

Read Exodus 20

The Ten Commandments are controversial. Arguments over their display have gone to the Supreme Court. What are they all about anyway? God's magnificent display on that mountain means they must be important. Let's look closely at the very center of the Old Testament, the giving of the law. In Hebrew, the words mean "Ten Words." The commandments are short and simple. Jesus said, "Learn from me. My yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Mt 11:29-30).

Let's imagine standing there before God with all those thousands of people. They stood in the electrifying presence of God, knowing they had done nothing to get themselves out of Egypt. They stood there stomachs fed by bread that dropped out of the sky, straight from God. They drank life-giving water from a rock. Because of this, they said "yes" to God. The words God gave them are God's intent for God's children, including you and me. "Man does not live by bread alone," Jesus said, and we live by these very words God has given us.

The commandments were presented in the form of an Ancient Near East treaty, which included a preamble, a prologue, stipulations, provisions for conveying the information to its subjects, witnesses, and recourse for failure to keep it. God gave the Ten Commandments using this familiar structure, but with a creative, unique, one-of-a-kind approach. It's not that they were copied from surrounding people groups, but that God communicates in ways people can understand.

The preamble and prologue named the superior party and explained why the two parties made the relationship. Following that were the terms of the agreement. Provisions were made for periodic public reading. In Deuteronomy Moses writes that the witnesses to this treaty are heaven and earth, and as I read it, you will note the blessings and curses.

God's contract was unique in content because it stresses love. So the form used was one the people understood, but the content was entirely unique. Today we will talk about the first four commandments.

God's preamble began, "I AM, the One Who Always Is." God is always present in your life, no matter what your circumstances – You can count on it. Sometimes our troubles are our fault and sometimes they are not. No matter what the cause, the way out is to turn to God and rely on the God who is ALWAYS THERE willingly bringing people out of trouble.

This is key to understand about God. God's very name embodies the fact of God's presence and power. Learn this from Exodus. This is the most central message of the Old Testament and the most central message for us now. God is a God of grace who graciously extends Himself to us. This is how God said it in this document:

"I lifted you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself."

Now the eagle teaches the fledgling like this. When the baby eagle has grown its flying feathers and it's time to leave the nest, the parent, after placing food in the nest, hovers over the nest and flaps its wings. As the baby reaches out to grasp the food, it mimics the parent and flaps its

newly feathered wings. The wind the parent creates causes the young eagle to rise slightly above the nest as it is flapping its own wings. It may rise eight to ten inches.¹ So the image is, as the eagle “lifts up or takes up” the baby, so God took these people up, bringing them to Himself.

To understand the commands we have to keep in mind that the thrust of being God’s child is liberation; God frees us. Jesus said, “If you continue in my word . . . you will know the truth and the truth will make you free” (Jn 8:31-32). So God’s commands are not restrictive, but liberating, just like God liberated Israel.

God reaches down, and gives Himself first, therefore we love God in response. We love God because God first loved us. This makes Christianity unique among all other religions. In all other religions people strive to please or appease God. Recently I asked a Buddhist about her beliefs when I noticed an altar at her place of business. She said it was to appease the “business Buddha.” If she pleases him (her words), the business Buddha will make her successful.

Do you worry about whether you are good enough for God’s love? God loves you first. Are you trying to appease God? I encourage you to receive God’s love.

How do we receive God’s love?

You respond wholeheartedly. You love God back freely. God puts it like this: *You are not to have any other gods but me.*

It’s really short and simple. God wants exclusive love. Let’s say the Buddhist decides to become a Christian. What if she wanted to keep her Buddha altar to ensure her business was successful? This does not work for God.

What if someone got married but said to his bride, “I’m going to still hang onto this other woman. I just don’t want to give her up.” That is unacceptable to God.

God expects absolute priority.

Priority means you precede others in order, rank, privilege, and precedence. Receiving priority is not hard to understand. We belong to priority clubs; we send our mail priority. Businesses offer priority parking and priority passes and priority seats. If you go to Disney Land and you do not want to stand in line you can get a priority line pass.

God says, “I am FIRST and there are no others.” It’s perfectly clear.

Knowing this helps me love God correctly, but God gives the next three commandments to explain more fully just how to live out the first commandment.

Commandment two says, *‘You are not to make carved gods.’*

¹<http://www.prophetic.net/eagles.htm>, accessed 5/10/10.

And, in this commandment you will notice the curses that are promised if you break this commandment: *“You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children; the entire family is affected-- even children in the third and fourth generations of those who reject me.*

Notice that obedience is blessed: *But I lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations on those who love me and obey my commands”* (Ex 20:5-6).

Other religions often worship images, like my Buddhist friend, but it's rare for Christians. But we still have an inclination to worship idols. Let's say you have a decision to make and you go outside and pray. You see a shooting star. Your decision works out. Next time you have a decision to make you might go out and actually look for a shooting star. Now it's God who answers your prayers. But you have identified the star with it and the star has become an image for God.

This can happen with people or celebrities too. You idolize them, or pattern your lifestyle on the lifestyle they live, or watch their television show religiously, or follow their advice. God says don't do that. Rather, let God be your authority. Reject superstition and idols and let God guide you. This is our witness to others, who often follow all kinds of people falsely. Our witness is that God is central in our lives.

The third commandment says, *“You must not misuse the name of the LORD your God. The LORD will not let you go unpunished if you misuse his name”* (Ex 20:7).

Remember, God's name embodies all that God is. God is present and powerful. God had not withheld Himself from Israel, nor does God withhold Himself from you. You must honor God's name, not treat it with disrespect by tossing it around as a curse or using it to scorn something. To do so is to treat God's gift lightly and underestimate God's power. Jesus said, “let your yes be yes and no be no” (Mt 5:37). God says you can expect punishment if you misuse His name.

The fourth commandment reads: *“Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath day of rest dedicated to the LORD your God . . .”* (Ex 20:8-10) Again, obedience brings blessing. Why is this commandment important? It reflects trust. Israel had to trust God to provide for that seventh day. They were to stop each week to honor their source. In Egypt their labor was continuous. But God says, rest and worship. Honor me. I am your God, not your work.

Loving God brings light into our lives. All other things begin to fall into place when God is first, and we shine like the Son, who came to this earth to teach us how to love God. When we honor God, then we are a witness to a good God who loves us, and the truth of God's Word will set us free.

AMEN