

Introduction:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (**Genesis 1:1**). God was in the beginning of everything. Therefore, we are striving to put God in the beginning of everything we say and do, including worship. At heart, “worship” is “worthship.” It is attributing to the object of your worship worth and value. How worthy should we see God? To answer that, let’s go back to the beginning of Israel’s worship. Let’s go back to the 10 Commandments.

Why did God give Israel the 10 Commandments? The old rabbis delineated 613 laws in the Old Testament. Why did God separate out 10 of them? Were they the most important? Were they the uncompromisable, absolutely essential ones? Were they the summary of the other 603? Were they the ones that defined the Jews as different from the nations around them? Think about some of the laws that didn’t make the 10. Circumcision isn’t there. The dietary laws are not included. None of the sacrifices or memorial feasts are on this list. Why is “honor your father and mother” on there, but “honor the king” or “honor the priests” or “honor Moses” is not? I mean, God is going to open up the ground and swallow whole families because they didn’t honor Moses and Aaron, how is that not on the list? Why did God separate out this list and give it to Israel as if it were the sine qua non?

Put the 10 Commandments in their historical context. We know from passages like **Ezekiel 23:8, 19** that Israel had started worshipping the Egyptian gods while in her captivity there. God, through 10 plagues, 10 powerful signs of His divine supremacy over those Egyptian gods, delivered Israel from those gods and the slavery they had imposed on Israel. He brought them safely through the Red Sea, letting them walk on dry land and then bringing the waters down on the Egyptian army, severing their ties with and cutting off their path back to Egypt. He provided bread from heaven and water from a rock, defeated Amalekites, and brought them to Mt. Sinai. In **Exodus 19:10ff**, God told Moses to get the people ready, He was going to speak to them on the third day. So, they stood at the base of the mountain, and God revealed Himself through smoke, flashing of lightening (fire from heaven), and thunder. The first thing they hear from Yahweh is this: “I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” Then He gave the 10 Commandments. I suggest these commandments are actually explanations of that very first statement. Yahweh is essentially saying, “Here is what it means to be my people and to have Me as your God.” I believe if we back up and look at these commandments conceptually instead of just as 10 special rules, we will discover some powerful insights. By the time we’re done, we’re going to understand the heart of a covenant relationship with God, the nature of sin, and, shockingly, why hell is the natural consequence of sin. Please be ready, because when we are done, I’m going to invite you into a covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ, encouraging you to let God deliver you from your bondage and slavery to sin and the gods of this modern age by going through the waters of baptism for the remission of sins in just the same way that Israel went through the Red Sea.

Discussion:

I. “You shall have no other gods before me.”

- A. The covenant relationship with Yahweh is exclusive. As a husband doesn’t want his wife sleeping around with other men, God wants a faithful people. We worship Yahweh and Him only. We must not worship Yahweh as the supreme God in our list of gods, but as the only God. Only He is worthy. Everything else is either an instrument to help us seek Yahweh or a blessing from Him to enjoy and for which to worship Him more.
- B. We want Yahweh more than anything else. As Asaph said in **Psalms 73:25**, “Whom have I in heaven but you, and there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you” (ESV). And this, at its heart, defines sin. We know from **I John 3:4** that sin is lawlessness. But what is the heart of God’s law? Nothing comes before Him. This is why sin separates us from God. It doesn’t separate us from God because it hurts us or because it hurts others. It separates us from God because sin is choosing something else above or in place of God.

II. “You shall not make for yourself a carved image...”

- A. This was the first command Israel would break. In less than two months from hearing this, they would fashion a golden calf and Aaron would proclaim it was Yahweh (**Exodus 32:4-5**). What is the problem with this? If they were still worshipping Yahweh, why did it matter if they represented Him as a golden calf or any other statue for that matter? Surely what matters most is not how they represented Him, but simply that they worshiped Him alone. And yet, God condemns it. Why?

B. **Acts 17:29** gives this insight. Graven images are designed by the “art and imagination of man.” The art and imagination of man have no place in defining our relationship with God. God is so worthy, He gets to define our relationship. He gets to plan our relationship. We do not.

III. “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain...”

A. Yahweh is to be honored. He is to be lifted up in our hearts and minds, and also in our words and actions. We are not to treat Him lightly or vainly. Certainly, His name is not to be used as an epithet or an exclamation. Though it is common in our culture to express shock by exclaiming “Oh my God,” we should reserve that for worship, praise, and honor. However, in the Old Covenant the issue was not merely about prohibiting vain exclamations. **Leviticus 19:12** explains how God’s name might be used vainly or falsely. The Israelites were not to use God’s name in an oath against their neighbors to deal falsely with them.

B. But what do we learn from this? Consider it this way. When might you swear falsely by God’s name against your neighbor? When you want something that you can’t get through honest means. In fact, in **Leviticus 19:11-12**, that is exactly what is being discussed. The person who swears falsely by Yahweh’s name is using Yahweh as a means to an end. A relationship with Yahweh is not their highest goal and desire. They have something they want more than they want Him and they are not above making God their tool to get it. This command defines our relationship with God as about Him, not about us. Certainly, God is blessing us beyond our imagination, but if our relationship with Him is more about the gifts than the Giver, then He becomes merely a tool for us to pursue what is our true god. Our relationship is about glorifying God, not about getting something from Him.

IV. “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy...”

A. This is God’s covenant with Israel. We are specifically told the Sabbath is not a binding memorial in our covenant with God (cf. **Romans 14:5-6; Colossians 16-17**) but was a shadow fulfilled in Jesus Christ. However, conceptually this still helps us understand a covenant relationship with God and defines sin for us.

B. Notice the motivation for keeping the Sabbath as seen in the two records of the 10 Commandments. In **Exodus 20:11**, the Sabbath was a reminder of God’s creation. He made the heavens and the earth. He is the one who gives life, breath, and all things. In **Deuteronomy 5:15**, the Sabbath was a reminder that God delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage. Both of these motivations highlight an aspect of covenant relationship.

C. While the previous command highlighted that the relationship is about God and not about us, this one demonstrates that a covenant relationship with God actually benefits us, not Him. He is the provider; we are dependent. That is, in fact, what Sabbath was for Israel. It was a time of rest, whether the weekly day of rest, or the days of rest connected with memorial feasts, or the year of rest for the land every seven years (cf. **Leviticus 25:4**). It recognized God was the provider so they could take a weekly day to rest, they could take a year to let the land rest. God provides. The Sabbath was God’s provision for man, not man’s provision for God.

D. While the Sabbath rituals are not part of our covenant, the meaning behind them is. We love because He first loved. We worship because He first blessed. He is not dependent on our service, we are dependent upon His.

V. “Honor your father and mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”

A. In **Ephesians 6:2-3**, Paul will explain that this is the first commandment with promise. And it is that promise that helps us understand the concept behind this command. Please understand, God’s promise was not that individual children who honor and obey their parents will have long lives. The promise was when Israelites honored their parents, Israel would be long in the land and it would go well for Israel in the land God was giving them. Though it is likely a true statement, this command is not saying your parents are looking out for your best interests so if you obey them you’ll live longer. Rather, it is describing the means by which Israel was to create a generational legacy of faithfulness that would allow them to remain in God’s Promised Land.

B. We especially see this in **Deuteronomy**. God gives these commandments in **Deuteronomy 5**, then according to **Deuteronomy 6:4-9**, the parents were to teach this covenant to their children. Why would honoring their parents allow Israel to live long in the land? Because the faithful parents were teaching the children how to have a relationship with God. And isn’t it the violation of this that led to all Israel’s judgments? We have often blamed the Israelite parents when a generation arose that did not know God. Perhaps this law demonstrates to us that while some parents may have been derelict in their duties, the children were derelict in honoring, heeding, listening to, and obeying parents that were training them in their relationship with God.

C. Not every mother and father is faithful to the Lord. While we should honor them, we should honor God more by pursuing Him above our parents. However, we must take care in our desire to be independent from our parents that we do not become independent from our parents’ God. The purpose of this command is to honor those God has placed in our lives to lead us to Him. When we dismiss them, we are dismissing God.

VI. "You shall not murder...commit adultery...steal...bear false witness..."

- A. No doubt, as we look at these 10 Commandments we see a break down that mirrors Jesus's delineation of the two greatest commandments: ¹Love God and ²love your neighbor (**Matthew 22:37-39**). However, I'm still troubled why God chose these four. Why doesn't he include "don't hate your neighbor," that isn't something Jesus added later in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. **Matthew 5:21-26**), that was actually part of the Law (cf. **Leviticus 19:17**). Conceptually, I believe this is because God is still actually talking about a covenant relationship with Him. Of course, we know from **I John 4:20-21** that we cannot claim to love God if we don't love our brother. Obviously, I'm not loving God if I'm killing His children. That being said, I think there is still more to these commandments than that.
- B. Think about what these four commandments represent. God tells the Israelites, "Don't take your neighbor's life; don't take your neighbor's wife, don't take your neighbor's possessions, and don't take your neighbor's reputation." That final one goes even deeper than taking his reputation before neighbors, but includes doing so in a court of law where you might bear false witness against him so that the courts might take his life and you get his wife or possessions (cf. **Leviticus 19:15-16**). Why single out these four commandments?
- C. What are you saying about your relationship with God if you decide to take another's life, wife, possessions, or reputation. You are saying what God has provided for you is not enough. These four commandments demonstrate, by governing our relationship with one another, that our relationship with God is enough. A covenant relationship means trusting that what God has provided is enough. Let's face it, when we find out our relationship is about Him and not about us, and then we are told it is about dependence upon Him, that leaves us in a very vulnerable position. Maybe God doesn't care about us enough and that is why that person has the life, the wife, the possessions, and the reputation I want. In those moments, we step into the role of God and try to get for ourselves what we want. And sadly, that gets us back to wanting something more than God. Do we trust that Yahweh is enough? Or do we demand Yahweh give us more gifts? And if He doesn't, will we step up and try to procure them ourselves? We are to be like David who said, "Yahweh is my shepherd; I shall not want" (**Psalms 23:1**). He didn't mean Yahweh would give him everything he wanted. He meant that having Yahweh as shepherd was all he wanted.

VII. "You shall not covet..."

- A. Not only do we not take our neighbor's life, wife, possessions, or reputation we are not to dwell on those things. We are not to meditate on what belongs to another. We are not to focus on it. Let's face it, the more we fill our minds with the desire for our neighbor's life, wife, possessions, and reputation the more likely we are to violate one of the laws we just learned.
- B. However, this law takes us full circle to the first law. "You shall have no other gods before me." When we spend our time coveting what belongs to another, we are putting something in the place of Yahweh as our god. We are claiming we don't trust God. We are claiming God should bow down to our whims.

Conclusion:

Seeing this full circle explanation of a covenant relationship with God, we see the nature of sin. Sin, any sin, and all sin is, at heart, desiring and choosing something above God. It is seeking something above, beside, and in place of God. And when I understand that, then I can understand why the consequence of sin is hell. Hell is the complete absence of God. It will be terrifying and torturous. And many of us simply cannot understand why God would give anyone up to it. But when we grasp that all sin is saying we want something else more than God, we must not be surprised when God finally says, "Okay, you can have that instead of Me." The problem is everything other than God is destined for fire. If you spend your life chasing everything but God, even while you go to church, don't be surprised when you get something other than God and find out how eternally tragic, torturous, and traumatic it is to be away from the God you rejected or held at arm's length or tried to manipulate to be your tool.

Though Israel had chosen the Egyptian gods and been enslaved by them (cf. **Ezekiel 23:8, 19**), God wanted a relationship with them. He wanted a relationship with them so badly, he demonstrated His power by the 10 plagues culminating in saving Israel's firstborn from judgment and death all deserved. He then led them through the waters of the Red Sea and brought them to Mt. Sinai to make this exclusive covenant, this marriage, with them. All of this was part of His plan to bring Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, the Suffering Servant, the Crucified and Resurrected Savior into the world through them. And that leads to us. God wants a relationship with us so badly, He sacrificed His own Firstborn Son to judgment and death in order to defeat judgment and death. He is calling us out from our service to the gods of this world. He will sever our ties with and cut off our path back to them just as He did with Israel, through water, specifically through the waters of baptism. He wants to make this exclusive covenant with you. He wants you so badly He put you before His Son. Will you want Him so badly that you put Him before everything else?