and being afraid. Whatever words you use for fearing God, they need to have trembling in them.

It needs to be a think twice before you sin type of fear. And maybe the church in previous generations used to emphasize this trembling a bit too much to the point where people thought God would smite them from heaven if we broke one of his laws.

[7 : 48] But I wonder if our danger is going the other way. That we're a little bit too familiar. That we say God's my mate. God's my buddy. He's just a big guy upstairs.

A casual approach to God means a casual approach to obedience. Yes, rescued for relationship. But don't think we can waltz up to God like he's the other kid in the playground.

Andrew described him like the sun last week. We love the sun, don't we? We need the sun. It's good. It's glorious. Yes, but it would be terrifying to get too close.

When God speaks, do we take him at his word? Do we tremble like we're listening to the creator of the universe? Or do we take it lightly like he's our buddy?

He's our mate. He's just a big guy upstairs. I'll get around to following his words if I'm not too busy this week. In the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe stories, C.S. Lewis describes what it means to fear God.

[8 : 53] And I think he does it quite well. Mr. Beaver is telling the children that Aslan, the Christ figure, that Aslan is in fact a lion. Ooh, says Susan. I thought he'd be a man.

Is he safe? I shall feel rather nervous meeting a lion. Safe, said Mr. Beaver. If there is 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. He is the king, in fact. And as we look at the king's commands, you'll need to bear two things in mind.

Firstly, we are New Testament Christians, not Old Testament Jews. We're under the covenant of Jesus, not the covenant of Moses. That doesn't mean we ignore the commands out of hat.

In fact, Jesus restates the ones that we're looking at in our New Testament passage today. He says, Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.

[9 : 58] This is the great and first commandment. And so while we might not obey to the letter of the law, we do keep the spirit of them when we love God and follow Jesus.

And after all, these are the ten likes and dislikes of the very same God. The other principle about ten commandments is being clear with commandment zero.

Now, I'm not adding in another command. I know it's not a formal command, but commandment zero is verse two. This is really important. 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. Obedience comes afterwards. The ten commandments, that's chapter 20.

That is the relationship. But chapters 1 to 17 is the rescue. And that comes first. Rescue first. Obedience, service, relationship.

[10 : 59] That comes after. And that is really important. Because almost every other religion has it the other way around. You serve and worship your way upwards in order to be saved.

Obey well enough and God might be pleased enough to 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 when they arrived at Mount Sinai? Chapter 19, verse 4. 19, verse 4.

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt. How I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. Rescue first. Relationship. Obedience. Worship comes second.

We must be clear about the order. It's commandment zero first. Sorry. All the commandments in light of commandment zero first. And so I'm going to do the first three today.

[12 : 01] Andrew will do Sabbath next week. And then we'll come back to wrap up the remaining six, which is ten. And of course, there's the 11th commandment. Have you heard of it? Don't get caught.

Anyway. Sorry. That's not in the Bible. Let me read from 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 here is that Yahweh is the only. He's the only.

It's exclusivity. 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 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.

[13 : 02] It would be scandalous if the Israelites thought that they had played a part in bringing themselves out of Egypt. If they had lent a hand in defeating Pharaoh and his chariots.

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 own salvation.

No, no, no. I did it all by myself. You didn't lift a finger. When it comes to their rescue, if they're clear, if Israel are clear that Yahweh was the only one involved, they won't love other gods.

Because you love the one, you worship the one who saves you. In fact, Jesus says something very similar in the New Testament when he's speaking to a Pharisee and a sinful woman.

He says, whoever is forgiven much loves much. You will love the one who saves you, who forgives you. Whoever is forgiven little loves little. And as Christians here in the room, we would never admit to having another God before Jesus.

[14 : 11] But do we think that our big brains figured out salvation from the Bible? Were we already good enough and didn't need much help from God?

Did we have a pretty good record of religious and church service to finish off the job? We'd never admit, would we, to having another God before Jesus.

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

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

But that does raise 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.

[15 : 16] You shall not bow down to them or worship them. And the words here come straight out of Genesis chapter one and two. Making an image, heavens, earth, waters below.

It's the language of creation. Creation. The big idea in Genesis is that Yahweh, 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. But we have turned them into ultimate things. So an idol can be a person, a good thing, a person.

It could be a personality, a public figure. Could be your spouse. You can even worship your children. An idol could be sex or a relationship, money, a career, a social cause, a political ideology, beauty, brains, food, alcohol, sport, financial security, your achievements, the affections of the people.

A good thing that we have turned into a God thing. And the way idolatry works is like this. Let's pick financial security. If financial security is your idol, you will look down on people who are less secure than yourselves.

[16 : 38] And you will fear and resent people who have more. What's more, if your God is financial security, you will never have enough because of your God-like expectations on the money.

Whether it's a person or a thing, an idol can never bear the weight. They will be crushed by your expectations because at the end of the day, they are not on the creator's side of the ledger.

And what's more, you will be crushed when your idols turn out to be less than God's or less than God. Only Yahweh can meet our ultimate expectations.

I think the rescue from Egypt is the proof. Only Jesus will never disappoint you. I think his death and resurrection is the proof.

The more you love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, as the kids are singing, the more you do that, the less room you have in here and in here to love something else and to put it in his place.

[17 : 48] In his excellent book called Counterfeit Gods by Tim Keller, he says this about idols or he calls them counterfeit gods. A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that should you lose it, your life would hardly feel worth living.

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. When your meaning in life is to fix someone else's life, we might call it codependency, but really it's idolatry.

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 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. And Yahweh says in verse five, you shall not bow down and worship them.

For I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God. And you might be surprised to hear that God could or would be jealous. But that's only because you've confused jealousy with envy.

[19 : 00] You see, envy is where you want something that doesn't belong to you. Jealousy is almost the opposite. Jealousy is where you want or something that belongs to you has been given to someone else and you want it back.

So my romantic affections belong to my wife. She's over there. They are hers. My romantic affections belong to her.

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 them to someone else.

To take our worship, our love, which rightly belongs to God for all that he has done and give it to something less than him. That is scandalous.

And so it's easy to see why he attaches punishment to this command. For I, the Lord, your God, that is the only 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.

[20 : 05] But showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments. It's hard to pinpoint exactly what it means to punish the children for the sins of the parents.

It could be that God allows the human consequences of mum and dad's idolatry to play themselves out in the kids and the grandkids, so on and so forth.

Indeed, one of the failures of Israel was that they passed on idolatry rather than faithfulness to their children. But I think the big idea in verse 5 and 6 is that God's love overtakes his judgment.

It's an incentive for Israel to keep obeying him. The punishment of the children to third and fourth generation, that's overtaken by his love, which extends to a thousand generations of those who obey him.

And that is what you see when Israel makes an idol out of a golden calf. God is angry. His anger burns against them. He wants to block them out.

[21 : 12] But he is compassionate and gracious. So his abounding love takes over 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 think twice before you sin type of fear, not a free pass to do whatever we like. It's a warning against being too casual when it comes to God.

He's not our mate or our buddy. He is the Lord. It says in verse 7, And I guess like a lot of you growing up, this commandment was all about not using God's name like a swear word, which I think is still a fine application, by the way.

I used to work in an office and I had a manager who was, you know, he used to swear like a sailor. And he would, you know, Jesus this and God that all around the office.

And I had to say, would it be okay for you not to speak like that around me? And he did, to his credit. He did. It's okay to be offended and right to be offended when God's name is used like a swear word.

[22 : 28] But in this verse or this command, I think that the definition or the application is much more broad. And so we use God's name positively when we speak about Jesus in our evangelism, when we praise it in song.

And we ask for things in Jesus name. Our words and actions, they represent Jesus to a watching world. And so to use his name in vain would be the opposite.

It would be to speak or act in a way that brings his name into disrepute. Like when people are openly sinful and claim to be Christians at the same time.

Like when churches and their movements, they try and attach Jesus name to some teaching and the things, the agendas they're pushing. In the case of Israel, they were to carry Yahweh's name like a light among the nations rather than make his name a mockery and a laughingstock amongst the pagans.

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

[23 : 44] He cares deeply about his name. He cares for his reputation. And all of that is the first three commandments. We don't keep them to the letter of the law, but we obey.

At least we follow the spirit of them, which is that we love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, all our strength. And over the next two weeks, we'll look at the other commandments.

We're not obeying our way into heaven. For Israel, for us now, we're already saved by grace. Rescue first, relationship second.

But these commandments are the beginnings of a friendship between God and his people. They're written even for us so we can learn his likes and his dislikes so that our friendship can flourish.

It's an immense privilege, isn't it, that we're not left guessing what God is like. There it is, 10 words that tell us what he's like.

[24 : 46] And so let me pray for us. Father God, thank you that we are not left guessing what you are like, that you have made yourself clear by your word.

That you've revealed yourself to us in your son, the Lord Jesus. And Father, please, would we not be too overly familiar? Would we not have any undue irreverence about you?

Please, would we think twice before sinning against your words? Father, please, by your spirit, give us the strength to love you with all our everything, with our heart, our mind and our strength.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.