

EXODUS 20:1-3 2-18-18

God and God Alone

It was last week that we went up with Moses onto the top of Mt. Sinai, in the midst of thunder and lightning and fire and earthquake. There, surrounded by the external displays of God's dreadful majesty, we are privileged to hear the voice of God. **1-3** *Then God spoke all these words, saying, 2 "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 3 "You shall have no other gods before Me.* Today we look at the first of the Ten Commandments, but before we should do that it's important to give some attention to the preface of the 10 commandments which we find in verse **2** *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.* This is the brief preamble to the commandments, and is provided for us as a reminder of why we ought to obey what follows. And there are given in this short verse three reasons why God's people are to obey His law. God implies that we should listen and do because of who He is (the motivation of duty), because of who you are (the motivation of love) and because of what He has done (the motivation of gratitude).

Reason #1 for obedience is because of who God is. He says, *I am the Lord your God.* And He says it with thunder. He says it with a dramatic effect that would awaken the sleepest soul. He is reminding us of Who He is, the Creator and ruler of all, and why therefore, He has authority to command our obedience. The authority question is one that has to be answered. Whenever you lay down laws the question may arise, *who are you to tell me what to do?* That is a question that has always been asked, but what makes our day peculiar is that so few people seem to have an answer. In fact, it is the popular wisdom that nobody can tell you what to do. You are free to do whatever is right in your own eyes. The people who get applause on talk shows are the ones who say, *I'm doing what I'm doing because I want to and I don't care what anybody thinks.* And the only intolerable is intolerance. I grew up a major fan of the Peanuts comic strip. I never thought that I would like a strip more than Peanuts but that top spot in the cartoon corner of my heart was taken over around 1990 by Calvin and Hobbes. Sam Watterson who wrote the strip used little Calvin to caricature and ridicule some of our cultural values. Here's a strip in which he holds up a water balloon and listen to what he says. *In order to determine if there is any universal moral law beyond human convention, I have devised the following test. I will throw this water balloon at Susie Derkins unless I receive some sign within the next thirty seconds that this is wrong. It is in the universe's power to*

stop me. I'll accept any remarkable physical happenstance as a sign that I should not do this. He counts down thirty seconds, then proceeds to slam Susie with the water balloon. She chases him down and bashes him. Little Calvin says, “*Why does the universe always give you the sign after you do it?*” Folks, that cartoon is a study in miniature of western society. As a people we have challenged the notion of moral absolutes. We have stripped our schools of the Ten Commandments. We have shouted down our social conscience. We have said there is no empirical evidence of a moral order. So, we have broken loose of our traditional moral codes and done our own thing, followed the whims of passion and where have we ended up? Face down in the mud, covered with broken homes, overrun prisons, an epidemic of addictions and a twenty trillion dollar debt. History has always proven what the Bible has always taught that there is a moral law which you break to your own ruin.

That’s not difficult to see that, but the popular wisdom of our day, the motto of the cultural elite is that there are no absolutes, there is no universal moral law beyond human convention. The only absolute truth is that there is no absolute truth. Kids say it, professors say it. Apparently saying it makes them feel hip and intelligent but no one is willing to face the implications of it. When our country was founded there was an understanding that men are accountable to God. That God’s moral dominion gave order to human society. Men were endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights and were charged with certain undeniable responsibilities. But in the ascendancy of evolutionary theory and the practical atheism that followed we lost our moral bearing. God was removed from the equation, the Bible was put on a shelf, so that when men asked, “Who has a right to tell me what to do?” there was no answer to give. Dostoevsky said decades ago that if there is no God there can be no law. And he’s right. This is why in ancient societies kings typically claimed to be divine. It was considered the only basis of real authority. To teach morality without a theological grounding is ultimately impossible. To make sense of this world, to have a reliable moral compass we must have a God who is there and who has spoken. God begins His declaration of law by reminding us, *I am the Lord.*

Secondly, God reminds the people who they are. He does this by the word “your.” *I am your God* reminds the people that He has brought them into covenant relationship with Himself. They are not just any people, they are the people of God. They are to be a kingdom of priests, His special treasure among all the nations. Now this is important because it puts the commandments into a relational context. Human beings react differently to rules depending on who is handing them

down. Children are much less likely to rebel against parents who love them consistently. Students respond better for teachers who show they are concerned. My point is that when you know God and appreciate His love for you the burden of obedience is light. The Christian who really loves God and is thrilled with God's love for him doesn't chafe under God's command. Instead, he can say, "*Oh how I love thy law!*" Because he knows it comes from a heart of love. We aren't just obeying some rules, we are obeying a Friend, and a Father. When you look at God's law that way His burden is easy and His yoke is light. But, this fact also shows still more how awful sin is. When we break God's law we break His heart. We don't just break rules we break a relationship. Mr. Bruce Swain, from Virginia Beach, and his wife, Carmen, were sentenced to a year in jail for trafficking in cocaine. After she went to jail she found she was pregnant and Mr. Swain persuaded the judge to let him serve the rest of his wife's sentence. After six months in jail, Mr. Swain was released and went home to find his furnishings gone and a note from his wife that she was suing for divorce. Mr. Swain told the judge, "*She says she don't love me no more.*" John Newton once again, writes this: *The exceeding sinfulness of sin is manifested, not so much by its breaking through the restraint of threatenings and commands, as by its being capable of acting against light and against love* (Newton p.20 Letters). As He gives us his law God reminds us that we are His beloved and He is our God.

The third reason given for obeying His word is that of what He has done. In verse **2** God says, *I have redeemed you. I have brought you out of bondage and set you free.* The clear implication is that we obey Him, not to gain His favor, not to earn our deliverance, but to rightly respond to His grace and His salvation. God doesn't say, *here are the commandments, do these for 20 years and I'll set you free.* He redeems them first and then lays out His law as the way for the people to express their gratitude. Do you understand that? Do you know that you have not been and could not be rescued from sin by your own merit, or your own effort? Do you know that God has saved you already merely for His own pleasure and by His own unconditional love? Are you motivated to obey Him because you love Him for what He has done? Are you joyfully grateful and able to say with Paul, *The love of Christ constrains me?* Or do you labor under the false conception that you have to earn God's love, you have to perform to know His grace so that when you fail you are crushed and when you do well you still never know if you've done enough? If that is you I urge you to embrace the grace of God. Grace means you don't earn it, can't earn it. His salvation is freely given. And an obedient life is simply a thanksgiving unto your Savior and your God.

How does that make you feel? How does the doctrine of God's unconditional love affect your motivation? Far from undercutting it, when we grasp what God has done for us, when we see our Savior suffering on our behalf we are inspired beyond words. What a difference it makes to understand that the Lawgiver is your Redeemer, is the One who laid down His life for you! And the more you ponder that, the more you are filled with the truths of His grace, the greater your motivation to serve Him will be.

Those are the reasons provided in the preface for obeying God's law. He is the Lord, so we have a motivation of duty. We are His chosen people, His special treasure, so we have a motivation of love. He has redeemed us, so we have a motivation of gratitude.

Let's move quickly then to begin our look at the 10 commandments, beginning with what we have read from verse **3** *You shall have no other gods before Me*. As we break this down and apply it we should probably establish what is meant by the term "god." The Old Testament makes very plain that there is only one true God, but in the human world there are many things that we may relate to as a god. What the commandment forbids is the treating of anything or anybody as though it were God. What does that mean in specific? Four things at least. First of all, your god is what you believe to be the Supreme Being of the universe. Now, most all of you would say you believe that God is supreme. Over 90% in America say they believe in God and I have no reason to doubt it, but I do wonder what they mean by "God." They mean a higher power, a universal top dog of sorts but if you ask whether they believe in the god of Sinai or the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ you would get a much different survey. Many people hold in their minds such a misconstrued notion of the person and nature of God that it can only be called an "idol." He is a deity concocted in their own minds to meet their own needs. Are you guilty of that? Are you? Have you created a god in your own image? So many people say, "I like to think of God as...." and they tell you about the god they have invented, who bears little resemblance to the God of the Scriptures. In so doing you violate the first commandment.

Secondly, your god is what you worship or value. Regardless of what you may say you believe about a supreme being, the real god in your life is the one who receives your greatest praise and adoration. That may be another person, a man or woman you admire. For many it may be a child that you adore. Some express their devotion via posters on their walls of athletes or musicians. Possibly that is an example of idolatry. And there are many subtle ways to worship

something other than God, to treat it with the highest veneration, higher than you would give to the true God.

Thirdly, your god is what or whom you think will make you happy. If you believe anything has the power to satisfy and fulfill you then you have made it a god. Many look to their spouse, both real and imagined, as a god who alone can meet all their needs. Many look to vocational success and the material gain that goes with it as the key to their happiness. These are gods you have enthroned in your own mind and heart. And don't keep thinking I'm talking about other people here. I'm talking about you and me. To some extent all of us have looked somewhere except to heaven for satisfaction in life. We have all put non-gods in the place only God deserves. For example, Philippians 3:19 speaks of people whose god is their belly, or their appetite. Ouch! You know what that means don't you? Many of us worship at the altar of sensual pleasure, the delights of good food, erotic delights, and a comfy bed. Substances of various sorts, legal or otherwise, become gods in a bottle for millions of people. What are you looking to for happiness? What are you trusting in to meet your needs?

Fourthly, your god is what you look to for guidance. Who are you listening to, what are you reading? That will tell you something about your god. Some common forms of idolatry include the consultation of palm readers, ouija boards, psychics, and horoscopes. Now these are no problem for me, we geminis aren't taken in by that kind of thing. But millions of people are and when you dally in these things you are into stuff that is strictly forbidden by scripture and is an expression of an idolatrous heart, instead of looking for guidance and wisdom to the Lord who has spoken so sweetly and powerfully in His word.

You shall have no other gods before Me. Now, make sure you don't confuse the meaning of those two words, "before Me." God is not here saying that it's okay to have other gods as long as He is tops. He's saying that you should have no other gods besides Him. What we have in the first commandment is God's claim to the exclusive devotion of His people. That is the heart of the command. God is calling for our exclusive devotion, meaning that nobody and nothing is to rival His place of preeminence in our lives. The great Shema, the John 3:16 of Judaism is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 *Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.* There is to be no division of loyalty, no dividing up of your loves and allegiance. God is to have 100%. This is what set apart Biblical religion from everything else in the ancient world. In the time of Moses the

popular notion was that there were all kinds of gods out there, and the favorite idea was that each region of the earth had a distinct deity. There was the god of the desert and the god of the sea and the god of Egypt and so on. So widespread was this notion that when the Israelites claimed their God to be the only God it was viewed as bizarre and preposterous. No other ancient religious or moral code had anything like the first commandment in it. Nowhere but Scripture offers this clarion call to an exclusive loyalty to One Supreme Being. And it was a call that was repeated and strengthened by the teaching of Jesus. Jesus said to us Matthew 6:**24a** *No one can serve two masters.* Note, He doesn't say you shouldn't do it, He says you can't do it. **24** *No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.* You can't be devoted to Christ and to your own pursuit of riches. These are mutually exclusive because Jesus demands your whole being. If He is your Master then His will must be the priority in your heart.

Understand, then and now, nobody really minds if you want to worship God. Few are bothered by your devotion to Jesus. What gets to them and offends them is exclusive devotion to Jesus and your refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of other faiths and other loyalties. In the first century the Romans put no one to death for worshipping Christ. It was okay to say *Jesus is Lord*, the conflict came in their refusal to say *Caesar is Lord* too. You see the world, both then and now, is most often syncretistic. It allows for the mixture of many religions and philosophies. When the people of Israel fell away from the Lord and began to worship idols in Palestine they never stopped the worship of God. They didn't just change religions, they took on new ones. And in their eyes they were just becoming more religious. In God's eyes they were committing spiritual adultery and judgment followed.

Let's talk about that idea of spiritual adultery. In the book of Exodus, God is establishing a covenant with the people of Israel that was not unlike a marriage covenant. As we speak to outsiders about salvation in Jesus, I think it is good to describe it as we would a marriage. Becoming a Christian is making vows with Jesus. Similar in Exodus. God was saying, "I will be Your husband and take you as My bride." Now, when couples are married what is the understanding? I mean, if your wife were to marry you and continue to see other men how would you feel? Not too good. You would say that is wrong, that is adultery because she vowed that "forsaking all others she would cling to you alone." Right? I know a young man who was not a Christian but went to a pastor for premarital counseling, and this pastor, from a mainline Protestant

church, suggested to him and his fiancé that they consider having an open marriage. And he wasn't talking about honesty. He was throwing out the idea of their agreeing to let each other see and have relations with other men and women. My non-Christian friend and his fiancé walked out on the pastor. And I suggest you walk out on any pastor who suggests to you that it may be okay for you to worship God and...to be devoted to Jesus but also to who knows what else, money, success, pleasure, or some other great religious leader. God expects the same exclusive devotion as a husband or wife would receive. And when His people who are pledged to Him fail to give it He calls it adultery. Hosea 4:**12** (NLT) *They ask a piece of wood for advice! They think a stick can tell them the future! Longing after idols has made them foolish. They have played the prostitute, serving other gods and deserting their God.* This is why God brought judgment upon the people and many were killed and others exiled. Ezekiel 6:**9** *Then those of you who escape will remember Me among the nations to which they will be carried captive, how I have been hurt by their adulterous hearts which turned away from Me, and by their eyes which played the harlot after their idols.* What an amazing statement! Our God is high above us but He uses human language to help us understand Him and here He says our spiritual adulteries, our devotion to other things, hurts Him. And let me tell ya, it hurts us worse. God calls Himself a jealous God. In fact, he does so in Exodus 20:5. I would never do it, but God does compare Himself to a jealous husband. Is it good to be jealous? In a sense it is. You married men and ladies are right to be protective of your relationship. A friend of mine named Ray, who is a pastor, mentioned in a sermon that his wife who liked to jog got an invitation from a man in the neighborhood to start running with him. Ray wasn't a jogger and his wife was open to having the company so she asked him if it would be okay. What do you think? Should you let your wife jog with another man? Ray's response was this: *Over my fat, dead body!* You may differ with Ray on that but I hope you see that a certain jealousy, a guarding of your special relationship is proper and godly.

Now, hey, if God is protective of His relationship to us, surely we ought to be. We have more to lose than He does. God has offered Himself to us. He has said we will be His special treasure, His bride, upon condition of exclusive devotion. Now I ask, what could possibly be worth risking that relationship? That relationship is eternal life, that relationship is everything to the Christian. As a result we want to guard our hearts against anything which threatens our intimacy with God. Even nice things. Okay things. Think about what that means. If you find yourself attracted to someone at work who is not your spouse what should you do? You stay away from him or her. Even if you

come across as rude, love for your spouse requires you to zealously protect your heart. Now apply that to our relationship with God. When you find yourself getting more concerned about your business than your soul, when you find yourself getting more intense about your softball league than your prayer life, when your love for the Penguins rivals your love for Jesus then it's time for a heart check and a pulling away from those things. What is it for you? Is it a relationship? Dan DeHaan, a great Bible teacher now in heaven, once said that he viewed every attractive woman he met as a potential rival of Jesus. You say, *that's paranoid!* Right, Matt Lauer wasn't paranoid like that. Bill Cosby wasn't paranoid like that. No, I think that's a man who knew his own heart and valued his soul. Where is the challenge for you? Is it alcohol? Are you deceiving yourself about the place it has in your heart? Is it gambling or some other adrenaline rush? When I was 18 years old I was into gambling. I wasn't losing money, I was winning money, but God showed me one night that it was wrong for me to get so wrapped up, so intense about anything but Him. For you it may be something sensual, or the pursuit of wealth, it may be some hobby, it may be your dream house, or it may be your own family. You are so committed to your kids, and that's good but you have to watch your heart to make sure those kids don't jump onto the throne of your life. If you are ready to be challenged as a Christian parent read the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22. We can all read the comments of Tozer in the Pursuit of God, the chapter entitled, "The Blessedness of Possessing Nothing." Tozer says, *The man who has God for his treasure has all things in One. Whatever he may lose he has actually lost nothing for he now has it all in One, and he has it purely, legitimately and forever.*

Understand that when we give ourselves fully to God He directs us to take care of our marriage and our kids and our business and our bodies. Being wholly devoted to God doesn't mean you neglect these things it just means you care for them all as unto Christ and for His glory. That is where your discipleship starts. That is where morality begins. God goes on in His big ten to talk about your parents and your spouse and your neighbor and your property, but if you want to do right you start with God, you give your heart fully to Him. You allow no other gods into your life and you love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul and mind and strength. Such a thing as this is impossible on our own. So, we cry out to God for grace to trust His promise, to keep His word, to live in the power of His Spirit. Let's pray for that now.