

The Exclusive God

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[0:00] Let's pray. Father, we pray that you'd help us understand your word tonight and please shape us in the likeness of your Son as we respond to it.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Now I have a voice that is failing and I'm hoping it'll last past not only this sermon but the Lord's Supper.

So we'll see how we go. But this has been the fourth, this is the fourth sermon so you know I'm on the last leg really in more ways than one. I want you to imagine for a moment it is the late 1960s in Australia and Australia has a system of conscription to military service for 18 year old males.

The country is also engaged in a war in Vietnam and significant numbers of conscripts are being sent to war and many are engaged in killing Vietnamese enemy combatants. And a significant number of conscripts are themselves dying.

That's what was happening at this period of time. Now imagine a young Christian man is called up. He's worried about because he knows the Ten Commandments in which one commandment in his Bible is translated this way.

[1:12] Thou shalt not kill. Because of those words in the teachings of Jesus he has become a pacifist. What should he do if his name is called up?

Another man much later in Australian history has been convicted of the most horrific crimes involving brutal rape and the murder of an elderly woman. The last judicial execution in Australia was carried out in 1967 and death penalty was abolished in federal law in 1973.

However, because of such crimes the debate over capital punishment resurfaces again. Just as it did in many ways after the bombings in Bali.

Some who advocate it do so on the basis of biblical law. Which in the Old Testament argues for a life for a life. Exodus chapter 21 verse 23. How do you reckon Christians should respond?

Now elsewhere another situation. A single Christian businesswoman is becoming very successful in her career. Her work calls on her to make significant sacrifices of her time and she starts missing church occasionally.

[2:22] Out of concern for her some of her friends tell her that she must rest and arrange time to meet with God. And in the course of their counsel to her they quote the Sabbath commandment to her.

Her response is that Christians are not obligated to keep Old Testament law. Is she right? Does the fourth commandment have any force or relevance for her as a Christian?

These are real scenarios and they raise just a few of the dilemmas that are posed for us by Old Testament law. And I've chosen over the next year or two when I preach in this service to work our way through what we most of us would call the Ten Commandments.

But which the Old Testament itself calls the Ten Words. So most of us know them as the Ten Commandments but I prefer the Old Testament's way of calling them.

Which is the Ten Words that occurs in Exodus 34 verse 28 and Deuteronomy 10 verse 4. The Greek translation is Decalogue which means from which we get Decalogue.

[3 : 29] So my order of preference I think would be Ten Words, Decalogue and Ten Commandments. But anyway, there we go. Now, before we get into, we're only going to cover that very short reading tonight.

So I'm going to use it as an opportunity to give you a larger framework. And some of you will have heard this before but it's important to hear again. I want to set the context for the Ten Words, the Decalogue. I'm going to tell you a bit about how to read the Decalogue in a way that I think honours its purpose and its context.

And I should say before we begin that the version of the Decalogue that we're going to base these talks on is the one found in Exodus 20. There are various versions of the Decalogue found in the Old Testament.

The one we're going to look at is Exodus 20. Why? Because I'm working on Exodus at the moment. So, you know, it's the obvious choice, isn't it? So let's get started. And I want us to start in the right place.

Let me lay some foundations for us for thinking about Old Testament law. Because if you read your Bible, you're going to be reading Old Testament law before too long. I think as we come to the Old Testament as Christians, there are two important considerations that we need to take on board.

[4 : 39] Both, I think, are often misunderstood. And if we don't understand them properly, we can't think rightly, I think, about Old Testament law. So the first is this one. This is the most important.

So if you're going to write something down tonight, actually I think it's in the outlines anyway, so you don't have to write it down. But it is this. Grace precedes law. Grace precedes law.

To put it another way, relationship with God comes before instruction as to how to live in that relationship. That is clear within the book of Exodus.

That is clear within the larger context of the Old Testament. Let's think right back to Genesis, if you like. For example, God's abundant blessing to humanity in the garden, Genesis 1 through to chapter 2, verse 14, precedes his command as to how to live in the garden and respond to God in the garden.

That comes in Genesis 2, verse 14. So God's been abundantly kind, set up a relationship, and he gives the boundaries of that relationship, which includes law.

[5 : 44] So in Genesis 12, think about this. God's gracious choice of Abraham precedes the formal covenant he enters into with Abraham in chapter 15 and chapter 17.

So he calls Abraham in chapter 12. Later on, he says, well, these are the boundaries of our relationship. Grace, you see, precedes demand.

Grace, if you like, precedes law. And you can see that in Exodus as well. You see, in Exodus chapter 2, verses 23 to 25, God acts in grace, hearing the cry of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and he remembers his covenant.

And he stretches out his hand to save them in a spectacular way. And you can see what he says as a result in Exodus 20 here. So have a look at your Bibles.

Before God gives the very first word of the ten words, what does he say? Verse 2, God says, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt and out of the land of slavery.

[6 : 46] In other words, I've acted in grace towards you. Here is how to respond. Here's what you ought to do. Here are the ten words. Here is what I'm going to tell you.

And only after he's spoken about grace does he go on and say, you shall have no other gods but me. Can you see that? Because if you can see it, don't forget it. Grace precedes law.

Grace, God's gracious forming of relationship precedes the giving of the law, which tells people how to live in that relationship. And I think that happens in Old and New Testaments.

So please understand it. We often think it's just for us New Testament Christians. They got to relate to God by keeping laws. No. Grace preceded law for them as well.

Now let's move on to the second point. When you hear the word law, what comes into your mind? Think about it. Law. Not your mind, Adam. You're a lawyer. Well, maybe, yes, you should tell us what you think about.

[7 : 48] Perhaps you might think of speed laws or tax laws or other sets of laws that operate in modern society. Such laws often have governments behind them, don't they, or authorities or police to enforce them.

And it's because we think this way that we often don't quite fully understand the concept of law in the Old Testament. You see, the Hebrew word for law is Torah. And it probably comes from a word that has the sense of pointing the way.

That in turn gives rise to words like direction or instruction or teaching or perhaps even guidance. So law, therefore, in the Old Testament is therefore not exactly like law in our sense.

Okay? It's not exactly like it. It has some of those elements but not exactly like it. It's direction or instruction or guidance as to how people should conduct their lives that are in a relationship with God that's been formed by God.

So even a story in the Old Testament can be called Torah or law. Law. So a story about someone doing things can be called law. The ten words, the laws, even the narrative of God's ways with his people offer God's guidance to his people as to how he would have them live.

[9 : 05] So that's just a bit of background. So let's now take a quick overview of the ten words. I'd love to spend time looking at each one of them tonight but we're going to spend the next year or so doing it.

Okay? So gradually as I speak I'm going to work through these ten words. Have a quick scan of them. And I know some of you have heard this stuff but we can do it again. Take a quick scan of them and ask yourself who is the focus?

Who is the focus? That is, who is the centre of attention of each of the ten words? Look at the first word in verse 3. Who is the focus of it?

Who's the centre of its attention? That one's easy, isn't it? It's God. Commandment 2 is the same. God is the centre. Commandment 3 is the same.

It's God. Commandment 4 is about the Sabbath. I think its focus is also on God. Verse 10 says that the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. In other words, it's a day for God.

[10 : 06] What about Commandment 5? Who is its focus? It's not so much God, is it? No, instead it's your parents. The focus is on other people.

And the same goes for then the rest of the ten words that follow. They are focused on people. In other words, an overview of the Decalogue might be this. Love God.

Love your neighbour. Okay? Love God. Love your neighbour. Love other people. Love God. Love other people. If you want to listen to the way Jesus says it, it's this.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the great and first commandment, and the second is like it. You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

So Jesus himself summarises things that way. If there's a principle behind the commandments, it's this. Love God. Love your neighbour.

[11:03] That sums up the Decalogue. Now, there are another couple of ways to summarise the commandments. The first way is to think about the commandments as being about taking things away from other people, or another person that rightly belongs to them.

Think about it for a moment. What are you doing when you worship another God other than the Lord? That is, he brought you to, you know, he redeemed you, he brought you to himself.

What are you doing when you go off and worship another God? You're taking away from God what rightly belongs to him, your worship as a redeemed person. You're taking away from him his right to an exclusive relationship with you.

And what about when you misuse his name? What are you doing there? You're taking away from him the right to have his name respected. What about when you work on the Sabbath? You're taking away from God his right to have the Sabbath as a day that's totally for him.

What about when you don't honour your parents? What are you doing then? You're taking away from them their right to have a special place of honour and respect that is due to them as your parents.

[12:18] When you murder, what are you doing? Well, that one's easy, isn't it? You're taking away from them their life. When you commit adultery, what are you doing? You're taking away from your spouse.

Your spouse's right to your faithfulness, to her, as well as the right of the other person's spouse, to her faithfulness, or vice versa, whichever sex you are.

Do you understand? When you give false testimony, what are you doing? You're taking away your neighbour's right to justice by your lies. So I think that the commandments can be summarised as taking away or depriving someone of something that is rightly theirs.

It is a great way of thinking about them. See, how can you be loving of someone if you're taking things away from them that are theirs? How can you be caring for someone if you're wanting something that is theirs?

So there's a practical way to think about how to love God and love your neighbour. If your actions take something away from God that belongs to him, you're not loving God, are you? If you take away from God something that belongs to him, you cannot say you love him.

[13:31] If your actions take something away from others that belong to them, then it is not loving them. When I get angry with my wife, I'm taking away from her my duty to love her and care for her.

I'm not loving her at that point, you see. You might like to think this over. Think of your actions this week. Think back about what you've done, how you've acted in relationships, how you've acted in your relationship with God and with others.

Think through your thoughts. Think through them in relation to your spouse, your employer, your children, your parents. Think through them in relation to God.

Ask yourself honestly. Have my thoughts or my actions taken something away from God that belongs to him? Have your thoughts or actions taken away something from others that really belongs to them?

Think about it in relation to your employer, if you like. You see, if you've done these things, I suspect you've broken the core of what the Ten Commandments are about. You may have done it in your heart, you may have done it in your mind, or you may have even done it in your actions.

[14:41] But if you've taken away from God or your neighbour something that properly belongs to them, you have, I think, breached the very core of what these Commandments are about. And let me tell you, if that's the case, is there any of us who haven't broken them this week?

I think not, probably. The other way to summarise the Commandments is to think of them as reflections of the One who gave them. Let me give you just two examples. Think about Sabbath.

What is Sabbath about? Well, you see, think about God. God is holy. He considers that his people should be holy like him. And one way that they are holy is by setting aside days for him that are holy to him.

So, can you see how holiness flows down into Sabbath? Now, think about adultery for a moment. What is adultery about at its heart? You see, if I commit adultery against Heather, what am I doing?

I am breaking faith with her. Aren't I? You see, one day I stood up the front here in a church. I said in the presence of a whole group of people who were my friends and my pastor and so on.

[15:55] I said, I am going to love Heather. And I am going to love her all my life until death do us part. If I go and commit adultery, what am I doing? I am breaking that oath I gave her.

I am breaking faith with her. You see, it's about unfaithfulness. Therefore, the command about adultery, I think, is a call to be like God. Because God doesn't break faith, does he?

So, we ought not to break faith. We ought to be like our God. We ought to reflect our God in our actions. Be faithful to our spouse as God is faithful to us.

Now, one more thing to notice about the commandments. And I wonder if you've noticed it yourself. Did you notice that the ten words, the Decalogue, seem to be more about basic attitudes and principles than actual laws?

A good example is Commandment 10. Have a look at Commandment 10, the very last one. It's about coveting. Now, do you reckon you could take someone to court for coveting?

[17:00] So, you know, take them down to the local police station and say, this person coveted. You can't do it, can you? Because coveting is something you do in here, isn't it? It often finds its way out in theft or adultery or murder or whatever.

But fundamentally, it's something that happens in here long before the other commandments are actually broken. Coveting is something you can't see. It happens in your heart. And the other thing about the ten words is that there are no penalties prescribed for failure.

Did you notice that? You read through them. It doesn't say here. It says elsewhere that murder should be punished by death. But it doesn't say it here. It just says don't murder.

And what's more, some of them cannot be easily enforced. I think the ten words are a sort of summary of the central theological and ethical principles of the Old Testament. They are the only words that all Israel is said to have heard from God.

The other laws, they didn't. They only heard these ones. That means they're the core ones, I think. They're the ones from which all the others flow. They are sort of guidelines, general guidance, instructions, principles.

[18:11] Other parts of the Old Testament will show how these flow out into other places. You'll see if you read on in chapters 21 to 23, you know, about how you treat your daughter, how you treat your son, how you treat your slaves, how you treat your spouse, you know.

And, you know, what happens to people who hit pregnant women and they're caused to abort, you know. That's what those commandments will go on and describe how these things work themselves out in normal situations.

So now let's have a look at the first commandment. So keep your Bibles open. First thing to remember is the context. The law about Israel having no other God is set in the context of God's rescue of Israel.

See, God is not a stranger to the people he speaks to here in the commandments. He has established a relationship with them. And all relationships have claims.

And he has loved his people. He expects them to respond to him. That's the context, personal relationships. Relationship with the God of all the earth. Second thing we need to do is to think about what makes a God.

[19:20] What makes a God, do you think? In my view, this passage doesn't say much about the existence or the non-existence of other gods. I think it has implications for it, but I don't think it explicitly says it. I think Deuteronomy does, but not this one perhaps.

Nor I think does it say anything necessarily about the reality of other gods. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, there's lots to say about that. But I don't think it's being said here. What this passage does do is assume that there will be things in the world that we give the status of gods to.

Does that make sense? So we will give things in the world a status of gods, of deity. So what is a God in the end? Here's a ballpark definition.

A God is something or someone to whom you give your total loyalty, your love, your service, and that you allow to control you.

Okay? It's just a very ballpark definition. Something you give your all to, your loyalty to, something you love, something you serve, something you allow or someone you allow to control you.

[20:31] I think that means that some of our addictions have become gods for us. Does that make sense? So, in the ancient world, there were many such gods.

Israelites could choose from a pantheon of gods from the nations around them. Around about them, they had Canaanite fertility gods, nature gods, gods of war, gods of peace.

There was, you know, a sort of god for everything if you wanted it in the world of the Old Testament. In our world, I think there are many, equally many gods from which we can choose.

There are the great gods of, and I pinched this from someone else, it's great because it rhymes, sex, shekels, and stomach. So sex, money, and just earthly pursuits.

Okay? I think it's fascinating watching our world at the moment, which is quickly turning a staple, ordinary thing into a deity. That is, we are turning, I think, food into something that we worship, and we have high priests of it.

[21:39] And it is, I refuse to watch the shows myself. Because I think that's what it's doing. It's deifying something, taking something that is normal, that is right, that is a good gift from God, and exalting it to be something we worship at.

Therefore, we can no longer eat unless we eat gourmet food. And we can no longer drink coffee unless it's gourmet coffee. And unless it's been authorised by the appropriate people, and so on and so forth.

Sorry, I should have stopped a little while ago. But anyway, you understand what I mean. It's very easy to deify something, isn't it? I think God is there for anything we allow to run our lives.

Pleasure, possessions, position, the firm, the family, all can do it. But anything we, or anyone we live for, our life for, in the end can easily become a deity for us.

Or if you like to put it in the reverse, if you like, anything or anyone we cannot live without has become a deity for us. I think in our world, technology and what it brings us can very easily slip into that.

[23 : 00] But you know for yourself. You know that thing that you cannot give up, or that person you cannot give up, or whatever. That thing that so dominates you that there is, everything else comes second to it.

That's become a deity for you. Anything that claims your most fundamental loyalty has become that. These are our gods. And they are legion.

And in this commandment, God comes to us and he says a definite no to them all. He calls us to choose from the legion of prospective gods that are out there, and to make our creator and our saviour our exclusive God.

That is, he is to be preferred over any other object of devotion. It's not wrong to have an object of devotion. It's when you exalt that object of devotion above God himself.

God is to be preferred over any other object of devotion. He is to be the soul lord of our hearts, our motivations, our actions. He is to be our chief desire.

[24 : 06] The love of our life. The one we love with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength and with all our mind. God demands a total concentration of our purpose and our wills toward him.

In everything we do, there is just one sole aim for us. Pleasing and glorifying our God and saviour. He has our resolute and wholehearted allegiance.

So what does that mean in practice? What does it mean in day-to-day living to have no other God but the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ?

Friends, each one of us are busy people. Each one of us have a host of things we must do and think every day. This command says that each one of them, no matter how trivial, no matter how important, are to be approached as ventures of living service to the God who redeemed us.

Whatever we do, we must do everything with one goal in mind, to glorify our God and saviour. Each is an opportunity to enthrone the king we adore.

[25 : 17] And let me tell you, this is whether it's your study, or your work, or how you live with your parents, or how you live with your children, or how you spend your money, when you're watching television, or not watching television, when you're setting your timetable for your week, or you're talking to your friends, or you're deciding whether to get angry or not.

Having God as your exclusive God is not just an intellectual assent. It is a wholehearted and diligent choice that is reflected in every action and will saturate your whole being.

That's what this command means. It says, You shall have no other gods but this one. But the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as we would express it as Christians, and he must dominate our whole existence, every part of it, saturate down into every corner of it, and he must never be pushed aside for anyone or anything else.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you that you have only our good in mind. Thank you that you call us as your people, redeemed through your Son, to worship you, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to worship your Son.

Father, we pray that you would help us to do this with all our beings. Please help us not to be half-hearted about this, but to let this love of you filter down into every part of our existence.

[26:57] Give us a resolute commitment to enthrone you, the King we adore, whether it's studying or working or living with parents or living with friends or living with children or spending money or watching television or choosing not to watch it or setting our timetables or talking to our friends or deciding whether we'll get angry or not.

Father, please, may this not just be, may our love of you not just be an intellectual exercise, but one that is lived out in every corner of our existence. Please, keep us from idols.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.