

No Other gods
Exodus 20:1-3
August 30, 2026

In a side comment last week, Chris mentioned that Exodus 20 suffers from something of a public relations problem. He's not wrong. And if we were going to be even *more* specific about it, we might say that the Ten Commandments need a publicist who's actually read the rest of the Bible.

... including the Psalms. The longest Psalm we have begins: **How blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD** (Ps. 119:1). A few verses later we read: **I shall delight in Your commandments, which I love** (Ps. 119:47). *This* is the kind of thing one finds when just casually reading the Psalter. Which *shouldn't* surprise us, of course. Because of how the introduction to that hymnbook begins: **How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on His law he meditates day and night** (Ps. 1:1-2).

Now, maybe you are *quick* to say, "That's Old Testament." Well, first, that doesn't make the repeated statements any *less* true. The Psalmist wasn't lying. However, if I *were* to grant the point, we could just move to the Apostle Paul in Romans 7. In that context, where Paul had *just* quoted the tenth commandment, he writes this: **So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good** (Rom. 7:12).

So, *why* are we saying that Exodus 20 suffers from a PR perspective? Because the language the Psalmist and Paul use simply *isn't* how men and women *generally* describe law or commandments. To be clear, there isn't actually an issue with the Ten. The public relations issue has *everything* to do with the *public*. Most of us bristle to some degree when we're told what to do, or we're told what *not* to do, whether that's due to an inherent distrust of authority, or an inflated sense of self.

But, also, our aversion to command can spring from a misunderstanding of freedom. We discussed this, briefly, in 1 Peter, and then in the book of Galatians. But it's *imperative* that we return to this misconception as we begin this section of commands. Because, though the cultural winds, and our confused wills, believe "freedom" is freedom from any and every restraint, that's certainly *not* the case. In fact, if you *never* stop doing whatever you *want* to do, you'll soon find out that you're actually enslaved.¹ Because *true* freedom isn't the absence of restriction or instruction altogether; it's instead finding the right liberating restrictions. There's a reason why James calls the law the law of liberty (James 1:25).

So, with all that in mind, one of my primary goals with *each* of these commandments is to help us see that what God instructs actually leads us to what the Bible calls freedom. To make that point, and to bring the first commandment all the way from Exodus 20 to today, I'll ask three questions with something of a Trinitarian framework: (1) Why did *Yahweh* give this command to Israel in the Mosaic Covenant? (2) How did *Christ* fulfill this command for us? (3) How do we, by the *Spirit*, obey this command in the New Covenant?

1. Why did Yahweh give this command to Israel in the Mosaic Covenant?

I say, "to Israel" and "in the Mosaic Covenant" to keep us within the context. Preaching on one verse—or one command—is *one* of the most dangerous ways to miss the forest for one tree. Context is also why I read verses 1 and 2 *before* the command. Because when we consider verses 1 and 2, we're reminded that the One speaking is the One who'd revealed His name to Moses at the

¹ Bondage is rebellion against the God who formed us. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC, 350.

burning bush. He is the LORD. And in this covenant prologue, He goes on to remind the Hebrews that He is **the LORD your God**. He is Israel's God.

And, of course, *both* of those statements have amplified meaning when they—and we—consider what Israel's God had *just* done for them. Verse 2 goes on: **I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery**. So, once again—like Chris did last week—we emphasize the order. It's "love before Law. And done before do."² The LORD their God *had* remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And *because* of that, by a mighty right hand, He'd rescued His people.

And then *He*—the LORD, *their* God, their *delivering* God—says to those He'd delivered: **You shall have no other gods before Me**. Even though I think this command is fairly simple, that *doesn't* mean churches and commentators haven't labored to somehow make it complicated. In fact, a few wonder, "Does this mean the Hebrews could acknowledge *other* gods, but just must keep Yahweh pre-eminent, or in first place among their panoply of deities?" In other words, can it be God *plus* something else?

That's just not a possible interpretation, not from this verse or anywhere else. As it's been said, God has *always* been a monotheist.³ He, more than anyone, knows there is but one God. In fact, with—**In the beginning, God**—in mind, John Dickson writes this, "Monotheism is not just the Bible's first commandment, it is its first thought."⁴ Later in Deuteronomy, Moses will continue the point: **Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that the LORD, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other** (Deut. 4:39).⁵

So, it's clear: the Lord doesn't give this command in order to affirm the existence of other deities *besides* Himself. Instead, He gives it as an acknowledgement of that thinking's allure,⁶ in particular for the Hebrews. Keep in mind *where* they'd been enslaved, the context in which Israel had lived for over 400 years. Ancient Egypt was marked by, and *motivated* by, scores of deities that the Egyptians sought to appease—from the Nile to the snake, to the frog, and to Pharaoh himself—even to the calf. Exodus 32 will *soon* show us that, though Israel was out of Egypt, *all* of Egypt was not out of Israel.

So, with this command came something distinct. What was somewhat controversial, and what was intended to set the Hebrews apart from the pagan nations worshipping their panoply of deities, was that Israel's God demands every bit of their allegiance.⁷

Before me means "in opposition to Me" or "before His face."⁸ In other words, no other gods are *ever* to be in His presence (and where is He not?), nor are they ever to tug at the affections of His people. He—as the greater party in this covenant that He initiated—expects exclusive loyalty, receiving *all* of their worship, their adoration, and affection. In fact, if there were a *positive* way to communicate "no other gods," it's found later in Deuteronomy 6:4: **Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might**.

This is what the LORD demands of His redeemed people, both *then* and *now*. Maybe you're already feeling the sandpaper of the Law. Because we, like Israel, like our cafeteria religion. It's God—and, often, something *else*. Or practically it's, can I trust God *here*, in *this* area of my life, but

² See Chris Wilbanks, *Love before Law*, here: <https://southwoodsbc.org/media/g6n7mcb/love-before-law>

³ Phil Ryken, *Exodus*, 558.

⁴ John Dickson, *A Doubter's Guide to the Ten Commandments*, 49.

⁵ He is solitary. See A. W. Pink's *The Attributes of God*.

⁶ Alec Motyer, *Exodus*, BST, 213.

⁷ To the exclusion of all the other false deities that occupied the minds and hearts of paganism. See Kevin DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments*, 28.

⁸ Ryken, 560.

hold on to the reins over *here*, in this *other* area that I happen to be fairly trained in? You know, *some* would say I'm handling this aspect of my life with a good bit of excellence. My commitment to it has gotten me somewhere. I've found that I can depend upon it.

Now, yes, sometimes I treasure this other thing so much it squeezes out other things in my life, things I've thought were important for years. This other thing actually seems to have a lot of power, if I'm being honest. I've found that I love it *so* much that when it goes well, I'm happy. But when it *doesn't* go well, I'm absolutely distraught—almost as if false gods make false promises.

Might we hear the One who knew this commandment better than anyone: **No one can serve two masters** (Matt. 6:24).

There is one God. In kindness He's revealed Himself to us. And the fact that we occasionally think *otherwise* is just more evidence of our blindness. As we consider that, we experience *another* function of the Law. The Law not *only* reveals God to us; it reveals *us* to us. Paul writes in Romans 3: **for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin** (Rom. 3:20).

Maybe you're wondering how this understanding of the Law could ever bring freedom. It does so by cutting the power to humanity's treadmill of works—righteousness. Because when we see the Law rightly, our eyes also see our utter inability to keep it. And it is *then* that the Law leads us, like a tutor—to the One who has.

2. How did Christ fulfill this command for us?

We've said *some* of this before. But consider what we learn early in the Gospels concerning Mary and Joseph raising their "son" *where* they did. Consider Jesus—even as a 12-year-old—sitting at the epicenter of Jewish life, learning (and teaching!) the Scriptures at the Temple. The point of thinking upon the Gospels is *this*: Jesus was raised in a context where He would've not *only* known the Law, but been instructed to obey it. And I bring that up to point to God's wise and salvific purposes. Because if Jesus had come to this earth as a member of any *other* nation, born in *most* other places, He would *not* have been subject to what's being revealed here in Exodus.⁹ He was born under the Law (Gal. 4:4).

Now, when Paul says that *we* are *under* the Law, he's making quite a different point. Because of the Law he quotes in Galatians 3: **Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, to perform them** (Gal. 3:10). The Law's standard is *all* things—and always. Not just the *first* command, which we *certainly* haven't done, but *all* the commands. It's every *one* and every time. So, when Paul says *we* are under it, we're to conclude that *should* we seek salvation *by* it, we only bring ourselves under its condemnation.

We have *not* been saved by attempting to observe it. Which is, of course, not unlike Israel. We know what *they* will do in the chapters ahead. The proverbial "ink" was not yet dry, and yet they're falling before something golden, in the wilderness around Sinai.

So, for those under the condemnation of the Law, Christ came—and was born under it—so that He might fulfill it. Now, to merely *begin* considering this, we could journey to a different wilderness, one Jesus Himself was led into. We might consider *Him* ascending a mountain to behold kingdoms and glory. And *there* hear the Father of Lies utter: **All these things I will give You, if you fall down and worship me** (Matt. 4:9). Of course, to do what follows that "if" would be to break the Law of God—the very first commandment, the one every other human has. And yet, in *that* moment, the One who knew the Law, who'd been born under it, who'd come to fulfill it, said this: **You shall worship the LORD your God, and serve Him only** (Matt. 4:10).

⁹ Leon Morris, *Galatians*, 129.

Now, of course, Matthew 4 is a mere snapshot of a single moment. But it's not *only* that Jesus quoted *that* passage on that mountain, nor that He obeyed the first commandment in *that* moment, it's that He *always* did so. Not for one second did He give Himself or His affection to anyone other than the Father. It was *never* Yahweh—plus.

Born under the Law, He fulfilled it, for those condemned by it, in order to redeem those under it. Or as John Newton sings: "He has hushed the Law's loud thunder; He has quenched Mount Sinai's flame."¹⁰

This is one way the Law leads us, tutors us, functions as our schoolmaster to Christ. Because when we consider it, we're led away from self. And at one and the *same* time, we're led to Him. This is some of what Paul means when he says, **through the Law I died to the Law** (Gal. 2:19). Paul says, *I* died. And then he goes on to say, **I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.**

Which leads us to our third question:

3. How do we, by the Spirit, obey this command in the New Covenant?

Just to be clear, I believe in sin, and affirm depravity. As we've said, the Law reveals *us*. But if we're going to talk about this commandment in the context of the whole Bible, it's *also* important to speak of regeneration—of the new birth. Because there's a covenant superior to the Mosaic Covenant.

And in this New Covenant, one enacted on better promises, God Himself writes His law on His people's hearts. God Himself—in the person of the Holy Spirit—indwells His people. Why bring all that up in this sermon on the Ten Commandments? Because in this New Covenant, it's not *only* that we *should* obey the first commandment, it's that God has made provision so we *can*.

How? We do that, first, by acknowledging that our affections are often disordered. If the word of God is a mirror (James 1:23), if the Law exposes *us*, then we readily admit that we've loved the wrong things, often serving and worshipping other "gods." How do we know what those things are? We might ask: "Who or what is it that I ultimately trust? What is it that gives my life meaning? To whom do I give thanks? Or what do I want to the degree that I'll do *anything* to get it?"

By the way, this challenge doesn't just disappear. There's a reason 1 John ends: **Little children, guard yourselves from idols** (1 Jn. 5:21).

But that can't be *all* we do. A mirror—by *itself*—can't fix what's wrong. Its purpose is to drive us elsewhere. So, how do we not *only* identify our idols, but replace them?

First, we look to the One who fulfilled the Law for us. For His people, God Himself came and accomplished what we never could. His obedience is, *first*, our provision—and then, by the Spirit, our pattern too (1 Pet. 2:21). He was set apart so that we might be as well (Jn. 17:19). In short, all of this *He* makes possible.

In this, we see the same order that marks Exodus 20. Even in terms of our obedience, it's still *done* before do. That hasn't changed. What *is* different, drastically so, is that there came a *greater* Exodus, when a better Deliverer rescued *us* from slavery and brought us to Himself. And *then*—rather than merely writing it on stone—God wrote His Law on our hearts, so that by His Spirit we might be empowered to follow.

And if you say, "I can't," I'd agree, in *some* sense. That is, "You can't *perfectly*." You *will* sin. That's 1 John 1. However, if you *also* say, "I can't *ever*," then the New Testament would respond, "Either you're not a believer" *or* "You've not understood the New Covenant or the person and work of the Holy Spirit." Because of His indwelling, and the Law written on your heart, you not only *should*, but *can*.

¹⁰ John Newton, "Let Us Love and Sing and Wonder"

Of course, this is *not* on your own. But by faith in what God has done for you, faith in the One who came for you. Or as Paul says, **the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me** (Gal. 2:20).

Conclusion

That letter goes on to say that it was for freedom that Christ set us free (Gal. 5:1). Which means freedom *from* the condemnation of the Law, but also freedom *for* obeying it—with delight.

So, yes, the next time I am face to face with this or that sin, and I *know* God's command, I *might* fail. In fact, sometimes I *will* fail. But, by the Spirit, because of what Christ has done, I do not *have* to. Rather than bow before a lifeless idol, I can and should worship the One who made me alive. Christ alone. There is no *other*.

And if we were to continue to consider *each* of the Ten Commandments, we can and should say that by the Spirit, because of what Christ has done, I can and should hallow His Name. And by the Spirit, because of what Christ has done, I can and should rest in Him. By the Spirit, because of what Christ has done, I can and should submit to authority He's placed over me, I can and should do that which promotes life, I can and should be loyal to my spouse, I can and should give rather than take, I can and should reject falsehood.

And, finally, by the Spirit, because of what Christ has done, I can and should be content. I don't have to covet what I *don't* have. The one God is *my* God.

No *other* god. That's freedom.