TEN

how the commandments set us free

mark mitchell
In honor of my parents, Dr. Stewart and Jean Mitchell.
“Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one’s youth”
(Psalm 127:4).

Ten: How the Commandments Set Us Free

© 2016 by Mark Mitchell

All rights reserved.

Discovery House is affiliated with Our Daily Bread Ministries, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Requests for permission to quote from this book should be directed to: Permissions Department, Discovery House, P.O. Box 3566, Grand Rapids, MI 49501, or contact us by e-mail at permissionsdept@dhp.org.


Interior design by Michelle Espinoza

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Mitchell, Mark, 1956- author.
Ten: how the commandments set us free / Mark Mitchell.
   p. cm.
   Includes bibliographical references.
   1. Ten commandments. I. Title.
   BV4655. M45 2016
   241.5'2—dc23 2015030861

Printed in the United States of America
First printing in 2016
CONTENTS

Introduction 5

1. Recognizing the One Center 9
2. Detecting Subtle Idols 19
3. Calling on God’s Powerful Name 31
4. Rediscovering a Rest-Filled Life 41
5. Making Parents “Weighty” 55
6. Cherishing the Dignity of Life 65
7. Honoring Marriage and Sexuality 77
8. Exposing Our Deceitful Heart 89
10. Facing Our Covetous Heart 113

Conclusion 123

Notes 125
RECOGNIZING THE ONE CENTER

The first commandment seems pretty straightforward: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2–3). Unfortunately, it is easy to misunderstand this commandment. Sometimes we use it to wag our finger at “those people” who worship other gods. But God isn’t saying anything here about other people and their gods; he’s speaking to His own people about His role in their lives. Nor is this saying that somehow God is needy for our attention. He’s not some kind of insecure prima donna who can’t share the stage. He doesn’t need our worship. He desires it.

This commandment also doesn’t mean that God should become our “top priority.” Often, Christians will have a list of priorities with God at the top, the family second, and job or something else third. That kind of thinking assumes we can divide our lives into clean and tidy boxes—a God box, a family box, and a job box. On Sunday we open the God box, at home
we open the family box, and at work we open the job box. There is little or no integration; we often live by one set of values at church, another at home, and still another at work. That’s not what God had in mind when He gave the first commandment.

THE ONE AT THE CENTER

Instead, through the first commandment God is saying, “I don’t want to just be number one on your list. I want to be the One at the center of it all. I want to be the hub of the wheel that holds every spoke of your life together. I want to be your ultimate concern. I want to be your singular passion. I don’t want anything to rival the place I have in your life. There can be nothing in your life that compares with me.” The sixteenth-century reformer John Calvin said this kind of ordering really boils down to four things: adoration, trust, invocation, and thanksgiving.

*God desires our adoration.* God wants to be the One who captures your attention, the One you cannot get enough of, and the One you love to talk about.

*God desires our trust.* God wants to be the One you depend on for everything, the One who gives you a deep sense of security because you know you can count on Him for everything—from your eternal salvation to your daily bread.

*God desires our invocation.* God wants to be the One you turn to in times of need, the One you run to when you’re in trouble.
When you need forgiveness, wisdom, or encouragement, He wants you to turn to Him.

_God desires our thanksgiving._ God wants to be the One you thank when your table is full—when your heart overflows with an abundance of hope and joy.

**ROOM FOR ONLY ONE THRONE**

Why should God occupy this place in our life?

First, He deserves it. Notice the first four words in verse 2: “I am the Lord.” Don’t pass over that. That’s a statement about who God is. When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and Moses asked God what his name was, God answered with this statement: “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:14). In other words, “I am the sovereign ruler of the universe. I made it all. I sustain it all. I control it all. I’m not limited by time. I AM.”

At that time Egypt was the world power, and the pharaoh was viewed as an all-powerful god. But then Yahweh came along and said, “Let me show you who is really in charge.” When God sent the ten plagues, when He opened up the Red Sea and let the Israelites pass through, when the Israelites made it safely through and the waters came down and drowned Pharaoh’s army, God demonstrated His power.

God is not only sovereign but He’s also _personal._ That’s why He says, “I am the _Lord _your God” (Exodus 20:2). When He says, “your God,” He’s talking to you and me on a personal
basis. He’s not a God who exists way out there in the recesses of the universe and has no time for or interest in you. He’s not a distant, unapproachable king. He’s a personal God. He knows you, and He wants to be known by you.

Second, God should be hub of our lives, because if He is, that will determine everything else about us. Everything gets aligned or misaligned from that hub. It’s like buttoning the wrong button at the top of your shirt: each of the other buttons is subsequently thrown off. If we don’t get this first commandment right, the rest of our life gets out of whack. Everything flows out of this commandment.

The Ten Commandments start with the vertical; they start with our relationship with God. Only after we get that right can we turn to the horizontal—our relationship with other people. Some people want to preserve the second section of the commandments (starting with “Honor your father and mother”) but ignore the first section (the first four commandments, which deal with our relationship with God). They may agree that murder, adultery, stealing, and lying are wrong, but they want this moral code without the God who himself defines morality. In reality, however, if you cut out the author of life, it’s hard to respect life. If you cut out the author of marriage, it’s hard to respect the marriage vows. If you cut out the author of truth, it’s hard to tell the truth.

Third, God wants to occupy this place in our lives because
there’s room for only one throne in our hearts. The story in the gospels about the “rich young ruler” (Luke 18:18, Matthew 19:22) illustrates this point. He approached Jesus and asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him to keep the commandments. The young man made the startling claim that he had been keeping them his whole life. Jesus put that claim to the test. “One thing you lack,” [Jesus] said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Mark 10:21). The young man had nothing to say to that, and he walked away sad. Jesus had just exposed his real god. At that moment the rich young man realized he hadn’t kept all the commandments; he hadn’t even gotten past the first one. He had put his money before God. As Oswald Chambers once wrote, “If I enthrone anything other than God in my life, God retires and lets the other god do what it can.”

**IDOLS OF THE HEART**

We know that God is supposed to be the hub of our lives, but we all struggle with a subtle (or not-so-subtle) drift toward other gods. This doesn’t mean that we worship little idols made out of wood or stone. Most of us don’t have a golden calf stationed in our backyard that we worship during every full moon. But we have plenty of “idols of the heart.” John Calvin called these “shadow deities.” These are most often good things given to us
by God, but somehow, because of our own twisted nature, we take these good gifts and give them more significance than we should.

We were created with certain needs: security, significance, purpose. Throughout our lives we discover that some of these needs can be at least partially met by the good gifts of creation. It might be a particular talent that gives us a sense of identity or purpose. It might be a hobby, like scuba diving or hunting or participating in triathlons. It might be material things like food or wine or furniture or cars. It might even be something as wonderful and God-given as our marriage, our children, or our friends. These good things easily become idols when we move them into the center of our lives. But there’s one simple question that can expose these heart idols: *How do I react when someone or something threatens to take them from me?* If a good thing in your life is threatened, you’ll most likely struggle and grieve deeply. But if an “ultimate thing” is threatened, your life unravels; you may even descend into despair.

In this sense, I can’t help but think of Abraham. Abraham and Sarah had waited their whole lives for a son. Finally, when it seemed to be too late and they had given up hope, God gave them Isaac. So it was certainly strange when God told Abraham to sacrifice his own son on the altar—not a metaphorical altar, mind you, but a real one with a real knife. We wonder what kind of God would ask for that from a father. It’s even more
shocking to see Abraham climbing up Mount Moriah ready to do the unthinkable. What kind of father is he? It was obviously difficult for Abraham. But the root question of this story has to do with the first commandment: Did Abraham have any gods before Yahweh? Had he taken this gift from God and given his son ultimate significance in his life? No.

God stopped Abraham from killing Isaac, but Abraham passed the test that the rich young man of Mark 10 would later fail.

One of the ways we know if a good thing has become an idol is by the impact it has on our lives. When good gifts become idols, they tend to spoil—they tend to become burdensome compulsions. That’s one of the major themes in the classic movie *Chariots of Fire*, the story of two real-life Olympic runners. Eric Liddell is a Christian, and Harold Abrahams is a secular Jew. Both run for Great Britain, but Abrahams runs for his own glory and is so afraid of losing that he can’t even take pleasure in winning. Running has become a compulsion, not a joy. Liddell, on the other hand, puts his call to serve and obey God first in his life. He shows his willingness to put God at the center of his life by refusing to run on Sunday. Yet, in contrast to Abrahams, Liddell actually runs with joy. At one point in the film he says, “God made me fast. When I run, I feel His pleasure.” When good things have their proper place in our lives, they bring us pleasure rather than pain.
EVALUATE YOUR LIFE

Occasionally, it’s important to step back from our lives and evaluate whether or not God is our true hub. Is He really first—not in the sense that there are other things on our list but in the sense that He’s the center of our existence? Someone made an acrostic out of the word “first” that might help us evaluate our own lives according to the first commandment.

**Focus.** What is your focus? What do you think about? What are you watching? What are you listening to? In Colossians Paul says to “set your minds on things above, not on earthly things” (Colossians 3:2).

**Income.** How do you spend your money? We tend to pour our dollars into things that are meaningful to us. Jesus put it this way: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). If someone were to evaluate what’s important to you based on your checkbook register or your online bank statement, what would that person conclude?

**Relationships.** Who influences your life? Who is in your inner circle? Who do you go to when you need some counsel? Perhaps even a better question is this: Who are you trying to please? Or this: Who are you trying to impress?

**Spiritual food.** How is your spiritual diet? What place does the Word of God really have in your life? Are you feasting on the Word of God on a regular basis? The apostle Peter said, “Like
newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk” (1 Peter 2:2). Does that describe you?

**Time.** How do you spend your time? We all need time for important relationships, time for work, and time for play. It’s amazing, though, how many hours we can spend doing things that really aren’t that necessary or important. Then, when it comes to the things of God, we say, “I don’t have time for that.” Scripture says, “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:15–16).

**THE PATH TO FREEDOM**

When I ask myself these questions, I quickly realize how often I fall short. Here’s my prescription: Simply run to Jesus. Instead of feeling guilty and burdened by your sin, confess your sin and remember God’s promise in Romans 8:1: “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

But don’t stop there. Take the next step and ask God to help you make some changes. If you know Christ, then the Holy Spirit lives within you, and the Holy Spirit doesn’t just convict you from the outside, He also helps and empowers you from the inside. Remember, the Ten Commandments are meant to enrich you, not to enslave you. You can yield to the Holy Spirit and begin to make God your only God. That’s the path to true freedom.