

The Big Ten: There Can Be Only One
By Jason Huff
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Deuteronomy 6:1-7; Matthew 5:17-20; Exodus 20:1-17

Our final Scripture reading today is Exodus 20:1-17. I invite you to turn there in your Bibles and to follow along with your bulletin insert. Let's listen to the Word of God. "And God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.""

The Big Ten is confusing. For a guy like me who knows next to nothing about college sports, it's a whole other world. As it turns out, there are fourteen schools in the Big Ten. Did you all know that? Since Michigan and Michigan State are two of them, maybe you do. (By the way, if anybody wants to design a Big Ten PowerPoint slide for Michigan State for me, go right ahead!) There are fourteen teams, but it's the Big Ten, but they're part of Division 1 college athletics, which includes schools from all over the country. So the Big Ten refers to the ten biggest Midwestern colleges that participate...except there are fourteen of them. And then when they play basketball, some of them get into the Sweet Sixteen...and that's where I lose my mind.

But there's another Big Ten out there that most people find more confusing - the Ten Commandments. They're written out twice in the Bible. There are 613 commands in the Old Testament law, but these ten are different. But what are they? And are they still important today? Why should we know them better than the Big Ten schools?

Most people don't. In 2007, it was found that more people knew the ingredients to a Big Mac and all the names of the Brady Bunch kids than knew the Ten Commandments. More than 60% of Americans can't name even five of the ten. The number goes way down when you hit all ten. But the Ten Commandments are still valid for Christians. They are our ethic for life just as they were for the Israelites. In fact, Jesus repeated nine of the ten Himself in His teaching!

Over the next ten weeks, we're going to hear them all and learn them together. But not only that, we're going to figure out what they mean for us today. We live in a vastly different culture from ancient Israel, but it astounds me just how much they apply to our lives today – even in ways the ancient Israelites would have never expected.

Now most of us are used to calling these the Ten Commandments. We think of them as rules. But God never called them either one. In Hebrew, they are literally the “words” of God. They aren't rules in the typical sense at all. They are commands, but they are far different from the laws we think about.

Let's use a football analogy to make sense of it. Football has rules. Both teams score by taking the football into the end zone. Each team gets four attempts to move forward ten yards before they have to turn over the football to the other team. Certain players can do certain things on the field. We might not know all the rules, but those are rules by which the game is played.

Most of the laws found in the Old Testament are like the rules of football, but not the Ten Commandments. Ten Commandments are like the ethics outside the game that make the game even possible. Rules like: no cheating; no betting on the game; no deliberate attempts to injure the other team's players; no stealing the other team's playbook. It's really serious when one of those is broken. In the world of baseball, Pete Rose is trying once again to get his lifetime ban overturned from betting on games decades ago. People are still upset with him not because he broke a rule on the field, but he violated one of the sacrosanct laws of sports ethics.

But the ten words of God are far more important than the ethical code of conduct in the sports world. And here's why: the Ten Commandments are the terms of a covenant with God. God builds a relationship with His people on the groundwork of the Ten Commandments. Through them, He tells all people how we can be in good relationship with Him. These are essentials; without them, there is chaos and relationship isn't possible with God or other people.

The Ten Commandments are relational. The first thing that proves it is the way God gives them to us. Moses presented case law to the people. But God spoke the Ten Commandments directly to the Israelites. There was no mediator. It was so awesome and scary that in Exodus 20:19, the people beg for Moses to speak on God's behalf. They were afraid they would die just by hearing God speak to them! But these things were so important, so foundational and so relational, that God delivered them to the Israelites Himself.

The ten words are also relational because they are based in the love and grace God has already shown. God doesn't demand obedience because He is the creator, though He could. He asks for Israel to follow these words because, as He says, “I brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” Their affection toward Him is not supposed to be based solely on His creating them but because of all He continues to do for them. He has already stepped into His role as savior. These are not rules for salvation because they are already a saved people – saved from Egypt! And the Israelites who followed God faithfully back then were saved by the sacrifice of Jesus which would come in their far future, just as we are saved by His sacrifice in our distant past. God tells them how to continue the relationship He has already started with them.

God also tells them His name – what most translations have as the LORD, in all capital letters. This is God’s proper name in Hebrew – YHWH. It may be pronounced “Yahweh”; sometimes it’s been translated “Jehovah.” No one knows exactly how it’s pronounced because the Jews would never say it; they simply pronounced it “Adonai” to avoid using it wrongly. But God told them His most holy and sacred name. He shared His identity. He wanted a relationship. When He says, “I am the LORD your God,” it is regal but also personal.

The Ten Commandments are still for us today because they build relationship with God. They aren’t the laws of an ancient society determining what behaviors to punish. These are the basics that govern relationship with God. They still hold true. As we heard Jesus say this morning, He didn’t come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it – to do everything it said and show us a deeper way into relationship with God through Himself.

So let’s take a look at the first commandment, the first word from God. “You shall have no other gods before me.” It seems simple enough, but we need to dig into it. Why does God say “you shall have none *before* me?” This is the translation of a Jewish idiom. God says “before My face.” That means that we are to serve no other gods, not to worship them or to think of them as anything worthy of worship. There is but one true God, and that is YHWH.

But does it leave open the possibility that there are other gods? No, not like we would think. The Hebrew word here is *elohim*. It encompasses all beings beyond the earthly realm – angels, demons, heavenly creatures like seraphim. YHWH is *elohim* and is even given that title because it is true. Other beings can be *elohim*, too, but they are not gods; they are completely different from one true God. They do not deserve worship or adoration because they are still YHWH’s creations. The New Testament says that service to the foreign gods of the ancient Near East was service to creatures – demons. The first commandment recognizes the reality that there is a world of beings God has created beyond what we can see, but they are creations, not the Creator. Nothing else should be worshipped because no other being is like YHWH.

So how do we keep the first commandment today? It affects three unique areas of life. It affects what we worship, who and what we trust, and what we spend our days pursuing. This word tells us to deny anything that would keep us from deep relationship with our Heavenly Father because that relationship is the heart of life.

Worship is to ascribe to something honor and worth above all other things – it helps to think of it as “worth ship”. *The first thing we cannot do is worship other gods.* That one sounds so simple. We all know that, right? Don’t worship other gods. But some of us have been tempted to do it, some of us might have done it and not even realized it, and we may know people who do it, even while claiming to be Christians.

First, there’s no following other gods or religious systems. When I was at seminary training as a chaplain at a hospice, another chaplain trainee told me he was a Christian Buddhist. I told him he was deeply confused. You can’t mix the two systems; they are incompatible. You can’t be a Christian and a follower of Allah or Krishna. They just don’t fit together logically or theologically. Those are probably the easiest ones to understand.

Then there are occultic practices that Christians don't participate in like fortune telling, Ouija boards, and psychics. Some Christians read their horoscope, but that's astrology – which tells people what to do based on the alignment of stars. None of that's good. Those things try to tell us the future, but the future is in God's hands, not in our own and not in a fortune teller's.

The next thing we avoid are rituals of other religions. There are many, but the one that's become a part of our culture is yoga. Non-religious yoga is fine; it's called stretching. I stretch before I play racquetball, and some of what I do coincides with yoga poses. I'm not doing yoga. Some things that are called yoga, aren't yoga. They can be OK for Christians.

But the vast majority of yoga forms are religious. The basic poses are meant to help a Hindu greet the sun god. The sound "om" is meant to clear your mind; it's religious in nature. Christianity never says to empty our minds; instead, we're to fill them with thoughts of God! Again, we have to be mindful about this. If you're a part of a yoga class, think about how the class is conducted. If you have any doubts about what's taught, if there are religious elements, it's better to get some other form of exercise than one that is meant to honor other gods.

The last thing to watch out for is syncretism. This is the idea that "all paths lead to God." You follow your path, I'll follow mine, and we'll all get wherever we're going in the afterlife. But to act that way honors demonic religions that do not deserve honor at all. If you care about someone who practices another religion, you don't have to shout at them and tell them they're doomed. But you cannot love them and tell them that what they believe is fine. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life – no one comes to the Father except through me." We owe it to those we care about to tell them the truth of the one true God. Anything else dishonors Him.

Second thing: we aren't to rely on anyone or anything else in place of God. God was the savior of the Israelites, and He is our savior too. He is worthy of our trust in a way that nothing and no one else is. But in subtle ways, we pledge our allegiance elsewhere. Not to gods, not to religious systems, but to secular saviors that we become convinced will protect us.

The obvious one is money. Jesus taught, "You cannot serve both God and money. You will be devoted to one and despise the other." Was true back then; is true today. Do you love money? Most of us would say no. That's until the preacher starts asking you to give the church some, right? Then we get very protective of our money. "No, I need that!" Let's be honest – how many of us were nervous about the ALS challenge because you're supposed to give \$100? I was! I don't have \$100!

Do we trust in money? It's ironic that our money has printed on it, "In God We Trust." I think the founding fathers knew that it was fleeting. Money can disappear. A bad hospital visit, a mistake with your car, something happens to your house, and all of a sudden, it's gone, no matter how much of it you have. But still, we often can't wait to get more of it so we can spend it on what we want. Because maybe we trust in money, or maybe we can trust in the things money can buy.

There are plenty of other things we trust will save us. We expect the government will save us from rogue nations and terrorist states. We trust the economic system will stay steady enough for us to retire someday. We trust that grocery stores will have food tomorrow and that there'll be a national power grid. We trust our cell phones will keep us in touch at a moment's notice. We trust our doctors will keep us free from sickness or fix the ones we've got.

You know what? God teaches us to be trusting, not cynical. But we don't trust because humanity is good. We trust people because we trust in a good God who loves us and will see us through any adversity. When everything else fails, He will be steadfast. We can trust others – not to save us, but we think the best of them. We give them the benefit of the doubt. We give them second and third and fourth chances. But we don't trust in them. We trust in God alone. Examine your heart and see if you've trusted your life or your heart to an imposter.

Finally, we're to rid ourselves of anything that alienates our affections from God. Alienation of affection is still a law on the books in seven states. In North Carolina, a jury awarded over \$1.4 million in a case where a suitor had deliberately and maliciously broken up what had been a happy marriage. Alienation of affection has caused wars throughout history. We must guard against things that would alienate us from God.

These are not things we trust in or we think will save us. These are things we like – so much, in fact, that we spend more time with them than with the Savior of our souls. They alienate us from Him. They are not bad things. They may be morally neutral. They may even be morally positive. But if they wind up alienating us from God, they are a really bad thing.

Most sports are morally neutral. They can teach us about teamwork, perseverance, even losing well. Paul was fond of sports metaphors – he compared the Christian life to a marathon. Nothing wrong with playing or watching most sports. But if your love of sports interferes with the time you spend in prayer and Scripture and worship, it's a problem.

Some of the arts – music, television, film, theater, books – are morally neutral. Some even reinforce family values. They can teach us about what it is to love others, to show compassion and mercy and forgiveness. But if we don't do those things because we're so busy watching them on TV, we've created a new god. If we use the arts as a substitute for God, if we want to watch more than we want to spend time with God, we've created a monster.

Too much of any good thing can alienate us from God because we enjoy that thing more than the presence of God. Alienation doesn't mean that we don't like God. It means that He simply isn't important enough to warrant the majority of our time and efforts. But that's idolatry. John Calvin said our hearts were a factory of idols; we create any number of things to take the place of God in our hearts.

Again, for us to recognize this in our own lives takes radical honesty, more than we can come up with ourselves. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to lead the appraisal of our lives, and then to give us the strength and courage to actually set aside those things that are alienating us from God.

You might be thinking, “I’ve already done several of those things!” Well, we all have. The Israelites did. At some time or another, we’ve put something ahead of our relationship with God. We default to idolatry because our sinful selves want our own way rather than God’s way.

But because of Jesus, we don’t stand condemned by the Law. We are free of its punishment because Jesus has taken the penalty for all who trust in Him. We don’t have to be depressed by this command. Instead, because we have the Holy Spirit, we know we can actually begin on the path of real relationship with God. We have been summoned to godliness. We are forgiven in order that we might have a real relationship with God. So let’s set aside anything that would take His place on the throne of our hearts.

As we discuss God’s ten words of relationship over the coming weeks, let’s keep our eyes on Him. As we do, I pray we’ll be blessed to see that these words aren’t laws meant to trap us and condemn us but a joyful invitation to enter into God’s presence and enjoy His goodness forever.