

The 1st Commandment: God

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[0 : 00] Well, we're starting a new series today looking at the Ten Commandments. And you may be wondering, well, why study the Ten Commandments? Why invest time in looking at each commandment in turn?

Well, it's because we live in a complicated and a confused world. In society today, there's confusion, not just about what to believe, but about how you should live your life.

And it's clear that there is no shared moral or ethical code out there that everybody agrees with or subscribes to. There's a little consensus about what's right and what's wrong, about what's good and what's bad, about what's appropriate and what's inappropriate.

And so you just need to browse social media for a moment and see that everybody is arguing about how you should think and how you should live. And yet everybody claims to care deeply about issues of equality and diversity and justice.

But different groups all say that they're right by claiming authority, by assuming the moral high ground and by virtue signaling. Just recently, Libby Purvis, who writes for The Times, she wrote an article with the title, Moral Superiority is the Curse of Our Times.

[1 : 19] And she says this. She says, This ability to believe in your own virtue, provided you utter the approved slogans, is neither logical nor helpful, but it's a key marker of the modern world.

And she goes on to say that everybody basically thinks that they are the goodies. And the people who don't think like the goodies do are the baddies. And so it's not as if there's no moral or ethical rules out there.

There are plenty of rules out there. There are plenty of people telling us how we should live. But it's just that our society doesn't want these rules or these commands to be Christian.

And so we don't think, as a culture, that God's Ten Commandments have anything useful to say to us. Hey, we think they're irrelevant. But they've simply been replaced by another bunch of commandments.

Secular commandments. A secular code or a secular creed, which is just as much a bunch of rules as the Ten Commandments are.

[2 : 25] Rules or laws. And today's secular creed, today's secular commandments, they're not necessarily written down, but it is assumed that everybody should be following them.

I guess they're the woke commandments that thou shalt not disobey. For example, some contemporary commandments today would be Black Lives Matter, Love is Love, Transgender Women are Women, Gay Rights are Civil Rights.

And whatever you think of these, there's no denying that many think that they must be obeyed with a fundamentalist zeal. Because if you blaspheme against any of these commands, then the angry Twitter mob will be after you to make sure that you are cancelled.

And so surely such strong reactions in our society, they tell us that we actually want rules. We want some kind of framework so that life works better for everybody.

But in the secular West, what we find is that, having turned away, life hasn't got any better or made us any happier as human beings.

[3 : 39] Things have got worse. Because if we believe the statistics, we're more stressed, we're more anxious, and we're more suicidal than ever before. So it seems that we pay the price as a society and as individuals if we push God out of our lives.

And so we've got to be careful, not just to assume that God's commandments will restrict our lives or that they're there to spoil our fun. Because the issue isn't, do we need a moral and ethical framework by which to live?

Obviously, we think we do. The issue is actually, what is the best moral and ethical framework for our lives? What will best enable human flourishing, both for me as an individual and for our society as a whole?

And so that's how we should approach the Ten Commandments as we study them together. Because for human flourishing, for human freedom, for human harmony, we need to listen to what our Creator God says to us.

So if you're listening, if you're here, and you're not sure about God, I hope that you'll see that what He commands is far better for our lives and for our society than any of the alternatives, any of the other voices that continue to preach to us today and tell us how to live.

[5 : 05] What God says to us makes most sense. If He is our Maker, then the best thing to do is to follow the Maker's instructions, and we find those in the Ten Commandments.

So our three points are up on the screen. Three things about the Ten Commandments. First, they come from God. Second, they're based on grace. And third, they demand our obedience. They come from God.

They're based on grace. And they demand our obedience. So first of all, they come from God. This is the first thing that we need to grasp. They're not man-made rules like all the other rules or commands that we hear today.

They come from God. So verse one, we read, and God spoke all these words. So we've got the Ten Commandments because God spoke them.

Later on, in Exodus 31, verse 18, we're told that God wrote them with His finger on two tablets of stone. And so they come to us with the authority of God, which means they give a very firm foundation for our lives.

[6 : 08] Far better a foundation than any other rule or command that is simply human or man-made. And that means we're not left to decide for ourselves what is right or wrong, what is best for me or for other people.

And we don't need to rely on the latest look opinion to tell us how we should live our lives. No, because God has spoken. And His words were written in stone back then, and they are still inscribed and set in stone today.

In other words, they can't be changed and they will never be obsolete because they are absolute.

They have always and will always apply to all people because God spoke them.

So we can't disregard them or dodge them or dilute them because they are what God says to us.

And yet when we hear the word commandment or law, we instinctively think of rules.

And rules tend to be regarded as bad things that restrict our freedom and that spoil our fun. And so people are often put off Christianity because they think it is excessively restrictive.

[7 : 21] And perhaps that's where you find yourself coming from. Believing that the rules we find in the Ten Commandments surely deprive us of our happiness.

and yet that's far too simplistic a way to think about it. Just think of a fish. A fish is designed for water. It's not designed for land because it absorbs oxygen from water instead of air.

And so it's only free if it's restricted to water. There's no freedom for a fish living outside of water and on land instead. There is only death for that fish.

Outside of water, life is not enhanced or better for the fish. Life is only destroyed. And so true freedom is not the lack of restrictions on our lives.

Rather, true freedom comes by submitting ourselves to the right restrictions, to the best restrictions. And that's what we find in the Ten Commandments.

[8 : 22] As our loving creator, God gave them to us not to restrict our lives, but because he knows how life works best for us, for our relationships, for the world.

And so when you read through the Ten Commandments, you can't say the world wouldn't be a better place if we all managed to live them out. Can you imagine how good life would be if everybody obeyed all the Ten Commandments all of the time?

perfect relationships with everybody, family, friends. No murder, no adultery, no stealing, no lying, no coveting, no greed.

And so pushing back against what God says makes life worse for ourselves and others. Isn't that better? And because God gave the commandments, it's no surprise to find that they cover every single aspect of life.

No other set of commandments or rules is so comprehensive and succinct as what God gives us here. But somebody might ask, well, didn't Jesus turn the Ten Commandments into just two? [9 : 36] And aren't they just about really loving? Well, when Jesus was asked which is the greatest commandment, he said, in the Gospels, Matthew 22, he said, 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. But then he went on to say, all the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments.

So what Jesus does is he summarizes the Ten Commandments. He doesn't do away with them. He summarizes them into two. And so, how do we love God?

Well, we love God by obeying the first four commandments. And how do we love our neighbor?

Well, the following six commandments tell us how to do this.

So they begin with our vertical relationship with God and then they move out onto our horizontal relationships with those around us as human beings.

[10 : 39] And so as we study each one, we'll see that no aspect of life is left out. So that's our first point, the Ten Commandments, they come from God. Second point is that they're based on grace.

We need to get that they come from God and we need to get that they're based on grace. So verse two says, I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

Now notice that God says this before he gives his people the Ten Commandments. God tells the Israelites that he is the Lord, their God. So God is entering into a covenant relationship with his people.

And that's why the Ten Commandments are based on grace. And so you don't need to be a mathematician to know that one to nineteen comes before twenty.

So Exodus chapter one to nineteen come first, what God has done for his people, before Exodus chapter twenty, what God demands of his people. So before God gives the Ten Commandments to Israel, he delivered them out of their slavery in Egypt.

[11 : 50] And it was only after they'd been set free did God then tell them how he wanted them to live. And so God didn't give the commandments so they could become his people because they already were.

God didn't say, obey these words and then I'll bring you out of Egypt. Instead he said, no, I have brought you out of your slavery in Egypt.

Now obey these words. So it's not a case of I love you and I'll save you if you can prove to me how good you are. No.

Rather it is I've saved you by grace. You have contributed nothing. Now this is how I want you to live. So grace came before the law.

And so the commandments are how God's people respond to God's grace. And it's still the same for Christian believers today. What God did for Israel is what he has done for every believer in Jesus Christ.

[12 : 54] So just as the Lord God rescued his people out of slavery in Egypt then he told them how to live as his redeemed people. So the Lord God rescues people out of slavery to sin through Jesus and then he tells us how to live as his redeemed people.

So it's never obey the commandments to be accepted by God but it is when we have been accepted by God we obey the commandments.

Not to earn our salvation but because we've already received it by grace. And you know that is the opposite of everything else that our world tells us whether religious or secular.

Every other religion says that if you want salvation then you've got to do all these things obey all these commands follow all these rules and maybe just maybe if you're good enough then you'll get in you'll be saved you'll be accepted.

And our secular culture when you think about it is just the same it's just the same. If you want to be accepted then thou shalt say this do this promote this thou shalt not think that say that or do that obey and you're in you've proved yourself to be a good and noble and worthy citizen but if you fail then you're cancelled there's no forgiveness for you you are the scum of the earth no hope no redemption.

[14 : 26] Just ask England cricketer Ollie Robinson who was suspended a couple of weeks ago for some tweets that he sent when he was a teenager a long long time ago.

And so Christianity is radically different from anything you find in any other religion and radically different from anything that you find in the secular culture. It is good news for all people because it tells us that God accepts us not on the basis of our good record but because of his grace towards us in Jesus Christ.

He shows us mercy and so it's in the light of what he has done for us that he then calls us to go and obey him. The story is told of a slave auction in 1800s New Orleans.

A young Englishman watched on as a young slave girl was paraded around for everybody to see and as the auctioneer opened the bidding the man shouted out a bid that was twice the amount of any other selling price that had been offered that day and so the slave girl was sold to the Englishman and so he stepped forward and waited as she was led towards her new owner.

The rope that bound her was then handed to him and so he paid the purchase price and he signed the necessary ownership papers and then when the transaction was complete he turned to the girl and he gave her the papers and she wasn't sure what was going on and then the man said take these papers I bought you to make you free as long as you have these papers in your possession no man can ever make you a slave again.

[16:15] The girl looked into his face and slowly she said you bought me to make me free you bought me to make me free she kept repeating as the significance of what had happened began to sink in.

She couldn't believe that this man had bought her freedom and so she fell to her knees she wept at the man's feet and through her tears she looked up and said to him you bought me to make me free then I will serve you forever.

That's grace isn't it? It's a beautiful picture and it helps illustrate what's going on with the Ten Commandments just as God brought his people out of slavery in Egypt redemption paying the price for them to come and just as in Jesus God sets us free from our slavery to sin by paying the price for it at the cross so now God calls his people to live for him by obeying his commandments and as a response to his grace we will want to serve him and so Christians are not saved by obeying God but our salvation will cause us to want to obey God out of sheer gratitude for his grace towards us and so the Ten Commandments they come from God first of all secondly they're based on grace and thirdly they demand our obedience so God delivers his people and then he gives them the Ten Commandments for his people to obey and so what is the First Commandment?

The First Commandment is you shall have no other gods before me now this is a demand for exclusive loyalty to God so the Lord who enters into a covenant relationship with his people will not tolerate any other gods now God first spoke these words to the Israelites they'd just spent several hundred years in Egypt as slaves they were in a culture where there were many gods all the nations around about Israel always worshipped different gods you can read all about them all the way through the Old Testament false gods like Baal or Molech or Chemosh or Ashteroth these were some of the most popular false gods and yet the one true God the Lord demanded that his people be devoted to him alone and so that's the immediate context of the Ten Commandments but before we think well this doesn't really apply to me now it was for God's people away back then well we also are commanded to give our exclusive loyalty our exclusive devotion to God and so we need to see wider than just the immediate context of Israel because the first commandment implies doesn't it that there will be other gods out there that we in our hearts will want to worship because the first commandment implies there are other gods there are many gods there were many gods back then for the Israelites but there are still many gods today because the reality behind this commandment is that we are all worshippers and so we'll all find gods to worship and so the question is well what or whom will I worship will it be the

God who saves by grace or will it be other gods because we shouldn't just think that other gods are man-made idols that primitive people bow down and worship or that other gods are what other religions follow other gods can be anything that comes before the one true and living God anything we put first before him anything that our hearts are committed to instead or in place of him anything that competes for our exclusive loyalty to him for example Jesus described money as being another god he said you cannot serve both God and money meaning that you can be devoted to money to such an extent that money matters more to you than God does money can be something that we love because we live for it we think about it too much of the time and we're obsessed by it because whenever something whatever it is whether we give something whatever we give when we give it a higher place in our lives than God it functions effectively as another god it takes priority in our

hearts before God and so if we want to discover the other gods that do come before God in our life then we just need to reflect on what we spend our time doing or what we focus our attention on or what we think about for most of the time what do we do when we've got a spare moment that we begin to daydream the thing we think about is probably the thing that's most important in our lives or what do we spend our money on what do we live for so Jesus spoke of money being another god but we can devote our lives to all different kinds of gods gods like power ambition success status work family home possessions sex pleasure people science politics relationships our bodies food entertainment sport ourselves all of these things so many of them good things can simply become god like things in our lives because they become more important to us than god does so you get the idea the sobering truth is that anything or even any person including myself can become another god i can displace god off the throne of my heart and life good things can be elevated to god things and may me break the first commandment it's like the great poet bob dylan used to sing you're going to have to serve somebody and so if we want to test our obedience to the first commandment you shall have no other gods before me then we should ask ourselves questions like who or what do i love the most who or what do i spend my time on who or what do i daydream about who or what makes me most happy who or what do i spend money on who or what am i most afraid of losing because the answers will reveal to us whether we are keeping this commandment or not martin luther the german reformer said whatever man loves that is his god for he carries it in his heart he goes about with it night and day he sleeps and wakes with it be it what may wealth or self pleasure

[23 : 58] or renown and so if we're honest then it will be clear to us that we break the first commandment every single day of our lives because when god says you shall have no other gods before me he doesn't mean we're allowed to have other gods coming after him or other gods coming alongside him he means we're to have no gods anywhere near him no gods competing for the devotion of our hearts that should be exclusively for him god demands our hearts without any rivalry from any other gods and that's why god enters into a covenant relationship with his people just think of a marriage it's the best example of a covenant relationship it is an exclusive relationship between a husband and a wife and many of us were reminded of this when we were at Andrew Mackenzie's wedding on Friday and they took vows committing themselves to one another exclusively and it's this exclusive nature of the relationship a marriage that enables a marriage to flourish so if the husband puts another woman before his wife it's clearly going to damage their marriage or if the husband say on his desk at work has a picture of his wife and then he has 20 other pictures of other women it clearly indicates that he is not exclusively devoted to his wife and so we are to have eyes for god alone as it were not to flirt with other gods because god not only demands but he deserves our exclusive loyalty he commands us to worship him alone that is what we ought to do and yet we know the problem is that we don't do it do we god's people failed to obey this commandment and we fail too god is our loving creator but we fail to devote ourselves exclusively to him our sinful hearts commit spiritual adultery as we pursue and try and live by worshipping other gods even if we call ourselves a christian we will try to worship the one true god but still keep other gods alongside him and so we break this commandment and we deserve god's judgment because we do and yet the good news for us is that jesus came and he fulfilled this commandment for us jesus christ is the only one who always obeyed you shall have no other gods before me jesus lived the perfect life of exclusive loyalty to god his father and so jesus has succeeded where we have failed and so unless we turn from our sin and trust in jesus then we fail to worship the one true god and yet by his grace god accepts us not through anything we do but through what jesus has done to obey him and give him our exclusive loyalty and so we need the grace of the gospel of jesus christ it's only through jesus that we can ever obey any commandment we need the grace because we fail we sin we disobey and jesus forgives but we also need the direction of the ten commandments to show us how we ought to live our lives and it's only as we seek to obey these commandments that we find freedom not restriction but freedom freedom and flourishing for me as

an individual but also for our society and so if we fail to listen to god if we fail to obey god if we fail to pay attention to god life doesn't get any better for us life only gets worse as the good news is we have a loving creator who not only tells us how to live but he forgives us when we fail because of jesus class