

Sermon 60, The Preface to the Decalogue, Exodus 20:1-2

Proposition: The first five commandments all contain within themselves a reason why they should be obeyed, but the first commandment's reason comes first and stands over the whole series as a statement that God saves and then commands.

- I. The Reasons Annexed to Commandments 2-5
- II. The Reason Annexed to Commandment 1
 - A. Yahweh Has Revealed Himself to Us
 - B. Yahweh Has Become Our God
 - C. The Decalogue Is Rooted in the Being of God
 - D. The Decalogue Is Rooted in God's Salvation
 - E. The Decalogue Is for Freed People
- III. The Ultimate Point: Gospel Precedes Law

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, tonight we look at God's own preface to His Ten Words that sum up His covenant. Remember, covenant is relationship. If you are in relationship to God, then you are under total obligation to love Him and keep His commandments. You are required to do this because God is your creator. You are doubly required to do it because He is your redeemer. You are in relationship to Him because He has crushed Satan's head and saved you from the Devil's evil plots against you. And thus, as His child, you have been given certain house rules.

The Ten Commandments, as we will see today, don't come to us in a vacuum. They come to us in an environment of love and saving grace. Because God has already given Himself to you, these commands are yours and your children's forever so that you can respond in love to the God who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. As we will see in particular today, the first five commandments all contain a statement about who our God is, a statement that explains and justifies and motivates obedience to the command to which they are attached. In other words, for these first five commands, for which there is less light of nature, there is more light of grace as God explains exactly what He means and why He's telling us these things. As the greatest and most prominent instance of this, the reason annexed to the first commandment comes before rather than after the imperative. Thus, it stands over the whole sequence of Ten Words as the motivation and explanation for them all. Ultimately, you and I should obey the Ten Commandments because God is Yahweh, He is our God, He brought us out of Egypt, and He delivered us from the house of bondage.

I. The Reasons Annexed to Commandments 2-5

In a brief preview, let us look at the reasons annexed to commands 2-5. We will cover each of these in detail over the next few weeks, but I want you to see the pattern because though it is clearly present in the first command too, it is not present in quite the same way.

The second commandment, against the making and worshiping of images, gives as its reason the reality that Yahweh is a jealous God. A jealous God is one who is allergic to any appearance of breaking faith, one who cannot bear to have your affections alienated from Him to something else. We use this word in human relationships: “When I see my wife spending long hours on Zoom with that slick guy from HR, I get insanely jealous.” Well, Yahweh too is jealous. He explains his jealousy as the reason that He allows sins, and the punishments for sins, to pass down the generations — and also as the reason that He shows mercy to thousands, perhaps even thousands of generations, of those who love Him.

We don’t have time to comment on this at length, but I will just point out that Alexa is in the seventh consecutive generation that has contributed elders and/or deacons to their local church. Her brother is a deacon, her dad is a deacon, her grandpa is an elder, and so on all the way back to an 18th-century Myers. So that’s why you shouldn’t use images: sin and its punishment run in families; so do righteousness and its reward.

Same for the third commandment: God will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain. Do you want to stir up God’s wrath against you? Then use His name lightly.

The reason annexed to the fourth commandment is that God made the world in six days and rested the seventh. He blessed the seventh day and hallowed it. Because the day is peculiarly holy, therefore, you are to respect its holiness by resting.

Finally, the reason annexed to the fifth commandment is a promise of life to all who keep this commandment. Indeed, the promise is specifically a promise of life in the land, a promise that applies *mutatis mutandis* to life in heaven itself.

Do you see the pattern? Commandments 2-5 definitely have reasons, and we will spend some significant time on each of those reasons.

II. The Reason Annexed to Commandment 1

But what I want to do today is to spend significant time on the reason attached to the very first commandment. That commandment is, famously, “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.” It is a command to worship God alone, and a conclusive condemnation of all kinds of idolatry. Why, though? Why shouldn’t we have other gods? Most people in world history have thought that it made sense to serve a number of deities at once, just in case one of them could take care of some sector that the other would not be able to handle. But God says no, and He says no for five reasons.

A. Yahweh Has Revealed Himself to Us

The first reason, the way these things start out, is that God spoke all these words. In other words, don’t worship any other God because they don’t talk to you! Our God talks to us. Yahweh speaks.

That is a basic point, but it’s incredibly important. Pleasure can’t have a conversation with you. Power doesn’t speak. Toys don’t talk, not really. They may be able to say a few catchphrases, but try to engage them in genuine conversation and you will quickly see that they have nothing to say. That is even true of artificial intelligences like Siri and Alexa. They can’t speak all these words, saying. They can’t talk a bit.

In other words, there is no such thing as a personal relationship with Zeus, or a hard conversation with Thor. These false gods are not able to speak; our God is. And He not only speaks, but introduces Himself by name. He is Yahweh. And that too is a key point. He introduces Himself with the phrase “I am,” showing that He is not only the God who speaks but also the God who is there.

In other words, why should we have no other gods? Because He is Yahweh. In one sense, that is reason enough to not even think about submitting to or worshiping other deities. They are not what He is. Remember, Exodus is the book of the knowledge of God, and here at the beginning of the Ten Commandments He says once again what He has said over and over through Exodus: “I am Yahweh.”

The great I AM gave the commandments; why would you want or need to worship anyone else? Rather as we Americans can truly say “I am already a citizen of the richest, most powerful country on earth; what could Zimbabwe or Tajikistan offer me?” so Yahweh’s people can say “I already have the best deity in the whole world; why on earth would I worship some other God?”

B. Yahweh Has Become Our God

And of course, that’s immediately where God takes it. He explains that He is our God. Remember, that possessive pronoun is a sign of the covenant. Other religions do not speak of the deities they worship as “our god(s)” in this way. When God promises “I will be your God and you will be my people,” He is saying that He has bound Himself to us in a mutual and unbreakable relationship. We know that we belong to Him. The glory of it is that He condescends to belong to us! Thus, it’s not “I am Yahweh and you’re mine.” Yes, He says that, but the emphasis is “I’m Yahweh, and I’m yours.” He’s ours! God belongs to us by way of covenant.

In coming to Abraham and establishing His covenant with him, God became the God of Abraham. Now He reminds Israel that He is the God who belongs to them and therefore that they ought to have no other gods. Why would you submit to a god who doesn’t even belong to you? To a god who thinks he is his own? Yahweh doesn’t belong to Himself, but to you. That’s why you should have no other gods.

C. The Decalogue Is Rooted in the Being of God

Furthermore, for Him to say “I am Yahweh” as the reason for the first commandment is for Him to say it as the reason for all the commandments. The reason that these ten precepts are here is ultimately rooted in the very being of God. In other words, it’s not that God could have made adultery good and murder acceptable, but He chose to do it the opposite way. No. At the root of who He is, He is committed to standing against adultery, murder, theft, lying, and every other sin. Because He is Yahweh, you should worship no other god, commit no unchaste deed, and honor your parents assiduously.

D. The Decalogue Is Rooted in God’s Salvation

He also roots these commands in His salvation. If they are based in who He is, they are equally based in what He has done. He does not say “Obey me and then I’ll save you.” He says “I’ve

saved you, so now obey me.” The difference is huge, and quite important. Again, the ten words come after the deliverance from Egypt, not before. You shouldn’t worship pleasure, power, money, fame, health, safety, security, stuff, or anything else the world pretends to offer because none of those things delivered you from Egypt. How much less can they deliver from sin?

E. The Decalogue Is for Freed People

Ultimately, the decalogue is for freed people. You are no longer in the house of bondage. Why keep the law? Because you are free! Freedom does not mean that your relationship to the law has been severed. It does not mean becoming an amoral creature. It doesn’t mean that there is no longer a limit to your fallen desires. It means instead that you are not in bondage to sin, to your own whims, and to the demands of the world and the devil. You aren’t slaving for Pharaoh any more. Thus, you are free to keep all the words of this law. The law is a statement of purpose. It tells us what we are for — and true freedom is to fulfill your purpose. If you think of a car, would it rather be partially disassembled and put to running a grain mill? Or is its purpose to race down the road?

What about a basketball team? The rules free it to play basketball; without the rules, basketball is impossible!

And so it is for us. Without the rules, human life is impossible. But knowing to have one God and to worship Him, honor father and mother, refrain from coveting, and all that rest of it? That is your life and length of days.

III. The Ultimate Point: Gospel Precedes Law

God saves, then tells us how to live as saved people. That’s what the Ten Words are about. They summarize our relationship with God — how it got started when He rescued us, and how He expects us to live so that we can look like Him and live like Him. The law doesn’t save, but it does describe what salvation is. It tells us how we will live in Heaven, and how God lives now. So listen, believe, and do. Amen.