

Put God First

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[0 : 00] Again, I want to extend a welcome to you and particularly those of you who are here visiting for graduation weekend.

We are glad that you are able to join us this morning. You know, trajectory is an important thing. I don't know if you're a fan.

I know this is dating me, but if you haven't seen it, it's Oscar worthy. Apollo 13 is a great movie with Tom Hanks. And for those of you who are younger, pull it out of some archive and go watch it. One of the things, it's about this tragedy of Apollo 13 and how the launch created a problem with the mission and how they sought to rescue the astronauts and bring them home.

And in the midst of the crisis that was happening in Houston as they were trying to solve multiple problems of failing systems and failing vehicles and limited resources, one of the things they realized was that if they didn't get their trajectory right, as they sought to take this group of men flying through space in this little piece of metal around the moon and bring it, slingshot it back to earth, if they didn't get the trajectory right, they would be lost.

[1 : 32] It's graduation weekend. And for some of you, this is a time of transition. For all of us, the question of the trajectory of our lives is always an important one.

The Westminster Catechism gives us an answer to the question, what is the trajectory of our lives as God designed it? The chief end of humanity is that we would glorify God and enjoy Him forever. If I might translate that into 21st century language, the whole purpose that we are here is that we would focus our lives on the worship and display of God's glory in our lives.

We are here for God. But friends, we know how easy it is for us to not do that, don't we? Think back over your last week.

How much was God the center of your life in your everyday comings and goings, wakings and sleepings, working and playing, recreating? We don't treat God the way He deserves.

[2 : 50] We don't make Him the proper focal point of our trajectory of our lives. We often diminish Him and make Him less than He truly is.

We often ignore Him or dismiss Him when it's inconvenient. Often we don't trust Him, perhaps because of our past disappointments, perhaps because of our fear of future uncertainties.

Sometimes for those who have grown up in church, we become familiar with God and in becoming familiar, we diminish Him. Sometimes we make God about us.

And we think that God is there to make us happy and to serve our purposes and to make our lives great. As we look at a passage this morning in Exodus 20, we're continuing in our series in the book of Exodus.

And as we look at this passage this morning, I want you to know that as we think about these things, I don't stand before you as one who knows the answers or who has done this perfectly.

[4 : 04] In fact, this week has been a struggle for me because I realize how much I need this message and this word as well as you. But if you would, turn with me in your Bibles to Exodus 20, page, I forgot, 61 in the Pew Bibles if you need to look at those.

We're going to begin a two-week series on the Ten Commandments, which is probably a very well-known part of the Bible. Well, you've probably heard them before, so we're going to read them again in just a minute.

But remember where this comes in the story. In Exodus, in chapters 1 through 18, there is this grand story of deliverance. God has come, and with a mighty hand and with great works, He has shown His power to deliver His people.

And not only to deliver His people from slavery in Egypt, but to deliver them into His own possession and in His own care as He has now delivered them from Egypt and has led them

through the wilderness, providing for them in ways that miraculously showed His commitment to not only deliver them, but to sustain them as His people.

And so He brings us, then the story brings us to the foot of Mount Sinai. And in chapter 19, if you were here with Greg last week, we explored the question, what does it mean to be God's people? [5 : 32] What does it mean to look at Him and to come to Him on His own terms and to understand the pattern of grace and law that He calls us to be His people by His grace and to live according to His instructions?

We come to chapter 20 and the beginning of the instruction of the giving of the law. We'll continue to explore this as we look at it in the chapters in the weeks to come.

But let me quote a great Bible commentator who says this about the Ten Commandments just to orient our thoughts a little bit about the law before we jump into our passage.

He says this, This is the way we are to think of the Ten Commandments, not as cramping restrictions on a fullness of life that we might otherwise have enjoyed, but as the very gateway to the fullness we seek.

As God gives us the law, what He's doing is instructing us on how to live as His people, how to live and to flourish under His rule and under His.

[6 : 40] But what that means is that we live according to the patterns and according to the current of His created purposes for us and His redemptive purposes for us.

And so as we receive the law, we receive it hopefully not as a restriction, but as instruction to teach us who don't know God as well as we ought, how we ought to live as people who do know God.

So that's where we are as we come to Exodus chapter 20. We're going to focus this morning on the first four commandments, but I'm going to read a good part of the chapter for us to get the context.

So let's read Exodus chapter 20 together. 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 slavery.

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth.

[7 : 47] You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not take the Lord, the name of the Lord your God in vain. For the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord, your God. On it you shall not do any work. You or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant or your livestock or the sojourner who is within your gates.

For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery.

[9 : 00] You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that is your neighbor's.

Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountains smoking, the people were afraid and trembled and they stood far off and said to Moses, you speak to us.

We will listen. But do not let God speak to us lest we die. And Moses said to the people, do not fear, for God has come to test you that the fear of him may be before you and that you may not sin.

The people stood far off while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was. And the Lord said to Moses, thus you shall say to the people of Israel, you have seen for yourselves that I have talked with you from heaven.

You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen.

[10:13] And in every place where I cause my name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you. If you will make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it, you profane it.

And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it. Now these are the rules that you shall set before them.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you that you have not left us to grasp at seeking to understand you on our own wisdom or by our own imaginations.

But God, you have revealed yourself and you have spoken to us so that we might know what kind of a God you are. And Lord, we pray this morning that you would give us ears to hear and hearts to receive your word.

Lord, that your spirit would be at work amongst us as we look into this word together. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

[11:20] To be God's people is to make him truly first in everything in our lives. Truly first in our hearts and truly first in the pattern of our lives.

This is the main idea of the first four commandments that we're going to look at. If you look at the ten commandments, it's fairly clear there are ten of them. There are actually ten words technically as they're described.

And it's very easy to split them up. The first four are about our vertical relationship with God primarily. And then the second six are more about our horizontal relationship with one another. And yet all of them are about what does it mean that we are God's people? He's giving instructions. These are principles, foundational concepts of what it means to be God's people.

So we're going to spend a few minutes this morning looking at the first four commandments. And I'm going to lump them together. We're going to start first by looking at commandments one and two.

[12:23] And seeing that being God's people means making God first in our hearts. That is, the thing that we worship, the thing that we love the most, the thing that we set our heart upon is to be God himself.

Look with me again. God says, you shall worship no other gods before me. You shall make no images for my worship. And if you think about the context that God was speaking this word into, think about what the Israelites had known for 400 years.

They had lived in Egypt, a land full of graven images, a land full of idols, of statues that were bowed down to and worshiped for various things in the transactional nature of ancient religion where you offered to a particular image, a particular God, a particular act of worship, and he gives you something that you want.

Fertility, long life, healing, crops, children, success in battle. And God spoke this word knowing that these people were going to enter into the promised land where similarly the Canaanite religions would be characterized by a similar kind of idolatry.

And God comes and says, if you are to know me and to worship me right, you must do it differently than those people do. And recognize, too, that God isn't simply saying to Israelites, hey, I'm your God, everything else is excluded.

[14:01] You can't build those statues and bow down to them and worship other gods. But he's also saying you can't worship me by using statues and images as well.

And I don't know about you, I didn't think this week, you know, I wonder if I should just build a statue. You know, life is kind of hard. My worship, my life with God, my relationship is a little dry. I think I'll build a statue so it'll help me to worship. It's not a common impulse in our modern culture, is it? Right? But recognize how much it was for the people of Israel.

For 12 chapters later, what will they do as they sit at the foot of Mount Sinai, as God reveals himself in these very words to Moses? What do they do? They make a golden calf.

Why? Not to worship some other god, to worship this god. They think God's given us all this bounty. Let's make an image so that we can worship this god. God says, no, you may not do that.

[15:06] Why does God care so much? Well, first of all, as we see in verse 5, he says, I am a jealous god. I want your worship to be for me alone.

This is where the images of citizenship and marriage come in as analogies for how we relate to God. What spouse wants to share the affection of their partner with another?

What country says, sure, you could be a citizen of our country and five others. You can fight in their army, work in their government. It doesn't matter. It's not a big deal.

Now, in our fallen world today, we might start to think, well, okay, we might hedge our bets on some of that because all those institutions seem pretty fallen. But in their ideal, in what they were meant to be, in what they were made to be, God is saying, I want you to be wholly mine.

And it's not based on a jealous grasping. It's not God seeking to simply control his people. But it's based on the grace that he has already shown him.

[16:24] Look back with me at verse 2 of chapter 20. Do you see what he says? Because I have redeemed you. Because I have brought you out of the land of slavery.

I have rescued you to be mine. Worship me. Worship me alone. And he's really serious about this. You see in verses 6 and 7 that there's a result if you don't do this. And for those of you who read this the way I read it the first time and think, well, that doesn't seem fair.

God's just extending punishment from generation to generation for no good thing. I want you to read the verse again carefully. The end of verse 5. Visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children of those who hate me.

The point here is not that God is going to punish you because your grandfather hated God and you are trying to love God and you are still reaping those consequences.

[17:30] The point here is that you will be punished as you are a part of a generation that refuses to worship God and rejects him. And yes, we know that these things are often passed down from father to son, from generation to generation, from parent to child.

And so it may be that the apples don't fall far from the tree and therefore God's judgment will. But recognize that what God is saying here is, if you are going to be my covenant people, I really expect you to be committed to this.

I really expect you to be wholehearted in it. Because what I have done is called you into a covenant relationship with me. Because I love you.

And I want to show my steadfast love to you for thousands of generations. Friends, we know that our hearts don't do this very well.

As John Calvin said, our hearts are idol factories. Human culture, ever since the fall in the Garden of Eden, has created other things to worship other than God.

[18:48] We confuse the distinction between creator and creation. And rather than trying to worship an unseen God, which can be challenging sometimes, we worship a seen God by making idols out of them.

And if they're not physical idols that we shape with our hands and bow down to, they're idols of our hearts. Things that we look to, to be our provider, to be our protector, to be our justification, to be our identity, our careers, our families, our successes.

And we cling to these things. But the God of the Bible is one who has come and said, I am a spirit. You cannot see me, but you can know me.

Because I am a God who has revealed myself in my words. Think about that. As God is meeting with his people on this mountain, he is manifesting his majesty through great signs and wonders. But there is no manifestation of God himself. What there is, is words. God gives us words to know him.

[20:08] God allows us to worship him and to know who he is because he speaks to us. And friends, we know that God in his graciousness knows our weakness.

And in the fullness of time, the word became flesh and dwelt among us. And we have beheld his glory. The glory as only the son of the father, full of grace and truth.

Friends, we know today as we gather that the God of the Israelites in Exodus 20 was the God who came in Jesus Christ to be our savior and our redeemer, to work a greater redemption for us and to make a greater people of God.

The fulfillment of all that the story in Exodus points to will come in Jesus. And so, friends, this morning as we look at these first two, have no other gods before me.

Do not worship any other thing. I simply want to ask you, what do you worship? What is the thing on your lips most often?

[21:25] Where do you run in times of trouble? What do you trust in when everything else falls away? What do you rejoice and exult in on your best days?

Friends, God is meant to be the answer to all of those questions in our lives. He wants us to experience the Copernican revolution in our lives whereby we as the self are unseated from the center of our solar system and God is put in place.

It's the center of gravity and the one who is the life-giving force. As we relate to him rightly, we find our place in the universe.

This is what God has called us to, to make him our God above all other things. So if the first two commandments tell us that, to love God with all of our heart and be wholehearted in this God-centered life that he's called us to, the next two commandments help us make it practical in very real ways.

Look with me in verses seven and following in chapter 20. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

[22 : 54] What's in a name? Your reputation, your significance, your lineage, your identity. We live in a world where names are cheap, where presidential debates can descend into name-calling and cheap words.

But throughout history and certainly in the scriptures, a name was the badge of who you were. It was your reputation.

It was your person. It was your character. In fact, the New Testament talks about the word glory or weightiness to be connected with a person and a person's name.

And when God says this, he says, you may not call me your God and you may not claim to be my people if you are frivolous or empty in the way that you use my name.

Now, for most of you, and for me too, I grew up in church. What does the third commandment mean? Well, you don't curse. And you don't use God's name when you curse. That's sort of the simple, and you know what?

[24 : 05] That's right. That's exactly right. We should never use God's name simply because we're frustrated or angry because we want to call down judgment on someone else.

But this commandment is much more than that. This commandment is to say, if you are going to say that you are God's people, you are taking up the name of this God and you are saying, this is who I am.

This is the family that I have belonged to. Again, the marriage analogy, I am joining in with you and I am taking your name and I am being yours fully and completely.

we have hitched our wagon to him and we will follow him to the end of the road. This is what it means to be God's covenant people and therefore to take his name seriously is to not use it in an empty way in our lives, to not use it without substance.

Friends, we live in a culture today in America where there are, depending on where you're from, depending on what part of America you're in, there are parts of America where Christian is a social category.

[25 : 23] There are parts of America where Christian is a political category. But friends, we must understand that when the Bible talks about Christians, it is those who have identified with the name of Jesus Christ.

And therefore, we must not take his name lightly in how we live. We must not be afraid to identify with him publicly and to say, yes, I am one who has been bought by the blood of Jesus Christ.

I am one who has been saved by this Savior. Even when you may be misunderstood, even when you may be rejected, even when you may, it may cost you much.

Friends, the third commandment joins us. It tells us that we are to take up that name and to live according to it.

And that in our words, we are to speak reverently and joyfully and gladly and worshipfully about God. Not only are we to worship God, not only are we to make him first in our words, but we are also to make him first in the way that we use our time.

[27 : 02] As we look at verses 8 through 11, we see the fourth commandment. To take the Sabbath, to take one day out of the week and to set it aside.

Set it aside from the regular work. And we've already seen this in the story. Do you remember when God gave manna in chapter 16, 17, 17, chapter 17, when God gave manna, he instructed them, six days you go out and gather it.

And on the sixth day, gather extra because on the seventh day, you won't need to because I will have provided for you. And there's all this, oh, and if you try to save it on other days, it'll go bad.

And if you go out and do it on that day, it'll go bad. God gave all sorts of specifics, but we've already seen this happen. And in that story, we see God asking his people a couple of questions. Do you think that you know better than the Lord how to provide for yourself? Do you think you know better than God what you need?

[28 : 09] For the Sabbath rest is a rest from our regular work so that we might be renewed personally and spiritually in our worship of God so that we might take one day out of the week and trust that God will provide for us as we take a break from our regular work.

And friends, it's not a break so that we can play Fortnite for 14 hours. Okay? This is not a Sabbath. Nor is it doing hobbies while your spouse takes care of everybody else all day.

But it is setting aside your regular work as best as you can, as much as possible so that you can focus on the Lord and remember his goodness, enjoy his creation, take a nap, sing songs, be with friends.

Now look, I know some of you are in medical residency and you don't have control of your life. You don't get to say, I can't work on Sunday right now. Okay?

I get it. Some of you are moms of newborns. Where's the Sabbath rest in that, right? I mean, seriously. Okay? But here's the thing.

[29 : 40] The pattern is still the same. And for the rest of us, we really have no excuse. Do you really think you know better than the Lord what you need to do to be successful, to accomplish?

So what does it look like? Unplug. Unplug from your devices, unplug from your regular schedule, unplug from your phone, turn off your email notifications, get out into creation if you can.

Be with God's people as much as you can. Friends, if nothing else, and I say this particularly to those of you who are graduating and moving on, observe the Sabbath by making it a commitment to be with God's people every week.

Go to church. It's not optional. It's a part of Sabbath observance to be with God's people. And you're going to go out into a world that is going to trample all over that.

And your work group is going to say, can you come in on 9 o'clock on Sunday mornings? And your ultimate Frisbee game down the street is going to say, hey, we're playing at 10, why don't you come over? And your sports teams, as you have kids, are going to say, oh, we've got a weekend tournament and the game's at 8.30 and we got to be there.

[31 : 04] And so on and so forth. We live in a culture that no longer recognizes Sunday as a separate. You're going to have to be ready to be different and stand out from your peers to take that rest.

Some of you work in labs where you think, I can't tell my PI that. I'll get fired. There are challenging things we have to face.

I will not say you have to, therefore, not work on Sundays. The New Testament does not tell us explicitly that this is what all believers must do.

But it is a principle based in the very fabric of creation itself that God created the world in six days and then he rested. He didn't do it because he was tired.

He didn't do it because he needed a break or he was overwhelmed. He did it for us. He did it so that we would enter into a rhythm of rest.

[32 : 13] And so that we would know, as Deuteronomy will point out, that the Sabbath is also the freedom from work, the work that we do as we seek to justify ourselves in the world by how well we do, how well we succeed, and how well we progress in the world.

So friends, this is what God calls us to in the first four commandments. To truly be God's people is to make him first in all things, in our hearts, in our worship, in our identity, in our words, in our use of time, and to honor him as God in all of these things, to make him the center around which our lives find their orbit.

And of course, we know that the problem with this is that we do this so poorly, don't we? Like the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2, we wander from our first love.

We grow cold in our affection. We grow weary in our obedience. We want so much to be accepted by others that we lose sight of what God has called us to in his people.

Our efforts to be law keepers will fail. And if we try really hard, it will crush us. But as we do that, it brings us, in fact, to the very sweetest part of what this passage in Exodus points us to.

[33 : 50] Because it points us ahead to another time, to another covenant, to another promise. We read it earlier in Ezekiel 36. this covenant prepares the world to know that we can't be law keepers

on our own.

And that God is going to have to intervene and do something. And God himself and Ezekiel promised that he would. And in the person of Jesus, he did. He came, and Jesus came to be the law keeper for us.

To perfectly worship God and to love him above all things. And as he lived this life of perfect obedience, he did this for us. And then he did that, not only that, but then he offered himself in our place to take the penalty for our sin that separates us from God.

So that by his life and death and resurrection, we might be God's new people in a new covenant relationship with God based not on our works, but based on his gracious work for us in Christ.

And with this new covenant comes one wonderful things. He gives us a new heart that can now love God in ways that we never could apart from him. He gives us his spirit to live in us so that we actually know the laws and that we long to please God because God's spirit lives within us.

[35 : 16] Friends, this is what the Ten Commandments points us towards. It points us towards Christ who did all these things for us so that we might be God's people. So that we might be like the Thessalonian church at the end of chapter one who turned from idols to serve the true and living God and to live our lives for his glory.

This is the trajectory and this is our hope. We pray this will be true for you, for me, today. Let's pray together.

Lord, thank you for this word. Lord, thank you that you have created us for yourself and though we so often fail, Lord, you graciously draw us back again and again.

Lord, I pray for those this morning, Lord, that you may have convicted that they haven't made their life about you. Lord, they have made empty the name of Christ and the work of Christ on the cross for them.

I pray, Lord, that in this conviction that they would turn to you in their need and find grace and know, Lord, that they would know salvation is in Jesus.

[36 : 46] Lord, I pray for all of us that you might prick our consciences to see the places in our lives where we don't put you first, where we have made other things more important, where we have worshipped other gods, where we have bowed down to other things to play God in our lives.

Lord, help us to repent of those and, Lord, in turning from them to find you to be the God who has delivered us from slavery, from slavery to sin, rescued us and called us to be your people.

By the grace of Jesus, we pray. Amen.