

# EXODUS

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We are going to Exodus 20 today.

The section we are starting today is one of the most important in all of the Bible. It is a chapter that has shaped every society in the west. It's a chapter where the part of God's word that He reveals is so important that it was written in stone and the Jews carried it around everywhere they went.

This section is the ten commandments, which are the summary statements of the rest of God's laws in the Bible.

In thinking about God's law, David wrote,

**Psalm 19:7-11 “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;8 the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;9 the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether.10 More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.11 Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.**

And in passage after passage, the authors of scripture revel in the goodness of God's law. In these commands we are given wisdom, joy, truth, and guidance. God's law is something solid to put our feet on, it's the direction that we need.

This is opposed to a negative view of God's law that we often have.

One reason we view it negatively is we tend to think that commands are given just to restrict us. “Command” is almost a dirty word to modern people, we like “options”. We don’t like commandments, we prefer menus, where we can select our own standards. Even Christians sometimes will think that the idea of commands is antiquated, and the fact that we have free grace liberates us from any talk of obedience. We think we’ve been freed from all of that, that a life under grace is a life free from restrictions.

Part of the guidance we’re given in the commands is a set of restrictions. They do restrict us in some ways. But for our good. They are the right restrictions for us. Tim Keller writes:

*“Modern people like to see freedom as the complete absence of any constraints. But think of a fish. Because a fish absorbs oxygen from water, not air, it is free only if it is restricted to water. If a fish is ‘freed’ from the river and put on the grass to explore, its freedom to move and soon even to live is destroyed. The fish is not more free, but less free, if it cannot honor the reality of its nature. The same is true with airplanes and birds. If they violate the laws of aerodynamics, they will crash into the ground. But if they follow them, they will ascend and soar. The same is true in many areas of life: Freedom is not so much the absence of restrictions as finding the right ones, those that fit with the realities of our own nature and those of the world.”<sup>1</sup>*

So we believe that, because this is God’s word to us, these are the laws that so fit the realities of our own nature and realities of the world that they are for our good and ultimately, our freedom. They guide us to the life God wants us to live by directing and restricting us. The stream of our life is channeled into the ways God has for us.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller, Every Good Endeavor, pp 38-39.

Another reason we view God's law negatively is we think that the whole thing is useless now that Jesus came. Some Christians would say that "now that we know Jesus, the only command we have is to love. And as long as we love, we don't need commands. We no longer need laws. Love has its own built-in moral compass and just knows what to do for people in each situation."

Now it's true that all of the commands hang on the two commands to love God and our neighbor. But that love requires a direction.

Love needs moral laws and directions.

I love my wife. And I need from her some law, some direction, as to what makes her feel loved. I had to learn that she feels loved if I'm home for dinner, if I call and check in when I'm out of town. And not all of it came naturally to me. I've learned from what she has told me what communicates love to her and what doesn't. I'd like to say that I don't need any of that, that if I just love her I'll always know exactly the right thing to do. I, however, have learned that I don't always understand how her mind works. And I need her to communicate to me some laws that will express love.

And so it stands to reason that we certainly won't always know how God's mind works. So He has given us his laws to express his will for us, how to love Him and others well.

We need the direction of God's law, and this use of the law to direct our lives is a vital and valid one.

But these laws are even better than that. They are even more than direction for our lives. There are even better reasons to embrace them. So let's jump in:

**Exodus 20:1-3 “And God spoke all these words, saying,<sup>2</sup> “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.<sup>3</sup> “You shall have no other gods before me.”**

Before God gave his people these commandments, He reminded them of who He is and what He had done for them.

They were commanded after being saved. Before God gave them the do's and don'ts, He made them His people.

And keeping that in mind helps us avoid two errors. There's a ditch on each side of the road.

On the one side is legalism, which says, “I keep these commands so I can earn God's favor and be saved.” That's false. They didn't pull themselves up by the bootstraps and obey long enough to make God finally tap out and save them from Egypt. In an act of sheer grace, He rescued them first, and then commanded them.

And the same is true for Christians.

God came to us in Christ and saved us with his substitutionary death and resurrection. It isn't when we work but when we repent and believe that we are saved. And then there are all kinds of implications that come from that, all kinds of ways that shapes us, all kinds of ways we are commanded to live accordingly.

To mess up that order is to miss the heart of the faith. At the heart of our faith is the Gospel which says God came and died and rose again so that whoever believes would be saved. We aren't saved by doing. We are taken from our slavery to sin only by God and His gracious work on our behalf.

The commands are never meant to save.

We have to watch that we don't make the common and FATAL MISTAKE, the mistake that keeps us from being Christians, that keeps us from a right relationship with God, that keeps us from life. We make this mistake when we take the commandments, which were meant to diagnose us, and try to use them to cure us.

That's the essence of religion, and the essence of what often passes for Christianity: "you've been bad according to the commandments, so now keep the commandments and you'll be all set."

But that is a fatal error. Because commands don't save, they indict. They diagnose, they don't cure.

This is the difference between an X-ray and a cast. The x-ray might reveal that there's a problem. But the solution to the problem is not "more x-rays." The technician doesn't say, "Yep, your arm is broken. So we're just going to give you 40 or 50 x-rays and you'll be all better."

No, you go off to a different room to get your cast - the thing that will allow you to heal. The x-ray is a tool that is meant to diagnose, but never cure.

It's great at what it does, but bad and what it was never meant to do. It doesn't cure you - it was never meant to.

And the point of the commands of God is not to cure us, it is not to give us our rescue and new life with God. It never has been. They're meant to diagnose.

And when we strive to obey them, as we should, we will see that the diagnosis isn't good and we need a cure.

Augustine wrote, *“The law orders, that we, after attempting to do what is ordered, and so feeling our weakness under the law, may learn to implore the help of grace.”*

He also wrote, *“God commands what we cannot do that we may know what we ought to seek from Him”*

That’s the primary purpose of these laws and why they are so good. They send us running to Christ, our healer.

And while the laws do guide us and help us, their primary purpose is to point us to Christ.

**Galatians 3:24-26 “So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. 25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, 26 for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.”**

The word guardian here is literally “schoolmaster.” This was the strict disciplinarian teacher in a classroom. The law is a teacher, a disciplinarian, who shows us our guilt and our need for Christ.

So do we need the law? The ten commandments? The do’s and don’ts of scripture? YES! They point out our need for Jesus. Without them we don’t see how desperate our situation is.

We need the commands. We need to teach our kids the commandments, morality, right and wrong. Because you have to see you fall short to run to Jesus.

But seeing that the rescue comes before the response, the salvation comes before the commands, they red sea crossing comes before sinai, is life-and-death important.

And it keeps us from falling off the road into the ditch of legalism.

**But the ditch on the other side of the road is license.** It is saying that “I’m not saved by commands, therefore there are no commands.” It’s using grace and the rescue God gave us as the freedom to sin and to make our own rules. This error is thinking that if we are asking, “What does the bible command us to do” that we are somehow being legalistic and religious and rulesy and moving away from relationship with God.

It would be like if I were to say to my wife, “I love you. Where do you want to go on our date tonight?” And she were to name a fancy place, say Applebees. And then I were to respond, “Why have you gotten so legalistic - this was supposed to be a relationship. Now you’re specifically telling me where you want me to drive. I thought this was about love.”

No, because I love her, I want her to tell me what she wants.

And the laws of God are God telling us what He wants.

Love needs the direction of the law.

Commands do follow on the heels of grace.

**Ephesians 2:10 “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”**

We are saved by grace, and saved to good works.

Saved people are people who are under the commands of God.

So before God gives commands, He reminds them of their rescue.

And He reminds them of Who He is.

**Exodus 20:2 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery**

He says, “I am Yahweh,” the Lord, the specific God who brought you out of Egypt. Not just any god or any nice form of spirituality, a God with a name and attributes who has proven that I am superior to all other gods.

And these laws are going to tell us something about what God is like.

Imagine you’re starting a new job, and you’re sure not really sure about the place. It’s a sales job and that could go either way, it could be great, or you could be pressured to be dishonest and lie to customers. I was a telemarketer in college (somehow escaping with my soul), and I remember managers saying, “Don’t lie, just imply” with a wink and a nod. It was clear what kind of manager that was, and what kind of company that was.

But if on the first day of work, the new boss calls you in and says, “First, we never lie to customers. Even if it costs us a sale, integrity matters more than a buck.” You know something about that boss - he’s got integrity. He demands integrity, so he’s either a hypocrite or a man of integrity himself. And when God gives commands, we learn something about God - the law’s our tutor in that way.

We can’t see God, but we know he said “don’t lie”, so He must be true, He must be a God we can trust, He must tell us the truth.

He said “don’t steal”, he must be a God who would never cheat us out of anything, and He must be a generous God. He must be a God who is not out for himself, but to overflow in kindness.

That's what God is like.

He's a unique God, He isn't like the gods of Egypt, He showed Himself superior to them in Egypt and now He is going to show how totally unique He is at Sinai.

Back in Egypt, God had shown His power over the false gods of Egypt. The Egyptians worshipped Ra, the sun god, and God sent a plague of darkness, blotting out the sun. They worshipped Kep, the god of the earth, and God made the dust from the earth turn to lice. They worshipped hapi, the god of the Nile, and God turned the Nile river to blood.

So God demonstrated that the Egyptian gods were no gods at all, and that He was true and real and superior to everything they were worshipping. And in light of that God gives the first command and says:

### **3 "You shall have no other gods before me."**

God has shown that He is better and more powerful, and says, "Don't go back." Don't put some other god up above me.

Now they, and we, might be tempted to. Things are going to be hard for them in the wilderness and hard for us in life, and we will be tempted, in the darkness, to ask, "What has God ever done for me?"

God always has an answer to that question. For them, the answer was "I rescued you out of the house of slavery." That's what I've done for you, that's how you know I'm good in all that I command.

And His answer to us is better. It's the gospel. "I gave my Son to rescue you from sin and hell."

So during the dark nights when we are tempted to live for something that we make more important than God, and our souls grumble, “what has God ever done for me?”, He always has an answer: the cross. That’s our exodus.

And sometimes when things get dark we can’t see anything God has done for us in life. We doubt whether He has ever answered our prayers, whether He has ever been good. We get low and forget all He has done. But even if it were true that we can’t trace a single thing in our lives back to God’s work, we have the cross, and that’s enough.

That’s the answer for the “why should I keep following, why should I keep trusting?” question. The cross. He brought us out of our Egypt.

And when we’re tempted to go back, we have to remember our rescue. It’s remembering our rescue that keeps us from putting another God before God.

Now if you’ve been a Christian a long time, you might say, “Breaking this first commandment is not a temptation. I only have one God, it is the God of the bible, I wouldn’t think of calling something else god.”

But the commandment is not only, “don’t call anything else God.” That’s fairly easy to do.

The command is, “Do not have any other gods *before* me.”

And the fact that we would never call anything else God doesn’t mean we’re off the hook. God wants us to put nothing before Him.

God will be preeminent. Nothing comes before God. That’s what this commandment means.

And putting someone or something else first is far more subtle and tempting than we might think.

God doesn't only want to be the only thing we call God. He wants to be first. So if we're wondering whether we are drifting toward putting another God before Him, we can examine our firsts - what is first in our lives, what is our first priority?

We can ask some questions to help us:

**What do we do with the first part of our week?** (Since the resurrection, the week has been designed so the first hours of it are spent in worship with God's people on Sunday morning.)

**What do we do with the first part of our money?** (Sometimes our giving is what we do with the leftovers - if I have some left at the end of the paycheck I'll throw some change in for the Lord. But God has designed giving in His kingdom to be the first thing we do with our money.)

**What do we do first in the morning?** Grab the phone and see what happened in instagramland at 2am? Or open up the Bible app to hear from the Lord.

**What is our first priority for our kids?** That they would get a great education? That they would be athletes? Or that they'd know the Lord? And again, it's easy to say, "The Lord is first," but what do we put first in their week? What's the thing that would never be compromised? Sports? Homework? School activities? Or the Lord?

**What is the first thing we care about in a potential spouse?** Good looks, income, fun at a party? Or godly? Of course you may notice the looks first, but what's the first priority in the selection process?

**And, probably most importantly to determine what our God is, we can ask where do we go first for our direction in life.**

My friends rally around and tell me not to forgive someone because they betrayed me. But whose word is first?

My friends cheer me on in leaving my spouse without biblical grounds? But whose word is first?

Our God is whoever calls the shots for us. Our God is whatever we go to as our final court of appeal. When we've heard wisdom from everywhere, whose wisdom is the most important? When we've heard out everybody, who is the final court of appeal? Whose word is of first importance?

Whose word do we take most seriously?

Who makes the final, binding, authoritative laws for our lives?

Whoever does is our god.

And while we can say we are following Christ because we label ourselves Christians or are learning his word, discipleship is mostly about obedience, not box-checking on a doctrinal questionnaire. It is not just a mental response to God, it is a behavioral response to God.

*Our God is whoever makes the laws that we live by.*

We put God before all other gods when His commands are final and binding and authoritative.

And when we acknowledge that this is the true standard of righteousness. The commands of the Bible are not just strict fundamentalist religious rules

that nobody really follows anymore so its cool. But these are the words of God, that tell us the heart of God, tell us what He is like.

And the level of purity commanded, if we take it the right way, is levelling. Paul uses the example in the NT of the tenth commandment, do not covet, as one of the most devastating to our self-righteousness and one of the most revealing about God's holiness.

Because it says that what goes on in our hearts matters. It doesn't only matter if I steal my neighbor's stuff, it matters if I covet it in my heart.

And if God cares about heart level obedience, I haven't kept the other commands either. We murder out of hatred and anger. And in me, the hatred and anger has stayed contained in my heart. In a murderer, the same junk spilled out. But what is in our hearts is the same.

Jesus expanded this idea in the sermon on the mount. **In Matthew 5:27-28, for example, Jesus taught, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart."**

God wants not only outward obedience, but inward obedience. His law demands it. And that wrecks us. Because now there is no looking at the law and saying, "I'm pretty good." We can only say, "I'm a lawbreaker, I'm a sinner." In view of God's holiness, we're levelled.

This reveals how big the gap is between us and God's purity.

This makes us all equals before His holiness so nobody can boast.

It reveals how serious our offense is.

But the cure came in what is represented in the bread and wine here.

One true lawkeeper came for us.

**Notes:**

**Exodus 20:1-3**

**The First Commandment**

- I. **The goodness of commands (Psalm 19:7-11)**
- II. **The foundation of commands (Exodus 20:1-3)**
- III. **The first of the commands (Exodus 20:3)**

**For Discussion in Small Groups:**

- 1. Why do we often recoil at the idea of commandments?
- 2. Are there real risks to making too much of the commands?
- 3. Is there a real risk in making too little of them?
- 4. Discuss the statement: commands diagnose but cannot cure.
- 5. What is the right use of commands today?