

Prayer

Gracious Lord, we worship You; come and pour out Your Spirit on us again and again. Convict us of our sins, and empower us to be a people on the march for righteousness and justice. Strengthen us in faith, in love, and in hope; and may the gifts of Spirit enable us to do Your will. May Your Kingdom come, gracious Lord: AMEN!

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Find a few moments to praise God, and if possible, do this out loud! As you bless the Lord, this can create a sense of liberty in your spirit

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Christian speakers.** *Pray for those Christian speakers who have influenced you. Pray for their spiritual health and well-being.*
- *Pray about waste, and attitudes towards this in your country*
- *Give thanks for laughter and all this means*

Meditation

When everything happens all around me too fast,
Lord Jesus, slow me down.

When everything all around is in chaotic disorder,
Lord Jesus, bring me calm repose.

When everything I come across is incomprehensible,
Lord Jesus, grant me understanding:

When everything I try to do seems dominated by others,
Lord Jesus, give me humility and perspective:

When everything appears to be drifting out of control
Lord Jesus, hold me close, in spirit.

For You are the Master of all, the great organiser,
And the accurate timekeeper of all history!
So we place our trust in You, in confidence.

Bible passage - Exodus 20:1-6

¹ Then God spoke all these words: ² I am the LORD your God, who brought you from the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery; ³ you shall have no other gods before Me.

⁴ You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything in heaven above, or on the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, observing the sins of the fathers within the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing faithful love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Bible Study

Review

Exodus 20 contains the Ten Commandments (20:1-17), one of the most influential texts of the Old Testament. They are the revelation of God's moral law and indeed, a revelation of God Himself. They also introduce the great swathe of moral, practical and religious law recorded in the Old Testament, largely in Exodus and Leviticus. The Ten Commandments are also found in Deuteronomy 5:1-21, together with many other laws, as part of Moses' personal testimony to Israel before their entry into the Promised Land.

We might think that the Ten Commandments are a simple list of God's commands, but when we read the text, we find that it is not as simple as that! According to Christian tradition, our passage contains the first two commandments, arranged like this. Verses 1 and 2 contain an introduction, verse 3 contains the first commandment using the words '*You shall ...*' and it requires the Christian to honour God (20:3). The second forbids the making of idols (20:4-6).

This seems straightforward, but some Jewish traditions regard the whole of this passage (20:1-6) as being the first commandment! Jews, of course, emphasise the importance of God's self revelation; '*I am the Lord ...*' (20:2), and regard this as the same as a 'command'. Viewed like this, the ban on making idols (20:4) is just part of what it means to believe in One God (20:3); He is exclusive, and no other gods exist or are tolerated. Then, to compensate for the loss of one commandment in the early part of the list, this tradition splits the last law about covetousness (20:17) into two, to make up the ten (verse 17 contains two actual commands, '*you shall not ...*')! Yet other traditions list verse 2 as the first commandment, and this suggests that '*I am the Lord your God*' is a command of God underpinning everything else!

All these things are debatable and very important, and we must deal with God's words as they are given to us. However, we will start by accepting the traditional interpretation, and keep a watchful eye on what these words all say about the nature of the God who gave them.

The first command of God is fundamental to our faith. It is summarised in verse 3, '*You shall have no other gods before Me*'. However, it may be best if we think of the first command as a combination of this and the words found in verse 2, '*I am the Lord your God ...*'. Together, these words stand out as a definition of God. He has been revealed as 'I am' to both the forefathers (Gen 15:7 etc.) and to Moses (Exodus 3:6), and He is the one and only God who made the world. Verse 2 also describes God as a God of action; '*who brought you out of the land of Egypt*'. The work of God is that of salvation and redemption, for this is how God brought His people out of Egypt (6:6, 13:13f. 15:13).

The first commandment clearly emphasises that God is unique; He cannot be replaced, and he tolerates no competition! This is picked up in the next command (20:4-6), which forbids the making of idols or any object that might take the place of God. The second command comes with a distinct threat, for God saw that it would be hard for His people to retain this distinct faith at a time when people generally believed in a large range of gods, thought to be responsible for every imaginable aspect of life. We will look at this later on in the study, but it is worth noting that the threat come with a marvellous promise, that God will keep faith with those who uphold this commandment, virtually, forever!

People still debate these laws, and especially the uniqueness of God. But for the Christian today, the first Commandment is a powerful reminder that there is only One God. There can only be one Creator of the world and One Redeemer of humanity, and we are unashamed to declare it. Further, we do indeed have one unique 'image' of God in the person of Jesus Christ, but he is God Himself. We need no other 'image'.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The numbering of the Ten Commandments
- The great divine disclosure (20:1,2)
- The uniqueness of God (20:3)
- What do we mean by idols, images, and a jealous God (20:4,5)
- The meaning of 'generational sin' (20:5,6)

Notes on the text and translation

V3 'you shall have no other gods before me'

The Hebrew end to this verse says literally '... no other gods against my face'. The word for 'against' can mean a variety of things, for example, 'over, concerning, on account of, beside, in addition, upon, by, etc.' according to the sentence in which it is set. See study for a fuller discussion of the meaning of this here.

V5 'you shall not bow down to them or serve them ...'

Many versions translate this '... bow down to them or worship them'. Worship and service are frequently the same thing in the Bible, but here, the basic Hebrew word is 'avad' which is rooted in the idea of working. However, the form of the verb implies 'being led to work for ...' something; in this case, the idol, and this could imply worship. The verse already contains the idea of worship in the phrase 'bow down', however, so I have decided to keep the word 'serve' in order to keep the basic idea of working for the idol.

V5 'observing the sins of the father within the children ...'

There are a number of versions of this, either, 'visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children', or 'punishing children for the sins of the fathers ...'. The Hebrew verb I have translated 'observing' (Hebrew 'paqad') usually has the meaning of 'attending to, visiting, tracking', and it makes more sense to me to see this passage not as some kind of divine condemnation, but of divine observation (see study).

V6 'but showing faithful love ...'

The two words in this clause are interesting. The Hebrew says, literally, 'but doing faithful love ...', where faithful love is the Hebrew word 'cheseth' that refers to the quality of love God shows within His covenant. The Old Testament often speaks of 'doing faithful love' as if this kind of love is something that must be put into action. However, because we do not speak about love in this way, we have to change this to 'showing faithful love' so that it makes sense in English.

Going Deeper

The numbering of the Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments are commonly regarded by most people as simple, just ten statements from God, in the form of 'you shall ...' or 'you shall not ...' (as in 20:4 within today's reading). This is not true, however, and it is not at all certain how the commandments should be numbered. If you read through the entire text of Exodus 20:1-17, you will find 'you shall ...' or 'you shall not ...' written ten times, not coinciding with the commandments as we understand them. The commandments about the Sabbath (20:8-11) and honouring parents (20:12) do not begin with these words, for example. In addition, what is usually called the second commandment (20:4-6) and the tenth commandments (20:17) have two such commands within them!

Some people call the Ten Commandments the 'Decalogue', meaning the 'Ten Words' (in Latin), and this enables scholars to avoid the implication that each of these great statements by God must be in the form of a command. The truth is that the expression 'Ten Commandments' is only used in three places in the Bible (Exodus 34:28, Deuteronomy 4:13, and 10:4), but the name has become adopted by the church. Jesus Himself referred to them simply as the 'Commandments' (see Matt 5:19, 19:17, Mark 10:19, John 15:10), and regarded them as an essential explanation of God's moral law. In saying this, Jesus was radically different from other rabbis of his day, many of whom would have taken the standard line of the day, which said that the Ten Commandments should not be given greater prominence than the other laws (e.g. of sacrifice and ritual). The Ten Commandments have come down to us as a standard expression of God's moral law because of Jesus' clear teaching about them, and His elevation of them above the other laws of the Old Testament.

In this study and those coming, I will use the standard numbering of the Ten Commandments as follows:

1. A call to believe in the uniqueness of God (20:2,3)
2. A ban on idols and images (20:4-6)
3. A ban on wrongful use of God's name (20:7)
4. A call to remember the Sabbath (20:8-11)
5. A call to honour parents (20:12)
6. No murder (20:13)
7. No adultery (20:14)
8. No stealing (20:15)
9. No false witness (20:16)

10. No covetousness (20:17)

The great divine disclosure (20:1,2)

Yesterday, we saw that chapter 19 comes to an abrupt end, as if uninterrupted by chapter 20. Perhaps God does have to interrupt the affairs of this world if He is to be heard above the noise of our world and all its activity! What God said was this; *'I am the Lord your God ...'*. Now, the name of God, *'the Lord'*, is used a great deal in the Bible, but there are only a few places where God Himself says *'I am the Lord'* using the sacred name 'JHWH', which is loosely translatable as 'I AM' and usually translated 'Lord' (written in most translations of the Bible in small capitals). In the past, God had revealed His sacred name to Abraham in one of his great visions (Gen 15:7), and also to Moses in the burning bush (3:6). It is therefore unsurprising that at this critical moment, the Lord God revealed Himself in the same way, and all of these instances are special and unique moments of divine revelation. The great theme of divine disclosure is continued in the New Testament with Jesus' own divine self disclosure; *'I am the Way'* (John 14:6), *'I am the gate'* (John 10:7,9), etc.

This, however, is the first occasion in the Bible where the Lord God discloses Himself formally as the one who saves His people. There are a number of ancient documents indicating that when a great King introduced Himself, he made a formal declaration of his deeds and claim to rule. This is the divine equivalent of such a gesture, yet it surpasses all human imitations. As far as I am aware, there are no other ancient stories of whole subservient peoples being liberated 'en mass' from dominant superpowers such as Egypt. The tales of escape that exist in Greek mythology are largely tragic, and certainly not triumphant. We cannot escape the conclusion that the historic liberation of Israel from Egypt (20:2) is indeed unique evidence of God's power and authority in this world, and the Exodus is an event on the 'world' stage, and not just a private enterprise on behalf of Israel by God; as the Bible consistently declares.

The uniqueness of God (20:3)

At face value, verse 3 makes a plain case for the worship and service of God alone, with no toleration of any other gods. What we must remember is that in ancient times, all the peoples amongst whom the Israelites lived had their own gods, and the popular thought that transcended national boundaries considered there to be numerous 'gods' affecting the workings of the world. Each nation had its 'god', and some would be content with the idea that Israel had its own god, distinctive from those attached to other nations. God was therefore involved in a monumental battle to persuade His own people to put aside this general 'mythology' and accept Him as the only true God.

It is possible to see the evidence of this battle in the words of verse 3. In the translation notes (see above), I have indicated that the phrase 'before me' has a number of possible meanings, perhaps 'besides me' or 'alongside me'. In whatever way we translate this, however, the phrase reads like the formal banishment of other gods from the Lord's presence, indeed, from 'before my face' (see notes above). It is easy for us to look back at ancient times and discuss what this may have meant to people in past times, but people today have many ways of replacing God with other things. These may not be called 'gods' but everything from pastimes such as golf to addictive attachment to music can be human substitutes for the one true God; almost anything in the world can be used as a substitute for God when it is allowed to dominate life. The church today is in a fierce battle to proclaim the uniqueness of God, the Creator and Redeemer of the World, and it cannot take for granted that people know what the first of the Ten Commandments means.

What do we mean by idols, images, and a jealous God (20:4,5)

There is considerable logic in connecting the first and the second commandments, as the Jews do, and both the first and the second commandment (in our numbering) are summarised in verse 5; *'for I the Lord am a jealous God'*. Yet despite this command, there are plenty of Old Testament stories telling of Israel attempting to worship other gods alongside the Lord. They worshipped the fertility god 'Ba'al' when it suited them, alongside their worship of the Lord (archaeologists have found altars to both of them, side by side). This, for example, was exactly what Elijah fought against when he challenged the prophets of 'Ba'al' on Mount Carmel (1King 18). When we read later stories such as these, we might well ask why God's people failed to keep the commandments. Surely, they knew what they were doing was wrong?

Unfortunately, we must all confess that possessing the truth and acting upon it are two different things. The whole of the Old Testament is full of references to household idols kept by Israelites (e.g. Genesis 31:19, Judges 18:4) and also to the worship of various foreign gods (1 Kings 11:5f.) and Ba'als (Hosea 2:16, Jeremiah 11:13). Most of these were represented by carved or manufactured idols and images, often cast metal objects. However, it was not just the objects themselves that were objectionable to God, but the practices that went with them; burning children in fire to Molech (2 Kings 23:10), sexual promiscuity (Hosea 1-3) and much more; objects and images were the 'tip of the iceberg'.

It seems that God's people only began to take the Ten Commandments seriously eight hundred years later, after the Exile (587BC). The writer of Kings says of those who caused the nations of Israel and Judah to fall,

'they were stubborn, as their ancestors had been ... who did not believe in the name of the Lord their God. They despised His statutes ... and went after false idols and became false themselves by following the nations around them.' (2 Kings 17:14-15). Israel had the commandments, but they learned the hard way that they had to believe them and act upon them.

The meaning of 'generational sin' (20:5,6)

The last part of our text today has given people cause for concern for many years, often because of the way the text has been translated. In verse 5, the jealousy of God is said to 'track' the sins of the fathers within children to the *'third and the fourth generation'*. I have not translated this passage in this way lightly (see notes above), because the traditional version reads *'punishing (or visiting) the sins of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation ...'*. This suggests that God is vindictive, and purposefully punishes a father's sins upon his children and his children's children etc. The idea is unhelpful because without a clearer understanding of how sin is released by Christ, it gives the impression that people are necessarily bound in sin not by themselves, but by their parents.

It is best to look carefully at this text to deal with this misperception, and I have come to these conclusions. Firstly, in this passage, the people who offend God are those who 'hate' him (20:5), by which Scripture means those who knowingly contravene the second Commandment and worship other gods. Secondly, it is a matter of fact that what people do will affect their offspring, and the sin of rebellion against God will frequently have consequences for future generations. Nevertheless, I believe that God watches this with concern. The Hebrew word for 'punishing' does not always mean what we think today. It suggests tracking and observing, perhaps even watching or attending to (see notes above). In the fullness of time, Jeremiah would prophecy that children would no longer suffer for the sins of their parents (Jer 31:29,30), and in Jesus, He has made it possible for all who receive Him to be set free from slavery to sin. In Old Testament times, God was watching and planning for the day when the awful consequences of 'the Fall' would be overcome by Jesus, and in this light, the Ten Commandments reflect the truth of the situation at that time, with more than a hint of God's redeeming love.

The last verse of our passage is the final comment of God on the second command. Here, in contrast to the awful consequences of sin to the third and the fourth generation, God promises His faithful covenant love to the *'thousandth generation'* of those who remain faithful to Him! Some versions of the Bible say *'thousands'* instead of *'thousandth generation'* through a misunderstanding of the Hebrew idiom (word use) employed here. The fact is that this is an eternal promise of God. Even if we reckon that the Creation in Genesis can be dated around 5,000 BC and each generation lasts forty years (a typical Biblical estimation), then only 175 *'generations'* have yet passed throughout Biblical history so far! There is a long way to go before we reach the thousandth!

Application

This important passage of Scripture bids us to accept the nature of God as unique and exclusive, and as active in this world for salvation. He is the God who brought Israel out of slavery (20:2) and thereby showed Himself in this great revelation at Sinai. He is the God who went on with complete consistency to send Jesus into the world bringing salvation for all who believe. We do not choose our God, He chooses us. In addition to this, we must make sure that we do not succumb to the earthly temptation to replace God in any way. No earthly object or worldly image can take His place, for that would be idolatry.

This sounds simple, but I can assure you it is not easy. I have met many Christians who have given up reading the Old Testament because they are unwilling to try and deal with its apparent difficulties, and they say that the *'God of the Old Testament is not the God of the New!'* Frankly, such a view is contrary to the Ten Commandments. God is one, and God has always been the same. He does not change from one *'Testament'* to the other! Jesus Himself confirmed that the Ten Commandments are a part of God's primary revelation in Scripture, and we ignore the history of God's dealing with His people at our peril.

Idolatry is not something of the past. I have met many Christians who have confessed that their lives are indeed dominated by one or other habit, pastime or attitude, and although these things are not wrong in themselves, they have become, or sometimes have the potential to become like little *'gods'*, which control their lives. All these problems can be dealt with properly under the redeeming love of Christ, but there is no denying that such idols can be a significant problem even today. It is surprising what comes to the fore when the true barriers to faith are revealed!

This scripture also tells us that we receive an immeasurable blessing for our dedication to the Lord. It is important for us to remember this, for if we will allow him, Satan will quickly take away from us any remembrance of God's blessings. It may be wise to make sure we recall the whole Ten Commandments, including the wonderful blessing of God, which says that He will love us with an unfailing love!

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group whether you have ever learned the Ten Commandments, and whether there is any value in doing this now.
2. What idols prevent us from worshipping and serving the Lord today, and how do they affect the church?
3. How does rejection of God affect people and how does this affect their children? How does Christ overcome these barriers to faith?

Topics covered by this text

- *The commandments of God*
- *The exclusive and unique nature of God*
- *The sin of idolatry*

Personal comments by author

The Ten Commandments are an important part of the Christian faith, and children in church should learn them, in my opinion. It is not fashionable to learn Scripture by rote, but the evidence is that people are truly blessed where this is done. There are ways of making this interesting and reducing the sense of failure for those who find it hard to remember things (which I always did). I believe that in days when we cannot assume that children will learn anything relevant about Christian faith anywhere except in church, we have a duty to help the children of Christian families learn about the heritage of their faith.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *For a period of several days, try to learn the Ten Commandments in some simplified form, perhaps as listed above, or by using the Biblical text. Go over the list of Commands several times in the morning and the evening without giving yourself a time limit, and see whether you are able to conquer this task!*
- *Pray for any people you know who you believe may be adversely affected by the influence of their parents or previous generations. Their problems are not their fault, but they still need our understanding and loving prayers.*

Final Prayer

Help us, Lord Jesus, to pray for other people with care and regularity. Teach us how to pray for people who are in need; for those who have earthly needs and those who have spiritual needs. Give us a heart for prayer and true desire to see Your Kingdom come in our midst. May we be instruments of Your compassion and care; AMEN
