

“The One at the Center of All” (Exodus 20:3)

We have started the new series, “The Call to Undivided Intimacy.” We are studying the Ten Commandments.

Let me begin with a big picture. We are bound by so many things and often we don’t even notice it because it’s so natural for us and for our family. This is a big part of us, but we don’t realize it, we don’t think about it.

There are good things which help you to live out the word of God, develop you to become mature disciples. But there are also bad things which turn you away from the word of God. I call this “emotional garbage.” In order to go forward, to be a more mature Jesus follower, we need to be set free from this bondage.

When we are freed from this bondage, we become able to more freely live out the Word of God, more freely be in relationship with God, with others and with ourselves.

This leads us to the next journey, “the Call to Undivided Intimacy.” Our relationship with God will be deepened and will become stronger. And this will be reflected in all our other relationships, our relationship with others, with ourselves and even with nature, God’s creation. And through these transformed relationships, the kingdom of God will be revealed. We may build this kingdom culture in our families, in our working places, in our society. This is what we will do through this series.

Last two times, we had an introduction to the Ten Commandments. Today we will finally start studying the content. This morning we will look at the first commandment.

Exodus 20:3

You shall have no other gods before me.

First, we will study the meaning of this commandment. Then we will have a case study in the Bible. Then, we will apply this to our lives.

1. What is the Center of Your Life?

Whom was this commandment spoken to? It is clear if you look at v.2. It was spoken to people who used to be slaves in Egypt, those who were led out of slavery, saved and redeemed by God’s mighty works.

In the Ten Commandments, God is not speaking to people who don’t know Him about their other gods. God is showing Himself to His people whom He had redeemed for Himself. He is showing who He is in their daily lives.

“You shall have no other gods before me.” In other words, “I am your only God, right?”

It is not the matter of priority. It is not who is at the top of your list. This God must be the One at the center of all.¹

He is saying to His people, “I am the Lord your God. Because I’m the One who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, I must be the One who captures your attention. I must be the One you depend on for everything. I must be the One you turn to in times of need, the One you run to when you’re in trouble. I must be the One you thank when your table is full— when your heart overflows with an abundance of hope and joy.”²

I don’t think we Christians, will ever leave God of the Bible completely. We won’t probably totally forget God of the Bible, nor just seek good things from God.

Then what is the danger? “We violate the first commandment when we worship, trust, invoke, or thank others in God’s place.”³ There are many good things in our lives. Career, possessions, status, reputation, self-esteem, family, friends, entertainment, fashion, food, and whatever. These good things easily become idols when we put them into the center of our lives.⁴

Thomas Molnar adds to the definition of contemporary idolatry: The more dangerous idols we currently worship are more subtle in their idolatry: science, history, a way of life, this or that regime, satisfaction with one’s own goodness, a cause like progress, Utopia, an “ism.”⁵

To clarify this, let’s think about animism. There are gods of agriculture, entertainment, government, love, war, and whatever, and their lives are ruled by these forces. People do something in order that the god or gods to respond in the way they wish. For harvest, they will go to the god of the rice field and ask for a good harvest. If they fall sick, they will go to the god of healing and ask for healing. When they deliver a baby, they will go to the god for a smooth delivery. If there is no rain, they will go to the god of rain. If there is too much rain, they will go to the god of good weather. They will go to their desired god, whenever they want to, and ask whatever they want.

For us, Christians, the danger is to separate God from our lives. To separate our spiritual life and practical life, everyday activity. Then, we will have a different center, depending on the realm. We will rely on something other than God in the practical realm. In our everyday activities, something other than God will occupy our mind. We will start to believe we can’t live without these things, and think “If I lose this, I will no longer be I.” In the end those good things will become idols as we place them at the center of different realms of our lives.

¹ Mark Mitchell, *Ten: How the Commandments Set Us Free*, Discovery House, 2016, [Kindle] location 87

² Mitchell, 92-97

³ Michael S. Horton, *The Law of Perfect Freedom*, Moody Publishers, 1993, [Kindle] location 637

⁴ Mitchell, 136

⁵ Horton, 666

It is said “By worshiping our agenda, our goals, our nation, our group, our movement, our whatever, we are able to, in short measure, worship ourselves.”⁶

The first commandment shows that God must be the One at the center of all in our life.

2. God tested Abraham

Genesis 22 records that God tested Abraham.

V.1 says, “Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham” (NASB). What did God test Abraham about? Why did God test him after these things? What are “these things”?

Abraham was staying in Gerar, and there he said of his wife Sarah, “She is my sister.” Then, Abimelech, king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her. But at that night, God came to Abimelech in a dream and said, “You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken. She is already married.” Now Abimelech had not come near her yet. So he said, “Lord, will you destroy a nation that hasn’t done anything wrong?” God told him to return Sarah to Abraham. The following day, Abimelech called Abraham in and said, “What have you done to us? Why have you brought so much guilt on me and my kingdom?” Abraham replied, “Because I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.”

Abraham is saying Abimelech and people in that region had no fear of God.

Abimelech understood it was wrong to sleep with a woman who was already married. If there is an attractive woman, and they find that she has a husband, what would they do? How can they take her without committing a sin? Kill her husband. Then she is a widow. She no longer has a husband. Now she is available. Abraham knew that. So to protect himself, to save his own life, he said, “Sarah is my sister.”

In this context Abraham says, “Surely there is no fear of God in this place.” But, it doesn’t mean Abimelech had no sense of right or wrong. He was trying to avoid committing sin according to their moral cord. Abimelech returned Sarah to Abraham before he came near to her.

After that, just as God promised, Sarah became pregnant and she gave birth to a son. Isaac was born to Abraham. They were staying in the land of the Philistines. Abraham understood that they have their own rules. They have their own moral code, the criteria for good and bad. They were trying to avoid committing sin, and trying to do good and to maintain good order in their society. And Abraham looked at them and thought, “They had no fear of God.”

It was after these incidents that God tested Abraham. God tested Abraham’s conviction. “You say, ‘They have no fear of God.’ But what about you? Which do you fear more? Do you fear your own moral code, the criteria for good and bad, or do you fear Me more? Am I the center of all the areas of your life?”

God said, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering” (Gen 22:2).

⁶ Horton, 666

The next morning Abraham got up early. He prepared for his journey and started it.

When they arrived at the place where God had told Abraham to go, he built an altar and placed the wood on it. Then he tied Isaac up and laid him on the altar over the wood. And Abraham took the knife and lifted it up to kill his son as a sacrifice to the Lord. At that moment the angel of the Lord shouted to him, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Yes," he answered. "I'm listening."

Genesis 22:12

He said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." (NASB)

"You shall have no other gods before me." It's about our relationship with God.

We must remember that the Ten Commandments are meant to enrich you, not to enslave you. You yield to the Holy Spirit and accept God at the center of all of your life. That's the path to true freedom.⁷

Gifts, talents, vision, mission, ministries, blessings and any good things can take the place of God in our mind and become idol, if we are not careful. And we serve it, sacrifice something for it. We feel "That keeps my life. I can no longer live without it." Now we are bound by it. But God wants us to keep our freedom.

3. The One at the center of all your life

"You shall have no other gods before me." Let's look at this word closely.

(1) You

God calls us "You".

This "You" is singular form. He is not talking to the whole Israel collectively, but He is talking to each person on an individual basis.

Is there anyone who doesn't want to be recognized? Everyone wants to accept themselves, and want others to accept and recognize them. Our desire to be rich, to have a fulfilling job, to become famous, to do something useful for people, those desires are connected to our fundamental desire, that is to be accepted, recognized and to see ourselves as worthwhile people.

Everyone wants to be accepted, and prove their worth. So they try their best. But as a result, they will suffer from superiority or inferiority complexes, with complaints and discontentment. And they come up with different rationales; "I didn't try hard enough," "It was my parents' fault," "It was society's problem," or "It was because the time wasn't right for me."

⁷ Mark., 177

As a result, we have troubles but no joy, stress but no peace. Then God speaks to us, “You shall have no other gods before me.” He is saying “Don’t live with the words of the world, but live in my words.”

God purposely chose powerless small Israel as his treasured possession. God sees us as His beloved. And he is saying, “I am with you always.” He’s not a distant, unapproachable king. He’s a personal God.

“You shall have no other gods before me.” This is a call from God. He is telling us, “I am your Lord, your God. Live in this reality.” We can live in his love because God who is love is with us, and he is helping us.

(2) Before Me

The direct translation of the phrase “before me” is “before my face.” This has two meanings. One is that there is no other god besides Me. Another meaning is that while you have Me and are right before Me, your God, why would you serve other gods, who are powerless, and who stifle you? You wouldn't do that, would you?

When God says, “You shall have no other gods before me,” He is saying, “Now I recovered myself. Don’t lose yourself again.”

When we are with this God, what are we to Him? God sees you and me as precious in his sight. God loves you. Therefore, you are wonderful. You are precious. And as we respond to this call from God, we are treated as precious. “I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine” (Isaiah 43:1).

God has redeemed us through the cross of Jesus. When you accept this, receive Jesus as your Savior and Lord, turn to God, and choose to live in his love, then God can have you as his own.

It is not what you have, or what you can do. But God has chosen you as precious. And He wants you to be worthy as His treasured possession. And as you accept this, and respond to this and enter into relationship with Him, He transforms you to live as his precious beloved. That’s why He says, “You shall have no other gods before me.”

God says, “Remain in my love,” “Live in loving relationship with Me. Accept (the fact) that you need to receive My love to live. Repent from your old way of life where you ignored Me. Turn back to Me. Make Me your Center, your Lord.”

Jesus died on the cross to redeem you and me so that we can be reconciled with God. We are invited to remain in this grace, in Jesus’ love. When we live in this loving relationship with God, we will never be crushed by anxiety.

God who is the Lord of lords, King of kings who created everything and rules everything says, “I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.” No matter what others say, it doesn’t matter any longer.

If you measure yourself with the words of the world, you may not see yourself worthy. But it really doesn’t matter. Because you are accepted by God, and He loves you as His treasured possession. You have hope in all circumstances. God says

“For I know the plans for you, declares the Lord, plans to give you hope and future (Jer 29:11).” You may not see it yourself, or your circumstances may look hopeless, but you have hope, you have potential. You don’t have to give up. You don’t need to live passively. Because God is your Lord, He has the plans for you and He is responsible for you. You don’t have to feel insecure in any event, because God is your Lord in each of these events.

(3) You shall have no other gods

In other words, God is the only one whom we can rely on. There is no one else like that.

People of Israel were saved from slavery in Egypt by God. God gave them food, and He produced water from a rock for them in the desert and kept them alive. God protected them from all their enemies. People of Israel had experienced that God was the only one they can totally rely on.

But, here God purposely says again, “You shall have no other gods before me.” It is because if we aren't on our guard, we tend to think God alone is not enough. We are likely to have an illusion that there must be something better here and there outside of God. So God is again deliberately emphasizing that you shall not have other gods.

To have other gods is to leave the true God. You can't serve two gods. It is to go back to the state of slavery, to become a slave to sin, a slave to sinful desires, and a slave to anxieties.

We might think if we have many things to rely on, we are secure. But that is an illusion. It's good to prepare. It's good to work hard. It's good to study, and improve your skills. It's good to value relationships. But if we rely on those things in God's place, they will become our gods. They are just resources which God provided. They are something you can use, not something you are to serve.

“You shall have no other gods before me.” God is asking us, “Who is the one you can truly rely on? Remember?” God is speaking to you and me the words of his love, “If you rely on other things, you will again become a slave to what you rely on. Remember whom you should rely on.”

It's about our relationship with God. A relationship with this God starts by calling Him “You are my only God.”

“You shall have no other gods before me.” These are not exclusive, self-righteous, or stifling words. This is God's love call, which sets us free from all bondage, which enables us to live freely, to love and be loved with joy and gratitude. This is the call to undivided intimacy.

For Self-Reflection and Small Groups

1. It is helpful to evaluate our own lives according to the first commandment.⁸
 - Focus. What is your focus? What do you think about it? What are you watching?
 - Income. How do you spend your money?
 - Relationships. Who influences your life? Who are you trying to please?
 - Spiritual food. How is your spiritual diet? What place does the Word of God really have in your life?
 - Time. How do you spend your time?

2. Read Genesis 22:1-14.
 - 1) What are “these things (v.1)”?
 - 2) What was God’s test for Abraham about? (v.12)
 - 3) What could be at the center for Abraham other than God?
 - 4) List the top five good things in your life. How can they become your center or idol?
 - 5) What is the challenge for you to observe the first commandment?
 - 6) How do v.13-14 speak to you? What do these verses encourage you to do?

⁸ Mark, 157-168