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## Exodus 20:1-11      “The Ten Commandments - Part I”

Intro. This morning I will begin a two-part study of the 10 Commandments. These 10 Commandments contain some of the most important moral commandments of God. Though these 10 Commandments were given to Israel, I believe they have moral principles that apply to all of humanity. We see in them not simply “what we must do,” but what God is like. They show us something of the nature of God. All but the 4th commandment are repeated in some form in the New Testament as being required of Christians. So these 10 Commandments are very relevant to us today. The fact that these commandments were written in stone indicates the lasting authority of these Commandments, even to this day. These aren’t “ten opinions” of Moses, but Ten Commandments spoken by Almighty God. We must obey these commandments. No person and no society can play fast and loose with the 10 Commandments and get by with it. If you break the 10 Commandments, you will find that they will break you.

There are several reasons why these commandments are so important. First of all, God Himself spoke these commandments and selected *these* commandments out of hundreds of other commandments that we find in the Bible. That in itself should indicate their importance. Secondly, these commandments alone were written in stone directly by the finger of God. Thirdly, they alone were laid up in the Ark of the Covenant.

There are several reasons why God gave the 10 Commandments. One reason is that God gave His commandments to give moral guidance to His creatures. How do you know right from wrong? God defines what is right and wrong. In a day of moral relativism, we need to reaffirm that there is an absolute standard of right and wrong. However, these commandments were not given as a way of salvation for either Jews or Gentiles, because “by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified” (Gal. 2:16). The Law reveals God’s righteousness and demands righteousness, but it can’t give righteousness (Gal. 2:21). We are made right with God only by faith in Christ (Rom. 4:5; Eph. 2:8-9).

V.2 lays the foundation for obedience to these commandments, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” God speaks to the nation as a whole, establishing a special relation between Himself and them, requiring that they should be His holy people because He has saved them from bondage. The 10 Commandments are given to people *already* redeemed, not so *that* they might be redeemed. Redemption preceded the call for reverence and obedience. His rule is built on benefits. And the point is that morality must be based upon a saving relationship with God. The only people that are going to live by the 10 Commandments are saved people. I’m not surprised when an unbeliever steals or lies. It’s their nature. But born again Christians have been purchased by the blood of the Lamb of God, and we owe Him our obedience.

There are clearly two main divisions of the 10 Commandments. The first four deal primarily with our relationship to God, and the last 6 deal primarily with our relationship to our fellow man. The fourth commandment actually deals with our relationships to both God and man. We will deal with the first section this morning.

Now let’s look at the first commandment together:

## I. YOU SHALL NOT WORSHIP OTHER GODS

V.3 simply states, “You shall have no other gods before Me.” The Hebrew word translated “before” can mean “beyond Me or in addition to Me.” We are to have no other objects of worship. The God of Israel was not just one more God to add to their list of gods to worship. We are to make the one true God supreme in our hearts and lives. That is why the faithful Jew would quote Dt. 6:4-5 each day, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.” Of course, the main problem rebuked by this commandment would have been polytheism, the worship of many gods, which was the practice of every other nation at this time. Israel had come out of Egypt, a society that worshipped many gods, and no doubt many Israelites had begun to worship many gods as well. But God had clearly demonstrated His power over the gods of Egypt, and He deserved their total & exclusive devotion.

Even today there are millions of people who worship many gods. This is true of those who follow the Hindu religion. They worship many, many gods. We have Hindus right here in our community. This is also true of certain people groups in Africa, Haiti, and other places who follow ancient religions. In polytheism you usually have a god for each important attribute or aspect of daily life. They had a god of travel, a god of the harvest, a fertility goddess, and so forth.

Most people do not worship many gods in our society today, but the commandment has an important application. Anything or anyone who is more important to you than God is another god that you have placed before the Lord. Money, pleasure, fashion, fame, worldly approval, and a score of other things must not take God’s place as supreme in our lives. Some people worship no god at all, but in doing so, they have made themselves to be their own god. They are violating the first commandment.

Now the second commandment goes with the first:

## II. YOU SHALL NOT MAKE AN IDOL

In v.4 God said, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” The first Commandment says that God should be the one and only object of worship: the second commandment tells us how He is to be worshipped, not with carved images, or other visual representations like paintings,<sup>1</sup> but by faith. After all, God does not have a physical body, and no physical form can represent Him. Jesus said in John 4:24, “God is spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.” We are to worship the one true God in the way He prescribes, and not in the way that we choose. This is one reason why Protestant churches have rejected the practice of having images in our houses of worship.<sup>2</sup> Do you have to have incense or visual stimulation in order to *feel* like you are worshipping God? Do you have to look at a picture of Jesus to feel like you are praying to Him? If so, then you could be violating the spirit of the second commandment.

Soon after God gave the 10 Commandments, Israel supposedly kept the first commandment, while violating the second. When they made & worshipped the golden calf, it was supposedly a

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<sup>1</sup> God not only prohibited carved images, but “any likeness.” That Hebrew word refers to an image, likeness, or representation of something. There were many painting on walls in Egypt in their temples and elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> However, there is no necessity to believe that sculpture and painting of every kind are condemned here, but only those used in association with worship.

representation of the one true God. They said, “This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!” (32:4). Then Aaron even used God’s name YHWH in reference to the worship of the calf (32:5). But it was clearly a graven image. They broke the second command.<sup>3</sup>

In v.5 God prohibited two common means of worshipping other gods, “you shall not bow down to them nor serve them.” Bowing down is an expression of worship that is to be reserved for God alone. If the Pope or Billy Graham were to walk into this room, I would not bow down to them. People also worship other gods by serving or working for them. Millions of people give countless hours of their time serving other deities, working in other religions. Such service to false gods is prohibited.

Some people may feel that this passage does not apply to us today. They say we do not have idols today. Well, it certainly did apply to Christians in the early New Testament church. Polytheism was still very common. The apostle John warned, “Little children keep yourselves from idols” (1 Jn. 5:21). But even in our society there is relevance. Col. 3:5 tells us that “...covetousness... is idolatry.” In other words, if you love money, then money has become an idol in your life. Jesus said in Mt. 6:24, “No one can serve two masters.... You cannot serve God and mammon [riches].” So you see, there is more to idolatry than just carved images. Anything that you give yourself to, that is the supreme object of your devotion, becomes your “god.” An idol is anything that takes the place of God, anything for which we make sacrifices. Adrian Rogers said, “Anything you love more, fear more, or serve more than God is an idol.” For example, many people do not worship Bacchus, the god of wine and revelry, but they worship alcohol just the same. Many people do not worship Aphrodite, the goddess of sex, but sexual immorality is an idol, for it is more important to them than God!

Listen, you can create your own god in your mind, and even call him God or Jesus, and be an idolater. Before a person creates a physical image, they must first create an image in their mind. Some TV preachers have created their own god, who exists to make us healthy and prosperous, and who does not punish sin. That is not the God of the Bible. That is a different god. The god of Mohamed is clearly different from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. So I do not bow down 5 times/day and worship the god of Mohamed. Watch out for false gods that have been created by men, even if they refer to their god by the same name as the true God.

B. The Reason – In v.5 God gives one reason why we should not worship other gods, or make idols. He says, “For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God....” He allows of no rival to our heart’s affection. He will not tolerate competition (Zech. 1:14; 8:2).

We are created in the image of God, and this principle of righteous jealousy has been instilled in us. Marriage illustrates our relationship with God. God created one woman for one man. He did not create Eve, Jane, Sallie, & Sue. He created one woman for one man. And if you become intimately involved with someone other than your spouse, they will burn with jealousy, and they have a right to be jealous. Even so, God becomes jealous when anything is more important to us than God. In James 4:4-6 we see that if we love the world more than God, we have become spiritual adulterers, and the Spirit of God will burn with jealousy.

How does God feel toward you? Is He #1 in your life? Do you love anyone or anything more than Him? Are you more devoted to your job, or your sports team, than you are to God? Listen, don’t make God jealous by having any other god before Him, or by making any god take His place. And there are other good reasons for this, for notice with me:

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<sup>3</sup> Actually, they broke the first as well, because the golden calf represented a different god from the one true God as He had revealed Himself.

C. The Incentives for Obedience – God gives both a positive and negative incentive for being faithful to Him, and loving Him supremely:

1. The Warning of Bad Consequences – He said in v.5 that He visits “the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me.” God warns that sin can have lasting consequences in your household to the third and fourth generation. You see, we are what we are by birth, and by environment. If you choose to drink to the point of frequent drunkenness, there’s a good chance you will become an alcoholic. And the inclination toward alcoholism can be passed down to the third and fourth generation through your genes, as well as by your example. Sir, if you rebel against God, you may think you are hurting no one but yourself, but you are wrong. There’s a good chance that your children & grandchildren will follow in your footsteps.

I know of someone in Georgia who was the daughter of an alcoholic. Her parents divorced. She spent a lot of time with a friend’s family, went to church, and was born again. She turned out quite well. However, one of her two children has a serious drug & alcohol problem, in spite of the fact that he was raised in church. That alcoholic father also had a son. He grew up despising his father. Yet, by the time he was an adult, he became like him in many ways. He developed an alcohol problem. He even became worse than his father. He got involved in a homosexual lifestyle, contracted AIDS, and died before he reached the age of 35. When drunkenness or any other sin becomes your god, watch out! God warns that He will visit “the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me.”

Ah, but let me hold out some hope to those who are caught up in generational sin. I said that we are what we are by birth, and by environment. If you confess the sins of your fathers, and if you are born again by faith in Christ, and if you walk with godly people, you can change. And you can reverse the course of several generations that will follow you.

I have more good news. Notice also:

2. The Assurance of the Mercy of God – In v.6 God shows “mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.” Though we are sinners, and though we fail, remember that God is a God of mercy. If you love Him, and demonstrate your love by obedience, He will extend mercy and pardon for sin, instead of wrath.

So God gives strong reasons why you should love & worship Him alone. Don’t allow any other god to come into your life. Now let’s move on to the third commandment:

### III. YOU SHALL NOT TAKE THE LORD’S NAME IN VAIN

A. The Meaning – In v.7 God said, “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.” God puts quite a bit of emphasis on His name. A person’s name stands for their character and reputation. If God is the greatest being in the universe, then His name is the greatest name and must be honored. To take God’s name in vain means much more than not speaking a cuss word with His name. The words “in vain” indicates that God’s name is not to be spoken irreverently, or needlessly. Don’t say “God” or “Jesus” or “Lord” flippantly, or without a good purpose. Remember, Jesus taught us to pray, “Hallowed by Thy name.” We should always regard the names of our God as above all names, and worthy of special honor and reverence. We should praise His name, not take it in vain.

Have you noticed how often God’s name is taken in vain? If you turn on your TV to a sitcom or movie, you will probably hear God’s name taken in vain several times. When you’re out

with the general public, you will hear God's name taken in vain. I do not like it when people take God's name in vain. I wouldn't want my name spoken every time someone became angry. Don't speak my name in vain either!

When I was coaching soccer, one time I noticed that during practice a number on my team kept saying "God" or "Jesus" in vain. I got tired of hearing it so I stopped practice and said, "Since you seem to want to talk about God so much, let's stop and have church right here on the field." That took care of that problem for a good while! Maybe you can try that at work some time.

B. The Warning – Once again, God warns that there would be serious consequences for taking God's name in vain. He said in the last of v.7, "for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain." Those who take God's name in vain will bear the consequences unless they receive forgiveness from the Lord.

So from now on, be very careful how you use God's name. Make sure you only speak His name with a good purpose, either to praise Him, or to tell others about Him.<sup>4</sup>

Now let's move to the fourth commandment:

#### IV. YOU SHALL KEEP THE SABBATH DAY HOLY

In v.8 God said, "Remember the Sabbath day...."<sup>5</sup> That means more than just making a mental note that it is the Sabbath. To illustrate, what does it mean to remember your wife's birthday? What does it mean to remember your anniversary? It means to remember it so that you do something about it! Biblical remembrance requires action. Even so, God commanded that the Sabbath day was to be remembered in such a way that we observe it properly. For example, one reason Israel was commanded to remember the Sabbath day was "to keep it holy" (v.8b). To make the day "holy" is to set the day apart from other days as special. It is to be dedicated to God. It was not to be treated as common, just another day of the week.

In v.11 we see an example of the fact that the commandments of God are not arbitrary. They are rooted in the nature of God, or the actions of God. God said, "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it." God rested, so we should rest.

Even though the Sabbath command is not repeated in the New Testament epistles, and even though it was a covenant command specifically for Israel, I do believe there are some applications we should make for today. There is evidence that the early church made a transition from worshipping on the Jewish Sabbath to worshipping on the first day of the week, the day the Jesus rose from the dead (John 20:19, 26; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor.16:2). So Sunday has become a special day of worship for believers. I believe it is good to keep Sunday as a day dedicated primarily to the worship of the Lord and for rest. Many people today treat Sunday as just another day, a common day. But it is a good practice to make it holy unto the Lord.

Another application is found in v.9. God said, "Six days you shall labor and do all your work." It doesn't say, "Work one day and rest six days." We are not to be lazy, but we are to work. The Jews had a work ethic, partly from this commandment. They have prospered as a people, partly because of their work ethic. The work ethic is repeated in the New Testament. In I Thess. 4:11 & 2

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<sup>4</sup> Another application of this commandment is this: If you take the name of God, i.e. call yourself a Christian, then be sure to live a godly life lest you profane His name by your life. Ezek. 36:23 says, "I will sanctify My great name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst [by your ungodliness]."

<sup>5</sup> This and the fifth commandment are the only two positive commands among the ten.

Thess. 3:10 Paul commands Christians to work, and if they refuse to work, then they should not receive any food assistance. [Skip if short on time].

One of the more important applications is found in v.10. God said, “but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work...” Even God rested from His labor, and so we should follow His lead, and rest one day/week. Jesus said that “the Sabbath was made for man” (Mk. 2:27), i.e. for man’s benefit. Have you noticed that our bodies function best on regular cycles? For example, you should establish a regular sleep cycle. You will sleep better if you go to bed about the same time each night, and get up about the same time. Another cycle that is beneficial is to rest one day out of seven. In fact, Ex. 23:12 says, “Six days you shall do your work, and on the seventh day you shall rest, that your ox and your donkey may rest, and the son of your female servant and the stranger may be refreshed<sup>6</sup>.” We need one day a week to rest, to heal, to recharge. Stress is bad for your health, and during restful sleep, and during a weekly rest day, our bodies can repair the damage caused by stress. Otherwise, we will experience “burn out” or a heart attack. Your immune system will be weakened, and you will be more susceptible to sickness. What a wonderful gift from God that He should give us a day of rest each week. Don’t neglect God’s gift.

Notice in the last of v.10 that employers & others in authority are to give their workers a day of rest each week. I doubt if the Egyptians gave the Israelites a day of rest. So this means that parents are not to overwork their children. Children are not to overwork their parents! Even a person’s work animal was to be given a day of rest.

Conclusion: One reason God gave these commandments is to give us moral principles to live by. Is God #1 in your life? Is He the object of your supreme devotion? Are you devoted to any other god that you or others have created? Are you careful not to take God’s name in vain? Are you following the principles of work, rest, & worship found in the fourth commandment? God deserves our obedience. If you have been violating any of these principles I encourage you to repent of that sin, receive forgiveness from the Lord, and rededicate your life to the Lord. Be careful to obey the Lord who has saved you.

A second reason God gave His Law was to help us realize that we are sinners. The 10 Commandments were not given as a means of salvation, but as a means of showing us that we *need* salvation. None of us can fully keep the 10 Commandments. In this role the Law is like a mirror (James 1:22-25). A mirror does not make your face dirty; it simply reveals the dirt that is there. Have you noticed that nearly all the commandments are couched in the negative form of prohibition? That is because they presuppose the existence of sin and evil desires in the human heart. So the Law strips us of our self-righteousness. And since we are sinners, we need a Savior. The Law condemns us, but the sacrificial system of the Law points to a coming Savior, whose name was Jesus.

If you are not yet a Christian, will you acknowledge that you are a sinner? Will you turn to Christ today, who died on the cross in our place? He paid the penalty of sin. You can be forgiven. Turn to Christ today! Don’t let your unsaved friends keep you from coming to Christ. God should be more important to you than your friends. Come to Christ while you have the opportunity.

Sources: Ronald A. Beers, ed., *Life Application Study Bible* (Tyndale House & Zondervan, 1991); Peter Enns, *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); Stephen Felker, [\*Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible\*](#) (Col. Hgts, VA: Published by Author), 2007; C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old*

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<sup>6</sup> Literally, “to take breath, refresh oneself.” The word is used in 2 Sam. 16:14, “Now the king and all the people who were with him became weary; so they refreshed themselves there.”

*Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978 reprint); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1981); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972); Warren Wiersbe, *Be Delivered: Exodus* (Colorado Spring: Chariot Victor Books Publishing, 1998). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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