“Seasoned by personal wit, shaped by years of pastoral ministry, and highly skilled in interpreting God’s Word, Kevin DeYoung is the right person to write this book. DeYoung fleshes out the Ten Commandments in a way that helps us see the wisdom of our Creator and Redeemer in directing us on our pilgrim way. I highly recommend this book!”

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THE 10 COMMANDMENTS
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What They Mean, Why They Matter, and Why We Should Obey Them

Kevin DeYoung
To Roy and Barbara Bebee
Wonderful in-laws, loving grandparents, faithful Christians
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Exodus 20:1–2 introduces one of the most famous sections in the Bible—indeed, one of the most important pieces of religious literature in the whole world—the Ten Commandments. Oddly enough, they are never actually called the Ten Commandments. The Hebrew expression, which occurs three times in the Old Testament (Ex. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4), literally means “ten words.” This is why Exodus 20 is often referred to as the Decalogue, deka being the Greek word for “ten” and logos meaning “word.” These are the Ten Words that God gave the Israelites at Mount Sinai—and, I’ll argue, the Ten Words that God wants all of us to follow.

Whatever we call them, the Ten Commandments are certainly commands—more than that for sure, but not less. The problem people have is not with what they’re called but with what they contain. Studying the Ten Commandments reveals
the very heart of human rebellion: we don’t like God telling us what we can and cannot do.

The Noncommandment Commandments

A few years ago there was an article on the CNN website entitled, “Behold, Atheists’ New Ten Commandments.” The story explains how Lex Bayer, an executive at AirBnB, and John Figdor, a humanist chaplain at Stanford University, tried to crowd-source ten “non-commandments.” They solicited input from around the world and offered ten thousand dollars to the winning would-be Moseses. After receiving more than 2,800 submissions, they appointed a panel of thirteen judges to select the ten winners. Here’s what they came up with, the ten noncommandments of our age:

1. Be open-minded and be willing to alter your beliefs with new evidence.
2. Strive to understand what is most likely to be true, not to believe what you wish to be true.
3. The scientific method is the most reliable way of understanding the natural world.
4. Every person has the right to control [sic] their body.
5. God is not necessary to be a good person or to live a full and meaningful life.
6. Be mindful of the consequences of all your actions and recognize that you must take responsibility for them.
7. Treat others as you would want them to treat you, and can reasonably expect them to want to be treated. Think about their perspective.
8. We have the responsibility to consider others, including future generations.
9. There is no one right way to live.
10. Leave the world a better place than you found it.
That sounds about right—not with respect to God’s law, but in terms of how many people think of their moral obligations. These ten noncommandments perfectly capture the default moral code at the front end of the twenty-first century.

Nevertheless, I would hope, perhaps naively, that after a few moments of reflection, we would see that these new commandments are filled with some stunning contradictions. They say you don’t need God to be a good person or to know how to live (#5), and yet the seventh noncommandment is a summary of the Golden Rule, which came from Jesus (Matt. 7:12). They talk about the scientific method (#3), without an awareness that Francis Bacon’s method of inductive observation gained popularity in North America in large measure because of Presbyterian and Reformed theologians who saw Bacon’s approach as a good way to make observations about God’s created world.

More to the point, these noncommandments are logically indefensible. They’re presumably called “noncommandments” so as not to sound so commandment-ish. Yet they’re all commands! They all carry the force of a moral ought. We live in a paradoxical age where many will say, “Right and wrong is what you decide for yourself,” and yet these same people will rebuke others for violating any number of assumed commands. As a culture, we may be quite free and liberal when it comes to sex, but we can be absolutely fundamentalist when it comes to the moral claims of the sexual revolution. The old swear words may not scandalize us any longer, but now there are other words—offensive slurs and insults—that will quickly put someone out of polite company. We are still a society with a moral code.

And then there’s the second to last of these noncommandments. How does this ought square with the other nine in the list? How can we be told to leave the planet a better place and think of others and exercise control over our bodies if there really is “no
one right way to live”? Which is it: do as we say or do as you please? It can’t be both.

I know the contest was a publicity stunt for a book Bayer and Figdor wrote on being atheistic humanists, but the authors seem to genuinely believe it’s a fine idea to develop your moral code by taking the temperature of those around you. Elsewhere in the CNN article we read:

Bayer said humans are hardwired for compassion, and the scientific method and wisdom of crowds—or the tribes that gather online each day—will weed out bad ideas. In other words, this is an open-ended, and hopefully progressive, process, he said.

I don’t know what Internet they’re looking at, but I have not found “online” to be a place that’s entirely trustworthy for weeding out bad ideas. Remember, Bayer and Figdor had to appoint a committee of thirteen judges to pick out the best non-commandments. They realized instinctively that we might not come up with a great moral code just by asking people what they think.

In fact, going to the Internet to find your way in the world is often one of the worst ideas. Not too long ago I came across a story about the British government’s attempt to name a $287 million polar research vessel. In an effort to generate publicity for the new vessel, the government decided to name the royal research ship by way of an Internet vote. The agency in charge of the contest suggested to British citizens that they look at names such as Ernest Shackleton (the famous explorer), Endeavor, or Falcon. But the people’s overwhelming, runaway choice for this state-of-the-art research vessel—the clear winner of the Internet vote—was (are you ready for it?): “Boaty McBoatface.” You’ve got to love the British sense of humor, but that wasn’t exactly the name officials were
hoping for. In the end, the agency decided not to go with the clear winner of the contest and instead picked the fourth-place entry, naming the boat after Sir David Attenborough. The wisdom of crowds isn’t always wise.

And that goes for commandments as well as for boats. The Bible says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10). The way to find moral instruction is not by listening to your gut but by listening to God. If we want to know right from wrong, if we want to know how to live the good life, if we want to know how to live in a way that blesses our friends and neighbors, we’d be wise to do things God’s way, which means paying careful attention to the Ten Commandments.

Before we look at the commandments themselves, we need to lay some important groundwork. In particular, there are two questions that need to be answered:

1. Why should we study the Ten Commandments?
2. Why should we obey the Ten Commandments?

Let me give you five answers to each question. Think of it as ten words before the Ten Words.

**Why Should We Study the Ten Commandments?**

The answer to this first question used to be self-evident. Everyone just knew—whether Christian or not—that the Ten Commandments are important. But now, even inside the church, there can be a deep disinterest, or even a dis-ease, about spending a lot of time on the Bible’s moral code. We need to be convinced all over again that the Ten Commandments matter and deserve our careful attention. Here are five reasons why.
**Reason 1: General Ignorance**

First, most people are simply ignorant of the Ten Commandments. Fewer and fewer churches read the Ten Commandments in worship. Children are not made to memorize the Decalogue anymore. It would probably be embarrassing for both children and adults if we randomly picked people on a Sunday morning to come up front and recite the Ten Commandments.

And if ignorance is a danger in the church, it’s almost a certainty outside the church. A recent survey found that only 14 percent of Americans could name the Ten Commandments. By comparison, a quarter of all Americans can name the seven ingredients in a Big Mac, nearly three out of four can name all three stooges, and more than one in three know all six kids from the Brady Bunch, a television show that was cancelled before I was born! More of us know that a Big Mac has two all-beef patties than know that “You shall not murder” is one of the Ten Commandments.4

It’s no exaggeration to say that these Ten Words handed down at Mount Sinai have been the most influential law code ever given. That’s why you’ll find Moses or the Ten Commandments (admittedly, among other symbols and other lawgivers) in at least three different architectural embellishments in the United States Supreme Court building. “Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’” (Deut. 4:6). That has proven to be true. The commandments given to the nation of Israel, as recorded in the Scriptures, have become known all throughout the world. Whether we think they’re right or not, simply out of an interest in world history—especially Western history—we should not be ignorant of them.
**Reason 2: Historical Instruction**

The church has historically put the Ten Commandments at the center of its teaching ministry, especially for children and new believers. For centuries, catechetical instruction was based on three things: the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. In other words, when people asked, “How do we do discipleship? How do we teach our kids about the Bible? What do new Christians need to know about Christianity?” their answers always included an emphasis on the Ten Commandments. In the Heidelberg Catechism, for example, eleven of the fifty-two Lord’s Days focus on the Ten Commandments. The same is true in forty-two of the 107 questions in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, in more than half of the Lutheran Large Catechism, and in 120 out of 750 pages of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Across various traditions, there has been a historic emphasis on the Ten Commandments.

**Reason 3: Centrality to Mosaic Ethics**

The Ten Commandments are central to the ethics of the Mosaic covenant. We see this right from the prologue. There’s an important change in Exodus at the beginning of chapter 20. The Lord is no longer telling Moses to go down and relay a message to the people. That’s how the Lord operated in chapter 19, but now in chapter 20 God is speaking “all these words” (v. 1) directly to the Israelites. That’s why, at the end of the Ten Commandments, the people cry out to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die” (Ex. 20:19). They were too terrified to have God speak to them without a mediator, which says something about the stunning display of God’s power in chapters 19 and 20 and underlines the importance of the Decalogue.

Moreover, the language in verse 2 is a deliberate echo of God’s call to Abraham. Look at the similarities:
I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans. (Gen. 15:7)

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. (Ex. 20:2)

At these great epochal moments in redemptive history—first with Abraham, and now with Moses and the people of Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai—God says, in effect, “I am the Lord who brought you out of this strange land to be your God and to give you this special word.”

Some people—including a number of good Old Testament scholars—will say, “Well, look, there are all sorts of commandments. The Ten Commandments are succinct, and they’ve played an important role in the history of the church, but they’re simply the introduction to the Mosaic law. There are hundreds of statutes in the Pentateuch, and the Bible never says these ten are in a class all by themselves.” While it’s true that the Bible doesn’t say to print the Ten Commandments in boldface, we shouldn’t undersell their special stature in ancient Israel. They came from God as he spoke to the people face-to-face (Deut. 5:1–5), and they came from Mount Sinai amidst fire, cloud, thick darkness, and a loud voice (Deut. 5:22–27). Exodus 20 marks a literal and spiritual high point in the life of Israel. It’s no wonder the tablets of the law, along with the manna and Aaron’s staff, were placed inside the ark of the covenant (Heb. 9:4).

There are going to be many more laws in the Old Testament. But these first ten are foundational for the rest. The Ten Commandments are like the constitution for Israel, and what follows are the regulatory statutes. The giving of the law changes sharply from chapter 20 to chapters 21 and 22. The Ten Commandments are clear, definite, absolute standards of right and wrong. Once you get to chapter 21, we shift to application. You can see the distinctive language leading off each paragraph in chapters 21 and 22: words such as “when,” “whoever,” and “if.” This is the case law
meant to apply the constitutional provisions carved in stone on Mount Sinai. From the very outset of Israel’s formal existence as a nation, the Ten Commandments had a special place in establishing the rules for their life together.

**Reason 4: Centrality to New Testament Ethics**

The Ten Commandments are also central to the ethics of the New Testament. Think of Mark 10:17, for example. This is where the rich young ruler comes to Jesus and asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus says to him, “You know the commandments.” Then he lists the second table of the law, the commandments that relate to our neighbors: “Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother” (v. 19). Jesus isn’t laying out a path for earning eternal life. We know from the rest of the story that Jesus is setting the young man up for a fall, because the one command he obviously hasn’t obeyed is the one command Jesus skips—Do not covet (vv. 20–22). But it is noteworthy that when Jesus has to give a convenient summary of our neighborly duties, he goes straight to the Ten Commandments.

We see something similar in Romans 13. When the apostle Paul wants to give a summary of what it means to be a Christian living in obedience to God, he looks to the Ten Commandments:

> Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Rom. 13:8–9)

Paul says, much like Jesus did, that the Ten Commandments are the way for God’s people to love one another. When we love,
we fulfill the commandments, and when we obey the commandments, we are fulfilling the law of love.

Paul does something similar in 1 Timothy 1. After establishing that the law is good if one uses it lawfully (v. 8), Paul proceeds in verses 9 and 10 to rattle through the second table of the law, referring to the wicked “who strike their fathers and mothers” (a violation of the fifth commandment), and “murderers” (a violation of the sixth commandment), and the sexually immoral and men who practice homosexuality (violations of the seventh commandment), and “enslavers” (a violation of the eighth commandment), and liars and perjurers (violations of the ninth commandment). Again, when Paul needs a recognizable way to summarize ethical instruction for the people of God, he goes back to the Ten Commandments.

By Jewish tradition, there are 613 laws in the Pentateuch. They all matter because they all teach us something about love for God and neighbor. But the 613 can be summarized by the Ten Commandments, which can in turn be summarized by two: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself (see Matt. 22:37–40). Jesus certainly transforms the Ten Commandments, as we will see, but he never meant to abolish them (Matt. 5:17).

As we go through these studies, we will find that the law drives us to our knees, shows us our sin, and leads us to the cross. We need forgiveness. None of us keeps these commands perfectly. At the same time, however, for those who have been forgiven and know Christ, we see in both the Old and New Testaments that the Ten Commandments are foundational for living an obedient life pleasing to God.

Reason 5: The Law Is Good

Finally, we ought to study the Decalogue because the commandments are good. How strange, we think, that the psalmist should
say that his delight is in the law of the Lord (Ps. 1:2). We can un-
derstand delighting in God’s love or his grace or his promises, but in his law? Who loves commandments? Well, the psalmist does. He understands that God lays down his law for our good, not for our groaning. The good news of law, C. S. Lewis once remarked, is like the good news of arriving on solid ground after a shortcut gone awry through the mud, muck, and mire. After fumbling about in the squishy, stinky mess, you’re relieved to finally hit something solid, something you can trust, something you can count on.

Have you ever thought about how much better life would be if everyone kept the Ten Commandments? We may grumble about rules and regulations, but think of what an amazing place the world would be if these ten rules were obeyed. If everyone kept the Ten Commandments, we wouldn’t need copyright laws, patent laws, or intellectual property rights. We wouldn’t need locks on our doors or fraud protection. We wouldn’t have to spend money on weapons and defense systems. We wouldn’t need courts, contracts, or prisons. Can you imagine what life would be like if people obeyed the Ten Commandments? The law is not an ugly thing; it is good and righteous and holy (Rom. 7:12).

Five Reasons to Obey the Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments are not to be ignored. It’s important that we study and understand them. But, of course, it’s more important that we obey them. God isn’t impressed by an intellectually careful analysis that puts the Decalogue at the center of Christian discipleship. He expects disciples to actually follow these commands.

But for the right reasons. Working hard to obey the Ten Commandments from the wrong motivation and for the wrong end is a surefire way to live out our relationship with God in the wrong way. God gave the commandments that they might be obeyed—not
to earn salvation but because of who we are, who God is in himself, who he is to us, where we are, and what he has done.

**Reason 1: Who We Are**

Don’t miss the obvious: Exodus 19 comes before Exodus 20. God has already identified the Israelites as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). They are a people set apart. The same is true of us. As Christians, we too are a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9). We must be prepared to stand alone, to look different, and to have rules the world doesn’t understand. Of course, we aren’t always the holy people we should be, but that’s what he has called us to be. That’s who we are. We are God’s people, set apart to live according to God’s ways.

**Reason 2: Who God Is in Himself**

The opening verses in Exodus 20 are not just filler before the commandments start rolling. They establish who God is and why we should obey him. In verse 2 God reveals himself again as “the LORD,” that is, as Yahweh their covenant-keeping God. This is the God who spoke to Moses in the burning bush. This is the God who said, “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex. 3:14). This is the sovereign, self-existent, self-sufficient, almighty creator God. This is the God of the plagues and the Red Sea and the manna in the wilderness. This is not a God to be trifled with. If there is a God, and if he is anything like the God who is revealed to us in the Scriptures, then it would be extremely presumptuous, foolish, and (by all accounts) dangerous for us to crowdsource our own ethical code.

The law is an expression of the Lawgiver’s heart and character. We must think about that before we say, “I don’t care for laws,” or before we bristle at the thought of do’s and don’ts. The commandments not only show us what God wants; they show us what God is like. They say something about his honor, his worth, and his
majesty. They tell us what matters to God. We can’t disdain the law without disrespecting the Lawgiver.

**Reason 3: Who God Is to Us**

The God of the Ten Commandments is revealed not just as the Lord, but as the “**Lord your God**” (Ex. 20:2). We are his treasured possession (Ex. 19:5; 1 Pet. 2:9). This God of absolute power is not a capricious tyrant, not some cranky deity who wields raw and unbridled authority without any regard for his creatures. He is a personal God, and in Christ he always is for us (Rom. 8:31). It would be frightening to the point of death if God thundered from the heavens, “I am the Lord!” But the divine self-disclosure doesn’t stop there. He goes on to add, “. . . your God.” He is on our side. He is our Father. He gives us commands for our good.

**Reason 4: Where We Are**

The biblical definition of freedom is not “doing whatever you want.” Freedom is enjoying the benefits of doing what we should. We too often think of the Ten Commandments as constraining us—as if God’s ways will keep us in servitude and from realizing our dreams and reaching our potential. We forget that God means to give us abundant life (John 10:10) and true freedom (John 8:32). His laws, 1 John 5:3 tells us, are not burdensome.

You think it’s burdensome to have Ten Commandments? Do you know how many laws there are in the United States? It’s a trick question, because no one knows! There are twenty thousand laws on the books regulating gun ownership alone. In 2010 an estimated forty thousand new laws were added at various levels throughout the country. The United States Code, which is just one accounting of federal laws and does not include regulatory statutes, has more than fifty volumes. In 2008 a House committee asked the Congressional Research Service to calculate the
number of criminal offenses in federal law. They responded, five years later, that they lacked the manpower and resources to answer such a question.

God is not trying to crush us with red tape and regulations. The Ten Commandments are not prison bars, but traffic laws. Maybe there are some anarchists out there who think, “The world would be a better place without any traffic laws.” A few of us drive as if that were so! But even if you get impatient when you’re at a red light, try to zoom through the yellow, and turn left on a very stale pink—overall, aren’t you glad that there is some semblance of law and order? People stop and go. People slow down when driving by schools. They stop for school buses. You wouldn’t be able to drive your car to the grocery store without laws. When you drive on a switchback on a mountain pass, do you curse the guardrails that keep you from plunging to an untimely death? No, someone put them there at great expense, and for our good, that we may travel about freely and safely.

The Ten Commandments are not instructions on how to get out of Egypt. They are rules for a free people to stay free.

**Reason 5: What He Has Done**

Note once again that the law comes after gospel—after the good news of deliverance. God did not come to the people as slaves and say, “I have Ten Commandments. I want you to get these right. I’m going to come back in five years, and if you’ve gotten your life cleaned up, I’ll set you free from Egypt.” That’s how some people view Christianity: God has rules, and if I follow the rules, God will love me and save me. That’s not what happened in the story of the exodus. The Israelites were an oppressed people, and God said, “I hear your cry. I will save you because I love you. And when you are saved, free, and forgiven, I’m going to give you a new way to live.”
We need to hear it again: salvation is not the *reward* for obedience; salvation is the *reason* for obedience. Jesus does not say, “If you obey my commandments, I will love you.” Instead, he first washes the feet of the disciples and then says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). All of our doing is only because of what he has first done for us.
If our faith is to be genuine Christian faith, it must be more than faith in faith. The most important aspect of our faith is not how hard we believe, but in whom we believe. There is certainly a subjective element to faith—since we do want to be sincere and single-minded in our devotion—but to have a sincerely misguided belief in the wrong thing or in the wrong person is not saving faith at all. It’s possible to be full of sincere worship and worship the wrong God. That’s the reason for the first commandment.

The God of the Bible is not simply interested in being recognized as a strong and mighty deity. That would not have been a controversial claim in the ancient world. Lots of peoples had lots of impressive gods and goddesses. What was controversial, and what set the Israelites apart from the other nations, was that their
God demanded to be worshiped \textit{alone}, as the \textit{only} God, to the exclusion of all others.

There’s a reason that the first commandment is the first commandment. It’s not that this one is better than all the others, but it is foundational for all the others. Because there is only one God, who is God over all and has divine rights over all, we can have the subsequent nine commandments—an objective moral code that isn’t just true for some people, in some places, depending upon their circumstances, but is true for all people everywhere.

Can a truly authoritative moral law exist without the existence of a divine lawgiver? The obvious answer, according to the Bible, is that it cannot. If our moral obligations are to have any force or binding obligation behind them, they must rest on something more than majority opinion, our own internal sense of right and wrong, or (heaven forbid) an Internet poll. Remember what the ten noncommandments had for the ninth commandment: “There is no one right way to live.” That one commandment eliminates the force of the other nine. The noncommandment commandments, because they have no place for God, end up having all the force of internally contradictory suggestions.

\textbf{What Christianity Hath Wrought}

It may appear to many in the secular West that God is irrelevant in determining right from wrong. But it only appears that way because Christianity has been at the center of Western culture for so long. People do not realize where their ethical instincts come from. Recently there was a fascinating article by the popular and well-respected British historian Tom Holland. I don’t know if Holland is claiming to be a Christian in the article, but he is certainly describing how he rediscovered that his morality is owing to Christianity.
Holland tells his story of growing up in the church. From an early age, he started to have doubts about what he was learning in his Sunday school class, and he began to question everything about his Christian environment. Later, as he became a scholar of ancient antiquity, a writer, and a historian, he became enamored with the Greco-Roman world, in part as a foil to the benighted Christian age that would follow.

By the time I came to read Edward Gibbon and the other great writers of the Enlightenment, I was more than ready to accept their interpretation of history: that the triumph of Christianity had ushered in an “age of superstition and credulity,” and that modernity was founded on the dusting down of long-forgotten classical values.

In short, Holland came to believe that the values worth emulating came from the Greeks and the Romans. He concluded that Christianity introduced a backwards sort of spirituality and gullibility. But listen to what Holland says next:

The longer I spent immersed in the study of classical antiquity, the more alien and unsettling I came to find it. The values of Leonidas [a leader of the Spartans], whose people had practised a peculiarly murderous form of eugenics, and trained their young to kill uppity Untermenschen by night, were nothing that I recognised as my own; nor were those of Caesar, who was reported to have killed a million Gauls and enslaved a million more. It was not just the extremes of callousness that I came to find shocking, but the lack of a sense that the poor or the weak might have any intrinsic value. As such, the founding conviction of the Enlightenment—that it owed nothing to the faith into which most of its greatest figures had been born—increasingly came to seem to me unsustainable.
In other words, the more he studied the history of antiquity, the more Holland wondered if his sense of morality—and that of his friends—really came from Christianity.

Familiarity with the biblical narrative of the Crucifixion has dulled our sense of just how completely novel a deity Christ was. In the ancient world, it was the role of gods who laid claim to ruling the universe to uphold its order by inflicting punishment—not to suffer it themselves. Today, even as belief in God fades across the West, the countries that were once collectively known as Christendom continue to bear the stamp of the two-millennia-old revolution that Christianity represents. It is the principal reason why, by and large, most of us who live in post-Christian societies still take for granted that it is nobler to suffer than to inflict suffering. It is why we generally assume that every human life is of equal value. In my morals and ethics, I have learned to accept that I am not Greek or Roman at all, but thoroughly and proudly Christian.

I don’t know what Holland thinks of the Ten Commandments, but he’s done an excellent job summarizing the influence of Christian principles and the need for an ethical code outside ourselves. We have a moral code because we have a moral Lawgiver. The only reason that the Ten Commandments can have any sort of binding obligation upon or authority over us is that there is a God who created us, made us, loves us, and has rights over us. The first commandment not only gives us our first obligation as human beings; it lays the groundwork for every other moral obligation.

So how do we keep the first commandment? It’s helpful to see why the commandment matters and how it has shaped our ethical
reasoning, but the point of the commandment is that we do what it commands. Let me suggest, then, three ways we keep the first commandment: worship God exclusively, shun all idolatry, and turn to Christ uniquely.

Worship God Exclusively

The first commandment is predicated on what the Lord did for the Israelites in Egypt. He saved them. He rescued them. He delivered them. He has a claim over them. When God says, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Ex. 20:2), he is reminding them of the staff, the plagues, and the Red Sea. He’s saying to them, “Why would you trust any other so-called god? Why would you trust yourself? You didn’t escape Egypt by your own ingenuity or because of Pharaoh’s great kindness. I put you on eagles’ wings. I defeated mighty Egypt. You can trust me.”

We must not misunderstand the phrase “no other gods before me.” The first commandment is not suggesting that there are, in fact, other gods. There’s a view called henotheism, which says there are many gods, but you must give your god first place. That’s not what the first commandment is about. The Mosaic covenant clearly presumes monotheism. No other gods should be worshiped because in reality there are no gods but Yahweh. This is the point Paul makes centuries later when he says:

Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Cor. 8:4–6)
The gods of this world are only so-called gods. They have no ontological existence. There is only one supreme being in the universe, and he demands to be worshiped alone.

Already in the first verse of the Bible we see that Israel’s God is unique among the pantheon of (supposed) deities: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). That sounds right to us, but it would have been unusual in the ancient Near East. The ancients had lots of stories about how the universe came into being, but they always involved two gods fighting, or a god and a goddess procreating, or one god slaying another god and forming the earth out of its carcass. By contrast, Genesis comes along and says, “In the beginning, there was only one God, the real God, and he created all things.” This would have been a shocking way to begin a religious text. “Monotheism,” as John Dickson puts it, “is not just the Bible’s first commandment, it is its first thought.”

Syncretism was a perennial problem in Israel. God’s people were constantly tempted to make their faith a both/and religion, when God insisted on worship as an either/or proposition: “Either you worship me alone, or you don’t worship me at all.” When the covenant was renewed at Shechem, Joshua exhorted the people, “Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord” (Josh. 24:14). On Mount Carmel, Elijah said much the same: “If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21). Years later, Jesus would remind his followers that “no one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other” (Matt. 6:24).

The fault with God’s people has always been that little and. The Lord is fine, but we want the Lord and Baal, the Lord and Asherah, the Lord and money, the Lord and social respectability. We’re quite happy to have God in our lives, just so long as he fills only a part of our lives. We all want a Trivial Pursuit God, a manageable deity
God and God Alone

to round out our lives and fill in one piece of the pie. But he has no interest in being one important person among many. God cannot be worshiped rightly if he is worshiped alongside any other.

The other nine commandments speak of acts you should or shouldn’t do, but the first commandment mandates a certain kind of relationship. It tells us how we are to relate to God as the only God. When Exodus 20:3 says, “No other gods before me,” it could mean “none other but me,” or it could mean “no other gods before my face.” Calvin understood the commandment in the latter sense. He said that the sin here is “like a shameless woman who brings in an adulterer before her husband’s very eyes, only to vex his mind the more.”

Regardless of how we interpret “before me,” marriage is a good analogy for the first commandment. You cannot have a both/and relationship with your spouse—at least, not for very long. Suppose a husband came home and said, “Honey, it’s good to see you! I want to introduce someone who’s very special to me. Don’t get me wrong—you’re also very special to me. But I’ve met someone else. She’s lovely, and I’m going to spend some time with her, but also a lot of time with you! I just want to let you know that some nights, I’m going to be with her instead. I think you two will get along just fine. You’ll be great friends. You both mean so much to me.”

What should a wife say in this situation? “That’s great, dear, I’m honored that I can still be a part of your life.” Hardly! The wife would say, “It’s me or her! Make up your mind.” And if the wife were to say that with a great deal of passion, would anyone think she was being cruel, proud, unfair, or intolerant? No, we would say that she’s being just the sort of wife she ought to be. She has every right to be jealous. We’d be concerned if she wasn’t angry. Some relationships are meant to be either/or, not both/and. Marriage is a relationship that demands forsaking all others.

And so it is with God. Love is at the very heart of the first commandment. If we truly love God, we will love no one else and
The First Commandment

nothing else like we love God. That’s why the Shema was so foundational for the Israelites: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:4–5). Love suggests affection, but it is also a decision. The Shema called God’s people to choose the Lord as God, and him alone. We choose God because he first chose us. And now, forsaking all others, we commit ourselves to him unreservedly. There can be no and in our relationship with God. We love and worship him above all others because he alone is God.

Shun All Idolatry

The Heidelberg Catechism defines idolatry as “having or inventing something in which one trusts in place of or alongside of the only true God, who has revealed himself in his Word.” Though most Westerners aren’t tempted to bow down before trees and statues, we’d be foolish to think that we don’t have the same propensity for idolatry that they had in ancient Israel. While we may know on an intellectual level that we can make food or family or football into an idol, we don’t often stop to think about the perennial attraction of idolatry. The same forces at work in the ancient world that made idolatry attractive are still with us today, pulling us and prodding us to trust something or someone else alongside the only true God.

One of the best summaries of the attraction of idolatry comes from the Old Testament scholar Doug Stuart. In his Exodus commentary, he lists nine reasons the Israelites were so drawn to idolatry: 

1. It was guaranteed. If they did the right incantation, it worked. If they said the right words, God showed up. Who wouldn’t want a religion with guaranteed results?
2. *It was selfish.* In the ancient world, the gods (though they were powerful) needed the humans for one very important thing: food. It was understood that people needed to bring sacrifices because the gods were hungry. The people needed the gods for favors; the gods needed the people if they were to eat. It was a tit-for-tat relationship. You scratch their backs; they’ll scratch yours.

3. *It was easy.* Sure, one had to bring offerings and oblations, but there was little in the way of ethical standards or personal sacrifice. A good Canaanite didn’t need an elaborate moral code or a rigorous pursuit of personal holiness. He just had to show up and present a drink or a dead animal. That’s what Israel fell into, time and time again: “It doesn’t really matter what I do. I just have to show up and go through the religious rituals.”

4. *It was convenient.* Ancient worship worked on a franchise model. There were many places one could go to take care of his religious obligations. Again, this was part of the allure of idolatry for the Israelites. Why not build a few high places? Why not make worship a little more convenient? But Yahweh has prescribed ritual worship in one place: at the tabernacle, and later in the temple.

5. *It was normal.* Everyone else—though their gods had different names and did different things—did religion the same way. The Israelites were unique among the people of the ancient Near East. God’s people didn’t just have a few special rules; their conception of the divine and how to worship him was fundamentally different. It’s hard to be a religious minority.

6. *It was logical.* It made sense that there were many gods and goddesses, each one specializing in an area of blessing
and an area of the cosmos. One god brought the wind, another one summoned the rain, and another helped the animals breed. Religion in the ancient world seemed to make sense of the world around them.

7. *It was pleasing to the senses.* There was always plenty to see. There was even an aesthetic element to ancient worship, with beauty and craftsmanship on obvious display. Idolatry was right in front of them. Seeing was believing.

8. *It was indulgent.* Meat was a relative rarity in the ancient world. Most people didn’t have extra animals to slaughter, so they tended to eat meat only as a part of ritual worship. They would sacrifice an animal and present a drink offering, and then feast together with their family or clan. Idolatry was an occasion for eating the best food and drinking the best wine.

9. *It was erotic.* Many ancients believed that in order to get blessings from the gods, they needed them to mate together in the heavens. If Baal and Asherah hooked up, then their procreation in the heavens would yield fruitful harvests and offspring on earth. But how could they get the divine romance started? The answer was to have sex themselves. That’s why we find cult prostitutes throughout the Old Testament. The ancients believed that if they had sex as a part of religious ritual, then the gods and goddesses would have sex too.

It’s not hard to see why idolatry was so attractive and why Israel was constantly tempted to adopt the same practices. The religion of the world was guaranteed, selfish, easy, convenient, normal, logical, pleasing, indulgent, and erotic. It was a religious system made by men, for men.
When we understand the nature of ancient idolatry, it’s easy to see how we are tempted by the same things. We are just as interested as they were in worship that is entertaining, satisfying, and practical. Our idols look different, but it’s those same idols of sex and ease and convenience that we desire thousands of years later.

**Turn to Christ Uniquely**

As we’ll see throughout these studies, this first commandment (like the others) is transformed by the coming of Christ. By “transformed” I don’t mean that God says, “These commandments don’t apply to you anymore.” But the way they apply—and the way we obey them—does change.

Perhaps “transposed” is even a better word than “transformed.” When a piece of music is transposed, the melody stays the same, but it’s played in a different octave or a different key. That’s sort of how the Ten Commandments change from the Old Testament to the New. It’s the same score, different key. These commandments are still commandments for the church, but they have all been transposed by the coming of Christ.

We can think of this first commandment, in relationship to Christ, as a tale of two mountains. God came down on Mount Sinai, saying, “Worship me alone.” Then, millennia later, he came down on the Mount of Transfiguration and said, “This is my beloved Son . . . ; listen to him” (Matt. 17:5). It’s amazing that the God who said, “Worship me, and listen to my rules,” now tells us to listen to his Son.

On the other side of the incarnation, the first commandment means giving to Christ the worship he deserves. He is the “one mediator between God and men” (1 Tim. 2:5). He is “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:3). He is the one before whom everyone will bow in worship.
(Phil. 2:10–11). As Jesus himself says, “If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him” (John 14:7). In other words, Jesus has the audacity to say, “If you know me, you know God. If you follow me, love me, and worship me, you worship God. When you see me, you have seen God in the flesh.”

The implication from all this is that if you don’t know God in Christ, then you don’t really know God. The first commandment can no longer be properly obeyed unless we worship the one who alone shows us the one true God. It isn’t enough to use the word God or to belong to a monotheistic religion. We are not worshiping the one true God unless we are worshiping the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The coming of Christ has changed everything.

**Four Closing Questions**

In his commentary on the first commandment, Calvin argues that we owe God four things: adoration, trust, invocation, and thanksgiving. Each of these can be applied to Christ as we seek to obey the first commandment. In adoration, we worship Christ. In trust, we treasure Christ. In invocation, we look to Christ. In thanksgiving, we find grace in Christ. That’s how we obey the first commandment as New Testament Christians.

We can use these same four points to ask four diagnostic questions. These will help us determine not just what we say we believe but the nature of the real functional deity in our lives.

1. **Whom do you praise (adoration)?** You may compliment your children, spouse, and friends, but who receives your highest praise?

2. **Whom do you count on (trust)?** Sure, God works through means, such as doctors, insurance companies, and pre-
scription medicine, but when you really are in need, who do you know will always come through?

3. Whom do you call for (invocation)? Where do you look for answers? Where do you turn for purpose and joy? Is it food, work, TV, your phone, or the God of the universe?

4. Whom do you thank? Where do your good days come from? Who made the trees and the stars and that cooing little baby?

Questions like these help to reveal the real gods in our lives. For the one we praise, the one we count on, the one we call for, and the one we thank is the one we worship. Only in Christ can we find satisfying and saving answers to all those questions. Only in him can we truly obey the first commandment. He alone is worthy, willing, and mighty to save.
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