

SI: We're looking at Ten Commandments. Let's remember the setting. When the Israelite people first heard the Ten Commandments, didn't read them, they heard the original audio version, heard them spoken by God. And they saw the video version. At base of Mount Sinai, mountain covered with smoke and fire and cloud and rumblings. It was frightening. Who were the Israelites?

They were ex-slaves. Had been slaves for 400 years. Known nothing but slavery. It was so bad that years later, when referring to Egyptian slavery, they called slavery there the iron furnace. Imagine a mother bringing a child into the world and knowing that newborn boy girl is destined for life of making bricks. Slaves for generations.

So when God speaks audibly for the first time to this nation of ex-slaves, what does he want them to hear? Exodus 20:1-3
And God spoke all these words saying: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me."

INTRO: In 1745 a young Presbyterian minister named David Brainerd started doing missionary work in a Native American village in New Jersey. As he began sharing the gospel almost immediately the people began to respond with understanding and faith. These Indian men and women who had for generations worshipped the gods of nature, gods of the weather, gods of the hunt, gods of the harvest, gods of own making, heard for the first time about the true Creator God who had made them. David Brainerd preached to them about the God of Eternal Majesty, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who will by no means clear the guilty but who loved them and sent his Son to die for their sins.

Brainerd recorded in his journal that as they came to know God and believe in him, some remarkable things began to happen. One Indian woman told him she had wept through the night because she had been angry with her child the previous day and now she feared she had offended God. He recorded a more involved story about an Indian man who had recently gotten rid of his wife and exchanged her for another woman. It was an accepted custom in of the tribe and the man wasn't bothered by it a bit. But now that he knew God, it started to weigh on his conscience. He asked David Brainerd what he should do.

So the missionary did some investigation and found out the man's wife had been faithful and did not want to be sent away and wanted to return to her husband. So he advised the man to renounce the woman he had recently taken and receive his wife back and live with her in love and peace. He not only did it. He called witnesses and publically promised his wife before the tribe that he would love her only and treat her kindly the rest of his life.

These stories illustrate something important about the First Commandment. The First Commandment is not merely one commandment among the ten, it is the foundation of all the commandments.

If you break this commandment, you will break all the others.

If you keep this one, it will put you in the way of keeping all the others.

Before the members of this Indian tribe knew God, when they had lots of other gods, they had no real concern for or drive to keep God's commandments.

But when they began to keep this First Commandment:

You shall have no other gods before me.

then they began to feel the force of the other commands and want to keep them.

The First Commandment is not so much do or don't do a certain behavior, it mandates a relationship with God that gives a reason for obeying the other nine.

Why do I do the wrong things I do?

Why do I not honor my parents?

Why am I not truthful?

Why do I covet the possessions of other people?

It's because I have other gods before God himself.

So let's look at this under two points.

1. The Commander
2. The Command

1. The Commander

Did you notice that right before the First Commandment is a statement?

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

That's called the Preface to the Ten Commandments and it's very important.

I'm going to give you a line from a famous movie and you see if you can identify it.

The line is: "I'm going to make you an offer you can't refuse."

Imagine it being said with an Italian accent. The Godfather.

When the mafia boss says: "I'm going to make you an offer you can't refuse"

There might actually be something in it for the person. But it's a threat.

Do what I tell you or I'll kill you.

You give me half of the earnings from your liquor store and I'll make sure it

doesn't get robbed. You don't want to pay for my protection? Then I'll kill you.

The Preface to the Ten Commandments is an Ancient Near Eastern version of

"I'm going to make you an offer you can't refuse."

Back then, if a powerful king wanted tribute from a weak king, a weak kingdom

he would send a treaty. Archaeologists have found these carved on stone.

These treaties had a certain form. They would start with a preface.

In the preface the powerful king would say: This is who I am.

I am king so and so the magnificent, the all powerful, etc.

Then he would say: This is what I have done.

And he would tell of all the terrible destructions he had visited on other nations.

I besieged and sacked this city and killed all the men, women and children slaves.

Then after the preface, he would give the terms and stipulations of the treaty.

This is what I expect you do for me or else.

The Ten Commandments are in that ancient treaty form. Familiar to Israelites.

And the Preface has these two elements.

God says: This is who I am. This is what I've done. Let's look at each.

This is who I am: I am the LORD your God.

In English translation, LORD in all caps—that's not the translation of a title,

like Creator or King—it's God's personal name.

LORD all caps is how most English Bible translations have decided to render it.

But the actual name of God is Yahweh. Reasons why not literally rendered.

What can we say about this name?

God's name Yahweh shows up very early in the Bible, in Genesis 2.

It's Yahweh who plants the Garden of Eden and makes Adam and Eve.

It's Yahweh who speaks to Noah and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

But it's not until we get to Exodus that God says what his name means.

And he explains it to Moses. It's when God comes to Moses in the burning bush and says, I've seen my people Israel suffering and I've heard their cries.

I remember my covenant with Abraham. I'm sending you to bring out of Egypt. Moses says: But when I tell them that the God of their fathers has sent me, what should I say if they ask me: What is his name? Who sent you?

And God says to Moses:

I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you. I am the Creator who made you. I am the Deliverer who saves you.

In every moment, in every action, I am all that I am.

No diminishing, no adding. I always will be all that I am. I am Yahweh.

So the Commandments begin with God saying: This is who I am. Yahweh.

And then he says: I am Yahweh your God

In English the second person pronoun you is used for both singular and plural. You can mean just you as an individual person or all of you as a group.

We've fixed that in the South with y'all.

But in proper English you is both singular and plural.

But in Hebrew, you plural and you singular are different words, different forms.

So when God speaks from Mount Sinai and he says to all these hundreds of thousands of Israelites gathered there: I am Yahweh your God—

Do you think he speaks in the singular or plural?

It's singular. That must have been one of the things that made it so frightening.

The voice of God from the smoking mountain. Fire and cloud and trumpet blast. And the voice speaks and says: I am Yahweh your God.

You sir, you ma'am, you child. I am the Lord your God. He's personal.

He's in a relationship with every individual Israelite not with them as a mass. So that's who the Commander is.

Now, what has he done? As I said, in all the Ancient Near Eastern treaties this was the place where the great king listed all the terribly cruel things he had done to people who opposed him as a way of threatening the weak king into signing.

But what does Yahweh say he has done:

I brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

He doesn't name the terrible things he has done to his enemies as a threat.

He reminds the Israelites that he has delivered them.

He's freed them from a terrible plight.

For generations the Israelites made bricks for the Egyptian building projects— day in and day out, without a Sabbath, year after year, under the hot Egyptian sun.

God brings them to the base of the mountain and says:

I am Yahweh your God. Not y'all's God, but your personal God.

I have brought you—once again, it's the singular you—

I have brought each of you personally out of slavery.

So the Preface to the Ten Commandments is not a threat.

It's the good news of freedom from bondage that God has accomplished.

Who is Yahweh? Who is the I AM?

In Gospel of John Jesus says these sorts of things to Jews.

I am the bread of heaven, I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world,

I am the gate, I am the resurrection and the life, I am the good shepherd.

I am, I am, I am.

Ultimate example is John 8, speaking to religious leaders.

Abraham saw my day and was glad.

They say, You're not 50 years old and you say you've seen Abraham.

He replies: Truly, truly I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.

And they picked up stones to stone him.

They didn't try to stone him because he was nuts.

Being insane wasn't a capital offense, but blasphemy was.

When Jesus says: Before Abraham was, I am.

As a man standing here before you, I am Yahweh.

If people say Jesus was just a great teacher, not God.

No great teacher would say this. I would be blasphemy with a high hand.

Jesus is presented in the New Testament as Yahweh in the flesh.

In the Christmas carol, *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* a stanza.

O come, O come, great Lord of might, who to your tribes on Sinai's height,

In ancient times did give the law in cloud and majesty and awe.

Yahweh who gave the law on Mount Sinai has come to us as one of us.

That's how the New Testament presents Christ and his incarnation.

The Great Commander and Lawgiver is God the Son, Second Person of Trinity.

And how do the Ten Commandments begin? Not with a threat.

They begin with the Gospel. I've delivered you. I've liberated you.

From bondage to sin and death. Now, this is how I want you to live.

2. The Command

You shall have no other gods before me.

Once again. It's singular. Not y'all shall have no other gods before me. True. But it's you and you and you and you. In your real life. Public and private.

Outside and inside. You shall have no other gods before me.

One of the most popular gods in Hinduism is the goddess Lakshmi.

She's the goddess of wealth. She wears a red dress with golden thread.

There's a holiday called Diwali where people buy new clothes and redecorate their homes and light candles and sing to pictures and images of Lakshmi so that she will bring them wealth in the coming year.

Some cultures and religions personify their gods with statues and figurines and mythology and rituals.

Obviously the First Commandment is speaking against that.

But we all know that it's possible to have other gods and not have all the religious trappings. You don't have to believe in the goddess Lakshmi to worship money. What the First Commandment is really addressing is idolatry.

What is idolatry? Trusting created things to give you what God alone can give.

Tim Keller's teaching on idolatry has been formative for me, *Counterfeit Gods*:

"The old pagans . . . had sex gods, work gods, war gods, money gods, nation gods—for the simple fact that anything can be a god that rules and serves as a deity in the heart of a person or in the life of a people. For example, physical beauty is a pleasant thing, but if you make it the most important thing in a person's life or a culture's life, then you have Aphrodite, the beauty idol. And you have people, and an entire culture, constantly agonizing over appearance, spending inordinate amounts of time and money on it, and foolishly evaluating character on the basis of it. We may not physically kneel before the statue of Aphrodite, but many young women today are driven into depression and eating disorders by an obsessive concern over their body image. If anything becomes more fundamental than God to your happiness, meaning in life, and identity, then it is an idol."

Tim Keller says in *Counterfeit Gods* that our idols are often hard to identify.

One of the first things is to recognize the distinction between what he calls surface idols and deep idols.

Deep idols are when the deep motivational drives of our hearts become idolatrous.

He says there are four deep idols: Control, Comfort, Power, and Approval

Depending on your personality, your experiences, even your brain,

you are going to be drawn to one or two of these more than others.

Deep idols are hard to see, but they are always connected to surface idols.

Surface idols are visible and concrete things.

Surface idols can literally be anything: your children, money, your appearance, your health, a political party, a romantic relationship.

Money is the clearest example of a surface idol.

People worship money for very different reasons, depending on their deep idols. Some people want money in order to have control.

If I have enough money, my future can be planned and secure.

Other people want money because their idol is approval.

Money can buy the things to make me acceptable in eyes of people who matter.

Other people want money for comfort and pleasure.

Other people worship money because it gives them power over people.

It's easy to see how other people use money wrongly, hard to see in yourself.

So what does the phrase "before me" mean? No other gods before me.

It sounds like God might be saying, I have to be first in your life.

You can have other gods, but as long as I'm first, that's ok.

I've just got to be at the top of your list.

But that's not before me means. It means, before my face. In my presence.

God sees all things, he doesn't want to see any other gods in your life.

Even in the secret corners of your mind and heart.

Because the way our hearts work, there can only be one God.

When a bride and groom take wedding vows, one of the traditional lines is:

And forsaking all others, be faithful to her/to him, as long as we both shall live.

Does mean it's ok if I have other romantic partners as long as I make sure my spouse is always in first place in my heart.

Baby, you know I love you more than I love any of my other girlfriends.

Of course not. Our hearts don't work that way.

God has given us lots of good things in his creation for our use and our enjoyment.

But he does not want us to give our hearts to any of them.

He does not want us to trust them to give us what he alone can give— meaning in life and security and eternal hope.

One of the ways the Bible describes believers going after other gods is adultery.

What does the Lord require of you? Deuteronomy 10:

Fear the Lord your God, serve him, love him, keep commandments.

You shall fear the Lord your God and hold fast to him.

Hold fast to God, same Hebrew verb used of first marriage of Adam and Eve

A man shall leave father and mother and hold fast to his wife.

Only give his heart to her.
What does God want?

He wants you to love him and hold fast to him. That's the first commandment.

The number one thing we need to do is know God and know Jesus.
Before Jesus was arrested, he prayed to his Father. And in that prayer he said:
This is eternal life, that they may know you, the one true God and Jesus Christ
whom you have sent. Eternal life is to know Yahweh in the flesh, Jesus himself.

The way we change, the way we become the people God wants us to be—
Over and over again as God gives the commandments he says,
I want you to do this and obey my laws because I want it to go well with you.
The way we really change is by knowing Jesus, giving him our ultimate allegiance.
If you don't, all you'll do is change your outward behavior,
but your underlying motives will not change.

Jesus did not come to earth to just prop up and make possible the life you've
dreamed up for yourself. He didn't come to make your dreams come true
and then make it so you can go to heaven when you die.

That's not why Jesus came.

He came to bring you out of slavery to sin and death and he wants you to give
him your full allegiance.

So how do you love Jesus more than anything else?

What does the Bible say?

We love him because why? Because we focused? Because we tried hard?

We love him because he first loved us.

The good news that Yahweh, the I AM, became a man to deliver us from the land of
slavery and the house of bondage. Jesus did it by keeping the law perfectly.

His life was a masterpiece of love. But then he was crushed.

By faith in Jesus, you get his perfect life. You get the masterpiece.

And his crushing death pays the penalty for all your sin.

As you look at your life. Lots of things want to change. First thing to pray is not—

Lord, help me quit this sin. Help me tell the truth. Great thing to pray.

Lord, I want to know you and love you and be so secure in you, I don't have to
bend the truth to make someone like me, because I have your love.