

Love God
Exodus 20:1-11
Matthew 22:34-40

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Exodus 20:1-11

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Matthew 22:34-40

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘ “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’

Last week I introduced the Ten Commandments, the centerpiece of the Law that God gave to God’s people at Mount Sinai, shortly after bringing them out of Egypt. We spoke about that these commandments, and the Law in general, are not just God commanding for the sake of commanding. They were never intended to be a weapon in some kind of culture war, or something that you hit people over the head with. They are not bad news to tell you that you’re living your life wrong. They’re good news, because they tell you how to live your life right.

The Law, and the Ten Commandments in particular, are intended to be the instructions of a loving parent on how to live our lives. Just like we don’t abandon our kids and say, “Eh, they’ll

figure the world out,” God does not do that to us. God gives us instructions for how to live our lives.

There are lots of other ideas out there about what is best in life and how people should live, but we have the original instructions from the manufacturer. We need to teach these instructions to our children, and we need to remind ourselves what they say.

These first four commandments point us toward God. They show us that the goal of a life of faith is to be aligned with what God is doing in the world. For that to happen, we need to turn away from things that we might seek out instead of God. Doing that takes time and attention.

The first commandment is the *Shema*, the one Jesus called the greatest commandment. There is only one God, and you shall have nothing in your life that is more important than God. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

This is not just God’s ego. This is not just giving God God’s due for all that God has done for us, though that would be enough reason. God has given us everything that we have, everything that we most highly value, from our lives to our spouses to our children to our friends. We ought to be grateful to God. But there’s more to it than that. God knows, because God made us, that we human beings live better lives when they are centered around God.

We’ve talked before about how, when we center our lives around anything other than God, we pay for it in spades. If your life is centered around money or fame or power, you will always feel insignificant. You will always feel like you don’t have enough, like others have more than you do, and that’s a problem. If your life is centered around being beautiful, you will always feel ugly. If your life is centered around feeling pleasure, there will never be enough. You end up

seeking better and better highs, until something kills you.¹ These things happen because your life is misaligned.

When you center your life around God, first of all, you can have enough. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”² You cannot exhaust God. You are aligned with the purposes of God Almighty. You are where you belong. There is a harmony there that is unavailable any other way.

That leaves no room for idols. An idol doesn’t have to be a statue, and you don’t have to literally bow down before it. An idol is something we love, worship, or center our lives around that isn’t God.

An idol can be your career, if you place it before the people in your life.

An idol can be your reputation, if you value it more than doing the right thing.

An idol can be an institution, like a church. If you wonder how church coverups of grievous sin happen, this is how.

An idol can be another person.

An idol can be your child.

I spoke with a woman who worked in a retail store the year that the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle toys first came out. They were “THE hot toy” that year, and the store sold them rapidly. On Christmas Eve, after the store closed, they found a woman unconscious in a toy aisle. According to the security cameras, a man had seen that she had the last complete set of the Ninja Turtle toys. He had punched her out and taken them. He then bought the toys and walked out of the store. This man valued so highly his child having what he or she wanted, that he was willing

¹ If you haven’t read it, seek out David Foster Wallace, “This is Water,” Commencement speech at Kenyon College, 2005.

² Matthew 5:6.

to attack someone else, on Christmas Eve, and take what she had. This was not about something his child needed; this was taking toys, and it was about a child's wishes being an idol.

Across the country, youth sports have a terrible problem with parents. Parents who yell at the kids. Parents who yell at the coaches. Parents who yell at the officials. Parents whose kids never rightfully strike out or make a mistake. It's always the coaches putting the wrong kids in or the officials calling something a strike when it wasn't. And these parents disrupt the games, to make sure that everyone knows this. They call the officials names, they make it difficult for the game to continue. They teach their children terrible lessons. Little Leagues in some towns have banned parents from watching the games. This is making your child, and his or her sports success, an idol.

If our lives are centered around God, then treating other people like that would not occur to us. But centering our lives around God is not just saying "Yes" to God. It's also saying "No" to other things.

In America we live in a pluralistic society, and so we resist the idea that a person of faith might have to say "no" to some things in order to say "yes" to God. "Why can't I just believe in God and other things, too? Why do I have to turn away from other gods?"

Because we cannot truly believe, at the same time, that two plus two equals four, and that two plus two equals five. Either we believe that God created the Heavens and the Earth and all that there is, that Jesus Christ came here, was born, lived, died, and was resurrected for us, and that the Holy Spirit empowers us for service in this world, or we don't. It is not possible to have it both ways here.

In America we may not want to hear this, but it is possible to have to choose between your job and God. If you believe that your job requires you to facilitate something immoral,

whether it is legal or not, the proper response is not to ignore the problem. The proper response is not to steal from your employer by getting paid and not doing your job. The proper response is to either fix your job, or quit. That's not fun. Those aren't pleasant conversations. But I can tell you from my own experience, they lead you closer to where you ought to be, aligned with God.

God has given us the divine name, or YHWH, "the Lord," so that we could call upon God for forgiveness, sing out in thanksgiving and praise, and cry out for deliverance and healing. God did not give us the divine name so that we could use it casually, or carelessly. "Jesus Christ" should not be the first words out of your mouth when you are exasperated, unless they really are the start of spontaneous prayer. And we should all make certain that when we say, "God says" something, to make sure that it is something that God says, and not just something we wish God said.

We are also called to keep the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a day of worship to attend to God's Word. A day for gathering as a community. A day of fellowship and grace. A day of reminding each other what God is doing in the world and where we fit in that.

But the Sabbath is also a day of rest and justice. The Sabbath was the first fair labor law. Not only were the rich to rest, but the servants, slaves, foreigners, and even the animals. Everybody is to get the benefit of what science has now discovered is necessary for proper brain and body function.

The Sabbath doesn't happen once. It happens every seven days, because God's intrusion into human existence was not a one-time thing – it is a regular reality.

There are other sabbatical laws in the Hebrew Laws. Once every seven years, the land is given a rest – laid fallow for a year. Once every seven years, all debts are to be forgiven and all slaves go free. And every seven times seven years, all land was to return to its original family. God's gracious intrusion to ensure that the means of life were not monopolized by the few.

Keeping the Sabbath is a lot more than one day a week – it's a whole way of life. A way of life that aligns you with the God who made you and who has a purpose for you in this world.

That's what the whole set of commandments are about – they are about aligning yourself with God right here, in this world and this life.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN