

## Exodus 20:1-17

1 Then God spoke all these words: 2 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3 you shall have no other gods before me. 4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, 6 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. 7 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. 8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work--you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore, the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. 12 Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. 13 You shall not murder. 14 You shall not commit adultery. 15 You shall not steal. 16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. 17 You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

“God spoke all these words” (“words,” not commandments).

God’s own introduction to these words is important for an appropriate understanding: **“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”**

This introductory line about redemption is recognized in Judaism as the *first word*; “you shall have no other gods before me” is *the second word*.



This opening word of God accomplishes several things. It keeps the commandments personally oriented: I am the Lord **your** (singular) God. Obedience to the commandments is relationally conceived. These are words given to *you* by *your* God.

The law is a *gift* from God who has redeemed *you*. The Ten Commandments are a gracious word of God and they begin with a word of good news about what God has done on behalf of “you” as a member of the community of faith. The commandments are to be read through the lens of *redemptive confession*. God’s saving action has drawn the people of God into a new orbit of life and blessing, to which the people respond by giving a certain **“commandment shape”** to their lives.

The Ten Commandments are a part of the covenant between God and the people at Mount Sinai. This covenant is a specific covenant **within** the *already existing* covenant with Abraham. The Sinai covenant does not establish the relationship between Israel and God. Israel had long been God’s people when the events at Mt. Sinai happens.

These commandments are given to an already elected, redeemed, believing, and worshiping community. They were a reminder, if you will. *They have to do with the shape of daily life on the part of those already in relationship with God.*

The commandments give shape to Israel’s *vocation*. The Ten Commandments specify no judicial consequences for disobedience. The “**calling**” that a person feels is his or her direction.

Being obligatory toward them is not conditional on their being enforceable. **Their appeal** is to a deeper grounding and motivation: these are the commands (the words) of the Lord *your* God, who has created you and redeemed you. The “Words of God that lead your life.”

“You shall have no other gods before me” introduces the commandments and gives shape to all the others. Idolatry is the focus. But how will we define idolatry?

- It commonly has reference to material images; the story of the golden calf comes to mind.
- “Other gods” could include any person, place, or thing that we hold to be more important or as important as God.
  - These “other gods” could also lift up the long-standing gods who have long been worshiped among us, such as:
  - Property, ...



- fame, ...
- power ... the list is long.

The command is to be loyal to God. Being loyal to your call.

In Martin Luther's language, **the call is to *fear, love, and trust*** in God above all things. This commandment is the grounding for all other commandments, which draw out what loyalty to God entails in various aspects of the relationship.

Less well remembered is that idolatry includes the *language* one uses to speak of God. Our *ideas* about God and the *verbal images* we use for God can be idolatrous; they often have as high a standing in our thinking/speaking about God as does God himself. Or, we can reduce God to a set of fixed propositions and make God into a settled, unchanging God. Is that not to break the first commandment? And negatively affect the way in which the other commandments are kept?

The Ten Commandments were not new commandments for Israel (see Exodus 16:22-30). They are a convenient listing of an already existing law for vocational purposes.

Think about this: Consider, if you will, that the Commandments were not thought to be transmitted in a never-to-be-changed form. They were believed to require adaptation in view of new times and places. Compare the Commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5; the latter text contains some important new developments. For example: the wife -- on a list of property in Exodus 20:17 -- is removed from that list in Deuteronomy 5:21; wife is exchanged with house and given her own commandment, perhaps reflecting a changing role for women in that culture.

Before the Ten Commandments were given, the Bible talks much about law; indeed, laws are already specified in the pre-sin creation accounts (Genesis 1:28).

*Genesis 1:28*

*28 God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."*

Such words are reflective of God's law given for the sake of the world before sin. To obey these words and others which follow in their train is to act as one was *created* to act. And so, commandments become an integral part of the life of the community of faith before we get to Mount Sinai.



While the address of the commandments is individual, the concern is not some private welfare. The focus of the commandments is vocational, to serve the life and health of the community, to which end the individual plays an important role. The first commandment lays a claim:

*How you think about God will deeply affect how you think about and act toward your neighbor.* How you live your call, your vocation.

The first commandment is positively formulated in Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

**Jesus** uses this positive formulation of the first commandment.

**Luther** follows in this biblical trajectory by giving each commandment a positive thrust. The commandment to love one another does not set the Ten Commandments aside, however; it opens the particularities of the Ten Commandments to limitless, on-the-move possibilities in view of new times and places.

The God who appeared to Abraham and Sarah is the same God who appears to Moses now, and the people are those who bear Abraham and Sarah's names. Exodus 20 even remembers the creation of the world. In verse 4, the language of "heaven above," "earth beneath," and "water under the earth" recalls that same language in the first creation narrative. The God who separated those waters at the creation is the only god who is worthy of worship. The commandment to remember the Sabbath overtly refers to the first creation narrative; in resting on the seventh day, the people are in fact doing what God did. In these ways, the text demonstrates that God is the creator and that the people are the created, and that the harmony and order that God established in creation is once again established through God's law in the community of the Israelites.

Interpreters of the Ten Commandments often divide the passage into commands regarding worship (verses 1-11) and commands governing human relationships (verses 12-17). But the two emphases of the Ten Commandments are better understood as intertwined throughout. Laws concerning proper worship of God are also about how the people are formed through that worship to be a certain kind of people. Laws concerning how people are to relate to one another are also about living as God requires, even doing as God does. The Ten Commandments, and the books of law that follow, are meant to form Israel as a sacred community, a community rooted in right worship of God and living in justice and peace with one another. The Israelites are to live as neighbors to one another, the foundation of which is knowing the God to whom they belong.

