

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance Church. This morning I'm going to begin a new preaching series entitled *The Ten Words*—you may know these *Words* by a different name—the Ten Commandments.

Last Fall we spent 10 weeks studying the Book of Exodus; Exodus tells a part of Israel's story. Long before Israel was a nation, they were a large family who immigrated to Egypt in order to escape famine. 400 years later, this family had become a nation within a nation. As Israel grew in numbers, Pharaoh perceived Israel to be a threat and he enslaved them. Exodus tells the story of God rescuing Israel, leading them from slavery to freedom.

The Book of Exodus it is written in the form of history, but it is a theological history. Exodus tells us about the history of Israel, but more specifically, it tells the history of Israel's relationship with the One True God.¹ As we read Exodus, we are introduced to a God who is in relationship with people, a God who is good, a God who saves, a God who loves. Our situation might be radically different from ancient Israel, but God has not changed—as we turn to Him we find Someone we can trust our lives with.

This morning, we're going to begin where we left off last Fall. In Exodus 19, Moses hiked up Mount Sinai to speak with God; Exodus 20 contains the words God spoke, and it's to these words that we now turn. All of the words will be on the screen behind me, I'm going to read them aloud, and when I indicate, please read along with me.

Mark: *“And God spoke all these words: ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*

All: *You shall have no other gods before me.*

Mark: *You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

All: *You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.*

Mark: *Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

All: *Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.*

Mark: *You shall not murder.*

¹ Tremper Longman III, *How To Read Exodus*, 20.

All: *You shall not commit adultery.*

Mark: *You shall not steal.*

All: *You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.*

Mark: *You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.”*

Beginning next Sunday, we're going to focus on one Word per week, until we have studied all Ten. This week, I want to set the stage for our preaching series by answering four foundational questions. Here's the first:

1. What is the purpose of the Ten Words? It seems a simple enough question. Ten commandments, ten rules—isn't this about regulating behaviour? Well...“no,” and “yes.” God's purpose in speaking these Ten Words can be seen in His introduction to them—take a look at vs. 2. *“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”*

What do we think is going on in this introduction? Is God saying something like, *“I saved you, I own you, and you'd better do what I say?”* No, before speaking the Ten Words, God reminds Israel who He is and who they are. *I am the Lord your God, the One who rescued you from slavery, and you are a freed people.* Freedom—they had dreamed about it, prayed for it, and it God had made it a reality. In fact, God was so committed to their freedom, He gave them Ten Words that would protect their newfound freedom.

I want to pause for a moment to let that thought sink in. It might sound strange to your ears; it did to mine when I first heard them. Am I simply making God's “rules” sound better than they are? How do these Ten Words—words that regulate behaviour—protect freedom?

illus: Let me offer an analogy. Soccer is a beautiful game, one that I know, love, and have been involved in as both a player and a coach. Soccer is a game of power, finesse, speed, skill, and split-second decision-making. It's also a game that requires teamwork—11 players a side, working together as one.

Like most games, there's a lot of rules in soccer. The sidelines and end lines let the players know when the ball is in play, or out of bounds. Before the game begins, each team knows exactly how long the game will last for, and, how many players are allowed on the pitch. There is a rule about what constitutes being “offside,” and there are many rules about what constitutes a foul. And on the list of rules goes.

I want you to imagine the game of soccer being played without any of the rules I've just mentioned. What would happen if there were no sidelines or end lines? What would happen if one team put 20 players on the pitch, and the other team could only field 11 players? Can you imagine how many injuries might result if the referee stopped calling fouls? In fact, if there are no rules, who needs a referee?

Here's the question: *Are the players more free to enjoy the game with, or without, the rules?* Ask a player who's played for a long time and they will tell, without rules there's only chaos—no one's safe, and no one can enjoy the game.

These *Ten Words* aren't arbitrary and they don't appear out of thin air—they say something important about who God is and about who we are.² *Do not commit adultery*. We might ask, “*why not?*” and the answer is: God does not commit adultery. God is utterly faithful—He has committed to love us and He will never run out on us. When we commit adultery, we do more than break our vows, we break lives. Darrell Johnson writes, “to ignore or go against [God's] Law is to go against the grain of our essential nature. When we violate [God's] good Law, we violate reality. We violate ourselves.”³

Israel had just left slavery behind, and God didn't want them to wander into another form of captivity. Freedom is both a gift and a choice; as I said a few weeks ago, sin enslaves, corrupts, and ultimately destroys. The Ten Words are boundaries—no question about that—but they are boundaries that protect our freedom to enjoy God and one another. Psalm 119:32 says, “*I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.*”

Let's move on to question 2.

2. Do the Ten Words lay out the path to earn God's love?

Quite simply, the answer is “no” but it all boils down to how we see God. Is He a Contract God or a Covenant God?

By its very nature, a contract is conditional while a covenant is not. When I go to a coffee shop to order a drink, I'm entering into a

contractual relationship—I promise to pay, *if* they promise to bring me the drink. *If* they don't bring me a drink, I don't pay; *if* I don't pay, they won't bring me a drink—that's how a contract works. A covenant is very different.

A covenant is void of all the *ifs*. There are no *ifs*—no conditions—in God's love. He doesn't say, “*If you are faithful, obedient, and holy, I will love you*”—that's contract language and He is not a Contract God. God committed to humanity, long before humanity committed to Him. When God the Son took on our flesh and blood, He bound Himself to the human race—in His life, death, and resurrection He demonstrated the truth that God is for us, not against us.

Through Jesus, provision has been made for our rescue. We don't have to achieve a standard to earn His love; the forgiveness He offers is freely given. Now that's not to say that God expects nothing of us, as though He saves us and then sends us on our way saying, “*Go do whatever you'd like.*” No, as I said earlier, when we contravene God's Words we go against the essential grain of reality.

James Torrance writes, “Love always brings its obligations. But the obligations of love are not the conditions of love.”⁴ Obedience isn't the price tag for securing God's love—it's not our part in a two-sided contract—but there is a freedom that only obedience brings. As we follow God's Words, we experience life as God intended it; only then can we be who God intended.

² Darrell Johnson, *Jealous For Our Freedom*, 5, 6.

³ Johnson, 5.

⁴ Ibid.

Covenant always comes before Command—Grace before Obedience. The Ten Words are not the **way into** relationship with God, but they do reveal the **way on**—they are God’s path to our freedom.

Let’s move on to question 3.

3. Is there a structure to the Ten Words? Before I answer that question, let me take a moment to explain why I keep referring to the *Ten Words* instead of the Ten Commandments.

Exodus 20:1 says, “*And God spoke all these words*;” it doesn’t mention “commandments”? In fact, the Old Testament never refers to the Ten Commandments as “commandments” even though it is translated that way in most of our English Bibles. A more literal translation from Hebrew to English results in the “Ten Words”.

A classic example can be found in Exodus 34:28. Our translations read, “*Moses was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments.*” In the original Hebrew, the same word is repeated: “davar.” A more literal translation of vs. 28 produces the following, “*Moses was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant—the Ten Words.*”⁵

In Moses’ final sermon, recorded in Deuteronomy, he repeated the Ten Words and reminded the people that after speaking the Ten Words God “added nothing more.”⁶ There’s a sense in which each word stands on its own, and, taken as a whole, there is a completeness to these words.

The first three *Words* have to do with humanity’s relationship to God, the fourth *Word* has to do with living a balanced life, and *Words* five through ten address our relationship with fellow human beings. When we get these relationships right, we experience peace and joy; when we get them wrong, we experience frustration and disappointment.

You may have noticed that each of Ten Words is framed in the negative—you shall not—but each negative command contains the positive as well. For example, when God says, “You shall not murder,” He also has the positive in mind. *Instead of wrongfully taking life, be a life giver, a life keeper; treat your life and the life of others with honour and respect; live, work, and speak in such a way that life—yours and others—will flourish.* As we make our way through the Ten Words, we will be looking at both the negative and positive aspects.

Let me make one last comment before I move on to the fourth question. The Ten Words are about a lot more than regulating behaviour—Word #1&10 provide the clues. Word’s 2-9 are easily evaluated by looking at external data:

⁵ Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen, *The Decalogue through the Centuries*

⁶ Deuteronomy 5:22.

- is my house filled with idols?
- am I speaking unworthily about the Lord?
- have I murdered?
- stolen?
- or been caught in a lie?

But Words 1 and 10 are primarily matters of the heart: *am I giving God my supreme allegiance? Am I burning with envy over what my neighbour has?* God is not merely interested in correcting our behaviour; He wants to renovate our heart.

Let's move on to the fourth question.

4. Who are the Ten Words for? I want to offer two final thoughts and then I'll wrap things up.

(a) I've talked with many Christians, new to Bible reading, who begin reading in Genesis and by the time they get to Leviticus, they are dazed and confused. In Leviticus we encounter laws of every kind: family law, property law, civil law, dietary law, purification law, and ritual laws. *What do New Testament people do with Old Testament laws? Do we keep them or ignore them?* I want to suggest that the way forward is somewhere in between.

The Old Testament laws were given to a particular people, at a particular time, for particular reasons—in the light of what Jesus has done, some laws have been set aside and other laws remain in place. Allow me to briefly explain.

Jesus Himself said that He did not come to abolish the law; He came so that the law might be fulfilled through Him. Jesus lived a sinless

life and offered His perfect obedience to the Father—the New Testament speaks of Jesus' death in terms of a once-for-all sacrifice. Through His death, all of the ritual and purification laws have been fulfilled and set aside—He is the one who makes us “clean and acceptable” before God.

In a similar way, the dietary laws have been fulfilled in Christ. These laws were designed by God, for a time, to set Israel apart as His unique people. But through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the way has been made for all nations to join the family of God.

But other laws remain. In Jesus' *Sermon* from the mountain, He drew upon the Ten Words—He still saw them as important and binding. In fact, each of the Ten Words is repeated in some form in the New Testament, and so, the Ten Words remain words to live by for New Testament people.

(b) The second thought I want to offer is an observation on the culture we find ourselves in. As I have said, many times before, we live in place and at a time where the individual reigns supreme; no matter how hard we fight against these tendencies, they creep into our thinking, and influence the way we read the Bible.

When we read the Ten Words, we automatically interpret them as an individual, moral code. And while they are individual, and moral, they are something more. God did not speak the Ten Words primarily to illuminate individual righteousness. We don't keep the Ten Words in order to earn God's love, or, to prove to God that He did the right thing in saving us. God gave the Ten Words to Israel, and to us, so that we could showcase who God is to the world.

Dave Sattler is going to love me for this—even the moral code that God gives is about more than right and wrong, **it's about mission**. God called Abraham and Sarah to represent Him to the world. He chose this one couple, saying, *“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you...all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”*⁷

The Ten Words tell us something essential about God:

1. There is One God and He alone is worthy of our affection.
2. God is who He is—the most Real and True Being in the universe—He is not Someone who can be modified to suit our preferences.
3. God is a Person—a Relational Being—though He is worthy of greatest honour, He can be dishonoured in word and deed.
4. God is our Provider, and as such He calls us to regularly stop working, that we might rest in His care and be refreshed.
5. God knows how to honour others.
6. God is a Life-Giver.
7. God is a Covenant-Keeper.

8. God does not take what is not His.
9. God is a Truth-Speaker
10. God is content with who He is and what He has

Dennis Prager writes, “Imagine a world in which there was no murder or theft. In such a world, there would be no need for armies, or police, or weapons. Men and women and children could walk anywhere, at any time of the day or night, without fear...Imagine a world in which no one [envied] what belonged to [another]; a world in which children honoured their father and mother and the family unit thrived”.⁸

When we align ourselves with God and His Words, we showcase something essential about Him to the world. And more, we showcase what true humanity is meant to look like.

I know there has been much discussion, largely south of the border, about the place of these Ten Words in the public square. As much as I long for the day when these Ten Words are honoured and integrated by all, these Words are for God's people, not for the world. Why would we expect people who do not know and follow God to adhere to God's thoughts and ways?

⁷ Genesis 12:2, 3.

⁸ Denis Prager, *The Ten Commandments: Still The Best Moral Code*, Introduction, xviii.

As God's people, we are called to be on mission, all the time, everywhere—our life is speaking, the only question is, *what is it saying?*

Conclusion: God spoke *Ten Words* and in doing so He tells us something important about who He is, who we are, and how to live a life of freedom. If we want to be free, these Ten Words can help to show us the path.

At this time I'm going to call our worship team to come, and as they come, let's turn to the Lord in prayer.