

“Freedom, Delight, and Joy in the First Commandment”

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60+ Legacies Class

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Sunday School Lesson II

RECAP

When last we gathered, we discussed relationship between the gospel and the moral lives that we are to lead as Christians. Although there are lots of reasons to live a moral life and try to follow the 10 Commandments—we’re living in line with how God made us, it’s just better, it works, etc.—we looked in particular at how God’s commandments are frequently connected with his works of deliverance.

Throughout Scripture we see, commonly, that God performs acts of redemption and calls the people he delivered into greater communion with him, and each other, through moral lives that reflect that deliverance.

In the flood narrative, Noah is delivered before the commandment not to murder is given. In Ephesians 2, Paul outlines how God loved us when we were sinners, and wraps up that summary of the gospel by noting that God has prepared us for good works, that we should walk in them.

One of the most profound examples of this is in the delivery of the 10 Commandments. First, just the historical setting. Deliverance comes first, then the Commandments at Sinai. Then, in Exodus 20:1, God puts a point on it by prefacing the 10 commandments with a reminder of that very fact.

Although it’s God’s will that we follow the 10 Commandments and live moral lives, it makes all the difference in the world, especially to us, when we understand that a moral life is essentially a life of thanksgiving to God for his mercies. And that changes everything in the world.

First, it means that we are not trying to justify ourselves through living out the 10 Commandments, or trying to embody the fruits of the spirit. We are responding to the goodness of God in salvation. It also means that we don’t feel the need to warp or twist God’s law into something that we can more readily achieve. It means that we can confess our own sins, because we know that God has already accomplished redemption. It means that we can be forgiving to others who make mistakes, who mess up, who fail, because we know that the only reason we can even be talking about the moral life is that God made it possible for us in our ignorance, our weakness, our sinful natures, to be having this discussion in the first place.

As one of my mentors put it, we are not struggling to be set free, we are set free to struggle. We are not trying to keep the law to be saved, we are saved, and so we respond by trying to keep the moral law. It makes us more likely to say, with David, that we delight in the law of the Lord and meditate on it day and night.

So, with that in mind, let’s do some of that meditating right now. We’re going to look at the First Commandment.

Read Exodus 20:3.

How We Read the Ten Commandments

We could spend a long time on this, and a good place for us to start would be the Questions 98-100 of the Westminster Larger Catechism. My summary of those answers is that:

- The Ten Commandments are a summary of what means to love God and love your neighbor. The first four commandments address our duty to God, the remaining six our duty to man.
- The Ten Commandments are perfect.
- They're spiritual, which means that these are not just outward observances but they are meant to touch our souls, shape our hearts and affections.
- The 10C are attacking, from different angles, our disobedience to God and our waywardness. And so, they're unified or united, and to break one is to break others. For example, adultery is very clearly wrapped up in idolatry. You can't commit adultery without first worshiping something that isn't God.
- Here's an important point—where a commandment prohibits something, it also commands performing its opposite. And where a commandment instructs us to do something, it's also prohibiting us from doing the opposite. A good example of this is the 6th commandment. It's not just enough that I don't murder or kill—the commandment is instructing me to seek things that help myself, my family, my community to flourish. If I want to abide by the prohibition against lying, I must not merely avoid lying, and I can't stop simply at telling the truth, but I have to be a zealous advocate for truth speaking.
- By prohibiting something, God has also prohibited the actions that lead up to it.

The Requirements of the First Commandment

Overview

The First Commandment — thou shalt have no other gods before me — literally translated says “there shall not be for you another god before my face.” It's not just about ranking God the highest of other gods, but rather expelling all other gods from his presence.

That clearly means physical idols, and the temptation to serve other gods from other cultures would plague Israel pretty consistently. We see that in the Book of Judges, where God raises up a judge to rule the people of Israel and deliver them from oppression, and then after that went after other gods.

Judges 8:33-35 is instructive here. [READ]

It sounds very much like our Preface, too, right? God provides deliverance, the people are to respond with faith and obedience, and they do not. After the “Golden Age of the Kings,” people in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah sought after other gods, serving Baals and Ashteroths and other deities.

But even in the Old Testament, there's a recognition that idols aren't just made of clay or wood, but they can be brought into our hearts. Ezekiel 14, "these men have taken their idols into their hearts and the stumbling block of their iniquity before their faces? Should I indeed let myself be consulted by them?"

What is Idolatry?

Heidelberg 95: "Idolatry is having or inventing something in which one trusts, in place of or alongside of the only true God, who has revealed himself in his Word."

False gods, superstitions, or anything else that suggests that something other than God is in control of our lives, of the world, etc. Things we pursue for evil purposes, believing that they might provide satisfaction. So, for example, someone who pursues power because they believe—worship—in what they think that will provide for them.

For us in the church, we are most prone to a different kind of idolatry that happens when we take the good things of God and start to place our trust in his gifts, rather than the Giver of those gifts. This can be anything. Calvin wrote that the "human mind is a perpetual forge of idols"—and with that forge we can turn even good things into idols. Intelligence, influence, power, wealth, beauty, relationships, family, etc. All of these things can be blessings, can be good things, and we can turn them into idols.

In my case, I was a pretty decent kid growing up. Answered questions in Sunday School, kept my shirt tucked in, didn't drink in high school, etc. But I was pretty miserable because, as I'd realize in my 20s, I had made "being a good person" and "not doing what the bad kids do" into an idol. I was trying to live a moral life without that Preface in my heart.

Prohibition & Command

With that in mind, let's look at what the First Commandment prohibits and commands.

Prohibition = WLC 105

- Denying God
- Idolatry
- Omission of worship or neglect
- Self-love or selfishness
- Immoderately putting our affections on other things
- Using unlawful means, or placing our trust in lawful means
- "Making men the lords of our faith and conscience"
- "Ascribing the praise of any good we either are, have, or can do, to fortune, idols, ourselves, or any other creature."
- We are to receive our goods as blessings from God and ascribe our blessings to his providential care for our lives.

Command = WLC 104

- Knowing God, acknowledging him as the only true God

- Worshiping, remembering, meditating on, esteeming, delighting in, and rejoicing in him

A Warning

- Obviously, Scripture warns us against violating the Ten Commandments and we can search God's word to find examples of what happens when the 10 Commandments are ignored. But one of the most terrifying warnings is about idolatry.
- Read Ps 115:1-8
- They who make idols become like them. Horrifying! God has made us in His image, to enjoy him forever and to enjoy those others who are made in his image. But what does this warning say? Those who make idols become like them. Or we could paraphrase that to say, those who make images become images of them. Instead of living out the image of God in light of our creation, we are seeking to become images of something else. And as a result, instead of showing forth the glorious lives we were meant to have, we contort ourselves into being less than human.
- Does someone worship beauty? Truly worship it? How capable is that person of speaking genuine words of encouragement to you? How likely is that person to come to your side when you are having a hard time? Or the person that worships power? Where will he be when you are genuinely suffering?

Recapitulation & Invitation

- Although the Preface of 20:1 applies to each commandment, we can see a strong connection between the Preface and this commandment.
- What other gods had delivered the Hebrew nation from slavery? What other god had worked the signs and wonders of the plagues?
- There is a desperation to serving other gods, to serving our idols. There's something instructive about Elijah's showdown with the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18. Do you remember the competition? 1 Kings 18:26-29. How much harm do we do ourselves when we call out to our false idols, whatever they may be?
- We also see how God's service is perfect freedom with this commandment. Our idols debase us, they degrade us, and they keep us from growing into who God has us to be.
- And this is why the Psalmists can so frequently express delight in the law of God. It is the law of God that preserves our humanity.
- And we can see the goodness and the opportunities of following the 10 Commandments when we have that "Preface Attitude" in our mind.

Assignment

A "Preface Exercise"

- Recall what God has done in your life. What has he delivered you from?
 - Can be spiritual/theological—Christ has delivered me from my sins.

- Can also be from suffering, trials, etc.
- Reflect on how God alone performed that deliverance.
 - This may mean being a little more skeptical of a story you've told yourself, about how you may have pulled yourself up by your bootstraps. I like to say to that, who gave you the boots? Who gave you the hands and arms to pull? These things are also gifts and blessings from the Lord, so let's ascribe to him his works and not ourselves.
- Think about what you might be putting your trust in today, or over the past few weeks.
 - As we discussed, this will often be a good thing that we've allowed to get out of position.
- How do we get rid of that idol?
 - We recognize it as a gift from God and thank him anew for it
 - We ask for his strength and wisdom in putting that good thing back in its proper place, that we may serve him directly and alone.