

A GOD-CENTERED LIFE THAT EXALTS CHRIST

A Sermon on Deuteronomy 5:6–15

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Throughout history, few Old Testament texts have impacted the church and society more than the Ten Commandments, which the Hebrew text calls the Ten Words or Decalogue. This special revelation of God at Mount Sinai has influenced art, politics, justice, and ethics worldwide for millennia. The Bible gives us two versions of the Ten, the first in Exodus 20:1–17 and the second in Deuteronomy 5:6–21. Deuteronomy's account is more expansive, suggesting that the form in Exodus is the more original statement housed in the ark of the covenant (Deut 10:1–2, 5), that Deuteronomy's version likely arose from memory, and that the Decalogue retained authority yet in a way that allowed for fresh applications in a new generation. Today, we will begin to consider the message and lasting significance of the Ten Words as they come to us in Deuteronomy.

In 4:13, Moses recalls, “And [Yahweh] declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments, and he wrote them on two tablets of stone.” Then, in 9:10 Moses adds, “And the LORD gave me the two tablets of stone written with the finger of God, and on them were all the words that the LORD had spoken with you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly.” That God gives “ten words” (4:13; 10:4; cf. Exod 24:28) allows for easy memorization, recitation, and discipleship within the family and community. That they came by “the finger of God” on “tablets of stone” (cf. Exod 31:18) highlights their function as the legally binding covenant document that solidified the relation between Yahweh and Israel and that served as a lasting witness between the covenant Lord and his kingdom sons/citizens (Deut 5:22).

The Ten Words are about valuing Yahweh and those made in his image. In short, they are about loving God and neighbor. Following Moses's structure in Deuteronomy 5:6–21, we will approach the Ten in five movements that cover the spectrum of Israel's relationship with God. Today we'll cover the initial three, and then next time we'll look at the last two and reflect more on the Decalogue's lasting significance for Christians today. The five movements include worldview and worship (Word 1, vv. 6–10), daily witness (Word 2, v. 11), weekly household patterns (Word 3, vv. 12–15), family relationships (Word 4, v. 16), and community relationships (Words 5–10, vv. 17–21). All of life is to be subject to God's rule.

Word 1: Worldview and Worship (vv. 6–10)

The revelation opens with Yahweh speaking in first-person: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of

slavery” (v. 6). Yahweh identifies himself in personal terms as “your God” who delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. They were needy, and Yahweh had arrived as a warrior to save, defeating the oppressor and rescuing the oppressed. Now, Israel had switched masters—slaves not to Egypt but Yahweh (6:13; 10:12; cf. Exod 3:12; 14:5), and this fact brings with it demands. But before ever giving prohibitions or commands, God reminds Israel of his past grace so that it might fuel their present loyalty. Let your experience of God’s power and benevolence yesterday help you trust and obey today.

This now leads to the main injunction: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Deut 5:7). While not clear in English, this initial charge relates not to Yahweh having highest priority or rank among many but to his status as the only sovereign, the one who acts alone, not as the head of a pantheon of rival deities but as the sole and ultimate power in the universe. Throughout the Old Testament, whenever the Hebrew preposition rendered “before” occurs with a personal object, the meaning is always spacial, which means that the stress is that Yahweh has no peers in his presence. When you think about the heavenly court, picture only one throne, for Yahweh does not share rule, authority, or jurisdiction with any other. “Yahweh is one” (6:4). There are other spiritual beings, but they are all created and thus subordinate to Yahweh—serving him (1 Kgs 22:19), bowing to him (Ps 29:2), obeying him (103:20–21), and praising him (148:2–5). “[Yahweh] is God; there is no other beside him” (Deut 4:35; cf. 10:17; Ps 95:3).

Jesus “is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2), taking no glory away from the Father because he is God’s Son with “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matt 28:18). Thus, the author of Hebrews stresses that, “after making purification for sins, [Jesus] sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs” (Heb 1:3–4). That Jesus sits enthroned at God’s right hand proves that Jesus is not like the angels but is indeed God. Paul declares:

We know that “an idol has no real existence” [citing Isa 41:24] and that “there is no God but one” [citing Deut 4:35–36]. For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords” [alluding to Deut 10:17]—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 Decalogue’s first Word speaks to the most fundamental aspect of reality: there is only one Sovereign—one Causer of all, and creation is subservient to him. He stands alone in both class and function; he is not the first among equals

but is the sole decisive mover in the universe who alone is worthy of worship. Both in his being and his actions he is exceptional or transcendent.

The implications of this truth are massive and clarify the very essence of the world's problem. Paul says,

Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.... Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.... They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever.... They did not see fit to acknowledge God. (Rom 1:21–23, 25, 28)

Where are you placing your trust today? Whatever we value most is our god, and how easily we create new gods of comfort, ease, health, wealth, success, reputation, or power. In our marriages, we prize being right and winning the argument over patience and self-sacrificing love. In our work, we cherish approval from the majority over a faithful witness to Christ. In our sports or even in our ministry, we esteem the praise of men over a quiet honoring of God. Friends, this should not be. Yahweh alone sits on the throne of the universe, and, therefore, he alone is worthy of holding the place of God in our lives. Surrender to him today.

What follows are two explanatory prohibitions that clarify implications of the initial charge: God's people are not allowed to construct an image (v. 8) or to worship other gods (v. 9). First, we must ask if verse 8 is forbidding fashioning an image of Yahweh or of a false deity? I think both. Israel broke this prohibition when they made the golden calf (9:16) and declared, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" (Exod 32:4). The single sculptured calf represented multiple gods, and we're told that in shaping it the people "had turned aside quickly from the way that the LORD had commanded" (Deut 9:16; cf. Exod 32:8). When did he command it? In the Ten Words!

The prohibition against a graven image also restricts misrepresenting Yahweh. Back in 4:15, Moses recalled how Yahweh revealed himself at the mountain as Spirit without form. Then, on this basis, using very similar language to 5:8, Moses warned Israel not to carve an image in the likeness of any created thing—"the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth" (4:16–18). Yahweh created humanity in his likeness, but humans have no right to attempt to recast the creator in their likeness or in the likeness of any other created thing. The result would be falsehood, for it automatically diminishes his transcendent greatness and supremacy. I don't think this prohibition would restrict

representing in art the creational disturbances like fire, cloud, and thick darkness that Bible associates with the intrusion of Yahweh's presence in space and time. I also don't think it would disallow casting a person in the role of Jesus in an Easter pageant, the "Jesus" film, or "The Chosen" TV series, for the Son of God did indeed take on flesh and dwell among us. So, what the Ten Words are prohibiting is the representation of Yahweh as Spirit in the form of creation.

The second explanatory prohibition is explicit that to envision a single throne in heaven means that Yahweh will allow no rivals with respect to veneration and devotion. The "them" of verse 9 likely refers to the only other plural in context—the "other gods" of verse 7; this grammatically links verses 7 and 9 and shows they are part of the same Word. Back in 4:19, Moses warned, "Beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, things that the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven." The Egyptians treated as gods all these created realities, which God had given the world as markers of providence—"for signs and for seasons and for days and years" (Gen 1:14). A beautiful sunrise should have moved them not to worship the sun but to praise its giver. How often do we fail to give God the glory he deserves? How often do we praise ourselves for successes or live as if we earned the right to ease or comfort, forgetting that in God alone do "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28)? How often do we value what is empty or even praise what is praiseworthy yet in a way that does not recognize God as ultimate? May the Lord help us honor him for who he is as the great giver of all.

In the rest of verses 9–10, Yahweh gives the main reason why Israel must worship him alone: "for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments." Yahweh is jealous (cf. Exod 34:14) like a husband is jealous for his wife; the marriage covenant demands mutual respect and loyalty, and jealousy in the covenant context is right, necessary, and loving.

Yahweh is right to expect that his people love him and keep his commandments because he alone is preeminent over all things and therefore worthy of worship (Exod 34:14; Deut 32:39; Rom 11:36; Col 1:16). Punishing those who hate him is a necessary part of his jealousy because if Yahweh, as sovereign of the universe, allowed his glory to be given to another, declaring something else worthy of highest praise, he would stop being God and the world would end (Isa 42:8; 48:11; Job 34:14–15; cf. Heb 1:3). Finally, Yahweh's jealousy for his people's affection is the most loving thing he could do because he alone can save (Isa 43:10–11; 45:21; Hos 13:4) and has saved Israel (Deut 5:6) and

because he alone can satisfy with full joy for the longest among of time (Ps 16:11; Matt 13:44; John 15:10–11). Therefore, Yahweh is jealous for his people's loyalty.

“We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). Deuteronomy 5:9–10 testifies to this truth. However, only punishment remains for those who reject or misrepresent Yahweh—a penalty that could impact all in household, even when four generations live under a single roof. May we not look elsewhere for help or satisfaction when God himself is the ultimate deliverer and greatest pleasure.

This week my son Ezra had a chance as a senior to challenge his cross-country team; he urged them not to chase after wins, as if they are supreme, but to chase after Jesus, who is eternally unchanging and whose worth will never wear out. The prophet Samuel said something similar: “Do not turn aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart. And do not turn aside after empty things that cannot profit or deliver, for they are empty” (1 Sam 12:20–21).

Word 2: Daily Witness (v. 11)

My last sermon noted how, in Deuteronomy 5, Moses is recalling the events from Mount Sinai to clarify why Israel must heed his instruction; at that mountain the people and God appointed him to mediate the covenant as God's mouthpiece. Verse 23 notes that, as soon as the community began to hear Yahweh speaking from the fire, the leaders ran to Moses in terror, thinking they would surely die. Then in verse 27 they plead to Moses, “Go near and hear all that the LORD our God will say and speak to us all that the LORD our God will speak to you, and we will hear and do it.” I recall this event because it likely explains why Yahweh is speaking in first person in verses 6–10 but then Moses in verses 11 and following speaks about Yahweh in third person. Word 2 is the point when Israel stopped listening directly to Yahweh and where Moses started clarifying God's instruction. Thus, we read, “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.”

In popular circles, taking God's name in vain is limited to casual, crass, or disrespectful use of God's name in speech. However, the phrase “taking or bearing the name” points not just to speech but to lifestyle, witness, and representation. Those “bearing” the name are those “called by Yahweh's name” (Deut 28:10; Dan 9:19), who have had his name “placed” on them (Num 6:27) and who claim Yahweh as their own (Isa 44:5). To keep God's word and to remain in the faith is to “hold fast” to Yahweh's name and not to “deny” it (Rev 2:13; 3:8), whereas to portray a warped view of Yahweh's power, will, and worth through poor judgment and rebellious behavior “profanes” his name (Ezek 36:22–23). “Bearing Yahweh's name” is about God's image in human lives; it's about reflecting, resembling, and

representing God rightly through covenant obedience, whether in public or in private. As Moses says later: “The LORD will establish you as a people holy to himself, ... if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in his ways. And all the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they shall be afraid of you” (Deut 28:9–10). Those made in God’s image who have surrendered to Yahweh’s claim on their lives must live for God’s fame, and this is done significantly by seeing the principles laid out in the Decalogue embodied in our lives. This is the point of Word 2.

Every week in the fall I am faced with the challenge of living as a Lion’s fan amidst the Chief’s kingdom. We mark our team loyalties by how we dress and talk. Similarly, as a church, we are a heavenly embassy in a foreign land. We identify with Jesus’s kingdom, and we are to represent it well. May our thoughts, speech, actions, and reactions testify that Jesus is Lord of our lives. May our priorities and witness declare that Jesus saves sinners from sin’s penalty and power and that he alone is worthy of our trust and hope. Do not bear Yahweh’s name in vain.

Word 3: Weekly Household Patterns (vv. 12–15)

Beginning in verse 12, we read: “Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God” (Deut 5:12–14). The noun Sabbath is related to the Hebrew verb meaning “to cease, rest.” Following the exodus, Yahweh established a 6 + 1 pattern of life for Israel, wherein they would work for daily bread the initial six days of the week and then cease from work on the seventh, looking solely to God to supply (Exod 16).

The Exodus version of the Decalogue explicitly grounds this weekly rhythm in the creation, “for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth ... and rested on the seventh,” thus making it “holy” (20:11). This link is only assumed in Deuteronomy’s version. After God’s original workweek, he enjoyed the rest of sovereignty, for all the world was at peace with him and he was at peace with the world (Gen 2:1–3; cf. Ps 132:7–8, 13–14). However, the fall into sin and curse disrupted the right order, so, in time, Yahweh raised up Abraham and ultimately Israel to serve as the agent through whom he would overcome the world’s curse with blessing and restore right order to the universe. God said of Abraham that “all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him” (Gen 18:18; cf. 12:3), and Yahweh commissioned Israel to serve as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” amidst the earth, thus displaying his wonders to the world (Exod 19:6; cf. Deut 4:6–8; 26:19; 32:43). Just as the rainbow and circumcision were covenant signs, God made Israel’s weekly Sabbath the sign of the old Mosaic covenant (Exod 31:13–17), something about it clarified the very purpose of Israel’s existence.

Through the 6 + 1 pattern, God reminded Israel every week that they were living for a goal—to see rest restored on a global scale. Peace with God was not only for them but was something they should ultimately want to see the nations enjoy. Deuteronomy highlights this outward movement by calling the heads of households to ensure that all under their care benefit from the weekly rhythm of rest. Thus verse 14 adds, “On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.” Notice how this Word addresses not the children, servants, or cattle but the household heads and calls them to work for the benefit of all under their care. This redefines what so many think of leadership, for the focus is on not what others owe the leader but what the leader owes others. The true leader serves, working for the welfare of his home.

Verse 15 then calls the community to remember how great a victory Yahweh gave them through the exodus to understand why he gave them the Sabbath. I think the logic is this: Because God gave Israel rest and right order through the exodus, he gave them the Sabbath to remind them that he wants to do this again for the whole world. Having tasted the hope of dawn, the joy of healing, and the freedom of deliverance, they must keep the Sabbath to both display and remind themselves of their mission. The world was not here for God’s people, but they were here for the world with a goal of seeing the seventh day restored, right order reestablished, and peace with God renewed on a global scale.

In answer to the global problem of sin and curse, Yahweh raised up a people through whom would come a person to save the world from its sins. Israel’s 6 + 1 rhythm of work leading to rest reminded them of this goal. Then, in the fulness of time, Jesus came as Israel’s representative; he is the ultimate king-priest who perfectly obeys where the nation failed, and through him alone you can gain a right relationship with God. Thus, Jesus urges, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). In coming to Jesus “you will find rest for your souls” because he is “lord of the Sabbath” (11:29; 12:8). The old covenant Sabbath symbolized a goal that Jesus secures, as the Sabbath “shadow” gives rise to “substance” (Col 2:16–17). He rose on a Sunday morning, and because of this we gather weekly on Sunday to testify to ourselves and one another that rest for our souls is now real and that one day it will be complete. Sunday is not the new Christian Sabbath; it is called the Lord’s Day for on a Sunday Jesus inaugurated the fulfillment of rest and right order that Christians now experience 24–7. “There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God” (Heb 4:9), and all who are in Christ are already experiencing it truly, even as we look forward to when we will enjoy it completely when “he will wipe away every tear ... and death shall be

no more” (Rev 21:4). In a world filled with stresses, deadlines, and relational tensions, Christ has already secured you peace with God and rest for your soul.

Conclusion

We’ve considered the first Three Words of the Ten, and all of them are radically God-centered and exalt Jesus. Word 1 informs worldview and worship and never allows for any God but Yahweh, who will have no misrepresentation or rivals because he is rightly, necessarily, and lovingly jealous for his people’s love. And because God elevated Jesus to his right hand and because Jesus is himself worthy of worship, we know that he is indeed God. Word 2 addresses daily witness and calls all who bear Yahweh’s name to do so faithfully without compromise, following the way of Christ who declared to God, “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me.... Keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one” (John 17:6, 11). Finally, Word 3 speaks to weekly household patterns, which served as a pointer for Israel to the peace and rest we are now enjoying in Christ. Israel was to keep the Sabbath “to the LORD your God,” which means they exalted God by trusting him for provision and by recalling that their missional goal was to see rest realized on a global scale. Jesus secures this rest and peace with God for all who trust in him. God shows himself to be the Savior, Sovereign, and Satisfier as he delivers, dominates, and delights through Jesus. We have counted the first three Commands; may the Lord now help us make them count. Pray with me....