

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance Church. Last Sunday I preached an introductory message on the *Ten Words* (or Ten Commandments); this Sunday we are going to look at the first of the Ten Words. At this time let me encourage you to turn with me in your Bible to Exodus 20:3, and as you do, I want to summarize last week's sermon by way of a **Big Idea** for the entire series.

Last Sunday I told you that Exodus 20:2 contains the interpretive grid for understanding the Ten Words. "*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*" I am your God, a Rescuing God, a Freedom-Giving God, and you are a freed people; each of the Ten Words needs to be understood in light of this truth. God didn't rescue Israel from Pharaoh only to enslave them under an oppressive set of rules—the Ten Words were given to protect Israel's freedom, and ours.

The Ten Words reveal something of who God is, and, who we are. When we ignore the Ten Words, or any of God's words, we go against the fundamental nature of reality—we distort "the way things are," as well as "who we are meant to be." Framed in the negative—*you shall not*—the Ten Words prohibit certain behaviour, but in so doing, they also encourage the opposite behaviour. The Ten Words are boundaries—there's no question about that—but they are boundaries that protect our freedom to enjoy God and one another.

Each week we will focus on one of the Ten Words and each week the following questions will frame our teaching:

- *What does this Word reveal about God and humanity?*
- *What does this Word prohibit? What does it encourage? How does it protect our freedom?*

- *How did Jesus align with this Word? How do we?*

Let's turn our attention to the 1st Word. Exodus 20:1-3 says, "*And God spoke all these words: 2 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. 3 'You shall have no other gods before me.'*"

This 1st Word—**no other gods**—is first not only in terms of order, but in terms of importance. By keeping this 1st Word, we position ourselves to keep the remaining 9; when we ignore the 1st Word, it's only a matter of time before we stray from the 9. The 1st Word is the most important of the Ten, and, it's also the hardest to keep.

Let's get to the framing questions...

1. What does the 1st Word reveal about God and humanity?

The Old Testament presents a monotheistic worldview—that is, there is only One God. Deuteronomy 4:39 says, "*Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below. **There is no other.***" The New Testament maintains this same monotheistic worldview, but with the coming of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit, early Christians began to adopt Trinitarian language—they spoke of One God, revealed in three persons — Father, Son, and Spirit.

While both the Old and New Testaments present a monotheistic worldview, the thrust of the 1st Word isn't primarily about God's oneness. "*You shall have no other gods before me*" is a call for allegiance—**exclusive allegiance**—to God.

Israel was told to have no other god's *before* Yahweh, and the word "before" is to be understood in terms of "time" and "space." At no "time" did any god precede Yahweh, and, there is no "space" for any so-called-god in Israel's life, or our own. The 1st Word is about exclusive allegiance, loyalty, and commitment.¹

In light of God's uniqueness (there are no other gods), and in light of the call to exclusive allegiance, the 1st Word hints at two further truths that have implications for us. **Here's the first: He is God and we are not.** My Old Testament professor, Iain Provain writes,

From the perspective of biblical faith, then, Oliver Wendell Holmes, is right: 'the great act of faith is when a man decides he is not God.' It is when he agrees that he is a creature of God, called to walk with God and to do God's will... It involves the acceptance of the difference between the Creator and creation. There is one God, distinct from the cosmos he has created... There is one God, sovereign over this cosmos and incomparable with respect to anything else that might be worshipped as a god. How am I to relate to this God? First things first: I am to acknowledge that God is God and I am not.²

Here's the second truth: He is worthy of worship and we have been created to worship. Darrell Johnson writes, "Birds fly in the air. Fish swim in the sea. Cats meow. Dogs bark. And human beings worship."³

¹ J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 223.

² Iain Provain, *Seriously Dangerous Religion: What The Old Testament Says And Why It Really Matters*, 173.

³ Darrell Johnson, *Jealous For Our Freedom*, 11.

We seldom think about what drives our behaviour, but even when we uncover the underlying desires, we are at a loss to explain why we behave as we do. We were made to worship, we are driven by this desire, but sometimes we express this desire in distorted ways. Why do we search for heroes to idolize and emulate? Why are we devastated when the limited, imperfect, people that we put up on pedestals disappoint us?

Presently my daughter is a young, preteen, woman, discovering her identity, and navigating the complex world of preteen friendship. A "good" day or a "bad" day at school rises and falls with her experience of friendship. Anna has lots of different friends but she doesn't have that one friend, that "best" friend that she can look to, be with, and trust at all times. In her desire for this exclusive friendship, I hear whispers of the greater desire for worship. We have been made to worship—to give our exclusive allegiance to the One who is worthy.

While there is only one God, we make "gods" of many things. Martin Luther once said, "whatever your heart clings to and trusts in, that is properly your God." *You shall have no other gods before Me.* Whatever you pursue, love, think about, dream about, worry about, look to, cling to, or trust in, just might be a rival god.

Tim Keller writes, "Anything can serve as a counterfeit god, especially the best things in life... The greater the good, the more

likely we are to expect that it can satisfy our deepest needs and hopes...[A rival god] is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.”⁴

We can make a god out of our most significant relationship. When we look to our friends, our spouse, to a boyfriend or girlfriend, to our kids, or a pastor to meet our deepest needs, we engage in an unconscious act of worship. When we set our significance or security upon making the team, or obtaining our next degree, or getting a promotion at work, or on a shiny new car—whether we recognize it or not—we are bowing down in worship.

Our West Coast culture may think Christians naive for our belief in God, but many people have simply replaced the traditional notion of God with the god of self. Making a god of self leads to self-worship, which leads to the insistence that my needs, my rights, my preferences must reign supreme. Anyone or anything that gets in the way of my needs, rights, or preferences is treated as a threat.

What are you pursuing these days? What have you set your heart upon? What consumes your thoughts and crowds your dreams? What are you looking to, clinging to, or trusting in? Cats meow. Dogs bark. And human beings worship. Who, or what, are you worshipping?

Let’s move on to the second framing question:

**2. What does the 1st Word prohibit? What does it encourage?
How does this Word protect our freedom?**

⁴ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, Introduction, xviii.

You shall have no other gods before me. We live at a time when we are encouraged to question any and every boundary. The prohibition is clear—I’ve just taken time to explain *what* God has prohibited—what may not be clear is the reason *why*.

When we take God at His word, we discover that He is a Loving God, a Rescuing God, a Freedom-Giving God. And so, the 1st Word doesn’t stem from His insecurity; God doesn’t have “control issues”. God is the One truly Free Being in the Universe—He is free to be Himself, so free in fact, that allows us the freedom to choose Him or reject Him.

You shall have no other gods before me. How does this prohibition protect our freedom? The 1st Word protects us against ourselves. To a person, we live with divided hearts. Jeremiah 2:13 says, “*My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.*” The 1st Word exposes our tendency to wander away from God—away from life—in the attempt to meet our needs. The 1st Word warns us about looking to other people or things that cannot satisfy our desires.

You shall have no other gods before Me, because, there are no other gods. You may love your degree, your job, your car, your house, or your money, but can they love you back? Can they deliver you from loneliness? You may look to your friends, your spouse, or your family, but can they tell you who you really are, what you’re worth, or why you’re here? When we’re facing overwhelming

circumstances—bankruptcy, broken relationships, or a failing body—who can give us hope, save us, or heal us?

The 1st Word isn't meant to restrict us, in the sense of taking away something good; it focuses us on what is truly good. False "gods" cannot love, protect, strengthen, or save. God cherishes our freedom, He wants us to be satisfied and He knows that **we will not be satisfied until we are satisfied in Him.**

In Isaiah 55:2-3, God says, "*I don't understand why you spend your money for things that don't nourish or work so hard for what leaves you empty. Attend to Me and eat what is good; enjoy the richest, most delectable of things. Listen closely, and come even closer. My words will give life, for I will make a covenant with you that cannot be broken, a promise of My enduring presence and support*". In John 6:35 Jesus said, "*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*"

Negatively, the 1st Word says "No other gods," positively, it says the reverse: **devote yourself to the One True God.** The Exodus story reveals God as the Loving, Rescuing, Freedom-Giving God; yesterday, today, forever He remains the same. In Christ, God has revealed His True Self—He is for us, not against us. It is because He is persistently (and stubbornly) faithful to us, that we can offer Him our exclusive allegiance; this allegiance ends up being in our own interests.

⁵ Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Mark 12:29-30.

⁶ Craig Blomberg, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 80-81.

The positive form of the 1st Word is seen in Deuteronomy 6, and later recited by Jesus in Mark 12. When Jesus was asked, *which is the greatest commandment*, He replied: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*"⁵ Jesus is saying that we are to love God with total commitment (**heart and mind**), with our total self (**soul**), to total excess (**strength**).⁶ When we live with divided loyalties, it leads to a supremely dissatisfying life.

Eugene Peterson offers the following commentary on 1 John 2:15-17, "*Don't love the world's ways. Don't love the world's goods. Love of the world squeezes out love for the Father. Practically everything that goes on in the world—wanting your own way, wanting everything for yourself, wanting to appear important—has nothing to do with the Father. It just isolates you from him. The world and all its wanting, wanting, wanting is on the way out—but whoever does what God wants is set for eternity.*"

Let's move on to the final framing question:

3. How did Jesus align with the 1st Word? How do we?

In Psalm 86:11, David, who is elsewhere described as a man after God's own heart, prays the following: "*Teach me your way, LORD, that I may rely on your faithfulness; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name.*"

Why did David pray for an undivided heart? Because He knew how divided he was—divided loyalties, commitments, and priorities. The reason I resonate with his prayer is because I'm aware of the same division within my own heart.

illus: When I turned 20, I began to take my commitment to God seriously. At the time I was training to be a pastor and I knew that parts of my life were out of sync with the call to follow Jesus. Lust, impatience, anger, and pride were bubbling under the surface of my life. I wanted to set apart all of me, for all of Him, in all of life and I developed a rigorous spiritual plan that would get me there.

If the truth be told, I developed dozens and dozens of plans, each one more strenuous than the next. My plans were perfect, but sadly, I was not, and after 10 years of trying to transform my heart, I gave up. The 1st Word calls for exclusive allegiance, but we regularly fail to give it. **Jesus is the only one who have ever lived this life of exclusive allegiance; He's the only one who can.**

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, His life was set apart as an offering to the Father. Jesus loved the Father with total commitment (heart and mind), with His total self (soul), to total excess (strength). He entered into our humanity fully, He was as we are—tempted and tried—but He never faltered. In the midst of overwhelming hostility and rejection, He looked to God to meet His needs and satisfy His desires. His exclusive allegiance made His living and dying an acceptable sacrifice on our behalf.

Now this is the part of the sermon where you might expect me to say something like: *Come on people, let's be more like Jesus. Let's try harder! Let's surrender more!*

Jesus is the only person who has ever lived a life of exclusive allegiance and He's the only One who can.

I want to pause here for a moment and repeat something I said last week—if I don't, I fear too many of us will look at the call to exclusive allegiance and see it in the wrong light. God's love for you is not based on how well you align with the 1st Word. **God is the God of covenant not contract.**

There are no *ifs* 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—the life He lived and the death He died was for our sake. 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.

Exclusive allegiance 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 such allegiance brings. As we live by the 1st Word we experience life as God intended it; only then can we be who God intended us to be.

The call to exclusive allegiance is both an invitation and a promise—Darrell Johnson helped me to see that.⁷ Because God is a faithful,

⁷ Johnson, 16.

covenant-keeping-God, the 1st Word is more than a command, it's a promise. One day—one glorious day—divided loyalties, commitments, and priorities will be a thing of the past.

In Ezekiel 11:19-20 God speaks of a day that is coming: *“I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.”*

When we put our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit came to indwell us. The work of allegiance has already begun and will be completed when Jesus returns. As I said earlier, **Jesus is the only person who has ever lived a life of exclusive allegiance and He's the only One who can.** And so, the Christian life isn't about copying Jesus; we surrender by the Spirit to the life Jesus wants to live in us.

What does this look like? Practically?

Confess: We begin with *confession*. We *confess* that He is God and we are not. We *confess* that while we were made to worship the One True God, we have looked to, clung to, and trusted in other “gods.” We *confess* that there is no other god that can satisfy.

Commit: After we confess, we *commit*. We *commit* ourselves to His goodness, looking to Him, entrusting Him with our lives, needs, and desires. We *commit* to pursuing Him above all others:

- above our spouse, children, and friendships;
- above our school, work, and passions;

- above our ambitions, goals, and plans

Pray...talk to the Lord about what you are committing to. If it helps, make your commitment in writing—use a journal to make a prayer of commitment to the Lord. And by all means, tell the Lord just how impossible this task will be unless He lives this commitment out within you. We can never put too much trust in the Lord Jesus, but it is possible to put too much trust in ourselves.

And we mustn't fall prey to discouragement—life with God is rarely linear. The closer we walk with God, the more clearly we will see where our heart is divided. We will never graduate from confession and commitment—these key practices will be with us until we see Jesus face to face.

Cooperate: The final practice is *cooperation*. We *confess*, we *commit*, and we *cooperate* with the Holy Spirit. Did you know that the Holy Spirit specializes in freedom?⁸ He frees us from the sin that binds us and from old ways of thinking that leads us away from God. The Holy Spirit is the one who transforms us from the inside us, He unites us to Christ so that His desires begin to grow in us, so that Christ's thoughts become our own, and bit by bit, we are conformed to the image of Jesus.

Conclusion: The 1st Word is about exclusive allegiance—no other gods—and it's a Word that protects our freedom. Perhaps today you find yourself wanting to *confess* that while you were made to worship the One True God, you have pursued, looked to, clung to,

⁸ 2 Corinthians 3:17.

and trusted in other “gods.” Perhaps today you find yourself wanting to *commit* to exclusive allegiance to Him.

I’m going to ask that we take the next minute or two in silence to engage in *confession*. I will then break the silence and invite you to consider praying a prayer of *commitment* with me—I will have it for us on the screen.

Wesley’s Covenant Prayer:

I am no longer my own, but yours.

Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing, put me to suffering;

let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you,
exalted for you, or brought low for you;
let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me
have nothing: I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to
your pleasure and disposal.

And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy
Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. So be it.

And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in
heaven.

Amen.

Worship

Benediction