

Word #1: First in your heart

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[0:00] Let's prepare our hearts now to hear from God's word. Let's pray. Father, we thank you that indeed you have spoken.

Amen. And implanting them into our hearts this morning. We pray all this in the name of Christ.

Amen. Now, I'm going to begin this morning with a test.

Don't worry, there are no marks or punishments. But I want you now to close your Bibles, whether they are hard copy or digital. Not every day you hear pastors say that, right? Okay?

Ready? Ready? Ready? Now, list the ten commandments in your head. All of them in order. I'll give you 20 seconds.

No cheating, eh? All right, time's up. So how did you do? How many did you get? Five? Six? Or ten?

[1:35] Well done if you got them all. But don't be surprised if you didn't manage to go ten for ten. After all, a few years ago, researchers in America found that more people could name the ingredients of a Big Mac than the Ten Commandments.

So, you know, two or beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, that one, no problem. But what the Nine Commandment is, not sure.

And can you relate? Maybe you don't know the ins and outs of a burger, but do you find it easier to rattle off every Pokemon character?

Or every lyric of your favorite singer than to list these supposedly famous words? If so, it's worth asking why that might be the case.

That's why I'm glad to begin this new sermon series today, Ten Words to Live By. I'm hoping to re-familiarize ourselves with the Ten Commandments.

[2:42] But I wonder what went through your mind when you saw that's what will be working through the next few months. A few of you, bless you, thought, yes, love it, looking forward to it.

But I suspect more of us, if we were being totally honest, might have reacted a little differently. Perhaps some of us thought, Ten Commandments?

Oh boy, isn't this going to be dull? I mean, this is Sunday school stuff. We know this already. It's so elementary. Can we do better? Others of us might have thought, Oh no, won't this be draining?

I mean, I'm not sure I want to endure ten weeks of don't do this, don't do that. Because that's what it's going to be like, right? Who wants to come to church for two and a half months of being told off?

And perhaps one or two of us might even have thought, Actually, Pastor, shouldn't this be discarded? I mean, come on, this is old covenant material and we are New Testament Christians.

[3:56] So they don't apply. And anyway, these words are three and a half thousand years old. What can these stone tablets say to people with iPads?

And if any of these were your reactions, don't worry, I'm not offended. They are completely understandable. But while I get why you might think that way, I want to show you they are not really true.

So today, for the first half of the sermon, I hope to give us some big picture orientation before we get to the actual commandments. And let me begin with a basic question.

What are the ten commandments, actually? Here is something that surprises people. The phrase ten commandments never appears in the Bible.

I'm serious. Whenever the Hebrew expression is used in Exodus and Deuteronomy, it literally calls them the ten words.

[5:05] Although the NIV keeps the translation ten commandments because it knows that's what we are familiar with. That's why our series is called What It's Called.

And that small difference in vocabulary matters, I think. Because it helps us understand these words are not pure legislation, like a parliamentary act.

Rather, they are part of a larger story. You see, these words have a context. Turn with me now to Exodus 20 verses 1 and 2.

And notice, the first thing God says at Mount Sinai is not actually commandment number one. Instead, God says, verse 2, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

So notice, before God commands anything, he reminds them of something. He says, do you remember what happened in Exodus 1 to 18?

[6 : 18] You began life in Exodus 1 as slaves. You were oppressed and afflicted. But I brought about acts of judgment on your oppressors, on Pharaoh, and warned you your freedom.

I parted the Red Sea and carried you through them while destroying your enemies. In short, I rescued you so I could be in relationship with you.

That's what Exodus 19, the chapter before our passage today, is all about. So that means grace comes before law.

Rescue comes before requirement. The ancient Jews had a parable about this. Imagine, they said, a new king coming to a province and saying, I will be your king.

And the people go, eh? They wonder why. It feels irrational. Out of the blue. But imagine if he came and proceeded to build the city walls.

[7 : 32] He brings in the water supply. He fights their battles. Then he says, shall I reign over you? Now the people reply without hesitation, yes.

That, these Jews said, is Sinai. God fought Egypt for them, fed them, brought them water from the rock, so that when he declares he will be king over them, the people say, yes, yes, with gratitude. If so, how should that affect the way we read these ten words? Well, it means we must not read them as legalism.

Legalism, in case you're not sure, is the idea that I keep rules in order to earn God's acceptance. It's how I persuade God to love me. And it is the complete opposite of the gospel.

But did you notice Exodus 20 actually follows the logic of the gospel? In the gospel, God rescues sinners in order that they might live transformed lives, not the other way around.

[8 : 52] And it is no different here. In Exodus 20, God saves them in order that they might live out these ten words, not the other way around.

Therefore, we can be sure that these words are not meant to be heard legalistically. They are not an entrance exam, but given to God's already redeemed people as words to live by.

However, that doesn't mean these words are comfortable. Precisely because they describe the life God wants for his people, they also expose how far we are from living it.

In fact, Paul says in Romans 7 verse 7 that it was the tenth word, Yusha not covered, that revealed his own sinful heart to himself.

So, over the coming weeks, expect to feel exposed by these words over and over again. But whenever we feel confronted, remember God's aim isn't to beat us up, but to drive us back to him.

[10 : 16] But if we are not to read these words as legalism, how should we read them? Let me suggest a few ways. Firstly, we should read them as words of timeless wisdom.

Have a look at this picture on the screen. Does anyone know what that is? It's the Code of Hammurabi, a Babylonian law code, carved in stone, older than the ten words by about three centuries.

In its day, it governed an empire. But where is it now? It's behind glass in a museum in Paris. Nobody's life is shaped by Hammurabi anymore.

It's been discarded. But what about these ten words? Is it also something we should no longer bother with? Jesus says quite the opposite.

Consider what he teaches in Matthew 5 verse 17. Jesus says, do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them.

[11 : 31] In other words, unlike Hammurabi's code, Jesus doesn't think these ten words are simply to be discarded. Instead, he transforms them.

He starts by showing us their depth. death. For example, he shows us that murder isn't simply about taking someone's life, but has its roots in sinful anger.

Then, he embodies them perfectly by being the only human being who never ever acted in sinful anger himself, qualifying himself to be our savior.

And then after he died and rose again, he presents them as God's wisdom for us still. Over and over again, we find many of these ten words repeated in the New Testament.

In other words, these are not simply Old Testament, but also New Testament ethics. The difference now is that Jesus has also written them on our hearts.

[12:40] So, read them as words of timeless wisdom, offering instruction and direction on how to live for God.

Then, secondly, read them as words that set forth a vision. You see, what are these ten words?

They are not merely about what God wants.

More than that, they show us what God is like. They are an expression of his character. That's why Paul in Romans 7 describes the law as holy, righteous, and good.

Because God himself is holy, righteous, and good. And if God's people live out these words and show themselves to be holy, righteous, and good as well, they will present a true vision of God to the world.

That's why, earlier in Exodus 19 verses 5 and 6, God said this, although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

[13:58] When we live this way, the Christian faith becomes attractive. And if that is true, how can we call these words dull and elementary?

After all, just imagine a world where every word spoken was true. Imagine a world where every relationship was marked by reliability and faithfulness.

Imagine a world where a handshake was as good as a signed contract, and nobody ever needed fraud protection. That is not a dull world.

Far from it, that is actually the kind of world people long for. And that is the kind of world the Ten Words imagines. That's the kind of world God's people are meant to create by the way they live.

They are to be a counterculture, offering others a vision of what life in God's kingdom is really like.

These Ten Words are really a blueprint.

[15:09] Then thirdly, read them as words that provide freedom. You might wonder, could these words be really that great when they sound so restrictive?

Or think of it this way. Some years ago, researchers studied children playing in preschool yards near the road. In yards with no fence, the children did not actually make full use of the yard.

Instead, they huddled near the teacher, close to the school building, because they were uncertain how far was safe. But in yards with a clear fence around the boundary, the children ran freely.

They played right up to the edges. They used the whole space. You see, the fence didn't shrink their world. The fence is what gave them the whole yard.

That's what these ten words are. They are not a cage, but a fence around the space where life flourishes. Inside these boundaries, rest is protected, marriages are safe, life is honoured.

[16:28] Take the fence away and ironically, you get more restriction, not freedom. That's why the people who actually lift out these words never describe them as draining.

Look at what the psalmist says, for instance. Oh, how I love your law. I meditate on it all day long, some hundred 19, verse 97.

Or look at what James says, and remember his writing to Christians. In James 1, verse 25, he says, this is the perfect law that gives freedom. It blesses people.

Isn't that as far from draining as you can get? Because true freedom, in the end, isn't so much about choosing whatever I like, but about becoming what I was made for.

And these ten words exist to guide us into such freedom. But, you might ask, what are we made for?

[17:38] Again, Jesus provides us the answer. In Matthew 22, verses 37 and 40, when someone asked Jesus to summarize the whole law, he didn't hesitate.

Jesus replied, love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.

And the second is like it, love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. Why did Jesus reply this way?

Because when we look at the ten words, that is exactly its shape. The first four are primarily about loving God, while the last six are primarily about loving our neighbor.

And actually, we can't have one without the other. We can't claim to love God while trampling! our neighbor, and we cannot truly love our neighbor while detroning God.

[18:45] love. So at its heart, these ten words are not mere rules. They are about love. Love for God, love for neighbor, at home, in the streets, in our WhatsApp groups, because that is what we are made for.

So where does love begin? it begins where God begins, the first commandment, Exodus 20, verse 3.

You shall have no other gods before me. This is word number one, because frankly, every other word hangs on this one.

Get your first love right, and the other nine have a foundation. foundation. Get it wrong, and your foundation has cracks. So for the remainder of our time, let's look at this first word together.

verse 3. And if we read verse 3 in isolation, it could potentially rub us the wrong way, couldn't it?

[20:06] It all depends on how we hear it. So if we read, you shall have no other gods before me, in the voice of a highly controlling friend, it might sound like verse 3 is saying, you better not have any friends besides me.

Talk to anyone else, I'll be upset. Or, if we read it in the voice of a toxic boss, it might sound like this. I don't care about your family, your health, or your obligations.

If they compete with me, they lose. That's how some people hear the first word. They hear a cosmic CEO saying, make me your top priority because I like being number one.

But let's slow down and ask, is that the God who speaks in Exodus? Let me read verse 2 again.

I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. Do you hear it? this is not some cult leader demanding your devotion or having done nothing for you.

[21:27] Neither are these the words of someone at a distance, handing down rules to people he doesn't know. No, this is the voice of someone who has bound himself in love to you.

This is the language of covenant. And that completely changes how we hear verse 3. Certainly it is not a tyrant's demand after all.

Rather, it is more like a marriage proposal. After all, what is marriage? marriage? It is a relationship where you promise to love, comfort, cherish, and honor your spouse.

But more than that, it is a relationship where you promise never to let anyone else come between you, or never let someone else steal the loyal love that belongs to your husband or your wife.

That is what verse 3 is asking for. Not submit to me or else, but be completely for me the way I am completely for you.

[22:43] But that raises a question. Why would we want such an exclusive relationship? Isn't it better to hedge our bets a bit, see what's out there, just in case something goes wrong?

Well, that is not a new question. In fact, it's exactly the kind of question that Israelites themselves probably ask. Because remember the world they live in.

You see, in the ancient world, people assumed every nation had its own God. Egypt had its gods, Babylon had its gods, Canaan had its gods, they were almost like national mascots.

So, from an Israelite's perspective, you might ask, why stake everything on just one God? What made the Lord different from all the rest?

God again, verse 2 gives us the evidence. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt. Now, in that one sentence, what is God really saying?

[23:53] He's saying that he marched into what was supposed to be the territory of Egypt's gods and completely demolished them.

For instance, many Egyptians worshipped the Nile, but God turned it into blood. Others revered the frog goddess, but God summoned thousands of frogs and then left them all dead in piles.

In plague after plague, God wasn't just judging Pharaoh, he was exposing the so-called gods of Egypt as powerless.

That's why Moses can ask in Deuteronomy 4, has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another as the Lord your God did for you in Egypt?

And the answer is obvious, no. And so Moses concludes verse 35, you were shown these things so that you might know that the Lord is God besides him there is no other.

[25:08] The God of the Bible is not in a league with other gods, he is in a league of his own. Every other so-called God must finally bow before him.

And that is why in the end God demands our loyalty. it is not to shiok sendiri but because he alone is worthy to set us free.

Think of it like this. Ask yourself, why does a doctor insist you take the real medicine and not the sugar peels the corn man is selling next door?

Not because the doctor is insecure but because only the real medicine works and because he actually cares whether you live. You see that's what the first word is.

God is not protecting his ego, he is protecting his people because he knows what these other gods are like.

[26 : 18] They make promises. Money says I'll make you secure. Success says I'll make you significant. A relationship says I will complete you.

Family says I'll make you happy if you build your life around me. But because these gods are fake, what we call idols, they can't ultimately deliver on their promises.

They are con men. The now couldn't. The frog goddess And neither can money or career. Even family, precious as it is, cannot save you.

None of them has ever parted a sea. None of them has ever redeemed a people. And without a doubt, none of them has ever gone to a cross and walked out of a tomb.

Only the Lord has done that. Only the Lord saves. You see, in the end, only the one true living God is strong enough and good enough to bear the wake of all our longings and expectations and worship and delivers on his promises.

[27 : 39] So, when God says, you shall have no other gods before me, hear it not as the insecurity of a fragile ego, but as the fierce protective love of a husband who will not stand by and watch his bride give her heart to a fraud when he knows he alone can meet her needs.

But what exactly does it look like to obey this command? Well, look at verse 3 a little more closely. And this time I want to hone in on that phrase before me.

Now, here is something interesting. In the original Hebrew, it literally reads before my face. So, God is saying something like, do not have any other so-called gods in my presence.

Now, let's ask, where is God's presence? Answer, everywhere. There is nowhere you can go that is not before his face.

So, everywhere you go, God is to have your undivided heart. He is to have your undivided loyalty.

That's how we obey.

[29 : 06] So, what does that mean in practice? Perhaps most obviously, it means we cannot participate in the literal worship of other gods.

As Pastor Andrew Chia puts it, you cannot say, I was offering a sacrifice to this idol, but all the time I was thinking about Jesus, so it's okay.

Any more than you can say, I was sleeping with this prostitute, but all the time I was thinking of my wife, so it's okay. It is not okay.

And if today you are a Christian, but that is what you are doing, then the Lord calls you to repent.

But I suspect most of us in this hall will hear that and relax a little.

We think, ah, well, I don't have any idol statues at home, I don't burn jaw sticks, I'm in church on a Sunday morning, aren't I? Surely this is the one commandment I'm keeping.

[30 : 13] But wait, let me show you something from Israel's history. You see, as we go through the Old Testament, we realize that Israel's besetting sin was almost never really about replacing the Lord outright.

Very rarely did they wake up one day and say, that's it, we're done with the Lord, let's switch to Baal. No, often their sin was far more subtle.

They didn't subtract God, they added to him. For instance, have a look at 2 Kings 17 verse 33, which describes the northern kingdom just before God finally sent them into exile.

It should appear on the screen. They worshipped the Lord, but they also served their own gods. Do you catch that?

They worshipped the Lord. They kept the festivals. They said the prayers. And they also kept Baal on the side.

[31 : 23] Just in case. A little backup. A little insurance. Baal. That's what we call a both and mentality. Both the Lord and Baal.

Both Sunday worship and the backup God for the rest of the week. And isn't that how we can so easily operate as well? Oh Jesus, I need you.

But I won't really feel my life has begun until there is a ring on my finger. both and. Oh Jesus, you are all I need.

Except I also really need that promotion or I'll feel like a nobody. Both and. Oh Jesus, I cling to you. But if the diagnosis comes or business is slow, I'll cling to the bomo too just in case. Both and. Oh Jesus, I want you.

[32 : 29] But actually, I also want to do ministry in my own timing, on my own terms, both and. You see, the problem often isn't that we forsake God entirely, but we become a little double-minded about him, don't we?

Or we have demoted him and we haven't even realized it. So if we raise our hands and say all the right words, serving him in order to secure that thing we really want, whether it's health or success, or even a genuine blessing like ministry fruit, that blessing has become the God.

And Yahweh himself has simply become a means to an end. God is to God and God is happening, then we have broken the first word even while singing worship songs and leading Bible studies.

The idol has simply learned to wear Christian clothes. So let me challenge you this morning. Is that what is happening in your life?

Have you unintentionally taken something good and allowed it to take the place that belongs only to God? If so, respond as the Thessalonians did in 1 Thessalonians 1 verse 9 and 10.

[34 : 03] Turn from idols to serve the living and true God and wait for his son from heaven. Ask God today to search your heart and review anything that has quietly taken his place.

Maybe you have elevated certain people until they become the hero that only Jesus can be. Maybe you have taken a good desire, even a desire for a healthy church, and turned it into an ideal that no real church could ever live up to.

Maybe you are no longer loving the church God has actually given you, but constantly judging it against the church you imagine should exist.

But as the theologian Dietrich von Haifa once warned, the person who falls in love with their vision of the perfect community ends up becoming an accuser, first of the brothers and sisters who keep falling short of the dream, that of God for not delivering it, and finally of themselves.

Because once the ideal becomes the God, real people, including yourself, can never measure up. So let me just sum up how we can disobey the first word.

[35 : 33] We can deny God our worship altogether, directly participating in the worship of other gods. or we can demote God, giving his rightful place to another.

But there is another way we can break this rule. We can simply neglect him, not deny him, not demote him, just forget him.

Go days without prayer, weeks without gratitude, make every decision, big and small, without once consulting him, while still calling him, my God.

You know, this is one area where your pastor himself has been guilty of more times than he wishes to admit. You see, friends, sometimes you don't need a rival God to lose your first love.

You just need a full calendar. So by this point then, perhaps you are asking, how can we possibly keep this word?

[36 : 43] After all, which of us has loved God with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength, non-stop for even one whole week? Well, let me tell you first how not to keep it.

You will not keep it by walking out of here saying, right, this week I'm going to try harder to love God more. Because, friends, that's just not how the heart works, is it?

None of us has ever loved God more by sheer willpower. No, a heart can only be changed when it is captured by a greater love.

200 years ago, a Scottish preacher named Thomas Chalmers put it this way. You can't just empty the human heart. The only way to let go of what you are clinging to is to take hold of something better, someone better.

So, can I say this to you gently? If you want to keep the first word this morning, don't start by obsessing over your idols. Start by looking at Jesus.

[37 : 59] Just look at him. Look at the one who walked into the wilderness, hungry and alone, and heard Satan whisper, all the world's kingdom can be yours if you just bow down to me.

Just once. All the blessing without the obedience. All the glory without the cross. And what did Jesus say?

He answered with the very first word. Away from me Satan, for it is written, worship the Lord your God and serve him only.

Do you see? This is Jesus, the only one who ever kept the first word perfectly, the only heart that never wandered, never hedged, never kept a backup guard on the side.

And this same Jesus, the one who kept it flawlessly, let himself be broken in the place of every one of us who hasn't. He gave his undivided love all the way to a cross so that our divided hearts could be forgiven and made whole.

[39:14] So this morning, would you just look at him and receive his love, receive a love that you did not earn and could never deserve. Because here is the wonderful thing.

the more we receive that love, the smaller every rival becomes. The closer we come to Jesus, the more we find we don't need the both and anymore.

His grace really is enough. So let me invite you to do something as we close. Let's take our eyes off ourselves and fix them on Jesus.

Maybe this past week you've denied him, demoted him, or simply neglected him. You found yourself too busy, too distracted, maybe even too self-pitying to even notice he slipped down the list.

Well, if that is you, please hear this. Don't run from him in shame this morning, but run to him. Come and rest in the finished work of the one who kept the first word perfectly in your place.

[40:29] And then as you do so, ask him, Lord, what have I allowed other than you to become first in my heart?

And if you already know, then name it. Lay it down. But if you don't, that's okay. Simply pray, Lord, search me.

Show me in your time. Then we read Exodus 20 verses 1 to 3 and hear the first word, the way it was always meant to be heard, as an invitation from our Savior God to commit wholeheartedly to him wherever we are.

Let's pray. I'll just give you a few seconds in silence if you have anything to bring before the Lord yourself, before I lead us.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are our great redeemer.

[41:50] You are the one who has brought us out of slavery, not just in Egypt, but out of slavery to sin. And so Father, we recognize that we have switched masters that you are our master now.

But Father, as we come to you, we confess that sometimes we have allowed rival gods to steal our affections. We have not acknowledged you as the Savior King as we should.

And so Father, if that is us, please help us, Lord, to hear this tree afresh, to have no other gods besides you. And then help us to turn to you in repentance, and in gratitude because of who the Lord Jesus is, because knowing that he has died in our place.

And help us to fix our eyes on him, help us to ask him again to be first in our hearts, help him to be the sum total of our vision as we live our lives before you in this world.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.