

(Devotional #23) **Christian Liberty and the Law:**
The Ten Commandments – God’s Demand for Exclusivity in Worship – Part 1
(Exodus 20:1-3)

Then God spoke all these words, saying, I am Yahweh your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt, from the house of servitude. **You shall not have other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol** or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath, or which is in the waters under the earth. **You shall not worship them, and you shall not serve them, for I – Yahweh your God – AM a jealous God, one who visits the iniquity of fathers upon sons, unto the third and the fourth (generations) of those, who hate me. But (IAM) one who shows lovingkindness to thousands (of generations), to those who love me and keep my commandments – Exodus 20:1-6**

In our last devotional, we made the point that **THE TEN COMMANDMENTS REVEAL TO MANKIND THE MORAL LAW OF GOD.** The commandments are encapsulated in the Mosaic Covenant, but the moral principles contained in them are eternal and immutable and they transcend God’s covenant relationship with Israel to find application to every individual and every nation.

YAHWEH, THE SELF-EXISTENT GOD:

The prologue (*verses 1 & 2*) begins with the divine name אֱלֹהִים – (*Elohim* – translated ‘God’) ... “**And God (Elohim) said ...**” Elohim is the generic name of God that reveals His majesty and His great power. It is the first name used of God in Genesis 1:1. Elohim reflects God’s nature as one whose power is such that He can ‘*speaks*’ the universe into existence by the very word of His mouth (“**And God said ...**”).

This name sets God above all others. In Hebrew it is written as a plural noun, and though as commonly used, *the intensive plural*¹ simply intensifies the meaning of the noun, it also foreshadows the later revelation of God as Trinity². Frequently Elohim is used when God engages with the entire world or with the Gentile nations. In the context of the Ten Commandments, Israel needed to know that God is supreme over ALL nations, not just over Israel and Egypt.

Self-identification was a common practice in the Ancient Near East in the contexts of royal proclamations and vassal treaties. Self-identification always involved the king making himself known to the vassal (*the greater to the lesser*). This is what occurs in verse two: “**I am Yahweh your God.**”

Last week we summarized the opening words of verse 2 as follows: “**I am the Self-existent God and you shall have no other gods before Me.**” As we will see in a moment, self-existence is implicit in God’s covenant-name, Yahweh. In Exodus 3:14, when Moses was in the presence of God at the Burning Bush, God self-identified Himself to Moses, by saying: “**I AM WHO I AM.**” This phrase, ‘**I AM,**’ both in English and Hebrew, is the verb ‘*to be*’ (*i.e., our term ‘IS’*). God’s name, ‘**I AM,**’ is a statement of His most fundamental attribute: ‘**SELF-EXISTENCE.**’ Said

¹ Some Hebrew nouns are *written* in the plural but are properly *translated* as singulars. (This is called *the intensive plural*.) It is used to ‘add weight’ or importance to the meaning of the noun. Most of the 2499 occurrences of Elohim in the Old Testament, when used of the God of Israel, are intensive plurals.

² For detailed coverage of how Elohim foreshadows the revelation of God as Trinity, see Lesson #3: “*The Trinity: Evidence From the Old Testament,*” by Rocky Miller: <https://www.gracebiblechurch.org/adult-bible-classes/lessons/foundations/topical-lessons/>

another way, *'God is the source of His own existence'*³. No other being in the universe can make that claim. And since all of God's attributes are eternal, God always has been, is now, and always will be, **'SELF-EXISTING.'**

Now the way you say, 'I AM' in Hebrew is אֲנִי־אֵלֹהִים – (Ehyeh); it is the 1st-person singular of the verb HAYAH ('to be' ... thus, 'I AM'). But in Exodus 3:15, after identifying Himself as 'I AM,' God says to Moses, *"thus you shall say to the Sons of Israel, YAHWEH, the God of your fathers, ... has sent me to you."* Then God says further, *"YAHWEH is MY NAME forever, and this is MY MEMORIAL-NAME to all generations."*

So, we have been introduced to three divine names so far in our lesson: (1) **ELOHIM**, the generic name of God that emphasizes his power, (2) 'I AM,' a self-declaration of God's self-existence, and (3) **YAHWEH**. In the simplest of terms, God's self-identification of Himself as I AM, is reflected in the name Yahweh, which if translated into English, would mean, 'HE IS.' Both names come from the same Hebrew verb, 'to be.' 'I AM' affirms God's self-declaration about Himself, and His self-existence, while Yahweh ('HE IS'⁴) affirms man's agreement about who God is.

ON WHAT BASIS DOES GOD HAVE THE RIGHT TO DEMAND UNCONDITIONAL OBEDIENCE?

There is a reason we have spent time drilling down into the divine names. Very simply, it is to show that God, because of His very nature, has the right to demand obedience from His Creation. Tertullian, an early Christian writer, who found his inspiration in the writings of the Apostle Paul, argued, *"the Ten Commandments were engraved on the hearts of men even before being written on tablets of stone."* One does not have to look beyond Romans 1:18-19 to see that Tertullian's argument is based on Paul's assertion, *"the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, **BECAUSE THAT WHICH IS KNOWN ABOUT GOD IS EVIDENT WITHIN THEM, FOR GOD MADE IT EVIDENT TO THEM.**"*

Since Christian thinkers began formulating the great doctrines of the faith, it has been accepted that there exists something called, 'THE MORAL LAW.' This means there are certain knowable truths about God that are 'BUILT INTO MAN' by the fact that man is created in God's image. This *'built in' sense of right and wrong* exists in us apart from special revelation – it is part of who we are as bearers of the divine image. THE MORAL LAW is known implicitly and can be discerned by all men and women. Therefore, the Gentiles, who do not have the Mosaic Law, still are without excuse because they have an innate sense of right and wrong based on the Moral Law that is *"engraved on the hearts of men even before being written on tablets of stone."* On this basis, the Prophet Amos condemned the Gentile nations, though they were not under the Mosaic Covenant⁵.

³ Notice in John 1:3, "All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being." This is confirmed in Colossians 1:16: "For by Him all things were created" These verses assert that all things, both the material universe and every living being, finds its origin in God Himself. Paul Tillich referred to God as "the Ground of all Being." We do not agree with many of the conclusions Tillich derived from this definition – but if we focus solely on the words themselves, we can conclude correctly that all 'being' is derived from God alone, and all being rests on that divine foundation.

⁴ A possible translation of the name Yahweh is, 'He causes to be,' subtly casting Him as the cause behind the Creation. This possible translation is based on the particular Hebrew vowel pattern that appears in the name Yahweh. At best, this would be an additional attribute of Yahweh, not the primary meaning of the name, which we have declared to be, 'HE IS.'

⁵ Amos proclaimed judgment against the Gentiles because they violated 'fundamental principles of morality,' which – though they did not have the Ten Commandments – they knew to be true. So, Gentiles are responsible to obey the

C. S. Lewis said: “*The great majority of civilizations have acknowledged ‘THE DOCTRINE OF OBJECTIVE VALUE,’ that certain attitudes are really true and others are really false.” Lewis’ point is, at Sinai God formulated into the Ten Commandments what has always been morally true. So, the commandments have immense value for Israel as part of the covenant, but beyond that, as moral principles, they have great value for all men – for what is codified in the Ten Commandments is the Moral Character of God Himself.*

Yahweh warned His people: ‘*when you enter Canaan, **other gods will try to take my place**, i.e., there will be a culture there that will attempt to compete with what I have told you is **TRUE and RIGHT and MORAL – Do not allow this to happen! Keep Me first by keeping My commandments!** God’s desire for the Israelites was that they should live among the Canaanites as **HIS PEOPLE**, uniquely belonging to Him. And this is exactly the plan God has for us – we are to live in the world, yet we are to be distinct from the world in worship and lifestyle.*

To sum up:

- (1) God has the right to demand our unconditional obedience because He is the source of our very existence.
- (2) And by revealing to us His own Moral Character, we have a pattern to follow in our own lives ... for like Israel, we too live in a competing culture that is morally perverse.

God has implanted in us an innate sense of right and wrong – the Moral Law – such that we are without excuse before Him when we violate what is implicit to the image of God in us.

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT: You shall have no other gods before me – Exodus 20:3

Based on what we now know about God’s nature, the **PRIMACY OF GOD OVER ALL OTHERS** is the obvious starting point. This is the first commandment, both numerically and conceptually. It is, in effect, **A FIRST PRINCIPLE**. God gives Himself primacy over mankind by means of His status as Creator, and then He asserts His primacy over other gods. From this, are we to believe there are ‘*other gods*’? Have we not just made the point that God-alone is self-existent? Bruce Waltke calls attention to a distinction between (1) *a Religious Statement*⁶ and (2) *a Theological Statement*⁶. The phrase in Exodus 20:3, “**have no other gods before me**,” falls squarely into Waltke’s definition of *a religious statement*. It reflects what some men believe, but it does not state a theological truth. In contrast, **Deuteronomy 4:39 is a theological statement: “Yahweh, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; THERE IS NO OTHER.”** This is an assertion that there is but one God and His name is Yahweh. In the Old Testament, the use of the phrase ‘**OTHER GODS**’ became ‘**CODE**’ for the pagan beliefs of the Gentiles, and in no way asserts a theological truth.

THE INVERSION PRINCIPLE:

Idolatry is abnormal: Man was created in an environment of perfect fellowship with his Creator; however, sin introduced a state of abnormality that broke fellowship with the Creator. This abnormality expresses itself in man as **AN INVERSION** – this is what Paul meant when after describing man’s rejection of God’s revelation, he says: “**They exchanged the truth about God for a lie**

Moral Law, even though the nations were not given the Written Law – and according to Scripture, because of this, they are ‘without excuse’ – see Romans 1:20.

⁶ *Waltke defines a ‘Religious Statement’ as relating solely to what men believe, which may or may not be true, while a ‘Theological Statement’ is declarative in nature and is a statement of theological truth.*

*and worshipped the Creature rather than the Creator*⁷.” This is a radical inversion of divine truth and it always is the result of sin.

THE PURPOSE OF THE FIRST COMMANDMENT IS TO REVERSE THIS THEOLOGICAL INVERSION AND RESTORE IN THE MIND OF MAN THE PRIMACY OF THE CREATOR AND THE PROPER RESPONSE TO THAT PRIMACY BY MANKIND

Man is to worship only the Creator – anything that interrupts that bond is idolatry and violates the first three commandments.

Some may say, ‘*we don’t serve other gods; there are no idols here in America.*’ But an idol, by definition, is ‘*anything that is inflated, so as to function as a substitute for God.*’ What captures your attention? Is it money, power, success, fame, self-fulfillment? We may not worship graven images, but these other things – *all too easily* – may become substitutes for God. What then does it mean to have only one God? It means loyalty, allegiance and trust in Him alone.

The first commandment demands our *inner loyalty* and our *outer allegiance*. No substitutes or cheap imitations are allowed! God must be **FIRST** because we belong to Him. He is our God, who demands obedience, but who also has acted on our behalf by amazing acts of grace. Think of it like this: the flipside of ‘**NO OTHER GODS**’ is the sublime positive, ‘**YOU SHALL HAVE ME.**’ This is how grace permeates the commandments. The Church is the Bride of Christ, and He is in love with us with a love we can never measure, but it is a love we are to reflect back to Him as love for God and for others⁸.

Just as husbands are commanded ‘*to love their wives*’ *exclusively*,’ God expects His Bride – the Church – to love Him exclusively – and the commandments show us how this is done. It is to be an undivided love-relationship that is honored by our complete and total commitment.

C.S. Lewis wrote: “*Our problem in life is not that we love things too much, but that we do not love God enough.*” The way we love God is by being sure there are no others, and that He is first in our lives.

BECAUSE OF THE PRIMACY OF THE FIRST COMMANDMENT, ALL OF THE REMAINING COMMANDMENTS REST ON THIS FOUNDATION: THE PROHIBITION AGAINST IDOLATRY.

Next week we will consider how the Primacy of God drives the proper worship of Yahweh.

⁷ See Romans 1:25

⁸ See Ephesians 5:25-27