

Ten Rules for Life | First Commandment: No gods Before God | Exodus 20:1-3

The Rev. Dr. Sam Ferguson | The Falls Church Anglican

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(Discussion questions on page 8)

What is the most important law in America? Freedom of speech? Freedom of assembly? Freedom of religion? Perhaps it's the civil rights act of 1964 or the voting rights act of 1965?

Put another way, if you were authoring a set of laws, what law would you start with? What law would come first? What law would all the other laws *depend* on?

That's a hard question. But every society—ancient or modern—is built on some foundational law, some truth or commitment, upon which everything else depends.

This takes us directly into the passage for our sermon today, Exodus 20:1-3, the *first* law of the Ten Commandments. Today, we see what law is most important to God. What law comes first for Him.

God begins the Ten Commandments with a law about himself: “you shall have no other gods before me” (Exod 20:3). In fact, the first four are all centered on Him: *not gods before God, no images of God, no cursing God's name, and no breaking God's Sabbath.*

This is utterly unique in ancient law. Other legal codes from that part of the world and time—the **Code of Hammurabi** (1745 BC), the **Assyrian Laws** (1400-1100 BC), and the **Hittite Treaties** (1650-1200 BC)—invoke gods and threaten divine curses. But none of them require this level of fidelity to one God.

And there are plenty of parallels between the second table of Commandments—those pertaining to people's duty to each other, “don't murder, steal, lie”—and ancient law. But again, nothing in the ancient world anchors man's duty to man upon man's duty to God quite like the Ten Commandments.

Distinctions appear when considering modern law, too. The democratic legislation of freedom of religion—where one is free to worship the god of their choosing—sounds quite different than the opening of the Decalogue, which *legislates* worship to one God.

In both its content and placement, the First Commandment is radical. It says, with no uncertain terms: *because God alone is God, because God alone saves, He alone must be the center of our lives—and everything else only holds together when He is.* The First Commandment is about one thing: *God-centeredness.*

Here are three things that commandment teaches us we'll now explore in more depth: **(1) Who Belongs at Center. (2) What That Center Holds Together.** And **(3) How God Himself Secures This Center for His People.**

I. Who Belongs at Center

God is not the *first* God; He is the *only* God

When we come to the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, Israel is just month from their deliverance from Egypt—where they'd been saturated in Egyptian culture during 400 years of slavery. And the Egyptians were no monotheists—they had gods in the hundreds. Images of gods covered their temples and imaginations.

We need to hear the first commandment in this context:

“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 (Exod 20:1-3).

“No gods before me,” does not mean God is first among the many gods. It means God is the only God. He is not the first among rivals; He has no rival.

We start to see this in God's name. Back in Exodus 3 Moses asked God about God's name, and

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Exod 3:14).

We translate this at times as *Yahweh*, or more often, in English Bibles, merely as “LORD” in all capitals. So in verse 2, when God says, “I am the LORD your God,” he is announcing his unique name: I am *Yahweh*. The name literally means *absolute being*, I AM. And it is meant to distinguish God from all other so-called gods the way you might **distinguish between Shakespeare and the characters in his stories**. Shakespeare is *totally* real; Hamlet is only real because Shakespeare invented him on paper.

The exclusivity of God is emphasized in Isaiah:

Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am *Yahweh*, and besides me there is no savior” (Isa 43:10-11); “Thus says *Yahweh*...I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god” (Isaiah 44:6).

The meaning of the First Commandment is that God is the only God, and he is to be worshiped exclusively: “you shall not worship any god other than me” (Ps 81:9).

God is center

The implications of this—in terms of the first commandment—are that God is center: God is the Center of Everything—world, career, family, life—but especially the heart.

What our sun is to the solar system, what a hub is to a wheel, God is to life: everything centers around him.

And just like a house cannot have two foundations, a planet doesn't orbit around two suns, a wheel doesn't turn on two hubs; a car cannot drive with two steering wheels: God's people are not to have more than one God. They are to be God-centered.

God-Plus Problem

Our greatest threat for keeping the first commandment today may not be an outright denial of God, but a dilution of God.

This is not atheism or idolatry, per se, it is what is called Syncretism.

Syncretism is God *plus*. It is having the biblical God at center but then *merging* into that sacred place other gods—the self, an ideology, success. This is God-plus: God at center *plus* my self, my ideology, my success. But God-plus is not God.

Elizabeth Gilbert’s bestseller, *Eat, Pray, Love*, is an example of how this works today. In her memoir, Gilbert recounts her spiritual odyssey out of a mid-life crisis into peace and self-realization. Key to the journey is not a rejection of God, but an opening to a more expansive, inclusive view of God. “You have every right to cherry-pick when it comes to moving your spirit and finding peace in God,” she tells her readers. “You take whatever works from wherever you can find it, and you keep moving toward the light.”¹

Biblically minded churchgoers can fall prey to this when we merge the biblical god with our modern sensibilities and modern commitments to ease and affirmation.

We like the God of grace, who forgives all our sins. But we don’t like the God who also demands us to take up our cross and follow him. So, we merge our god of “therapeutic diems” with the God of the Bible.

This type of God-plus religion is not an error; it’s infidelity. It is a violation of God’s covenant of love. It is a betrayal of the God who saved us from the bondage of sin and death. We h

The God-of-my-own making, the God-plus, is not an error; it’s infidelity.

Apply: Is God at Center?

Authenticate Your View of God: If you speak of God as part of your life, how do you know it’s *this* God, true God, and not a concoction of your own making? Don’t leave it to private guesswork—to a few feelings you have at night. Submit to a recognize, trustworthy authority: a local church that stewards the unbroken tradition, built on the Word of God.

Recenter Your Relationship with God: When life is hard, what’s your center? Who, or what, do you turn to for help and comfort? What would it look like this week to actively dethrone a rival center and reorient your life around God alone?

That’s the first lesson: the First Commandment sets the solar system in order: God is the Sun; God is at center—because he has no rivals, because he saves.

[T] Divided centers don’t produce moderation; they produce instability (Matt 7:24-27). We turn then to a second lesson: What this center holds in place?

II. What the Center Holds Together: *Truth and Love*

I want to suggest two things that are held together when God is at center; and which suffer instability and eventual collapse when He is not.

The first is truth—or what I will call Morality: Right and Wrong.

¹ See Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, 192; cited and summarized in Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion*, 211ff.

Call it ethics, civility, right and wrong, but life requires an agreed upon morality. When God is not at center, morality doesn't necessarily disappear—it becomes *negotiable*.

The biblical evidence is manifold. Just consider the book of Judges. In the decades following the giving of the Law, Israel enters a period known as Judges. Whenever these judges (leaders) turn away from exclusive obedience to God, adherence to the rest of God's law unravels. Twice we hear the refrain, "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6; 21:25), which so perfectly captures the logic, if there is no authoritative God at center: each person will be left to adjudicate morality according to their own senses.

Much classic literature supports the point, and Dostoevsky is the master of revealing this maxim, only he uses the phrase, "everything is permitted." His most famous example is the tortured conscience of **Raskolnikov** in *Crime and Punishment*, who under the influence of certain modern theories, tries to justify the murder of a poor and annoying woman. She offered nothing to society; only took from it; life is better without her—so he reasons.

So, on what *a priori* law do you think American Democracy rests? "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," the Declaration of Independence asserts. But how many societies across history have not found this truth to be *self-evident*.

It is the First Commandment that holds morality together because Morality comes from God.

When God is center, we believe all else that revolves around God: he is creator; all men and women are created in his image. The moral payoff of the beginning of the Decalogue is seen so beautifully in Proverbs such as this: "Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him" (Prov 14:31).

E.g., "**Atheist Ten Commandments.**" I came across a contest from about ten years ago where someone offered a 10k rewards to the best version of the "Atheist 10 Commandments."² Thousands offered their online entries. The winning opens, perhaps unsurprisingly, with the first command, "Be open-minded and willing to alter your beliefs with new evidence." The Fifth, "God is not necessary to be a good person or to live a full and meaningful life." The Seventh, "Treat others as you would want them to treat you."

Most revealing, however, is the ninth commandment and how it undermines every other: "There is no one right way to live."

If God is not at center, how can anyone establish that there is "one right way to live." And if there is no "one right way to live," every system of morality is only as strong as the strong people enforcing it. Ethics are built on religious commitments—beliefs we hold about people, the world, and God.

Without the first commandment, the rest of the commandments lose their authority. Without the first commandment, morality can't hold.'

² <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/12/19/living/atheist-10-commandments>

Love

A second, I would state as love. The heart of the law—as Jesus later explains—is love of God and love of neighbor. And here we need to remember that the context of the giving of the law is the making of a covenant—the establishment of God’s relationship with Israel. He has saved her from bondage in Egypt (20:2) and brought them to himself (19:1-5). Now he expresses the terms of their ongoing relationship—which is likened at times to a marriage.

The first commandment—“no gods before me”—is therefore about *honor*—a deep fidelity toward God. Idolatry always begins as misplaced love, not open rebellion.

One of the first lessons we teach children is to share: share your toys, your bike, your markers. And on into life, sharing is caring. But there are some things we are not to share. There are some things that would be dishonoring to share. Like one’s spouse.

Idolatry is not merely a mistake; it is a betrayal. To put something before God, or alongside God, is to forsake a lover.

God is not someone we simply pay attention to one morning of one day of the week. God is to be the most important thing to our hearts. We are to have a devotion and commitment to him that no one else can occupy.

Apply—well-ordered love: and notice, that when *love of God* is at the center of our lives, it protects us from asking too much of the others we love. One of the benefits to keeping the first commandment is that it prevents us from asking other people, or other things, to be god to us. It’s a great burden to put on your career, or your body-image, or your spouse, or your child, to be god to you. It’s too much to ask them to uphold your ultimate happiness, ultimate purpose, ultimate being in life. Love them, cherish them, work hard for them—but do not ask them to be god to you.

“He loves Thee too little” writes Augustine, “who loves anything together with Thee, which he loves not for Thy sake.” Proper love flourishes when love of God is its soil.

Sum: What is held in order, when God is held in Center? Nothing short of Truth and Love.

III. How God Himself Secures This Center

I mentioned last week that one of the challenges of the law is that it exposes us all as failures. None of us keep it perfectly.

And this prepares us to notice more vividly the uniqueness of Christ. He alone keeps the law perfectly. One vivid example of him upholding the first commandment comes when he’s tempted by the devil in the wilderness.

After 40 days of fasting, the Devil comes with this third attack. He takes Jesus to a very high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory and says to Jesus: “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me” (Matt 4:9).

But Jesus responds with the First Commandment on his mind: “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.” (Matt 4:10).

As we watch the ministry of Jesus further unfold, we realize that He is the embodiment of Israel—fulfilling the covenant between God and man as they could not.

We also see Jesus as our Representative as he goes to the Cross, paying the penalty for our breaking of the law. For all the times we have forsaken God as center, Jesus is forsaken by God on the Cross.

But then after his resurrection, he offers us a special union with him. He forgives us and draws us close. And we realize that what is unfolding in Christ is just a continuation of what had begun with Israel: even before we keep one iota of the law, aware we will never keep it perfectly, God yet *delivers us from bondage*—Israel from Egypt; us, now, from sin and death.

In Christ, we are enveloped in God's love. God's love is like a magnet we cannot resist, pulling us into its orbit. God keeps the center for us! That is the Gospel.

God does not merely command our allegiance to him—through our union with Christ, he creates it. When we see Christ, we want to follow God's ways out of *gratitude* not *pressure*—as sons and daughters, not mercenaries.

What does it mean, then, for the Christian to “have no gods before God” (Exod 20:3). It means that as we are enveloped by the love of Christ, we in turn offer God our *worship*, our *trust*, and our *obedience*. Not to earn his love; but because we are so lavished by it.

Some of you are actual legislators—you make laws. Some of you are judges—you interpret and apply laws. Some of you are lawyers—you advise and negotiate in light of law. Many of you are parents—and in your home, you make law.

But none of us are god. None of us are *The Lawmaker*.

But all of us can be united to Christ before the Lawmaker—and here he pronounce us Righteous.

Then, in the hands of Christ, the First Commandment because our joy—we get to honor God, our savior, with the rest of our lives!

“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 (Exod 20:1-3).

“How could there be any gods before you,” cries the Christian! “You alone are God. You alone save. You alone are worthy!”

Amen.

Small Group Questions:

1. The First Commandment establishes that we are to worship, love, and serve the True God alone. How do you know if you are worshiping and following the *True* God? Are there ways you may be serving “God-plus,” or a “God of your own making?” How can you tell if something has quietly moved into God’s place at the center of your life?
2. What falls apart when God is not at your center? The sermon notes that morality and love depend on the centrality of God to be held together. What are some other things you can think of that depend on the centrality of God?
3. God doesn’t just command obedience—He creates it through union with Christ. Jesus keeps the Law perfectly; Jesus takes our sin; Jesus then aids us in obedience. How does knowing that Christ kept the First Commandment for you change the way you think about obedience? What would it look like this week to re-center your life on God *out of gratitude* rather than pressure?