

Exodus 19:16–20:12 – Honor

The Ten Commandments begin and they're all about honor. First, we are to honor God as the only God, the creator of everything. There are no other God's, and idolatry is thus banned. We are even to honor His name and His Sabbath. Similarly, we are to honor our parents.

This forms into a pattern of humility for God's people.

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Thank you.

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1 Exodus 19:16-25 (ESV)

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

And the LORD said to Moses, “Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the LORD to look and many of them perish. Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, lest the LORD break out against them.” And Moses said to the LORD, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, ‘Set limits around the mountain and consecrate it.’” And the LORD said to him, “Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD, lest he break out against them.” So Moses went down to the people and told them.

Moses has been here before. Mount Sinai is the same as Mount Horeb – where a burning bush told Moses to liberate his people. Now the whole mountain is filled with smoke and thunder and lightning. *The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.* What does that mean? What’s so different about the smoke and why is that worth mentioning?

A kiln (or “furnace” in some translations) burns hotter than an open fire. The smoke is fast rising and not chased by flames. It doesn’t look like a forest fire.

But a forest fire is what you’d expect here, especially since it seems to have been started by lightning. No other kind of fire makes sense anyway. Thus, this hotter, stronger fire has an intimidating, unnatural feel. Just as the burning bush was striking in that the bush wasn’t consumed, this fire looks impossible.

The whole scene just tingles with supernatural power.

We memorize all the verses about God’s power and we understand it, but we don’t pray like we expect Him to use it. We understand that God can do anything, but we shrink from bold prayer.

Consider revisiting an old prayer request that was never granted – one that you wanted with all you heart, but God seemed to say, “no.”

Now if God really did give you a clear “no,” that one’s complete. But if He simply left it “on the table,” dig a little deeper and get more desperate. You may get a clear “no” – or maybe something else.

2 Exodus 20:1-3 (NKJV)

And God spoke all these words, saying:

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

“You shall have no other gods before Me.”

This passage makes more sense in Hebrew. It literally says, “You shall have no other gods in my face.”

The English translation sounds more like the LORD wants to be first among gods. Actually, the commandment is more like when a parent says, “I’d better not see any ...”

This commandment has to be first. Without this solid foundation, the other commandments don’t have a point of reference. Since all other gods aren’t real, they have no significance other than evidence of overactive imaginations.

Someone who views the LORD as just one among many gods is too confused to understand anything else.

Jesus made an important extension.

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” – Matthew 6:24 (NKJV)

So, with silly statue worship pretty much a thing of the past, *other gods* in Exodus 20:3 now refers to anything that controls you – money, exercise, golf, etc.

Most of these are normal. It’s good to manage your money wisely. There’s nothing wrong with exercising or playing golf. Healthy activities are great; just don’t obsess on them.

Unfortunately, our fallen nature makes us naturally obsessive. We act like we don’t want the LORD to control our entire lives; yet we let other things control us. Isn’t that what the word “Lord” is about?

Thus our battle with sin isn’t just about the bad things we do. We need to check on the good things to see if they have become sinful obsessions.

And the frightening thing is, obsessing over some good thing can be worse than the things we normally think of as sinful. This is tricky stuff. Anything can be twisted by our sinful nature into a problem. Everyone has something they are really “into.” Is that sinful?

No. The question is, “Do you control it, or does it control you?” For example, do you exercise when you’re sick and you probably shouldn’t be exercising? Do you play golf when the weather makes it no fun? Do you check your investments constantly? Whatever it is, can you take a break from it for a while to do other things without that stressing you out? Is “your thing” fun or necessary?

Ask the Holy Spirit to search your heart and root out other gods.

3 Exodus 20:4-6 (NKJV)

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”

At first glance, this commandment seems to ban all religious art. But that can't be it because God will soon specify art objects for the tabernacle.

The key to understanding this passage is to recognize the distinctions between this commandment and the first. This one isn't about worshipping other gods; it's about how to worship the real one. Of course, it's possible to break both commandments at the same time, but this one is principally about not misrepresenting the true God.

We don't know what God looks like but we want to and can't seem to resist the temptation to experiment. Images make us complacent and too “buddy-buddy” with God. Consider these descriptions of actually being in the presence of God.

And he said, “Please, show me Your glory.”

Then He said, “I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you.” ... But He said, “You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live.” And the LORD said, “Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen.” – Exodus 33:18-23 (NKJV)

So I said: “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts.” – Isaiah 6:5 (NKJV)

The closest thing in modern medicine to this is radiation sickness. Looking upon God is a bit like looking at a nuclear bomb. Remember, people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki **literally** had their faces fall off.

But that's not what God looks like either; I just said that to shake things up. Turning the bomb idea into a mental image of God would be the exact error we must avoid.

You can't visualize God.

Christians are often insufficiently intimidated by the LORD. We get bumper stickers that say things like, “God is my co-pilot.”

Seriously? Is God in training to be a pilot? Be awed by His majesty and holiness in your meditations.

4 Exodus 20:7 (NKJV)

“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.”

Out of respect for this very commandment, translators universally mistranslate this verse. God has a name – a personal name just like you and I have. That name is the four Hebrew letters “yod, hay, vav, hay” (YHVH). It’s so tricky to pronounce that common English transliterations include “Jehovah” and “Yahweh.” Can you imagine how a single spelling in any other language could lead to two pronunciations that far apart?

This is by design; God made His name almost impossible to pronounce. Most modern translations just translate YHVH as “the LORD.” Never saying God’s name obviously prevents saying it vainly.

But people in the Bible used God’s name in conversation (always respectfully, of course). For example Ruth spoke God’s name in conversation.

But Ruth said:

*“Entreat me not to leave you ...
The LORD do so to me, and more also,
If anything but death parts you and me.”*

When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her. – Ruth 1:16-18 (NKJV)

Ruth actually says, *“May YHVH do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts me from you.”*

She uses God’s name to make a point about her willingness to follow Him.

The third commandment isn’t against using God name; it’s against using it in vain. Still, the universal judgment of the experts is not something to be taken lightly. Is there a safe alternative?

Yes. Jews either pronounce YHVH as “ha shem” (Hebrew for “the name”) or as “Adonai” (Hebrew for “lord”). For example, the Complete Jewish Bible uses “Adonai,” instead of “the LORD.”

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ruth+1&version=CJB>

I like “Adonai” because, to my ear, it sounds like a name. This gives the passage a more personal feel. Follow the link above and see if you don’t agree.

Honoring God’s name is also key to the Lord’s Prayer. Consider the words carefully. Try praying the way Jesus taught us to pray but not by reciting it from rote.

Dwell on each part and pray what it means. This can be an eye opening exercise.

5 Exodus 20:8-11 (NKJV)

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.”

Moses has been super busy since the moment God called him. The scrolls of the Torah are far from done. At this time the details of creation are, at most, an oral tradition.

Thus, when Moses announces this commandment, it’s the first time some folks have heard of God creating the universe in six days and resting on the seventh. They’ve had a Sabbath from collecting manna every week, but may have wondered why.

Now God explains it. The Sabbath is part of the structure of reality. There is a link between what the universe is and how it was created.

God wants this celebrated and honored.

From a secular point of view, this is completely arbitrary. Secularists like weekends too much to complain, but they don’t really buy it. To them, weekends have no meaning.

This mentality infects Christianity in America. Many of us go to church on Sunday but don’t make the whole day special. That’s a bigger mistake than we realize. God wants the Sabbath to be honored and it’s so important to Him that this commandment precedes all but the most foundation ones. It’s a big deal.

If you go to church and then hit the stores and start projects, you might want to rethink that. Pray and meditate on this. Devise a plan for how to keep the Sabbath Holy and stick to it.

Praying about how to honor the Sabbath is generally a longer effort than a single quiet time. Just get this started. Whether your Sabbath keeping is minimal or excellent you can ask the Holy Spirit to shine a light on the weaknesses. Ask Him to convict you and open your eyes.

To be honest, my plan needs work too. I avoid doing anything strenuous on Sunday, because science defines work as force times distance. No exercise, no moving anything heavy, no chores that cause me to break a sweat.

But that’s it. Amazingly, God has blessed this small commitment. Still, I wouldn’t recommend my method for keeping the Sabbath to anyone but an absolute beginner. I need a better plan.

Please email me suggestions at mikeslay@ailbe.org.

Iron sharpens iron.

6 Exodus 20:12 (NKJV)

“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”

Now we move from the big, structure of everything commandments to some basic rules of behavior. This one stands out because it includes a promise for those who obey the command – *your days may be long upon the land that the LORD your God is giving you.*

There are two interesting twists in how this commandment applies to the Israelites it’s being delivered to. First, for them, living longer as a result of honoring your father and mother is pretty obvious. Your kids are watching how you treat your parents – especially in their old age. They’re learning how it’s done.

How you treat your parents will be the foundation for how your kids treat you. Life in biblical times have no Social Security and no 401Ks; your kids are your retirement plan. In fact, there’s not really such a thing as retirement; people contribute what they can to the family until they die. If your kids didn’t honor you, your senior years won’t be great.

The other twist is that the people hearing this aren’t going to live long in *the land that the LORD your God is giving you*, because they aren’t going to live there at all. They’ll blow it. Their rebellion will lead to their not making it there. They’ll die in the desert. Their lives won’t be all that long either.

Of course, the commandment is permanent and later generations will experience the value of it.

This commandment has blossomed into a magnificent calling for the modern church.

But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. – 1 Timothy 5:8 (NKJV)

Except parents are not now typically members of the same household as their grown children. Besides, our government has taken over some of this responsibility, especially with respect to healthcare. But note:

Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world. – James 1:27 (NKJV)

Our changing society has connected these two verse to produce a glorious calling for the church. Paul’s admonishment in 1 Timothy 5:8 now applies to us as a body. In 21st century America, ministering to orphans and widows isn’t just a sign of pure and undefiled religion. Anything less is a sign of unbelief.

If a widow in the church has, say, a plumbing problem, who do they call? If calling the church wouldn’t even cross their mind, something is not functioning up to standard.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What was the most curious/creative/bizarre response to prayer you have ever seen?
2. What things do you do that you wonder if you do them too much?
3. What is your mental image of God? How is it wrong?
4. Is calling God by His name inappropriately personal (like a child calling an adult by their first name)?
5. How should we go beyond just relaxing so as to seriously “remember the Sabbath and keep it holy”?
6. What is your church doing for widows and orphans?

Items for prayer: