

**LET'S GET SERIOUS ABOUT HOLINESS**  
**The Ten Commandments**  
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Exodus 20. We're going to be here this evening and the next four Sunday nights as we look at the Ten Commandments. Some of our feeling of holiness is conditioned by the use of the word in religious history. I've tried to redefine holiness for my own well being and scriptural understanding to simply be a word that expresses wholesomeness and healthiness. God's holiness is always wholesome and always healthy. We live in the midst of very unwholesome and unhealthy lifestyles in this world. People who are broken by their violation of God's laws of mental and spiritual and ethical health. When you break those laws, just like you break physical laws and bodily laws, you suffer consequences. God's commandments call us to a wholesomeness in our life.

In looking at the Ten Commandments and the need for them I was struck by Smede's way he begins his book on the Ten Commandments. He draws an illustration from "Fiddler on the Roof." The play begins with Tevye sitting on a steep roof playing the fiddle. Smede says that man is all of us trying to make some meaningful music out of our lives but lacking a level place to stand on. We're all fiddlers on the roof trying to scratch out a pleasant little tune without falling down and breaking our neck. How do we keep our balance? Says Tevye. "I'll tell you. In one word I'll tell you: tradition. Because of our tradition everybody knows who he is and what God expects him to do."

There is a value to tradition but even more valuable that our cultural tradition is the tradition that the scripture gives to us. The commandments certainly give us a level place to stand on as we try to keep our balance in a world that has a pitched roof.

Before we look specifically at the first two commandments, and it will be our purpose each evening to take two commandments as we move through this series, I want to ask some introductory questions about the commandments.

Are these commandments for now? We live in the New Testament age. The new has swallowed up the old and rules of interpreting the scripture that the new interprets the old, therefore what possible relevance does the Ten Commandments have for today? Are they for today?

When you look at the commandments you know what a topsy-turvy world it would be if the commandments were stated in reverse. If we took the opposite and proclaimed it as truth. For example: Worship any and every god you want or none at all. All gods are manmade. There is nothing sacred, not even god's name. Give god none of your time. It's not necessary to honor your parents. It's ok to kill. It's ok to commit adultery. It's ok to steal. It's ok to lie. It's ok to desire and to attempt to get your best friend's house, wife, property or anything else that's his.

What a wild world this would be if the commandments were lived in reverse.

Aren't they?

The commandments are called the Decalog has to do with our relationship to other people really protects the right of life, fundamental human rights. The right of life. The right of family,

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especially the children-parent relationship and the wife-husband relationship. The right to hold property. The right to communicate. If we introduce lying into communication it destroys our ability to honestly communicate with one another. So the commandments are really given to preserve fundamental human rights.

Law is always necessary to freedom. You never have freedom unless you have law and discipline. If you don't believe you need law and discipline, try playing tennis without any boundaries or net. It would be a crazy, nonsense game without some kind of parameters.

The same way would be if there were no rules for driving on the freeway. You'd just get on wherever you wanted to get on and go whichever way you wanted to go.

There would be no freedom if there were no rules. So the commandments are given because they preserve fundamental human freedoms. Without them life really does go awry.

A second question that arises about the commandments is Don't the commandments reflect an Old Testament God? This question comes perhaps as the result of the fact that we are always working with the heresy that the God of the Old Testament is the Old Testament God and the God of the New Testament is a different God. That's not true at all and we know that. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the God who revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses all the patriarchs, the lawgiver, the deliverers and the prophets and kings. In fact the only commandment modified in the New Testament is the fourth commandment, the commandment regarding Sabbath keeping. As we come to that commandment later in this series we'll talk more specifically how the New Testament modifies that commandment. But all the other commandments are spoken of and adhered to and kept within the New Testament.

In fact, we know from Jesus' own personal example that he kept the law. He's without sin, he fully kept the law. He approves the rich young ruler for having kept the second part of the law where Jesus quotes to him the last six commandments. The young man says, All these I have observed from my youth. He approves the man for that.

When Jesus is asked what the greatest command is by the scribe, he responds from the law, summarizing the law the two parts of the Decalogue – love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself. All the commandments can be reduced to these.

If anything Jesus intensifies the law. The law of Moses that God gave on Sinai had to do with outer actions. Jesus moves the law into an inner intent so that no longer is a person simply judged by what they do. But a person is held accountable before God for the meditative process and the consent process that brings in the wrong act. In fact all the fruit of the Spirit and the Beatitudes and the behavioral characteristics of Christian love really flow out of a base of understanding the law because Christian love goes beyond the law. Law tells us what we are not to do but love picks up beyond that and takes us a step in addition and shows us what we may and can do beyond the law.

It is true in the Christian life that we are always more ready for God to do something to us than for God to do something in us. The children of Israel were quite glad that God had done something for them in bringing them out of Egypt. But God knew if they were to keep their

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freedom he would need to do something more than that which was for them. He would need to do something in them. That is the purpose of the law.

One writer has said it took God one night to bring Israel out of Egypt but it took 40 years to take Egypt out of Israel. I think it probably took a little bit longer than that.

God wants to do something in us. To say that the law is that which is related to the Old Testament has no application to the New Testament believer is to misunderstand the law. This then brings us to the third vital question as introduction to the law.

What is the purpose of this law anyway?

It seems to me that as we look at both the Old and the New Testament we find four purposes for the law and I'm sure there are more than these but it seems that these are the highlights. First, the law tells us of God. God gives us commandments which are expression of the quality of his own life. These describe how God himself lives and sees himself. Part of the understanding of the believer is that God gives us the opportunity to be made in his image. Therefore the law reflects the person and character of God. In terms of his identity there is only one God but also in terms of God's moral nature. Here is where therefore the law that came through Moses so substantially differs from other kinds of religious practices of the Canaanite world which portray a God such as Baal and other Canaanite gods that were so lacking in moral and ethical dimensions. The law therefore is a reflection of God himself begins to tell us about him. And people do become like the gods they serve.

So in giving us the law God is nudging us in the direction of where his personality is.

The second purpose of the law is to tell us what God expects of us. There are requirements given. In Romans 1 in going back over the law it tells us that God has expected that we worship him alone and that that worship then conditions our moral relationships. When we therefore abandon our worship toward God it affects our morality so that everything becomes acceptable. The law reminds us and tells us specifically what God expects of us. Therefore it is not the ten suggestions. The ten hints. The ten helps to a better life. It's the Ten Commandments

The third thing is it creates within us the need for God's grace. Once we realize what the law expects of us and we attempt to faithfully keep the law we find that we do not. Paul in fact says that the more he meditated on the Ten Commandments thou shalt not covet the more covetous came into his life. There is a sense that as we seek to become obedient to God's law, we break God's law and we find that we're then in need of God's grace.

I like what someone has said about the ark of the covenant. A little wooden cedar box overlaid with gold that was kept in the holy place. The holy of holies. Inside of it was the law and on top of it was called the mercy seat where the blood once a year on the Day of Atonement was applied by the high priest. Someone has said that in God his justice, his law and his mercy are in equal proportions but in the mercy seat he visually represents to us that he elevates his mercy over his justice.

The law makes us realize we have failed to meet God's standard and therefore are in need of God's grace. The law therefore is our tutor. Paul says in Galatians 3:24 that the law is our

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schoolmaster, guardian, tutor – the one that gets us ready for the full revelation of the grace of Jesus Christ.

The fourth thing that the law does for us is it prepares us for the way of love. Love really does not need law. Law is a sort of a fence. I many times think of love and law in this fashion. When I talk to a couple who is having difficulty in marriage, the commandment in regard to divorce is sort of like the fence that is on the parameter of the corral. When things are going well within a marriage you're not worried about where the fence is that talks about divorce. It's as if the fence doesn't exist. But it's when love begins to diminish and you begin moving apart from one another that you find yourself sooner or later at a fence. The fence is saying you've gone far enough. Don't jump over this. Stay within this parameter. This is a safety point.

If I am deeply another person's friend I don't have to worry about whether I'm going to cheat them out of something that's theirs. But it's when I get into enmity with them that I say, They've got lots. It wouldn't hurt if I took a little.

Law is sort of the limit. When we learn where the limit is then we can begin to move in toward the center where love will keep us. Jeremiah 31 prophecies "The time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them declares the Lord. This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time declares the Lord. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people. The coming of Jesus Christ into our lives allows God to write his law very large in our heart and cause us to go beyond the negatives of the law the thou shalt nots to experience the thou shalt.

With this introduction behind us let's take some moments to look at the first two commandments.

The first commandment begins with a preface statement, "God spoke all these words. 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.'" Then the commandment is given: You shall have no other gods before [or it could be translated beside] me." Exodus 20:1-2.

The first commandment as are all the other commandments are rooted in the character and the essence of God in two fundamental truths are given to us as an anchor to the first commandment and the succeeding nine following. The two fundamental truths in the first verse are the beginning of God and secondly the revelation of God in history. God grounds his commandments in his being. He says "I am the Lord your God."

If you look at that in a modern translation the word "Lord" is in all caps. Whenever you find that in a modern translation it means that the Hebrew word that underlies it is a word that has four consonants – it's *yhwh*. God's covenant name *yhwh* which in many of the older English translations is simply rendered in the English Jehovah. Yahweh. The name Yahweh itself occurs 6823 times in the Old Testament. It's God's name for himself. The common name of the Semitic people for God was Elohim. That occurs about 2700 times in the Old Testament. But when God wants to reveal himself and his special relationship to his people he uses this word Yahweh. Or Jehovah.

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The word *yhwh* is connected to the Hebrew verb which means “to be.” It’s the name by which God reveals himself to Moses. God say I am who I am, I be who I be. I will be who I will be. That is I have the right to define myself. Any other term for me which defines me does not express me because I have, as God, the sole prerogative of declaring to you who I will be. And God’s being is a matter of revelation and action.

The sacred name of Yahweh became so sacred to the Jews that even to this day that this name is never pronounced. If you’re in a synagogue service today and you’re reading along in the liturgy in the Hebrew Bible and you come to the word *yahweh* you will hear the rabbi or the congregation use the other term – *addonai*. Which is the word Lord.

The scribes who worked on copying and preserving the Old Testament by the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. they had refined their respect of the name of Yahweh to a regular ritual. His name was held so sacred that every time before a scribe would take his pen and inscribe *yhwh* in the new copy of the scripture that was being made he would retire to his chambers, bathe, and put on clean clothes before continuing with his work. This meant in the 33<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Jeremiah a total of 39 baths. In Deuteronomy 28 it was a total of 40 baths. One should be in a state of cleanness, total cleanness, before addressing God, before writing his name.

We have a lot to learn about respect for God. When you see how people have treated God’s name with respect you’ll understand why a person who walks with the Lord for a number of years has an ear tuned to expressions that use the name of God in an altered sense. Such as slang word that substitutes a term for God.

Those scribes went a little overboard. We respect the name of God not by refraining from using it but by using the name of God to be our help. The Lord is my helper, the Lord is my strength. But there is respect. God has the sole right to define who he is.

The second thing about this first verse is not only does it tell us but the being of God that God alone has the right to tell us who he is and no one of us can tell God who he is. But secondly, in the Bible, the revelation of God always comes in history. God says, You know that I’m God because I’m the one who led you out of Egypt. That makes biblical faith different from all other expressions of religious faith. Other people may have a philosophical idea of God but we who are in the Judaic Christian faith understand that God has revealed himself in concrete historical events. The greatest event in the Old Testament is the Exodus and the greatest event in the New Testament is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And God reveals himself in those events and shows us who he is, what his personality is like.

That fact that God has disclosed himself in history means that he has the right to speak to us and it means also that when he speaks we must seek to obey what he lays down for us. This first commandment simply means that God is. It means that God is who he says he is. It means that only one God is. And that one God has revealed himself as Father, Son and Spirit. This one God asks for and demands exclusive worship.

Luther said it well. “Whatsoever the heart clings to and relies upon that is properly thy God.” So God calls us to cling to and rely upon him.

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When we understand that there is only one God we come to look at the gods of our day and in our society most of you are not tempted worshipping the God of Islam. Where we are tempted is in gods such as humanism, the belief that man is sufficient and is the pilot of his own ship. The god of hedonism which simply says live for pleasure. Pleasure is the highest and greatest good and you'll never come out wrong if you just live for pleasure. Or the God of materialism. I must have things and I must have money. Lives are sacrificed to materialism or Marxism which advocates the obliteration of private property in order that the working man may redistribute the capital and all might selflessly give themselves toward one another.

The problem with Marxism is it does not take seriously enough the evil in men's heart. That men are not as unselfish as Marx hoped they would be.

Or the God of neilism which simply says everything is coming down. The world is closing down. Despair. There is no hope.

We see these expressions in so many ways. These five things in the world in which we live. Scripture is saying to us there is only one God and these are not the way. God is the God who's revealed himself to us in the scripture and through history and through our own personal history.

This brings us to the second commandment which is the commandment forbidding the making of any idol. "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or in earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them for I the Lord your God am a jealous God punishing the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me. But showing love to thousands who love me and keep my commandments."

We all come to understand that it is God's revelation in the Old Testament that more than anything smote the world's concept of worshipping something that was made out of metal or wood or of man's hands. Here is where the truth of the Bible has made a universal impact. Whether one is a Christian or a Jew the educated world has come to understand the meaninglessness of created gods. In fact, Paul in coming to Mars hill at Athens simply slays the whole concept of idolatry by taking one of the images that was made to the unknown God and says this one is the one I'll declare to you, the one you don't know. Athens, an intellectual center, was filled with gods, false gods. We don't see that so much today. Most of our idols in western society are not metal; they are mental. That's where our problem with imaging is.

Really the whole concept of idol is imaging, imaging something to be God or to be attained and put on priority above God. Some have difficulty with the concept of hell. They're attempting to make the image of God and the personality of God, boil it down to what someone else's expectations of God might be.

You can't define God by the concept of your own fatherhood. Rather than letting God be larger than your concept of fatherhood you have limited him to your sphere of understanding and God may not choose to be captured within your definition of the term. False Gods.

J. B. Phillips book talks about modern images of God, mental images of God which are false. He has about ten of them. These gods will keep you from understanding and appreciating the one true God.

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The resident policeman god. The God who walks the beat and has a thunderstick and a gun. You step out of line and bang. He is an overexacting tyrant ready to crush you. How many people live with this concept? The god who is angry and walking the beat and ready to knock you up the side of the head.

Parental hangover. This is the idea of projecting the imagery of our own earthly father unto God as heavenly Father. I've talked with people who say, I find it very difficult to say in prayer, our Father, because of the father I had on earth. I say don't do that. But when you say "Our Father," think of him of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. You can be sure that he had a good Father. We see God in the same terms we may see our parents in and if we've had an inadequate or defective model of parenting we must be careful lest we project that onto God.

The grand old man. And emphasis maybe on the word *old*. God of eternity. We must be careful that we see him in terms other than the tottering old man who is barely holding on to his throne.

The meek and mild god. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild. The soft and syrupy and sentimental God.

The absolute perfection god is another false mental image. God cannot be interested in me unless I'm a hundred percent. If I slip to 98% he's through with me. The prodigal would be out in left field if that were the case. The prodigal was not 100% but God was still interested in him.

The heavenly bosom image from the gospel song, "Let me to thy bosom fly." It's the escapist view of God. There is a legitimate sense of course in which God is our refuge. But we have a false imagery and understanding of God if simply see faith in him as an escape. Where we cloister ourselves away from life in this world and the problems that God with it.

The god in a box. This is where we've got God characterized by our own particular theological understanding or ecclesiastical tradition or denominational background. The God of our denomination. Or sometimes this is even expressed as God in caricature.

Some come from a background where the view of Jesus is not in anyway like the biblical view of Jesus. Therefore a caricature of Jesus is formed in the mind as something he is when in fact he's not that at all. You will never know God until you're willing to wipe out that caricature and consider the evidence as he presents it. That's why the Nazareth people rejected Jesus. They had him in a box. They knew who he was. So when he began acting like God and speaking like God they couldn't accept that because what he was doing and what he was saying didn't fit within their caricature of what God was. God in a box.

Another mental idol is Managing Director. God's up there sort of running things and has no personal involvement.

The Second Hand God. The God about whose opinions we have gained from listening to other people rather than a direct encounter with him through the scripture.

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Perennial Grievance. The person who says I trusted God once but he let me down. I counted on him but he didn't appear to me when I needed him. He let me down. In a crunch you can't really trust him. When in fact, God may through some denial have been intending for us to emerge from that denial into something far better and stronger than if we had what we asked for.

The Pale Galilean view of Jesus. Jesus as pale-faced, weakly image. If I were to imagine Jesus in a visual form I would see him as a person of tremendous vitality. The scripture is wise with never giving us a pictorial representation because if we glue into just that we miss out on all the rest he might be.

The Projected Image of God – God's just like me. Therefore when we project our own image on God it's easy to see the wrong in others but we miss the blind spots in us.

What the Lord does through this second commandment is call us to throw out our false god's. whether we've made a God out of pleasure, our house, particular rules we live with, recreation, work or family or children. Whatever takes our fundamental priority is our God.

Paul shows us in Romans 1 when we abandon true worship of God we make up images and wind up with confused relationships.

Why is it important to put away false images of God? Two reasons, one is we need to put away the false image if we're going to have the true image. We must let God reveal himself to us who he will be. I find if I want a true image of God it's most helpful for me to go to the scriptures and read the names of God that are there. To take a passage like Isaiah which speaks of him as wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace. To see Jesus as the good shepherd. To see him as the light of the world. To see him as the resurrection and the life. To take those terms which bear witness to God in the scripture and let my understanding and knowledge of God proceed out of who he really is.

I had a 10 year old of our church ask me "How can I know God loves me?" We have the scripture giving us an accurate understanding of who God is. I shared with her John 3:16 and said every time you wonder if God loves you come back to that verse and put your name in there. Over the course of the conversation we talked about a number of different things that had to do with the similar issue: does God know me? Does God understand me? Is God aware of me? Does God love me? And the false images would say no. But the true image says yes. We need the true image of God.

The opponents of Jesus never got a true image. That's why they opposed him. They had a mental image of the kingdom that was false. A mental image of the king that was false.

The second thing that a true image of God will do for us is it will give us a proper view of ourselves.

The reason we do not want a false image of God is we will live by our images. Whom we will consider God to be that is how we will live. Since part of our understanding of the gospel is that Christ has come to make us into the image of God that has burned the personality of God within our lives. It is critical for us to have the correct understanding of who God is so that we might rise to the understanding of who we are in Christ.

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How do you understand and see God? Do you live with false images of God? Or do you seek by reading the scripture, by listening to the preached word, and by listening to the testimonies of people who have encountered God to live with God as he truly is?

These two commandments, Worship God alone, and Don't have false images of God are the beginning of foundations in our life and will bring us into a vital experience with God.

Our Father, we come now Lord to some moments of introspection and prayer. We want to thank you that we have you to worship and serve. There are so many people around us that do not know you. Whose only reference to you is in a curse, who do not reverence you as the God of creation and the God of redemption. We're grateful that because you've revealed yourself to us and taken the initiative we have the privilege of knowing you. Help us to look within our lives and see Lord, if we are reverencing you alone as God. Especially when it comes to our security. Do we really trust you to take care of us? I want to trust you. I want to trust you with all my heart because it's so easy to look at health and the ability to earn money as a means of our security. Lord, you are our security. You are the rock on which we stand. There may be within this audience be people who most recently had jobs lost and income cut and their concern right now is where their support is going to come from. It's in times like this that we can learn to rely upon you. And discover anew that you the Lord God will never leave us or forsake us. I have never seen the righteous forsaken nor his seed begging bread. There are many other tempting gods that attract young people. Gods that call us to be accepted and therefore to sacrifice and compromise what we know to be true. The thirst for popularity that will cause us to surrender our beliefs and ideals. Lord, in our hearts we pray to reverence you as God and give you total loyalty in our life, even if that means at times taking stands and saying things that may be misunderstood or not accepted by others. Thank you Lord that you revealed yourself to us. Take our understandings of you, the false idols and replace that with the understanding that while you are righteous yet you are long-suffering and full of compassion and complete in forgiveness and love. Lord, we seek the restoration which you can truly bring when you reveal yourself to our life. Teach us to stay away from the false gods. Lord, because of you we are everything in you. You are our strength. You are the one who makes us able. If you are for us who can be against us. In you we can go on from triumph to triumph. Save us from a defeated understanding of you and of ourselves which would drive us away from realizing the full potential you have for us as people. Thank you for your love for us and for the blessing of your life given to us. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.