

The Ten Commandments of Love

Preface

Does the Christian world need another book on the Ten Commandments? I doubt it. Great and godly Christian writers have been writing books for twenty centuries, and the Ten Commandments aren't exactly niche.

Then why this book? Quite simply, I knew it would be good for me, and I thought it could be edifying to some of the Lord's people. The discipline of writing will help me be more articulate on this fundamental portion of Scripture, and a closer inspection of these ten laws could help some saints love God and neighbor more - they are laws of love.

This book is little more than the output of sermons preached to Sovereign Redeemer Community Church in Youngsville, NC in the first half of 2020. Preaching those sermons helped me. I trust hearing those sermons helped our church. And I hope you are refreshed, encouraged, and maybe occasionally reproved by the book.

As the preaching and writing has progressed, I am more and more aware of how much more could be very profitably said. Those looking for a comprehensive commentary will be disappointed. I know that, but I hope to have approached the heart of the matter with each commandment in a helpful, useful, and memorable way. However much you choose to read of it, I hope it enriches you.

Chapter 1 The Bible's Framework for the Commandments

Launching immediately into a commandment by commandment study is a recipe for failure, because it leads so naturally to *moralizing*. Instead, the better approach is to *erect a biblical framework* for an overall understanding of what the Ten Commandments *are* and *aren't*. Otherwise, it too easily becomes "Do this," "Don't do that," "Work harder," "Stay away from more." And with that mentality, we either crumble under the weight of the never-ending requirements, or we never grasp the truth that we haven't actually obeyed the commands at all. Not as we should have. Not from the heart. So the right beginning point is to build a framework from how the Bible itself positions the law of God.

Let's begin with the number one principle of Bible interpretation: The Bible interprets the Bible. Matthew Henry is wonderful, eminently quotable, and the preacher's friend, but the best commentary on Scripture is *always* Scripture. So we will begin with Jesus, the center and pinnacle of Scripture. Often the words of Jesus get to the heart of things even better than

other portions of Scripture. That doesn't make His words more true than other places in Scripture, but Jesus *is* the Word, and He is the ultimate revelation of God.

I would like to draw out six texts of Scripture to erect our framework. Five of the six will be from the New Testament, but I want you to know that all the points could have been made from six Old Testament texts, or from six New Testament texts, making exactly the same points. The whole Bible presents a *unified perspective* on the law of God. The whole Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, Old Testament and New, presents a unified perspective on the law. What is the law of God? The whole Bible agrees on the answer to that question. What can the law of God *do* and *not do*? The whole Bible agrees on the answers to those questions too. So pitting Old Testament against New is a fool's errand. Pitting Moses against Jesus is a fool's errand, because Moses was simply Jesus' mouthpiece for the Old Testament law.

1. The first text for erecting our framework is Matthew 22:34-40.

34 But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. 35 Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, 36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" 37 Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Jesus is teaching that **the law makes it clear what it means to truly love God and to love people**. The question put to Jesus is which is the great commandment in the law. Which is the foremost commandment? Which one is the most important? Which is the most representative of what God desires when he commands people, requiring certain things of his creatures? In answer, Jesus simply quotes Deuteronomy 6:5. This is another reason why it is madness to pit Moses against Jesus. Jesus quotes Moses because Moses was inspired by God to give the law. It isn't Moses' law. It is God's law given through Moses. Jesus is God. He is quoting Himself! Then, as the second greatest commandment, Jesus quotes Leviticus 19:18b, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." So Jesus quotes the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19. He is not overthrowing anything. He is *framing* how we ought to think about the law. Jesus is erecting a framework through which we view how to truly love God and people.

Jesus makes this breathtaking statement: "On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." That means I don't understand any commandment - I'm ignorant of every commandment - until I understand how it is an expression of love. Until I understand how the keeping of a commandment is an expression of love, I don't understand it at all. This is intensely *internal*. This is law-keeping according to Jesus. It is an expression of something which begins in the heart. *Affection in the heart*, the starting point of all true law-keeping.

This is the structure which Jesus gives us. Commandments show us how to express love for God, or to express love for people. And this is actually easily discernible in the Ten

Commandments. The first four have to do, primarily, with loving God, and the final six have to do, primarily, with loving people.

So in 1 John 5:3, when John says, “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.” - John is only affirming what Jesus taught. Think about that. Keeping the commandments is an expression of genuine affection in the heart for God, and therefore it is not burdensome. And real love is not identified by profession, but by demonstration. Real love expresses itself by the keeping of the commandments. Real love leaves tracks. So the commandments aren't burdensome to the believer, because obeying them is simply *loving God*. When put it in those terms, it ceases to be a burden.

Now, how do we think of this? We have warm feelings towards it, don't we? We cheer Jesus on for His answer. Which is the great commandment? Love God. Which is the second? Love people. No wonder we have warm feelings towards those answers! Who doesn't want more love? Who doesn't want to become more loving?

But our unconquerable problem is this: Jesus says my love for God must be *all consuming*. All my heart. All my soul. All my mind. Affection at full intensity in every part of my being. It cannot be played at. It is full-on love. In another place, Jesus says, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.” (Luke 14:26). Now, is Jesus overthrowing the rest of Scripture, which says you should actually honor and love your father and mother? No, Jesus isn't not overthrowing. It is *comparative*. If the affection in your heart for your father, your mother, your wife, your children, your brothers, your sisters, is on the *same plane* with your affection for God, your love for God fails the test. You are not a disciple! You cannot be.

The affection of your heart, for the God in heaven who made you, must be so preeminent, it must so clearly have the place of honor, that *by comparison*, your love for your spouse seems like hatred. This might as well be Deuteronomy 6 again - all the heart, all the soul, all the mind. An *all consuming* love is the standard for loving God. How can I stand against this standard? It is all well and good to say the great commandment is to love God. But when the standard for loving God is that it must be full-on love in every part of my being, and then I compare myself to that standard, I'm a million miles away. And so are you. That, friends, is our problem. So I understand coming to Jesus' answer and having warm feelings about it. I do want more love. And I do want to become more loving. But understand the problem, the unconquerable problem. The standard is all consuming love, and so often, you know that your heart is cold and hard.

And my love for people has to rise to the level of the love I have for myself, which hardly ever takes a break. I find myself so self-loving, so self-serving. But the standard is to love my next door neighbor that way, love my siblings that way, love my co-workers that way, love my spouse that way, even love strangers that way. Oh, my love for all of those categories of people falls so far short of the *intensity* and *persistence* of my self-love! I can't stand against that standard.

Those standards create a devastating problem for me. Love God. Yes, that sounds like a good idea. Okay, love Him with all the heart, soul and mind. Oh. Love neighbor. Yes. We all want to live in a world of love. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Oh. We have a massive problem.

So what does the law do? It *defines* and *describes* love in *concrete terms*. If your idea of love doesn't transcend a sentiment which may or may not work its way outward, you aren't talking about Bible love. Sentiment which goes nowhere doesn't meet the standard for Bible love. Bible love is defined and described in concrete terms. The Ten Commandments simply command us to love, so breaking them is actually a failure to love. It is a violation against love, either not loving God or not loving your neighbor, and often it is both, all rolled into one.

2. The second text for erecting our framework is Deuteronomy 10:12-13.

12 "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes which I command you today for your good?"

In each one of these six texts, there are many very profitable things being passed over to simply focus on a few points which are relevant for the task at hand, and such is the case here, as I pass over everything else to get to the final phrase, "His statutes which I command you today *for your good*."

The commandments are for our good. ***The law is our friend, not our enemy.*** These are God's laws, and what He requires of us actually reflects His *kind intentions* towards us. The law is not our enemy. It is for our good. Our appetite for sin is the problem, not the law.

Think about the garden. God creates. There is no inclination in His creatures - in Adam and Eve - towards sin. They were completely free to obey, and completely free from an inclination towards disobedience. The command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was *for their good*. In the garden narrative we learn that God is not holding us back *from* good things, He is holding us back *for* good things. But we have to train our minds to think that.

What happened in the garden? "It's beautiful fruit." "It's desirable to make me wise." "I'm being held back from something good." "God is stingy and is holding out on me." Eve believed that lie. She ate the fruit. Adam did too. The rest is history. And to this day, we often feel like God is holding us back from something good. That's not true. It is the old lie. God is holding me back for something good, but if I plunge myself into disobedience, even though it looks desirable to me, I will essentially be walling myself off from the things which are *actually* good.

The commandments are for our good. They are our friends. They are not our enemies. We aren't being held back *from* good things, we're being held back *for* good things. It is God's kindness that he requires these things of us.

3. The third text for erecting our framework is Matthew 5:21-30, from the Sermon on the Mount.

21 “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire. 23 Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. 26 Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny. 27 “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ 28 But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.

In this passage, we learn that **mankind has become absolutely expert in shrinking the law.**

Jesus gives us two cases which both follow the same formula: “You have heard that it was said of old... but I say to you...” The first case involves the Sixth Commandment, the commandment against murder. You have heard that people who unjustly take a human life are in danger of the judgment. But Jesus says that there is *heart murder* and *lip murder*, and they also make you worthy of hell. The second case involves the Seventh Commandment, the commandment against adultery. You have heard that it is against the law of God to have sex outside of marriage. But Jesus says that if you *envision* those interactions *just in your thoughts*, only within your mind, you are guilty of breaking that same command. And just envisioning that also makes you worthy of hell, so much so that you must not spare anything which leads you into those thoughts, because those thoughts can and will drag you into hell!

Now, what is Jesus doing here? He is *not* changing the law. He is saying what was always true, all the way back to when Moses gave the law and before. He is correcting a prevalent but wrong, law-shrinking, law-minimizing understanding.

It was always a violation of the law against murder to *hate* and to *speak evil*. It was always a violation of the law against adultery to *lust* and to *envision* those interactions which are only to be enjoyed in marriage. And those violations were always enough to make you worthy of hell. All of that didn't *become true* with Jesus saying it in Matthew 5. It was always true, and He is correcting this wrong understanding which shrinks the law. Jesus is waging war against a

minimalistic view, a law-shrinking view which makes law-keeping *manageable* and *doable with only externals*.

That is what we've become so good at - shrinking the law so that we can say we have kept it and think that we're righteous. The law of murder is whittled down to just physically taking the life of my neighbor, while I put myself at liberty to hate him in my heart and speak evil of him. I'm innocent. I kept that law. I can withhold myself from physically having sex outside of marriage, while I put myself at liberty to let my mind run wild. I'm innocent. I kept that law. I can think of myself as righteous. But Jesus is teaching that the law has always transcended external conduct to include the thoughts of the heart and the words of the mouth.

How else do we so expertly shrink the law? Well, there are things which God commands us *not* to do. *Don't* murder. *Don't* commit adultery. *Don't* lie. But there are also things He commands us *to* do. He expects us to do good. So it breaks the commandments to do things which God said, "Don't do that." But it also breaks the commandment *not* to do good to your neighbor. You have the opportunity to do good, but you bypass that opportunity. This is often referred to as sins of *omission*. God told you to do good to your neighbor, but you passed by on the other side. You held back from doing good which God said He expected of you.

Jesus addresses sins of omission in Matthew 25. There Jesus describes the day of judgment. The sheep are on His right hand, and the goats are on His left. The sheep are those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, take in strangers, clothe the naked, visit the sick and go to prisoners. In short, they are doing good to their neighbors. And the goats are those who don't do those things. They could have but didn't. They passed by their opportunities to love their neighbors. Jesus is not teaching that law-keeping makes you fit for heaven, having *earned* heaven. Jesus is simply teaching that there is real evidence in the lives of people who actually have a new heart. They they do things because they have *new affections* when God gives them a *new heart*. There is nothing to be afraid of in that chapter, as if those sheep have earned heaven through doing things. They simply have evidence in their lives that God has given them a new heart.

All of this is devastating even to the most expert law-shrinkers. Law-breaking isn't just external in actions which the eye can see, but extends to your thoughts and your words. And law-breaking includes not only doing things God told you not to do, but also *not doing good* which you could have done to love your neighbor as yourself.

So Jesus has something to say to law-shrinkers who have whittled the law down to something very manageable and externally doable. He blows up their system of externals and forces them to think of all the things imagined in their minds which are defiled, to think of all the words they've said against their neighbors, to think of all the good they could have done and should have done but didn't. Jesus presses on them that each of those things was a violation of the commandments, worthy of eternal separation and punishment.

4. The fourth text for erecting our framework is Matthew 23:23.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.”

In this verse, we learn that **there are weightier matters of the law which undergird individual laws**. There are fundamental foundation stones which undergird and support individual laws.

In Matthew 23, Jesus is pronouncing a series of woes, a series of warnings and condemnations against hypocrites, against people who *teach* one thing while they *do* the opposite. And in verse 23, He says it is hypocrisy to give careful attention to very specific minutia, the little stuff, while ignoring the heart matters, the big stuff, which are the point of the laws. What are the heart matters, undergirding and supporting the individual commandments? *Justice and mercy and faith*.

Why do we tithe? God said to. Yes. Okay. But underneath God’s saying to is *justice*, and *mercy*, and *faith*. God has people He wants to set aside to give attention to serving and teaching and leading His people, and this tithe will provide for them. This tithe will make it possible to set them aside for these things. It is *just* to give the laborer his wages through the tithe. And it is *mercy* to give the poor tithe, so that those who don’t have what they need will have resources to draw on. Giving that tithe is intended to be an act of mercy. And your tithe should be an act of *faith*. It is intended to be an expression that all that you have come from God, as you give back just a fraction. It should be an expression of gratitude, and that you recognize that it came from God.

But it is *very* possible to comply with the individual law, down to dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s - you can go out to the garden and tithe on the spices! - and pass right over *justice and mercy and faith*. And consider yourself righteous. And consider yourself to have kept that law.

Is Jesus teaching anything new? Not at all. Micah 6:8 says, “He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” Jesus is practically quoting Micah 6:8.

So the the scribes and Pharisees were meticulously tithing, down to the garden spices, while at the same time cheating widows, and jockeying for positions of honor, and abandoning *justice and mercy and faith*. They weren’t keeping the commands. They might have been giving painstaking attention to the minutia, but they were not keeping the commands. They abandoned the weightier matters which are at the heart of the individual laws.

5. The fifth text for erecting our framework is Galatians 3:10-14, 19-25.

10 For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.” 11 But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for “the just shall live by faith.” 12 Yet the law is not of faith, but “the man who does them shall live

by them.” 13 Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”), 14 that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith... 19 What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator. 20 Now a mediator does not mediate for one only, but God is one. 21 Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. 22 But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. 23 But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. 24 Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. 25 But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

In this precious section of Scripture, we learn that **the law teaches you who God is in His perfect righteousness, and who you really are as a transgressor of the law, not how to be saved.**

Verses 10 and 11 destroys law-keeping as a means to be justified before God. What exactly is Paul saying in those verses? That if you want righteousness through law-keeping, you must continue in all the works of the law, ad infinitum. *Forever*. Do *all* the works of the law *all* the time. That is righteousness through law-keeping, the absolute absence of guilt from law-breaking, with a single breach ruining the whole scheme, because of the utter holiness of God.

I hope when you read that, you know with the greatest certainty that the hope of righteousness through law-keeping was obliterated so long ago in your life. Even if only today counted, you would have obliterated that scheme of righteousness more times than you even suspect. The just live *by faith*, and only by faith.

Paul condemns law-breakers and then sets forth Jesus as one willing and able to bear your curse. There is one who has offered Himself as a willing and able curse bearer. Jesus will hang on the tree for you, or you will bear your own curse because you haven't continued in all things that are written in the book of the law. But He *did* continue in *all* things that are written in the book of the law, so Jesus is not only *willing* to bear the curse of all who come to Him by faith, He is also *able*.

In verses 19-25, Paul declares the law to be devoid of power to give life. Look again at the second half verse 21, “... if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law.” The implication is that there is no law which can impart life. Then what is its function? Not to give you life, but to teach you that you deserve death for your crimes, so that sin might appear to us to be what it truly is - *exceedingly sinful* (Romans 7:13).

You have rebellion ingrained so deeply in your heart. You are filled with constant self-love and self-serving. The law is a mirror. It says, "Look! Look at you!" It is the perfect standard of righteousness, forcing you to look at yourself as you really are and begging the question, "Now what?" "Now what, now that you've earned hell?" You did this! Loving yourself, serving yourself, in rebellion to the God who is infinitely worthy of your love and your service, not just *acting* contrary to Him but *being* contrary to Him in your thoughts and words and deeds, doing the things He told you not to do, and not doing the things He expects you to do. Day in and day out. Now what? The law *throws you upon Jesus* for mercy! It is designed to *chase* you to Christ!

Before salvation comes by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, the ministry of the law is a ministry of condemnation. Its job is to convince you that you stand condemned. It is a tutor to drive you to Jesus, just as verse 24a says, "Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ..." It is a teacher that sends you to the Savior, that you might be justified through faith in His saving work.

So the law doesn't exist to justify, but to teach us of our desperate need, so that we will run to Christ, having forsaken the false hopes. It doesn't give us a scheme by which you can be righteous, *self-righteous*, before God. It convinces us of our desperate need, so we will abandon every false hope of self-righteousness, and run to Christ out of that desperation. And when we abandon all false hopes and run to Him, we find Him a willing Savior who washes away every last stain of defilement.

6. The sixth text for erecting our framework is Romans 7:22-25.

22 For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. 23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. 24 O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.

Paul is speaking of the *internal warfare* which seasoned Christians know well, the warfare between the redeemed spirit and the not-yet-redeemed flesh.

In these verses we learn that **the law has irreplaceable value for the believer, who is nevertheless no longer under the law**. If you are a believer, you aren't done with the law. It is better than gold to you (Psalm 119:72), and sweeter than honey and the honeycomb (Psalm 19:10), even though you are no longer under the law. This is not about reverting back and trying to law-keep your way into anything. It is about the continuing instruction, help, and benefit of the law in the lives of the redeemed.

Though much could be said about this text, let me focus in on one phrase in verse 22, "I delight in the law of God". Only a Christian can do that. Paul writes elsewhere, in 1 Corinthians 2:14, that the natural man cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God, so this cannot be an unbeliever. This is Paul, in his believing state - and more sanctified than you -

saying these things. He delights in the law of God in the inward man, but he also finds another law at work in his flesh.

There is a war happening, all day, every day. This is Paul, born again, but still inhabiting a body of death, with its remaining corruptions. Paul has been *spiritually reborn*, but he is still *physically* in a body with remaining corruptions, so there will be a war until the end of his life in this body. Then there will be a physical resurrection, and both spirit and body will be free of all corruption, and he will be free from this war, enjoying heaven. Praise God! Paul knows that the Lord Jesus can and will rescue him from this body of death, but he is still experiencing the current reality of war. He is looking to Christ. Who can free him from this body of death? Jesus.

In spite of the war, Paul can say what the Psalmist, “Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day.” (Psalm 119:97). Paul isn’t turning his back on the law, as if it is something to be regretted. In his inward man, he delights in the law of God, *because it reflects the righteousness of his Savior!* Paul doesn’t despise the law, he delights in it, even though he finds it is at war with the corruptions in his members.

The Psalmist wasn’t one of those professing believers who says, “I am born again by faith, so now the law has nothing to do with me.” Paul wasn’t one of those either. Professing believers who say that the law has nothing to do with them are commonplace now, but their view was foreign to Paul. That is not what he believed or how he felt. That isn’t what we should believe or how we should feel. Both the Psalmist and Paul found the law of God revealing the God of the law to them. They relished that. They wanted to know Him, and be conformed to Him. “Teach me about Yourself!” was their cry. “Reveal Yourself to me!” “I love the vision and beauty of Your righteousness!” “Make me more like You!” So they didn’t despise being brought face to face with their remaining corruptions, because it made them gaze on their Savior and rejoice. Hopefully, as we work our way through the Ten Commandments, we will gaze on our Savior and rejoice.

Here is a summary of the framework we have erected for understanding the commandments:

1. The law makes it clear what it means to truly love God and to love people. (Matthew 22:34-40).
2. The law is our friend, not our enemy. (Deuteronomy 10:12-13).
3. Mankind has become absolutely expert in shrinking the law. (Matthew 5:17-30).
4. There are weightier matters of the law which undergird individual laws. (Matthew 23:23).
5. The law teaches you who God is in His perfect righteousness, and who you really are as a transgressor of the law, not how to be saved. (Galatians 3:10-14, 19-25).

6. The law has irreplaceable value for the believer, who is nevertheless no longer under the law. (Romans 7:22-25).

As we now undertake a commandment by commandment study of the Ten Commandments of love, a pattern will become apparent. A systematic approach will be utilized in an attempt to access the depth and breadth of what each commandment is meant to communicate. As few as four words comprise a commandment (“You shall not murder”), yet the brevity of the command should not satisfy us with just skimming the surface, missing the breathtaking depth and breadth of each commandment. They truly reveal the beauty and righteousness of the eternal Law-Giver, the God of Scripture.

Here is the pattern which will be followed, more or less:

1. What the commandment requires. Most of the commandments are *framed negatively* (“You shall not...”). They tell us what we *must not do*. However, those negatively framed commandments also encompass things which are *positively required*, because love requires much more than *not doing*, and these are commandments of love.

2. What the commandment forbids. God is an utterly holy God, so His creatures are commanded to flee from everything that defiles. This God, in His kindness, keeps us *from* things to keep us *for* the best things.

3. What the commandment teaches about God. The commandments reveal the Law-Giver to mankind. His eternal character is displayed in what He loves and what He hates, and those things are set forth in the commandments. This is theology - the study of God - at its best. As we study the Ten Commandments, our prayer should be, “Show us Your glory!”

4. How we have failed to keep the commandment. A study of the commandments is a dry, academic exercise until we peel back the layers and attack our own self-righteousness. By expanding the law to include what it has always included - our thoughts, our motives, our words - we can own our breaking of His perfect commands, repent, and grow in Christlikeness.

5. How the Lord Jesus has perfectly kept the commandment. Finally, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Lord Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God. He *is* God’s righteousness. We should take time to revel in His perfect law-keeping on our behalf, qualifying Him to take the place of sinners, and winning our salvation. Watching Him perfectly keep each of the commandments in the gospel accounts gives believers a pathway to growing in Christlikeness.

On to God’s own preface to His Ten Commandments of love, found in Exodus 20:1-2.

Chapter 2

The God Who Spoke All These Words

Exodus 20:1-2

1 And 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 bondage.”

I hope the time spent soaking in the Ten Commandments shifts our view towards seeing the law of God as something beautiful and sweet as honey, not as an unbearable burden which is destined to grind us to powder. On the other side of the cross, having embraced the Lord Jesus Christ as our only hope for righteousness, the law of God can be sweet and good and an expression of God’s love for us. He wants our good. He intends our good. The law *isn’t* destined to grind the Christian into powder. No. Christ gives us His righteousness, and then we can obey God’s law as we become more like the Lord Jesus. The law can be an expression of His love to us. He is nothing like a cruel taskmaster.

The title of the chapter is “The God Who Spoke All These Words,” because the first two verses of Exodus 20 is essentially God’s own preface to His Ten Commandments. Before He delivers commandments to us, God introduces Himself and who He is as the Law-Giver.

The Ten Commandments are found in Exodus 20, so Chapter 19 obviously sets the context, and Exodus 19:1 gives us this time marker: “In the third month after the children of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on the same day, they came to the Wilderness of Sinai.” So in Chapter 20, when God speaks of His great deliverance of Israel from the land of Egypt, they are only a few months from having been a people in bondage. Their bondage and their deliverance would have all been so very fresh in their minds. And then in 19:5-6a, God tells the people this: 5 “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. 6 And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation...” God redeemed this people out of bondage to be His prized possession in all the earth. That is the context for the beginning of Chapter 20.

This is how Exodus 20 begins, “And God spoke all these words, saying” (verse 1) - and then He says exactly and only what He *wants* and *means* and *planned* to say. We are told who it is who is saying each and every one of these words. The source of every word of the Ten Commandments is the subject of this verse: God.

The Old Testament law is often called “the law of Moses,” even in Scripture, sometimes even by Jesus. But Exodus 20:1 makes it clear that the Ten Commandments, every word of them, is the law of *God*. In that sense, “the law of Moses” is a misnomer. Recall that Moses was actually a reluctant prophet. As he stood before the burning bush, just a handful of chapters earlier, he pleaded with God to find another spokesman. This is not the law of that man. This is the law of God. Moses relayed some of the Old Testament law, but all of Israel

actually heard God speak these Ten Commandments with their own ears. Every word was a word spoken directly and audibly to the whole nation.

Moses' recollection of these events throws light on our text, so let's consider that from Deuteronomy 4. Deuteronomy means *second law*, and the book is named that because God directed Moses to give the law to Israel a second time at the conclusion of their forty years of wilderness wanderings, just before they entered the Promised Land. They are to have God's law fresh in their minds as they go into the land where they are to be a distinct, God-loving, obedient people. Deuteronomy Chapter 5 is the second listing of the Ten Commandments, so it is in Deuteronomy 4 where Moses recounts the lead-up to God speaking from Mount Sinai. Let me bring out several sections from that account.

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 1 "Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe, that you may live, and go in and possess the land which the Lord God of your fathers is giving you. 2 You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you."

When God speaks, we *must* listen. We often make light of each other's words, but whoever else's words we discount, we must *never* do that to *God's words*. We must never *add* one single word to His words. We must never *take away* one single word from His words. You and I should have a *special kind of listening* just for His words. Yes, we should pay attention to the words of our friends, of others who have something to say to us, certainly of people who are in authority over us, but we ought to have a *distinct* and *special* kind of listening for the words of the God who rules in heaven. When He speaks, we must earnestly listen. When He speaks, we must give *careful, reverent* attention to each word, not adding anything, not taking away anything.

Deuteronomy 4:11-13, 11 "Then you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the midst of heaven, with darkness, cloud, and thick darkness. 12 And the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of the words, but saw no form; you only heard a voice. 13 So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone."

All the people heard the Ten Commandments directly from the mouth of God. You can't really discern that in Exodus 20. You are left wondering if everyone heard it, or if Moses heard it and related it to the rest. But in Deuteronomy it is crystal clear. God spoke the Ten Commandments, and all the people heard it. With the rest of the law, God spoke to Moses and then Moses related it to the people. The giving of the Ten Commandments was *very different* in that sense. All the people heard the voice God, out of the midst of fire and cloud. And God wrote these commandments on the two tablets of stone.

Question: Was the law the law before it was written on stone? In other words, did God judge murder before Exodus 20? Yes. Cain murdered his brother, and God judged him for it. Did

God judge idolatry before Exodus 20? Yes. People who engaged in the worship of false gods were guilty before the one true God prior to Exodus 20. The law was and is written on the heart. This is the argument that Paul makes in Romans 2:15, where he says that the Gentiles “show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness...” God has made us with an *internal sense* that the things which violate the Ten Commandments are wrong.

But since Genesis 3, when sin entered the world, the heart is *warped* and *distorted* and *deceptive* and *bent towards sin*. What does that mean? It means you’ll talk yourself out of all the commands, even though you know in your heart of hearts that murder is wrong, adultery is wrong, lying is wrong, cheating on your spouse is wrong, and on and on. God made you knowing that wrong is wrong, but given *time* and *practice*, more and more you’ll make your conscience shut up. Because you want to be God. Because you don’t want to be constrained or governed. This is the natural man. The heart is warped, and more warped over time, as you get better at practicing how to escape those internal promptings. The heart is distorted, and more distorted over time, deceptive, and more deceptive over time, as you practice sin and get dull to the pangs of conscience. You can make it be quiet, to some extent, over time. So God writes it in stone and then has it kept in the Ark of the Covenant. We need that. It is written on our hearts, but we need it etched in stone, where we can’t distort it or erase it to suit our own inclinations. We need it etched in stone because of what happened to human nature in Genesis 3. We need to be *forced to know* that these are God’s unchangeable words.

Deuteronomy 4:32-36, 32 “For ask now concerning the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether any great thing like this has happened, or anything like it has been heard. 33 Did any people ever hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and live? 34 Or did God ever try to go and take for Himself a nation from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great terrors, according to all that the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? 35 To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord Himself is God; there is none other besides Him. 36 Out of heaven He let you hear His voice, that He might instruct you; on earth He showed you His great fire, and you heard His words out of the midst of the fire.”

Moses identifies this as *unique in human history* up to that point. He invites you to go from one end of heaven to the other. Start at creation, ask anyone who has ever lived if God has ever dealt with a people like this, God speaking directly to a nation, *en masse*, all together, with these great accompanying signs. You will find that this has never happened before or since. This is unique.

Matthew Henry says this of the Ten Commandments: “They were not only spoken audibly... but with a great deal of dreadful pomp.” In other words, this was not a still, quiet, unaccompanied voice. This was God from heaven, coming in cloud and thick darkness and

fire, speaking to the people and with the warning, if you even set foot on this mountain, you must die, because the holy God is here, *commanding*.

God did speak before Exodus 20, but not like this. He almost always spoke to someone who then relayed what He said. God did give revelation before Exodus 20, but never by writing it on stone with His own finger. Think of the permanency which is communicated by God, writing it Himself on stone, and then commanding that an ark be made to preserve it. So when we read, "And God spoke all these words, saying: ...," understand all that is behind that. God is speaking in a unique way. God is not speaking the Ten Commandments through a mediator. God came in fire and spoke directly to the people. God Himself made sure there could be no misunderstanding about whose words these were. You have to come away from this text knowing that God left no room for doubt in the minds of this entire people. Hundreds of thousands of people. God spoke to them, and not one of them could doubt. "Are these God's words? Did Moses relay them rightly?" They could never ask those questions. God did something very unique here when he spoke all these words. So we are not free to take or leave these words. It is God who spoke them. We are bound to receive them and obey.

Consider James 2:10-11.

10 For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.
11 For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

James speaks of the law as *a unity*. What does that mean? It means that no individual law is sacred *per se*, just for its own sake. It is *God* who is sacred. The Law-Giver is sacred. So the law can never be a menu off of which you obey all except one. Violating one law is treason against the Law-Giver. It is an act of *unholiness* against the *holy, holy, holy* Law-Giver. It is not a *partial credit* test, where there are ten laws, and if you obey nine of them, you get a score of 90%. It is a *pass/fail* test, where all the laws hang together. You obey them as a *unified whole*, or you fail, and what lies behind that is the holiness of the Law-Giver. *He* is what is sacred. The laws aren't an exaltation of moral principles. They are an exaltation of the character of God, who expresses Himself through the commandments. The Law-Giver is sacred, and that makes the laws meaningful, valuable, important, *inescapable*.

Now consider Exodus 20:2, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Here we have the self-identification of the Law-Giver. "I am the LORD." Capital L, capital O, capital R, capital D. LORD. This is how you will find it in most Bibles. That isn't because the Hebrew word is in all caps. That isn't how Hebrew works. It is that the translators are looking for a way to cue you, to identify that this is a very specific word for God. The Hebrew word *transliterated*, meaning not simply translated from one language to another by word meanings, but brought over letter by letter from Hebrew letters into English letters, is something like *Jehovah*. Jehovah literally means "the existing one."

That takes us right back to the burning bush. "I'm sending you to liberate these people, Moses." "What do I tell them if they ask who sent me?" "Tell them 'I AM' sent you." (Exodus 3).

The existing One. Not like I exist and you exist. God exists, and *only because God exists*, I can exist. All life comes from Him. All reality is rooted in Him. No God, then no anything else. Everything finds its life and existence in Him, but God doesn't find His existence in anything outside of Himself. You and I need food and water and sleep and all sorts of things to continue to exist. He needs nothing but just being Himself to exist - He exists, period. This is a very deep well. Our minds don't have rope enough to even approach measuring the depths of it. My existence, my life is rooted in Him. I exist because He is the existing One. He is Jehovah. All life is in Him and only in Him.

Jehovah has the ultimate claim on me as my Life-Giver. And so, because He is my Life-Giver, He asserts his right to be the Law-Giver. Life-Giver is Law-Giver. Argue with that logic. Try to deny the one who gave you your life the right to give you your laws. "You made me. And You have given me every breath I have ever breathed. *But You will not govern me!*" Try that logic on for size. That shows the madness of rebellion against God, the Life-Giver and Law-Giver. Who can say that it's wrong for the Life-Giver to be the Law-Giver. No one. All must concede that is *perfectly right*. He gave me my life. He has the right to *govern* me, the right to *rule* me, the right to *command* my obedience, and to tell me how I ought to spend this life He has given.

Continuing in verse 2, "I am the Lord, *your God*." If we transliterate that Hebrew word rendered "God," bringing it over letter by letter from Hebrew to English, we get something like *Elohim*. Overwhelmingly it is simply translated "God" in the Old Testament, but it literally means "ruler," "judge". God as the supreme as ruler. God as the supreme judge. As such, He gives these Ten Commandments.

But notice, this isn't *generalized*. "I am God, I am Ruler, I am Judge, I give you these laws." That would be sufficient. But God goes much further: it is *particularized*. "I am *your* God. You are a distinct people and I am your God." This is wonderful! Consider to Isaiah 43:1-4.

1 But now, thus says the Lord, who created you, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are Mine. 2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you. 3 For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I gave Egypt for your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in your place. 4 Since you were precious in My sight, you have been honored, and I have loved you; therefore I will give men for you, and people for your life.

God says to this people, "You are mine!" "I created you. I formed you. I am the LORD. I am the existing One out of which comes your existence, and I redeemed you. *I came and got you! You are mine!*"

Thomas Watson says this: "... 'thy God,'... This, though a preface to the law, is pure gospel."

“I am the Lord, *your God*.” God is introducing His law, but that is gospel! What right do you have to this? God is holy. You are *not* holy. Yet He says, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by your name. You are Mine.” Think of how sweet those phrases are! These are gospel words! Jehovah Elohim has laid claim to this people for their good, because He loves them. It’s right here in Isaiah 43. He redeemed a people because they were precious in His sight. He *honored* them. He *loved* them. He tells them not to be afraid. “I have redeemed you. I bought you back. You were slaves, but I bought you back. You are mine.”

So, yes, God has claimed this people. But what is implied is that *this also gives this people a claim on Him!* “You can call me your God. You can cry out to me in your time of need. I am your God. You can lay claim to the privileges of having Me as your God.” Because this people belongs to God, they have a rightful claim. This purchased people and God belong to each other. He is their God, and they are His people. You see that language repeatedly in the Old Testament. “I will be your God, and you will be My people.” He claims them, giving them the right to claim Him. Here it is, the gospel in the preface to the law. His people have a claim on this God.

Meanwhile, while this is happening at Mount Sinai, God is overwhelmingly passing over the other nations, the other peoples of the earth. Not comprehensively, but overwhelmingly. God was letting them chase whatever they loved and then giving them whatever that deserved. And that is what it means for God to pass over you. It means for Him to just let you be governed by your very own inclinations, to let you chase everything you find pleasing and love, and then to give you whatever that deserves. It is a broad road that leads to destruction when God passes over you. He leaves you to prove what you love by the things you pursue, and then He simply gives you the paycheck for that. Romans 6:23a, “For the wages of sin is death...” God, at this time in history, was overwhelmingly letting the nations chase their lusts into destruction, but not Israel, not *His people*. He went and got them and said, “I’m your God. I’m not just going to let you chase your lusts over the cliff. I love you. And I am going to constrain you *as an act of love*.”

That brings us to the final two phrases: “...who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” (Exodus 20:2b). This was a people living in Egypt, a land where idolatry reigned, and all the wickedness that inevitably accompanies idolatry. When you abandon God in order to chase after false gods, you end up with wickedness of every kind. This is where they lived. Thomas Watson says, “You will sooner be corrupted by idolaters, than they will be converted by you.” That is simply the proverb, “bad company corrupts good character,” on a national scale. It is people living right in the middle of unchecked idolatry, surrounded by all the wickedness which travels with idolatry. By and large, with exceptions wrought by the Spirit of God, you’ll sooner be corrupted by the idolaters than they will be converted by you.

God wanted Israel to be a peculiar people, a separate people, a holy people set apart for Him. He wanted a people He was making to be like Him. So he brought them out of Egypt, where they were drowning in idolaters all around, and in the wickedness that idolatry nurtures. This was a people living in bondage, subjected to cruel taskmasters, with Pharaoh the greatest and cruelest of all. They were subject to unending toil, and when their taskmasters became

afraid of how God was multiplying them and making them strong, their taskmasters forced them to kill their male children. Moses came out of this part of their history. By the hand of God, Moses survived when so many of the Jewish male children didn't. And when God led Moses and Aaron to liberate Abraham's descendants, Pharaoh said: "I'll teach this idle people who don't have enough to do, so they ask to go worship a foreign god! I'll increase their labors. Same amount of bricks, but now no hay. Find your own hay. I used to give you hay for making the bricks. Now get your own hay and make the same number of bricks!" (Exodus 5). He was crushing them. No mercy. No rest. And God said "Enough! I'm claiming these people. I'm bringing these people out. Enough of the cruel taskmasters. I have heard their cries. I will be their Master."

Calvin says this of the commandments: "...it would not be enough for men to be compelled by servile fear to bear its yoke, unless they were also attracted by its sweetness, and willingly endured it... in order to bind them the better to Himself, He reminds them also of their former condition; for Egypt was like a house of bondage, from whence the Israelites were delivered. Wherefore, they were no more their own masters, since God had purchased them unto Himself." What is Calvin saying? We *ought* to obey the commandments. They're good. They're right. But just fear that God will judge us is never enough for us. So God, in His mercy, does what He has no obligation to do: He accompanies the commandments with *sweetness*. God reminds the people, "I'm for you. I brought you out of bondage. Not from under one cruel taskmaster just to be under a new taskmaster - I love you! My intentions towards you are kind intentions."

God adds sweetness to commandment-keeping. He introduces the law by reminding us that we used to be under the bondage of a cruel taskmaster. He is the deliverer, not the new taskmaster. He loves us! His commands are for our good. God adds sweetness to obedience. He entices us to obedience, though we have no right to expect enticements, and He has every right to command without extending them. It is simply His goodness, His kindness, His graciousness, His mercy towards us. The commandments are an expression of love from a kind Master who has delivered us from a cruel taskmaster! He wants us to remember, so He reminds us in His preface. He positions the commandments as an expression of love from a kind Master who has delivered a people from a cruel taskmaster. At the very beginning of the Ten Commandments, God reminds us that this Law-Giver is our *deliverer*.

This all makes me think several things.

First, God should be worshiped for speaking to us, and giving us a written record of what He has spoken. Was He obligated to reveal Himself? Did He *have to*, or *need to*, take us for His own? No, but He *has* spoken, and He *has* written, so that our bent towards self-deception and wiggling out of it could be stopped in its tracks by having His words in black and white. We should be thankful for that. We need that. You without your Bible is not the same as you with your Bible. God designed it that way. He gave us something immovable, unchangeable, to help us anchor ourselves, so we wouldn't just drift away through self-deception.

Second, and most importantly, understand that God bringing the Israelites out of slavery is a *picture of greater things*. God bringing Israel out of their bondage is a picture of *spiritual realities* which have been fulfilled by the Lord Jesus. The Exodus was real. Egypt was real. Israel was real. The bondage was real. The deliverance was real. But it was actually a picture of a greater spiritual reality, that spiritual slaves, slaves to the devil, would be liberated by the Lord Jesus Christ. Exodus 20:1-2 must have been very sweet to Old Testament Israelites, bringing them to a remembrance that God had delivered them from their bondage. How much sweeter should it be for the Christian, who lives in the reality which the Exodus merely pictured, *who had an infinitely greater bondage!* As bad as the bondage in Egypt was, as cruel of a taskmaster as Pharaoh was, it was *the lesser bondage* by far. Spiritual bondage is the highway to *eternal agony*. As sweet as it must have been to Old Testament Israel to hear of their redemption, it should be so much sweeter to hear that Jesus Christ has been sent from heaven to be a great Redeemer, our great Savior.

Finally, having been born again, I want to *consciously offer obedience as an expression of my love for God* - Father, Son, and Spirit. My Maker and my Redeemer is the LORD. Capital L, capital O, capital R, capital D. He is the existing One. I have a life because, and only because, He exists. He made me, and His claim on me - and my obedience - is absolute. But I haven't obeyed, and instead of passing over me, He redeemed me. *He came and got me*. I want to consciously offer obedience as an expression of love to Him. My lusts are clamoring to be served. I can say "no" to my remaining corruptions, because the work of Jesus not only breaks the *penalty* of sin, it breaks the *power* of sin. And when I say "no," I want it to be a fragrant offering, not just a lifeless gesture which reflects nothing more than the doing of duty. "You made me. You redeemed me. You love me. Thank You. I love You. Please give me the grace to obey You." This is growing in Christlikeness. Jesus always obeyed because He loved - and loves - His Father.

His ways *are* lovely. Let's walk in them and reciprocate His love.

Chapter 3

One God to Worship

The first two verses of Exodus 20 comprise the *inspired preface*, meaning God's own preface to the Ten Commandments. "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 bondage.'" God lays claim to being God, and to being *their* God. He lays claim to them, essentially saying, "I went and got you. I claimed you, and you have a claim on Me." God has *asserted His right* to be the Law-Giver, and it is a double claim. The first claim is that their existence comes entirely from Him. They exist because He is the existing One. Their Life-Giver is their Law-Giver. This is completely logical. What you create, you have the inherent right to govern. The second claim is that He redeemed them, He bought them out of the enslavement of a cruel taskmaster. They are not their own. He bought them at a price, and they belong to Him.

Now we embark on a commandment by commandment study of the Ten Commandments, and as it was set forward in Chapter 1, we will generally follow this pattern:

1. What the commandment requires.
2. What the commandment forbids.
3. What the commandment teaches about God.
4. How we have failed to keep the commandment.
5. How the Lord Jesus has perfectly kept the commandment.

Each commandment will normally have two chapters, the first covering one through three, and the second covering four and five.

The 1st Commandment: “You shall have no other god’s before Me.” (Exodus 20:3).

There are no other gods. God stands by Himself, utterly alone in His Godhood. He alone is worthy, and He is so worthy. No one except Him deserves ultimate allegiance, affection, or trust. This commandment exists, yes, so that we would identify our idols and smash them, but it *more fundamentally* exists so that our eyes would be fixed on the one true God, that our hearts would be captivated by His ultimate beauty and worth. There *is* a God to be worshiped, a God who *ought* to be worshiped, and we should take it as the great privilege of our lives to worship Him and be His people.

What the commandment requires

I want to begin by going back to a critical point from Chapter 1, because *Jesus’ view of the law should be my view of the law*. I don’t think there is any controversy there. However it is that Jesus conceives of the law, views the law, holds the law, is how *I* should conceive of, view, and hold the law. In Matthew 22, answering the question as to which is the great commandment in the law, Jesus said this:

37 Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Love is the fulfillment of the law. So even though the 1st Commandment is *framed in the negative* - it is a “You shall *not*,” “*Don’t* do this” - the 1st Commandment, maybe more than any other commandment in all the Bible, is a restatement of the great commandment to love God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength (the parallel account in Mark adds “strength”). This is the real issue at hand. Is there affection for God in your heart? Do you love him? You *must* love Him. This is what the 1st Commandment says. There is a God in heaven who is worthy of every ounce of your affection, and you *must* love Him. If you only come away thinking in terms of what you must *not* do, you will have a half-truth at best. It would be tragic if we came away from the 1st Commandment with no more than “Don’t do this,” “Don’t do that.” This is

about a glorious God who is worthy of all your affection, and the Bible says you must worship Him.

As we work our way through all ten of the commandments, we're going to find that each of these coins has two sides. Some will say *do this*, but those will imply to *not do* other things. Others will be framed in the negative, saying *don't do this*, and those will imply to *do* other things. Each commandment, whether framed in the positive or framed in the negative, has a set of things we are being commanded to *do*, and also a set of things we are being commanded *not to do*. So the 1st Commandment is framed in the negative, but there is another side of the coin, and we know that because Jesus says on these two laws - love your God, love your neighbor - hang all the Law and the Prophets. The implication is that as we come to the 1st Commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me," we must ask how it relates to love for God.

God is keeping us *from* something in order to keep us *for* something. He is holding us back from something in order to preserve us for something that is truly good, truly worthy. There is a greater objective in His mind than just the *absence* of something. It is the *presence* of something, true, authentic worship of the one true God, which is at the heart of the 1st Commandment. Though it is framed in the negative, it implies that I *do* take the one true God as my God. "You shall have no other gods before Me, but you *shall* have Me as your God, as the great affection of your heart!"

To truly take God as your God involves far more than just signing on to some external patterns, "I go here on Sunday," "I have a checklist with a little Bible reading and prayer on it." Praise God for church attendance, Bible reading, and prayer. I don't mean to diminish those things and make them seem unimportant. *We should* go to church, read our Bibles, pray, and more. All of that is important. But there is meant to be a *heart* behind all of those things, and you can do all of those things *without the heart*. This is what we always have to keep in view.

In John 4, Jesus says that "true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him." (John 4:23b). God is seeking people who worship Him in spirit and in truth. *Truth* means worshiping Him as He has revealed Himself to be (not as we imagine Him to be), and according to how He has said He desires to be worshiped. So yes, there are patterns for our worship prescribed by God Himself. God cares about those, but it is *spirit and truth*. Joined with truth must be *an overflow of affection for God from the heart*. That is what is meant by *spirit*. True worship is love for God expressed in the patterns of worship He has prescribed. The hearts of true worshipers are never disengaged when they worship. Worship is never just *form* and *formality* for them. Their hearts are *bearing down to express love* for God. They are bowed down in humility and overflow of love for God. What Jesus says in John 4 is about what worshipers *do*, not just what worshipers *refrain from doing*. They are embracing something, not just refraining from something. Yes, we must forsake idolatry, but the 1st Commandment is more fundamentally about who we are to embrace: God, who is worthy of all of our love, all of our trust, all of our allegiance, all of our worship.

These worshipers who worship in spirit and in truth *attack all rival affections*. They sense rival affections in their hearts and they *wage a holy war* against them. All competing affections have a target on them, because their hearts have been captured by the beauty of the King. He has captivated them. His beauty and worth has captured their hearts. God is their God. God alone is their God, and when they sense a competing affection, they wage a holy war against it, because they know that not only is God their God, they are part of His beloved people. “My God loves me, so I’m rooting out competing affections *to love Him as I ought*.” When you take the one true God as your God, He has your affections and your trust. You love Him and you throw yourself upon Him as your only hope. In our wedding vows, almost all of us said something like this: “I take you, forsaking all others, till death parts us.” The 1st Commandment is the spiritual equivalent of that. “God, I take You as my God, forsaking all others, and even death won’t part us!” You forsake all others in order to take Him as your God. You *must* forsake all others in order to take Him as your God. He can’t endure rivals. He can’t endure competing affections, and when He sees them in the hearts of His people, *He wages a holy warfare* on them too.

What the commandment forbids

All other gods are forbidden. That the 1st Commandment is framed in the negative should tell you something. There is a strong bent in your heart to direct your affections and your trust to other things. God would not have framed it in the negative, saying “You shall not,” “Don’t do this,” “Watch out for this,” unless there was a strong inclination in your heart towards redirecting your affections and trust away from Him to other gods. No one has a household rule to tell the kids not to eat the slime in the gutters. You don’t need a rule for that. No one has a bent towards that. The reason the 1st Commandment is framed this way is because *we need a warning*, because there’s something in our hearts that will, since sin enter the world, redirect our affections and our trust. Other “gods” have an attraction.

Let’s deal with the actual words of this verse, first with an important and interesting distinction which is lost in English: “You” is singular. It isn’t, “You, all as a group, shall have no other gods before Me.” It is, “You (eye contact), and you (eye contact), and you (eye contact), and you shall have no other gods before me.” God speaks the Ten Commandments to the *nation*, but He addresses the commandments to the *individual*. *You!* *You* shall have no other gods, and *you* shall have no other gods, and *you*, and *you*. God has come, and He is speaking to hundreds of thousands of people, a great multitude, but the constraint is given to *you* and *you* and *you*.

Consider to Deuteronomy 13:6-9.

6 “If your brother, the son of your mother, your son or your daughter, the wife of your bosom, or your friend who is as your own soul, secretly entices you, saying, ‘Let us go and serve other gods,’ which you have not known, neither you nor your fathers, 7 of the gods of the people which are all around you, near to you or far off from you, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth, 8 you shall not consent to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him or conceal him; 9 but you shall surely kill him;

your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people.”

When there is a *corporate obligation*, one shared by us together, there is a sense in which you feel safe if you just run with the pack. Deuteronomy 13 absolutely contradicts that, highlighting that this is the obligation of the *individual*. If the *closest person to you*, if your spouse, or your brother, or your mother, or your father comes and says, “Let’s go serve a false god,” you cannot conceal them, or protect them, or even ignore them. *You* must lead the congregation in administering justice, and the justice required is death. *You* must cast the first stone, as the witness against that loved one. With the 1st Commandment, “You shall have no other gods before Me,” just running with the pack is never acceptable. Going with the flow is never an acceptable excuse. Never, never, never. Obviously, to God this is an offense of the first order. The wages of every sin is death, but with some sins, God doesn’t want to wait to pay the wages. This is one of them, and we should pay attention when God counts a sin to be so devastating that He doesn’t want the wages of death to be delayed.

As in verse two, where the same Hebrew word was rendered “God,” the word rendered “gods” here in verse three can be transliterated *elohim*. It is overwhelmingly translated “God” in the Old Testament, which is a perfectly fine translation, but it literally means *ruler* or *judge*. God is king. God is ruler. God is judge. He has already laid claim to that title - *Elohim* - before He even begins giving the commandments. “Elohim is *Me*.” “Elohim is *no one else*.” “I claim this word, this title. You shall have no other gods, no other rulers or judges in the ultimate sense - no other *elohim* - before Me.”

The phrase “before Me” is *spatial*, not *preferential*. What does that mean? It means it isn’t, “You shall not *prefer* any other gods to me - make sure I’m your favorite,” but rather, “You shall have no other gods *in front of Me*.” The Hebrew word literally means “face”. “You shall have no other gods *in my face*.” God does not simply want to be our favorite god, to simply have preeminence among our gods. God wants to ensure that you bring no other gods before His face. The implication is that no matter how secretly you give away God’s place, it is actually done in front of him. “You shall have no other gods before me in my face.” You thought you hid it, that you had cultivated your idol in the secrecy of your own heart, but it was always before Him, always in His face.

No matter how secretly you give away God’s place, it is in His face. Several of the commentators I studied equate it to adultery in front of your spouse. Shocking. Unthinkable. You recoil from the thought of it. Why would the commentators say that? Because idolatry is called adultery over and over and over again by the Old Testament prophets. *Idolatry is spiritual adultery*. It is cheating on the one to whom you owe faithfulness. You cheat on God when you take other gods. You commit adultery in front of Him when you take other gods. It is always done *before Him*. I hope your mind recoils from that. It should. It should make us think differently about diverting our affections and our trust to another.

Hebrews 4:13: “And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.” You can never serve another god

without it being in His face, *before Him*. Every diversion of affection or trust to an unworthy object is open and naked before the one to whom we must give an account.

What does the 1st Commandment forbid? Simply put, it forbids *atheism* and *polytheism*.

To *not* take the one true God as your God is forbidden by the 1st Commandment. Whether you take Him as such or not, reality stands fast: HE IS GOD. “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” (Psalm 14:1a). It is unlawful *not* to take this God for your God. That is atheism, *no God*. The 1st Commandment forbids it. He is God. He is the existing One.

And it is unlawful to take any god but the God of Scripture, even to say the God of Scripture is the best and highest among the gods. No. All of that is polytheism, *multiple gods*. He has no interest in being the top of the heap of gods. He alone is God, there is no other. Ultimately, when you have a second god, what you *said* was your first god was not the God of Scripture, who doesn’t allow for that, who doesn’t make room for that. You have turned even your conception of God into an idol when you take the second god - and the third and the fourth.

I should also note the immediate context. The Israelites just had direct proof against atheism. They are three months removed from the ten plagues in Egypt, and from crossing the Red Sea on dry land, and now God has descended on the mountain in cloud and fire, and is audibly speaking the Ten Commandments to them. But they also had direct influences of polytheism in Egypt, and they were going to a place with more of the same. Egypt had gods everywhere, and they are going into Caanan, where there are gods everywhere. Understand the context in which the Israelites are hearing the voice from heaven.

What the commandment teaches about God

No doubt other important things are taught about God by the 1st Commandment, but I offer these three.

1. He is worthy, and He alone is worthy.

Revelation 5 relates a great search for one who is worthy to open a scroll. All of heaven is searched. All of earth is searched. Everything under the earth is searched. No one is found who is worthy to open the scroll and read it. John weeps, then an elder says him, “Do not weep,” because there is one who is worthy. There is a worthy Redeemer who has redeemed a people with His own blood from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. “You shall have no other gods before Me” is rooted in this truth. There is one - and only one - in all the universe who is worthy of our ultimate affection and trust. There is one and only one. He *ought* to be loved. He *ought* to be believed on. It is actually a great privilege.

On the other side of the cross, it isn’t burdensome at all. When you’ve been bought with that Redeemer’s blood, the 1st Commandment goes from being a crushing weight to being the greatest honor of your life. It is the privilege of a lifetime to take this God for your God. He is infinitely worthy. He bought you, He reconciled you, He’s taking you to heaven to be with Him

forever. At His right hand there are pleasures forevermore. That is what He's marked out for you when. What a privilege. What an honor. For the redeemed, *it is pleasure* to worship him. Maybe you have drifted away from that experience, and it jolts you to hear it in those terms. *It is pleasure to worship Him*. If that is you, if you have a sense of distance from it being pleasure to have this God as your God and to have your heart *erupt in affection* - then do heart work. Repent, turn around, return to your first love. Run as fast as you can to reclaim the pleasure of worshiping this God. If you have no frame of reference for this in your personal experience, repent, believe in Jesus Christ, and be saved, and *you will!*

He is worthy. He alone is worthy. That is the heart of the 1st Commandment. It is framed in the negative. "Don't have other gods." "Don't direct your affections and your trust to something else." But what is the heart of that? He is worthy. Only He is worthy.

2. He is alone, separate, "other," *holy*.

All of these mean the same thing. He is alone. He is not lonely, *He stands alone*. He is separate. He's not like anyone else you know or will ever know. He is "other". He is not the best of a category, He is in a category by Himself. He is holy. Many times when we think of *holy*, we think of *righteous*, as if they are synonyms, but to be righteous is only a sliver of what it means to be holy in the fullest sense. To be holy literally means to be set apart, to be distinct.

In Exodus 9:14, God tells Moses to speak this to Pharaoh on His behalf: "for at this time I will send all My plagues to your very heart, and on your servants and on your people, *that you may know that there is none like Me in all the earth*." The plagues were sent upon Pharaoh and his people for one great reason, that they would know that there is none like God in all of creation. God sent this message to an idol worshiper, to the great king of Egypt, with all his gods, and thinking he *was* a god. There is no one like God. Isaiah 46:5: "To whom will you liken Me, and make Me equal and compare Me, that we should be alike?" It is obviously a rhetorical question. You *had better* answer that question, "No one!" "To whom are you likening Me?" "No one!" "To whom will you make Me equal and compare Me?" "No one! No one is like You, no one is equal to You, no one can be compared to You!" God is not the best in a category, He is in a category by Himself.

Consider how Paul says it in 1 Corinthians 8:4-6.

4 Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one. 5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), 6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live.

What is Paul saying? False gods are *just make-believe*. God is in that category by Himself. There is no such thing as another god. They are all just inventions. None of them are real.

3. He is a jealous God. He will not share the honor which is due to Him, and He will not be robbed of it.

Isaiah 42:8, "I am the LORD, that is My name; and My glory I will not give to another, nor My praise to carved images." He will not share His glory. He is jealous of His glory, and we are coming to that truth explicitly as part of the 2nd Commandment: "you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, *am a jealous God...*" (Exodus 20:5a). Deuteronomy 4:24, "For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God." It is all over the Bible. He is a consuming fire, a jealous God. He will not share the honor which is due to Him. He will not allow Himself to be robbed of it. *It is a crime for creatures to short-change their Creator.* It is a crime for created ones to short-change the One who gave them their existence.

This all makes me think a couple of things.

First, we need the "do" as much as we need the "don't". *Don't* have other gods, but *DO* have this God! Render to Him the glory due His name! In that great day when God judges the living and the dead, I firmly believe that the greater crime will not be redirecting affections to the other gods, it will be that what was due to God wasn't given to Him. It is a great crime to give God's place to something else. I know that. But the greater crime is that He is infinitely worthy of all of your affections and your trust, and you wouldn't give them! It was right and good and the most fitting thing in the world, but you wouldn't give them. You withheld them from Him. How could He deserve your affections and your trust more? Study His nature and His character. And on top of that, He sent His only Son from heaven, and still you withheld your affections and your trust! Oh, it is such a crime!

Consider Exodus 34. God hides Moses in the cleft of the rock. He passes before him and shows him just a glimpse of His back so that Moses won't be consumed by His glory.

5 Now the LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. 6 And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, 7 keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation."

What more do you want than a God who would reveal Himself like this, a God full of mercy and compassion, longsuffering and forgiving sin? What more do you want in a God? Why would you withhold your affections and your trust?

We need the "do" as much as we need the "don't". Worship this God! He is worthy! Oh, may He capture your heart and make it His own, may He captivate you so that when you sense a rival affection, you wage a holy war against it because it isn't worthy of your affection or your trust.

Finally, understand that in our natural state (as we are born into the world), *we must have a new heart*. This commandment is for *the worship of a Redeemer*. Only those who have been redeemed can truly worship this Redeemer. Don't try to law-keep your way into God's favor. This is for the worship of a Redeemer who doesn't have law-keeping for salvation, law-keeping for righteousness, hanging over the heads of His people. If you succumb to law-keeping for salvation, you will never be free to worship Him without fear. This commandment is for the worship of a Redeemer who has purchased you with his own blood from every people and tribe and tongue and nation, so that you will be there in that scene in Revelation 5, praising Him for all eternity.

Thomas Watson says this: "It is more honor to serve God, than to have kings serve us... Serving the true God is delightful." Would God have that be true of us, that it would be more honor for us to serve the God of Scripture than to be served by kings!

Source Notes

Abbreviations Used

JC	Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses, Volumes II & III, John Calvin, Baker Books, Reprinted 2003
MH	Matthew Henry's Commentary, Volume 1, Hendrickson Publishers, Reprinted April 2000
NKJV	New King James Version (all Scripture quotations are from NKJV unless otherwise noted)
TW	The Ten Commandments, Thomas Watson, The Banner of Truth Trust, Revised Edition 1965, Reprinted 2013

Chapter 1 - N/A

Chapter 2

- 1 "They were not only spoken...": MH, 282
- 2 "... 'thy God,'...": TW, 17
- 3 "You will sooner be corrupted...": TW, 28
- 4 "...it would not be enough for men...": JC, Vol II, 339

Chapter 3

- 1 "It is more honour to serve God...": TW, 58