

REASON TOGETHER CHURCH

THE TEN WORDS WE THOUGHT WE KNEW

A TEN-PART SERIES | PART ONE OF TEN

CAN SOMETHING BE YOUR GOD IF YOU NEVER BOW TO IT?



DR. THOMAS W. HAWKSLEY

HEARING SINAI THROUGH ANCIENT EARS

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SERMON TRANSCRIPT

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Reason Together Church

Aloha.

Welcome to Reason Together Church.

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let us Reason Together the Word of God.

If this is your first time with us, you are an honored guest.

You do not need to agree with everything before you are welcome here.

You do not need to hide your questions.

You do not need to pretend that familiar Bible words have always been easy to understand.

We are here because we believe honest questions and an open Bible belong in the same room.

If you would like us to stay in contact with you, our guest card asks for only your first name and email address.

We do not need your home address, telephone number or a complete history of your life.

We simply want the opportunity to welcome you and let you know what is happening at Reason Together Church.

Our Keiki Kids Center is available for the children.

Families are also welcome to keep their children with them if they prefer.

After the service, please join us at the Reason Together Cafe.

The coffee is free.

The refills are free.

The conversations are free too.

COFFEE reminds us that Christ Offers Forgiveness For Everyone Everywhere.

Today we are beginning a ten-part series called The Ten Words We Thought We Knew.

Most of us know them as the Ten Commandments.

Some of us memorized them as children.

Some of us have seen them engraved on stone, printed on plaques or posted on courthouse walls.

We may know their familiar English wording so well that we assume there is nothing left to ask.

But familiarity can sometimes keep us from listening.

The Bible itself calls them the Ten Words.

That expression appears in Exodus and Deuteronomy.

It reminds us that these were not originally ten isolated slogans printed on ten separate posters.

They were covenant words spoken by God to a people He had delivered.

They were heard in a particular place.

They were heard by people with a particular history.

They were heard in a world filled with temples, idols, kings, household gods and competing claims of divine power.

During this series, we will listen as carefully as we can to what those people would have heard.

We will compare Exodus with Deuteronomy.

We will occasionally examine a Hebrew word or phrase.

We will consider the ancient setting.

We will also ask what Jesus and the rest of Scripture reveal about the commandment.

The Hebrew will not be used as a trick.

It will not be used to suggest that nobody understood the Bible until we arrived.

It will help us slow down and hear details that a short English summary can sometimes hide.

Our purpose is not to make the commandments say something strange.

Our purpose is to let them say everything God intended them to say.

Before we begin, let us pray.

Our Heavenly Father, thank You for giving us Your Word.

Thank You for speaking before we knew how to listen.

Thank You for delivering before You commanded.

Thank You for inviting us into truth rather than leaving us to manufacture truth for ourselves.

As we begin this series, protect us from pride.

Protect us from the pride that assumes familiar words cannot teach us anything new.

Protect us also from the pride that chases novelty simply because it sounds impressive.

Help us listen carefully.

Help us reason honestly.

Help us distinguish what Your Word says from what we have merely repeated.

Reveal every divided allegiance in us.

And when You reveal it, lead us toward repentance, grace and freedom through Jesus Christ.

We ask this in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

Our primary Scripture reading comes from Exodus chapter 20, beginning with verse 1.

The King James Version says:

"And God spake all these words, saying,

I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

Before we enter the study, I want to say a brief word about giving.

We do not pass an offering plate at Reason Together Church.

If you are visiting today, we do not expect you to give.

If you are a member of another church, we encourage you to support your home church.

For those who consider Reason Together Church their church home and feel led to give, there is a giving box in the back.

Scripture teaches that God loves a cheerful giver.

Giving should be willing, thoughtful and directed toward God.

It should never be purchased applause.

It should never be a payment intended to place God in our debt.

It should never be used by a church to measure the value of a person.

In fact, giving takes us directly toward today's question.

What do we trust?

What gives us security?

What possesses our allegiance?

Israel did not purchase deliverance from Egypt.

God delivered Israel before He brought them to Sinai.

Grace came before the command.

Then the God who delivered them asked what kind of allegiance a delivered people would give Him.

Most people who hear the first commandment feel reasonably safe.

"Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

We hear those words and begin checking our religious inventory.

No carved idol in the living room.

No household shrine in the bedroom.

No incense burning before a statue.

No prayer offered to Baal.

No sacrifice made to Molech.

No visit to a pagan temple.

The inventory appears clean.

So we mark the first commandment complete.

But notice something.

The first commandment does not mention a statue.

It does not mention an image.

That comes next.

The first commandment does not mention bowing.

That also comes next.

The first commandment begins with a claim of exclusive allegiance.

"Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

So here is our question.

Can something be your god if you never bow to it?

Can something control you without receiving a prayer?

Can something demand sacrifices without possessing an altar?

Can something promise salvation without calling itself divine?

Can something be your god while you continue calling yourself a Christian?

Before we answer, we need to notice the sentence that comes before the commandment.

God does not begin by saying, "Obey Me, and perhaps I will rescue you."

He says:

"I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

That order matters.

Egypt was not merely a difficult location.

It was the house of bondage.

Israel had been enslaved.

Their labor belonged to another.

Their children had lived under threat.

Their future had been controlled by Pharaoh.

They did not negotiate their release.

They did not defeat Egypt's army.

They did not prove themselves worthy and then receive deliverance as a reward.

God acted.

God heard their cry.

God confronted Pharaoh.

God brought them through the sea.

God fed them in the wilderness.

Then God spoke.

The commandments did not create their rescue.

The commandments taught rescued people how to live with their Deliverer.

That pattern matters for us too.

We do not keep commandments in order to persuade God to begin loving us.

We do not obey so that Jesus might decide to die for us.

We do not earn grace by becoming acceptable before we approach Him.

Romans chapter 5 says that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Grace comes first.

But grace does not leave allegiance unchanged.

The God who delivers us has a rightful claim upon us.

The first word Israel hears after the announcement of deliverance is not a suggestion that the Lord be included somewhere in an already crowded religious life.

It is exclusivity.

"Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

The Hebrew expression is short.

Lo yihyeh lekha elohim acherim al-panai.

Do not worry about memorizing that.

Listen to the final expression.

Al-panai.

It can be rendered before Me, before My face or in My presence.

We sometimes hear "before me" as a ranking.

God is first.

Family is second.

Work is third.

Everything else comes after that.

There is value in examining priorities.

But that is not permission to keep several gods as long as the Lord remains at the top of the list.

The command does not say, "You may have other gods behind Me."

It does not say, "You may serve other gods as long as I receive the largest offering."

It does not say, "You may divide your worship, but make certain I remain your favorite."

The Lord's presence leaves no room in which another god may safely hide.

Think about covenant marriage.

Imagine a husband saying to his wife:

"You are first among all the women I call my wife."

That would not honor the covenant.

The promise is not about preferred status within divided allegiance.

The promise is exclusive.

That does not mean no other human relationship matters.

It means no other person occupies the covenant place belonging to a spouse.

In the same way, Israel would still have parents, children, leaders, neighbors and responsibilities.

But no other god could occupy the covenant place belonging to the Lord.

The ancient world was filled with claims about gods.

Different peoples associated different gods with rain, fertility, warfare, crops, travel, healing and political power.

A person might attempt to honor several of them because life contained several needs.

If one god helped with the harvest and another helped in battle, divided worship could appear practical.

The first commandment destroys that arrangement.

Israel's safety did not depend upon maintaining good relations with a collection of divine specialists.

The Lord who brought them out of Egypt claimed their undivided worship.

We need to be careful here.

This sermon does not have to settle every question about what the surrounding gods were.

The Bible sometimes describes idols as nothing.

The Bible also warns about spiritual powers associated with idolatrous worship.

Our conclusion does not depend upon resolving that entire subject today.

Whatever claims surrounded Israel, Israel was forbidden to give them allegiance.

The practical temptation was not always to abandon the Lord entirely.

Often it was to add another source of security.

Second Kings chapter 17 describes people who "feared the LORD, and served their own gods."

Listen to that combination.

They feared the Lord.

They served their own gods.

They did not necessarily remove every reference to the Lord.

They did not announce that they had become atheists.

They combined recognition of God with service to rivals.

That may be more spiritually dangerous than an open rejection because divided allegiance can preserve religious language.

The setting of Second Kings makes the warning even sharper.

The king of Assyria had moved populations into the land.

The new residents did not know how to worship the Lord.

A priest was sent back to teach them what the text calls "the manner of the God of the land."

They learned something about the Lord.

They added religious knowledge.

But they also continued making and serving the gods they had brought with them.

They developed a faith that was willing to make room for the Lord without surrendering the rest of the room.

That is syncretism.

It combines loyalties that God has not permitted us to combine.

It does not always deny a Biblical statement.

It may place a Biblical statement beside a controlling belief borrowed from somewhere else.

It may say that God is sovereign while living as though chance rules everything.

It may say that God provides while treating money as the only reliable protector.

It may say that Jesus is Lord while permitting the surrounding culture to define what obedience may cost.

It may say that Scripture is true until Scripture challenges the allegiance we most want to preserve.

The question is not whether God has been given some room.

The question is whether He has been given the throne.

We can sing about the Lord while trusting something else to save us.

We can quote Scripture while obeying another master.

We can attend church while allowing another power to determine our identity.

We can say that God is first while living as though He is unnecessary whenever the other gods are satisfied.

That brings us back to our question.

Can something be your god if you never bow to it?

The New Testament says yes.

Philippians chapter 3 describes people "whose God is their belly."

Paul was not accusing them of building a statue shaped like a stomach.

Their appetite ruled them.

Their desires commanded them.

What should have served became the master.

Colossians chapter 3 calls covetousness idolatry.

Again, Paul is not describing a person kneeling before a coin.

He is describing desire occupying a place that belongs to God.

Jesus said in Matthew chapter 6:

"Ye cannot serve God and mammon."

He did not say that money is always evil.

Money can buy food.

Money can provide shelter.

Money can support ministry.

Money can help a neighbor.

The problem begins when money changes from a tool we steward into a master we serve.

That distinction is important.

We should not call everything we enjoy an idol.

A person can love his wife without worshiping her.

A mother can treasure her children without making them gods.

A person can work diligently without worshiping a career.

We can appreciate a home, enjoy a meal, participate in public life and plan responsibly for the future.

Creation is not the enemy.

The question is what place the created thing occupies.

A good thing becomes spiritually destructive when it demands what belongs ultimately to God.

So how do we recognize a functional god?

Ask what you trust to save you.

Not merely to help you.

To save you.

What must remain intact before you believe your life can still have meaning?

What loss would make you conclude that God can no longer be good?

Ask what determines your identity.

Who are you when the title disappears?

Who are you when the relationship changes?

Who are you when the applause stops?

Who are you when the bank balance falls?

Ask what commands your obedience.

What can persuade you to violate what you know God has said?

What desire regularly receives a yes after God has received a no?

Ask what you fear most.

Fear can reveal worship because fear identifies the power we believe controls our future.

Ask what receives your sacrifices.

Every god eventually asks for something.

Some ask for integrity.

Some ask for family.

Some ask for sleep.

Some ask for compassion.

Some ask for truth.

Some ask for the quiet surrender of conscience.

A functional god also offers a functional salvation.

Approval promises that rejection will no longer hurt if enough people admire us.

Money promises that uncertainty will disappear if enough has been accumulated.

Achievement promises that we will finally be worthy after the next accomplishment.

Control promises that nothing painful will happen if every variable can be managed.

Pleasure promises that emptiness will disappear after one more experience.

These promises contain enough truth to attract us.

Approval can encourage.

Money can solve real problems.

Achievement can reflect faithful labor.

Planning can prevent avoidable harm.

Pleasure can be received with thanksgiving.

The deception begins when a limited gift makes an unlimited promise.

No created thing can carry the weight of being our god.

Eventually it will fail under that weight.

And while it is failing, it may demand that we sacrifice more to keep believing.

The god you serve may never ask you to bow.

It only has to receive what belongs to God.

Consider approval.

Wanting to be respected is not automatically idolatry.

But approval becomes a god when the crowd is permitted to overrule Scripture.

It becomes a god when being accepted matters more than being faithful.

It becomes a god when criticism can make us abandon what we know is right.

Consider political identity.

Participating responsibly in public life is not idolatry.

Christians should care about justice, leadership and the welfare of neighbors.

But a political movement becomes a god when it receives the loyalty that prevents correction.

It becomes a god when we excuse conduct in our group that we condemn in another.

It becomes a god when the kingdom of God is reduced to the success of a party, personality or nation.

Consider financial security.

Planning is not idolatry.

Scripture commends wisdom and responsible provision.

But security becomes a god when obedience is impossible unless the numbers guarantee success.

It becomes a god when generosity feels like an attack upon our salvation.

It becomes a god when we believe that enough money can finally make us untouchable.

Consider control.

Order is not idolatry.

Planning is not idolatry.

Leadership is not idolatry.

But control becomes a god when we cannot obey unless we know every outcome.

It becomes a god when prayer is merely an attempt to persuade God to follow our plan.

It becomes a god when uncertainty feels more frightening than disobedience.

Consider family.

Family is a gift from God.

Scripture commands love, provision and faithfulness within the household.

But even family can become a rival when loyalty to a person requires disloyalty to Christ.

Jesus did not teach us to love our families less carelessly.

He taught us to love God so completely that every other love is placed under His truth.

These examples are not accusations.

They are diagnostic questions.

Only God sees the heart perfectly.

And our own hearts can mislead us.

That is why we need Scripture, prayer, honest community and the willingness to be corrected.

Joshua chapter 24 brings Israel to a moment of decision.

Joshua reminded the people that their ancestors had served other gods beyond the flood.

He told them to put away the gods their fathers had served.

Then he said:

"Choose you this day whom ye will serve."

We often display the final line:

"As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

That is a beautiful declaration.

But it was not spoken into a religiously empty room.

It was a demand to put away rivals.

Israel answered that they would serve the Lord.

Joshua pressed the matter.

The people answered again.

Then Joshua told them to put away the strange gods among them and incline their hearts unto the Lord.

The decision required more than adding a sentence about God to the wall of the house.

It required removing divided allegiance from the heart of the house.

Joshua's words also prevent us from treating this as a private intellectual preference.

"Choose you this day whom ye will serve" is not merely, "Choose which religious idea you find most comforting."

Service produces direction.

Service rearranges the household.

Service changes what receives time, labor and obedience.

The people could not choose the Lord while continuing to organize life around the demands of the strange gods.

In the same way, Christian allegiance is more than agreeing that Jesus belongs somewhere within our beliefs.

To confess Jesus as Lord is to acknowledge His rightful authority over the life He has redeemed.

Judges chapter 10 records another moment of crisis.

Israel cried to the Lord after serving other gods.

God reminded them of repeated deliverance and repeated abandonment.

The people confessed:

"We have sinned."

Then Scripture says:

"And they put away the strange gods from among them, and served the LORD."

Repentance became visible in changed service.

They did not merely feel guilty about the idols.

They stopped serving them.

That is an important word for us.

If something has become a god, repentance cannot remain a vague feeling.

We must ask how service to that god appears in practice.

If approval is the god, repentance may require telling the truth when the truth costs approval.

If money is the god, repentance may require honest generosity and obedient decisions that cannot be justified by profit alone.

If control is the god, repentance may require obedience before every outcome is visible.

If comfort is the god, repentance may require entering another person's pain rather than protecting our convenience.

If a political identity is the god, repentance may require applying the same Biblical standard to our own side.

If family approval is the god, repentance may require loving relatives while refusing to participate in what God forbids.

Repentance does not always require abandoning the created thing.

Often it requires removing the created thing from the throne.

Money can return to being a tool.

Work can return to being a calling.

Family can return to being a gift.

Leadership can return to being service.

Planning can return to being stewardship.

The first commandment restores creation to its proper place by restoring God to the place that belongs to Him alone.

But there is still a deeper problem.

Knowing that God deserves exclusive allegiance does not mean we have given it.

Israel heard the voice at Sinai.

Israel saw the signs in Egypt.

Israel crossed the sea.

Israel ate bread from heaven.

And Israel still struggled with divided worship.

Information was not enough.

Fear was not enough.

Miracles were not enough.

The problem was not a shortage of evidence that God had acted.

The problem was the heart's recurring desire for a visible, immediate and controllable source of security.

We share that desire.

We may not stand beside the Red Sea, but we know how quickly yesterday's provision can be forgotten when tomorrow becomes uncertain.

We may thank God for an answered prayer and then panic as though the next need has arrived in a world without Him.

We may remember grace in our testimony while organizing the present entirely around fear.

The first commandment exposes more than incorrect theology.

It exposes practical unbelief.

The law could identify the rival.

It could command the rival to be removed.

But the human heart still needed transformation.

This is where Jesus must not become an attachment added to the final minutes of a sermon about morality.

Jesus stands at the center of the first commandment.

In Matthew chapter 4, Satan showed Jesus the kingdoms of the world and their glory.

He offered the crown without the cross.

He offered visible dominion through one act of false worship.

Jesus answered:

"Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve."

Where Israel divided its service, Jesus remained faithful.

Where we trade obedience for security, Jesus trusted the Father.

Where we reach for a kingdom on easier terms, Jesus walked toward the cross.

He gave the Father the undivided allegiance we have failed to give.

First Corinthians chapter 8 says:

"But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him;
and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him."

Christian faith is not one more spiritual option added to a collection.

It is reconciliation to the one true God through the one Lord Jesus Christ.

The Gospel begins with grace, just as the Ten Words begin with deliverance.

God does not say:

"Defeat every rival in your heart, and then perhaps Christ will receive you."

Christ died for us while we were sinners.

He rose again.

He calls us to repent and believe.

He forgives divided people.

He does not forgive us so that the rivals may remain comfortably enthroned.

Grace liberates us from their rule.

Some of our gods are cruel masters.

Approval never says that enough people approve.

Money never says that the account is finally large enough.

Control never says that every risk has disappeared.

Achievement never says that the final task is complete.

Pleasure never says that no greater sensation is required.

Fear never says that the future is secure.

These masters promise salvation and deliver bondage.

The Lord who spoke at Sinai identified Himself as the God who brought slaves out of the house of bondage.

Jesus still liberates people from masters that cannot save them.

So let us return to the person with no statue.

No idol in the living room.

No shrine in the bedroom.

No pagan prayer on the lips.

Perhaps that person has never bowed physically.

But what receives the first obedience of the heart?

What decides whether life has value?

What possesses the final word?

What must be protected even when faithfulness is sacrificed?

What do we believe can save us?

That is where the first commandment finds us.

And it finds every one of us in need of grace.

Perhaps today you recognize a rival allegiance.

Do not merely rename it.

Bring it into the light.

Confess it to God.

Ask what service to that rival has required.

Ask what obedience to Christ now requires.

Perhaps you recognize that you have known Christian language without being reconciled to God.

You have known about Jesus.

You may have attended church.

You may have tried to live morally.

But you have never turned from sin and trusted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

The first commandment cannot save you by your performance.

It tells the truth about whom you owe allegiance.

The Gospel tells the good news about what God has done for people who failed to give it.

Jesus Christ died for our sins.

He was buried.

He rose again.

He offers forgiveness by grace.

He calls you to repent and believe.

You do not need to negotiate your own release from bondage.

You need to trust the Deliverer.

If you are ready to receive Christ, you may pray with me.

The words do not save you.

Jesus saves.

Prayer is simply the honest expression of faith.

Our Heavenly Father,

I confess that I have sinned against You.

I have given created things trust, obedience and allegiance that belong to You.

I cannot rescue myself.

I believe that Jesus Christ died for my sins.

I believe that He was buried and rose again.

I turn from my sin and place my faith in Jesus Christ.

Forgive me by Your grace.

Make me Your child.

Give me a new heart and teach me to worship You alone.

I ask this in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

Let us pray together once more.

Our Heavenly Father, You alone are God.

You created us.

You sustain us.

You have spoken to us.

You sent Your Son to save sinners.

Forgive us for every divided allegiance.

Forgive us for trusting gifts more than the Giver.

Forgive us for using Your name while obeying another master.

Give us wisdom to distinguish a good gift from a ruling god.

Give us courage to put away what competes with You.

Give us grace to obey without pretending that obedience earns Your love.

Help us leave the house of bondage rather than carrying its masters into freedom.

Make Reason Together Church a place where Jesus Christ is not one interest among many, but Lord.

Protect us from worshiping growth, recognition, money, comfort or control.

Teach us to use every gift beneath Your authority.

Teach us to love every person without asking that person to become our savior.

Teach us to work without asking work to become our identity.

Teach us to plan without pretending that we control tomorrow.

Teach us to participate in this world without confusing any earthly kingdom with Yours.

We ask all of this in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

Before we leave, carry one question with you this week.

What receives from me what belongs to God?

Do not answer too quickly.

Sit with the question.

Pray over it.

Open your Bible with it.

Pay attention to what produces fear, what demands sacrifice and what controls obedience.

If God reveals a rival, remember where the Ten Words began.

They began with deliverance.

The God who exposes bondage is also the God who brings people out.

If you prayed to receive Christ today, please speak with me before you leave.

If you have questions, I would be honored to reason through them with you.

Please join us at the Reason Together Cafe.

The coffee is free, and there are free refills on conversations.

Next time we will move from the first commandment to the second.

We have asked whether something can become our god without receiving a bow.

Next we will ask an apparent contradiction.

If God commanded Israel to make cherubim and other sacred images, what kind of image did He forbid?

Until then, bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let us keep reasoning together the Word of God.

Aloha Nui Loa.

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PASTOR'S COMMENTARY

Can Something Be Your God If You Never Bow to It?

Hearing Sinai Through Ancient Ears

Exodus 20:1-3

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Pastor & Teacher

www.ReasonTogether.Church

*Bring your questions. Open your Bible.
Let's Reason Together the Word of God.*

Introduction

The first commandment is easy to recognize and easy to dismiss. Many readers hear, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me,' look for a statue or shrine, find none and assume the command has little left to say. This Commentary slows that conclusion. The first word is not limited to carved objects, and it does not begin with a demand made by an unknown deity. It begins with the LORD identifying Himself as Israel's God and Deliverer.

This is Part One of The Ten Words We Thought We Knew. The series is not designed to make familiar commandments sound strange. Its purpose is to restore the setting that familiarity often removes. We will listen to the words as covenant speech, examine Hebrew where it clarifies the English text, consider what Israel's neighbors believed and follow the command through the rest of Scripture toward Jesus Christ.

The distinction between this study and the next one is important. Exodus 20:3 asks whom Israel may have as God. Exodus 20:4-6 addresses graven images, likenesses, bowing and service. The subjects overlap, but they are not identical. A person may violate the first commandment without owning an image. Part Two will consider what kind of image God forbade and why the tabernacle itself contained commanded visual art.

Controlling answer: Yes. Something can function as a god without receiving a physical bow because Biblical worship includes allegiance, trust and service. A created thing becomes a rival when it receives the saving trust, final identity, governing obedience, controlling fear or ultimate sacrifice that belongs to God. The first word begins with deliverance and calls a rescued people to undivided allegiance.

How This Series Reads the Ten Words

Exodus 34:28, Deuteronomy 4:13 and Deuteronomy 10:4 call these covenant statements the 'ten commandments' in the King James Version, translating language that more literally means the Ten Words. The expression does not reduce their authority. It reminds us that the text came as divine speech within a covenant relationship, not as ten detached slogans assembled for a wall display.

Jewish, Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed traditions do not all number the statements in exactly the same way. This series follows the common Protestant arrangement in which the prohibition of other gods is the first commandment and the prohibition of graven images is the second. The numbering question is worth knowing, but it must not become a distraction from obeying the text.

Four habits will guide the ten studies. First, read what comes before and after the familiar line. Second, compare Exodus 20 with Deuteronomy 5 and related passages. Third, use language and history as servants of the text rather than as displays of expertise. Fourth, ask how the entire canon reveals both our failure and God's saving work in Christ.

1. The Speaker Identifies Himself Before He Commands

The First Sentence Is Part of the Theology

Exodus 20:1 says, 'And God spake all these words, saying.' Verse 2 then identifies the speaker: 'I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.' Only after that declaration comes verse 3: 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me.' The command cannot be interpreted faithfully if the Deliverer is removed from its introduction.

The covenant name LORD appears in the King James Version with capital letters. The speaker is not presenting Himself as one anonymous power among many. He is the God who heard Israel's cry, confronted Pharaoh, judged Egypt, opened the sea and sustained His people in the wilderness. The words 'thy God' are personal and covenantal. The words 'brought thee out' locate the relationship in history.

The House of Bondage

Egypt was not merely an inconvenient address. It was the house of bondage. Pharaoh claimed Israel's labor, threatened Israel's sons and attempted to control Israel's future. The people did not purchase release or win it by military strength. God acted before they could present a record of obedience at Sinai.

This sequence protects the commandments from legalism. Israel was not told to obey in order to persuade God to become Deliverer. The rescued people were taught how life with their Deliverer must be ordered. Obedience was the response of covenant belonging, not the price of liberation.

Grace Before Command

The Gospel is not identical to the exodus, but it preserves this gracious order. Romans 5:8 says, 'But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.' Christ did not wait for divided people to achieve perfect allegiance before He gave Himself. Grace acts first, and grace then calls the redeemed person into a life under the Lordship of Christ.

This order guards against two opposite errors. Legalism treats obedience as the purchase price of acceptance. Presumption treats grace as permission to leave every rival untouched. Biblical grace does neither. The God who brings people out of bondage has a rightful claim upon the lives He has rescued.

2. Hearing the Hebrew Clause Carefully

Six Hebrew Words

The Hebrew clause is concise: lo yihyeh lekha elohim acherim al-panai. In Hebrew script it appears as: לֹא־יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל־פָּנָי. The purpose of displaying the language is not to make the command inaccessible. It allows us to notice how much meaning the familiar English sentence carries.

Expression	Basic sense	Contribution	Necessary caution
lo	not / no	Introduces the prohibition.	The force belongs to the complete clause.
yihyeh lekha	there shall be to you / you shall have	Concerns what Israel recognizes and maintains as its gods.	'Have' includes allegiance and relationship, not ownership alone.
elohim acherim	other gods	Names rival divine claims.	The command need not settle every question about their ontology before forbidding allegiance.
al-panai	before me / before my face / in my presence	Places every rival before the LORD's own presence.	The exclusivity rests on the covenant context and wider canon, not on one preposition alone.

'Before Me' Is Not a Ranking Permission

Modern readers sometimes convert 'before me' into a priority list: God first, family second, work third and other concerns after that. Examining priorities can be helpful, but the verse is not authorizing several gods as long as the LORD receives the highest rank. It does not say that other gods may remain behind Him or that divided worship becomes acceptable when He receives the largest share.

The expression al-panai may be heard as 'before My face' or 'in My presence.' No rival can be placed outside the LORD's awareness or jurisdiction. The point is not that Hebrew provides a secret translation missed by ordinary readers. The point is that the idiom, the exodus setting and the repeated demand for exclusive service all resist a polite hierarchy of loyalties.

A covenant comparison helps. A spouse would not be honored by being called first among several spouses. Exclusive covenant language does not deny the importance of every other relationship. It denies another claimant the covenant place. Israel would still love parents, children and neighbors, honor leaders and cultivate the land. None of those loves could become another god beside the LORD.

3. What Israel Heard in a World of Many Gods

Polytheism Could Look Practical

Israel heard the first word in an environment where peoples commonly associated deities with rain, fertility, crops, warfare, healing, travel, household protection and royal power. The cultures of Egypt, Canaan and Mesopotamia were not identical, and their religious systems should not be flattened into one simple pattern. Yet multiple divine claims were a normal feature of the world surrounding Israel.

Within such a world, honoring several gods could appear practical. A farmer needed rain, a ruler needed military success, a mother feared danger in childbirth and a traveler wanted protection. Different needs could invite different rituals and loyalties. Religious plurality was therefore not merely an abstract theory about how many gods exist. It could organize the calendar, household, economy and politics.

The first commandment refuses to let Israel manage life through a collection of divine specialists. The LORD did not rescue one part of Israel's existence while another deity controlled the rest. The God who

defeated Pharaoh claimed the whole people. Their crops, battles, children, journeys, worship and future all stood before Him.

Human concern	Why another power might seem useful	The first word's correction
Food and rain	A specialized fertility or storm deity appeared to address an immediate need.	Israel must trust and obey the LORD rather than divide worship for agricultural security.
War and government	Royal and military gods could appear to guarantee national survival.	No empire, king or divine patron outranks Israel's Deliverer.
Home and children	Household customs promised protection close to daily vulnerability.	Private space is not outside the covenant presence of God.
Travel and uncertainty	Additional rituals could feel like prudent insurance against unknown dangers.	Fear does not authorize a reserve allegiance.
Healing and crisis	Desperation makes any promised source of control attractive.	Need does not turn forbidden worship into faithfulness.

Kings, Service and Allegiance

For people delivered from Pharaoh, allegiance also carried political resonance. Pharaoh had demanded service and claimed control of labor and life. Exodus announces that the LORD defeated that master. The covenant should not be reduced to a secular treaty, but the analogy helps: loyalty is not a private feeling. It becomes visible in whose word governs, whose protection is trusted and whose claims organize the community.

This is why 'god' cannot be limited to a philosophical label. In Scripture, worship and service repeatedly stand together. The practical question is not only, 'What supernatural beings do I think exist?' It is also, 'Whose word receives obedience, and whom do I trust with the future?'

4. The First Commandment Is Not Yet the Image Commandment

Allegiance Before Representation

Exodus 20:3 does not mention a carved object. Verse 4 begins the prohibition of a graven image and likeness, and verse 5 speaks of bowing down and serving. The proximity explains why the commandments are related. The distinction explains why they must not be collapsed. The first asks who may occupy the place of God. The second asks how worship may be represented and practiced.

This distinction matters in both directions. A person may possess no religious art and still give saving trust to wealth, appetite or approval. Another person may encounter visual art without worshiping it. Part Two will examine the difficult image questions, including why God commanded cherubim and other sacred designs while forbidding graven images. Part One should not answer that study prematurely.

Why the Distinction Improves Application

When every discussion of idolatry begins and ends with statues, modern hearers can place the command safely in someone else's culture. When every valued object is casually called an idol, the word loses precision. The first commandment offers a better category: rival allegiance. The second will add the question of forbidden representation. Keeping the categories distinct makes both commands sharper.

5. Second Kings 17: Religious Language Without Exclusive Service

They 'Feared the LORD, and Served Their Own Gods'

Second Kings 17 provides one of Scripture's clearest portraits of divided allegiance. After the Assyrian conquest, populations were relocated into the land. The newcomers interpreted danger through a local-deity framework and concluded that they did not know 'the manner of the God of the land.' A priest was sent to teach them about the LORD.

The result was not simple atheism or complete rejection. The chapter says, 'They feared the LORD, and served their own gods.' They acquired information about the LORD while retaining inherited practices. Biblical language was added, but exclusive allegiance did not follow. The text later exposes the contradiction by saying that they did not truly fear the LORD according to covenant obedience.

Syncretism

Syncretism combines religious loyalties that God has not permitted us to combine. It may preserve accurate vocabulary. A person can say that God is sovereign while organizing life as though chance has the final word. A church can confess that Jesus is Lord while allowing growth, reputation or political access to determine what obedience may cost.

Syncretism is dangerous because addition can feel like faithfulness. The people made room for the LORD. The first commandment asks whether every rival has been denied the throne. Christianity is not made whole merely by placing a Bible verse beside a controlling belief borrowed from somewhere else.

A Warning Against Easy Accusation

The passage should first diagnose the reader, not arm the reader to label everyone else. Only God knows every heart perfectly. Significant attention, strong affection or careful preparation does not by itself prove worship. The question is whether another loyalty is permitted to override the known authority of God.

6. The New Testament Names Gods Without Statues

'Whose God Is Their Belly'

Philippians 3:19 describes people 'whose God is their belly.' Paul does not imagine a shrine shaped like a stomach. Appetite has become ruling authority. The created desire that should serve the person has become the master that directs the person. The language is functional and moral.

The verse should not become a cruel insult toward bodies, food, addiction or illness. Appetite is a good servant and a destructive god. Pastoral wisdom distinguishes ordinary enjoyment, physical need, compulsive behavior and defiant surrender to desire. The point is not shame. The point is that desire cannot be allowed the final word.

'Covetousness, Which Is Idolatry'

Colossians 3:5 explicitly identifies covetousness as idolatry. Coveting is not merely possessing an object. It is disordered desire that treats possession as the promised source of life, security or worth. This creates an important arc across the series. The first commandment addresses rival worship, while the tenth will expose the inward desire through which a rival often takes the throne.

'Ye Cannot Serve God and Mammon'

In Matthew 6:24 Jesus says, 'No man can serve two masters' and concludes, 'Ye cannot serve God and mammon.' Money is not condemned as material. It can purchase food, provide shelter, meet obligations, help a neighbor and support ministry. The conflict concerns mastery. Competing masters eventually issue competing commands.

Financial wisdom asks how resources can be stewarded under God. Mammon asks that obedience be delayed until the numbers guarantee safety. Wisdom plans while admitting that God controls tomorrow. Mammon promises that enough accumulation can make the future untouchable. The promise is unlimited, so the service never ends.

7. Five Questions That Reveal Functional Allegiance

A functional god is not identified by one emotional moment. Patterns matter. Scripture, prayer, mature community and honest observation help us discern what may be receiving the allegiance that belongs to God. The following questions are diagnostic rather than automatic verdicts.

Diagnostic	Question	What a rival may reveal
Trust	What do I expect to save me, not merely assist me?	A created thing is carrying an unlimited promise of security or meaning.
Identity	Who am I when the title, relationship, applause or account changes?	Worth has become dependent upon a gift that can be removed.
Obedience	What can regularly persuade me to violate what I know God has said?	The rival receives a yes after God receives a no.
Fear	What threatened loss makes faithfulness seem impossible?	Fear identifies the power believed to control the future.
Sacrifice	What receives truth, integrity, rest, compassion or relationship in order to survive?	Every ruling god eventually demands an offering.

Trust

Created resources genuinely help. A salary pays bills, medicine treats disease and human friendship supplies needed companionship. Idolatry begins when assistance is turned into salvation. What must

remain intact before we believe life can still have meaning? What loss would make us conclude that God can no longer be good?

Identity

Vocation, family, citizenship and accomplishment may all contribute to a truthful description of life. None can bear the full answer to who a Christian is. If the title disappears, the child chooses differently, the congregation does not applaud or the business fails, the person remains a creature made by God and, through faith in Christ, a redeemed child of God.

Obedience

The clearest rival may be the loyalty that receives obedience when commands conflict. Approval becomes a god when acceptance overrules truth. Political identity becomes a god when conduct excused in one's own group would be condemned in another. Family becomes a god when love is defined as participation in what Christ forbids.

Fear

Fear often exposes the power we believe possesses our future. This does not mean every anxious response is idolatry. Trauma, illness and uncertainty require compassion. Yet fear becomes spiritually revealing when it repeatedly tells us that disobedience is safer than trust. The appropriate response includes truth, prayer, wise help and concrete obedience, not accusation alone.

Sacrifice

Every master asks for something. Achievement may take family and rest. Control may take honesty and peace. Pleasure may take health and promise. Reputation may take confession. The question is not whether sacrifice exists. Christian love itself sacrifices. The question is which altar receives it and whose will determines whether the sacrifice is faithful.

8. Good Gifts Are Not the Enemy

Do Not Confuse Love With Worship

A husband may deeply love his wife without worshipping her. Parents may treasure children without making them gods. A worker may pursue excellence without turning a career into identity. A citizen may participate responsibly in public life without treating a nation or party as the kingdom of God. The intensity of care alone does not settle the diagnosis.

Scripture presents creation as gift. Food may be received with thanksgiving. Money may be stewarded. Work may become service. Families may practice covenant love. Planning may express prudence. The deception begins when a limited gift makes an unlimited promise or demands disobedience to keep that promise believable.

Returning Gifts to Their Proper Place

Repentance does not always require abandoning the created thing. Often it removes the thing from the throne. Money returns to being a tool. Work returns to being a calling. Family returns to being a gift.

Leadership returns to being service. Planning returns to being stewardship. Pleasure returns to grateful enjoyment beneath holiness.

The first commandment therefore protects creation from the impossible burden of being God. Approval cannot permanently silence rejection. Money cannot abolish uncertainty. Control cannot remove every risk. Achievement cannot announce a final task. Pleasure cannot cure the soul. The gifts fail most destructively when we require them to do what only the Giver can do.

9. Joshua and Judges: Repentance Changes Service

'Choose You This Day Whom Ye Will Serve'

Joshua 24 is often remembered for the declaration, 'As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.' The setting gives the statement its force. Joshua recounts God's acts, names the gods served by ancestors and surrounding peoples and tells Israel to put them away. The choice is not between religious preferences in an empty room. It is a demand to abandon rivals.

Service makes allegiance visible. It rearranges time, labor, household practice and obedience. A sentence displayed on a wall may confess the truth, but Joshua calls for the heart and house to incline toward the LORD in practice.

'They Put Away the Strange Gods'

Judges 10 records another crisis. Israel confesses, 'We have sinned.' The narrative then says, 'And they put away the strange gods from among them, and served the LORD.' Confession names the wrong. Repentance changes the service. Feeling ashamed about a rival while continuing to obey it does not complete the Biblical movement.

Concrete repentance depends upon the rival. If approval rules, repentance may require telling the truth when truth costs admiration. If money rules, it may require honest generosity and obedience that cannot be justified by profit. If control rules, it may require taking the faithful step before every outcome is known. If political identity rules, it may require applying the same Biblical standard to one's own side.

10. Jesus and Undivided Worship

The Crown Without the Cross

In Matthew 4, the tempter shows Jesus the kingdoms of the world and offers them through false worship. The temptation promises a crown without the cross. Jesus answers from Deuteronomy: 'Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.' Worship and service belong together.

Where Israel repeatedly divided its service, Jesus remained faithful. Where we trade obedience for security, He trusted the Father. Where we seek a kingdom on easier terms, He walked toward the cross. Jesus is not attached to the end of a moral lesson as one more example. He is the faithful Son whose obedience reveals our failure and whose saving work gives hope to divided people.

One God and One Lord

First Corinthians 8 acknowledges that many beings are called gods and lords, then gives the Christian confession: 'But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him.' Christian faith is not one spiritual option added to a personal collection. It is life reconciled to the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Gospel Begins With Deliverance

The law tells the truth about the allegiance God deserves and the rivals we serve. It cannot transform the heart by command alone. The Gospel announces what God has done. Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried and rose again. He receives sinners by grace through faith and begins the liberation of lives ruled by masters that cannot save.

Romans 3:23 says, 'For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.' Romans 6:23 says, 'For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.' Romans 10:9 promises salvation to the person who confesses the Lord Jesus and believes that God raised Him from the dead. The Deliverer, not our moral performance, is the ground of salvation.

11. A Pastoral Answer for Different Listeners

For the Person Who Feels Accused by Everything

Do not conclude that every enjoyment, ambition or close relationship must be abandoned. Ask the more exact questions of trust, identity, obedience, fear and sacrifice. Receive creation with thanksgiving while refusing to ask a gift to become savior. Conviction should lead toward truth and freedom, not toward vague suspicion of every pleasure.

For the Person Who Cannot Imagine Life Without One Thing

Pay attention to that sentence. It may describe grief, deep love or a real responsibility, so do not diagnose it carelessly. It may also reveal an ultimate claim. Bring the fear into prayer. Name what the threatened loss seems to say about God. Invite a mature believer to listen without flattering or shaming you. Ask what faithful obedience would look like if the gift changed.

For Families and Churches

A congregation can confess Christ while serving attendance, money, reputation or institutional survival. A family can display Biblical words while allowing comfort, secrecy or one powerful personality to govern every decision. Communities should examine what cannot be questioned, what failures must be hidden and whose approval determines whether truth may be spoken.

For the Person Ready to Trust Christ

Knowing Christian language is not the same as being reconciled to God. The first commandment cannot save by performance. It exposes the allegiance we owe and have failed to give. Jesus died for sinners, was buried and rose again. Turn from sin and trust Him as Savior and Lord. The words of a prayer do not save; Jesus saves. Prayer may honestly express the faith of a heart turning to Him.

You may pray: Our Heavenly Father, I confess that I have sinned against You. I have given created things trust, obedience and allegiance that belong to You. I cannot rescue myself. I believe that Jesus Christ died for my sins, was buried and rose again. I turn from my sin and place my faith in Jesus Christ. Forgive me by Your grace. Make me Your child, give me a new heart and teach me to worship You alone. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Pastoral Summary

1. The Ten Words begin with God's identity and deliverance, not with Israel earning rescue.
2. The first commandment concerns exclusive allegiance; the second commandment will address images and forbidden representation.
3. Lo yihyeh lekha elohim acherim al-panai forbids maintaining other gods before the LORD, before His face or in His presence.
4. The Hebrew phrase supports the sermon's presence language, but the full covenant context and wider canon establish exclusivity.
5. In Israel's world, multiple gods could appear practical because divine powers were associated with different needs.
6. Second Kings 17 shows that people may retain language about the LORD while serving rival gods.
7. The New Testament identifies functional idolatry through appetite, covetousness and mammon without requiring a statue.
8. Trust, identity, obedience, fear and sacrifice help reveal what is functioning as a god.
9. A good gift is not automatically an idol. Idolatry begins when the gift receives an ultimate promise or governing authority.
10. Joshua 24 and Judges 10 show that repentance includes putting away rivals and changing service.
11. Jesus gave the undivided allegiance we failed to give, died for sinners and rose again.
12. Grace precedes moral repair, forgives divided people and liberates them from cruel masters.

Functional Allegiance Worksheet

1. Name the concern. What created person, possession, role, desire, institution or outcome may be carrying unusual spiritual weight?
2. Separate gift from claim. What good does this thing genuinely provide, and what unlimited promise has been attached to it?
3. Test trust. Am I asking it to help me faithfully or to save me finally?
4. Test identity. Who do I believe I would become if it were reduced, criticized or removed?
5. Test obedience. Has preserving it ever required a deliberate no to something God has clearly commanded?
6. Test fear. What future do I assume will become impossible without it?
7. Test sacrifice. What truth, integrity, rest, compassion, relationship or responsibility has been offered to keep it secure?
8. Examine the evidence over time. Is this a passing feeling, an appropriate grief or a repeated pattern of mastery?
9. Invite honest counsel. Who understands Scripture, knows the facts and has permission to disagree with my preferred answer?
10. Confess specifically. Name the divided allegiance without pretending that confession earns grace.
11. Choose changed service. What one act of obedience would remove the rival from the throne?
12. Return the gift to stewardship. How may it be loved, used or received beneath the Lordship of Christ?
13. Seek appropriate help. If addiction, trauma, coercion, anxiety or danger is involved, combine spiritual care with qualified practical support.
14. Remember the Deliverer. The God who exposes bondage is also the God who brings people out.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Why does Exodus identify the Deliverer before stating the command?
2. How does the 'house of bondage' shape the meaning of obedience at Sinai?
3. What is gained by calling the commandments the Ten Words?
4. What does al-panai contribute to the phrase 'before me'?
5. Why is the command more than a ranked list with God in first place?
6. How does the first commandment differ from the image prohibition that follows?
7. Why might honoring several gods have appeared practical in Israel's ancient environment?
8. What does Second Kings 17 reveal about religious knowledge without exclusive allegiance?
9. Where can syncretism preserve correct Christian words while another loyalty governs practice?
10. How do Philippians 3:19, Colossians 3:5 and Matthew 6:24 expand the category of idolatry?
11. Which diagnostic question, trust, identity, obedience, fear or sacrifice, most clearly exposes modern rivals?
12. How can we distinguish a deeply loved gift from a ruling god?
13. What does concrete repentance look like in Joshua 24 and Judges 10?
14. How does Jesus answer the first commandment in Matthew 4?
15. Why must grace precede moral repair without leaving allegiance unchanged?
16. What receives from me what belongs to God?

Prayer

Our Heavenly Father, You alone are God. You created us, sustain us and have spoken to us. Thank You for acting before we could rescue ourselves. Thank You for sending Jesus Christ to die for sinners and rise again.

Forgive us for every divided allegiance. Forgive us for trusting gifts more than the Giver, using Your name while obeying another master and asking created things to promise what only You can give.

Give us wisdom to distinguish love from worship, prudence from saving trust and responsibility from control. Reveal what receives our obedience, fear and sacrifice. Give us courage to put away every rival and to return every good gift to faithful stewardship.

Make Reason Together Church a place where Jesus Christ is not one interest among many, but Lord. Protect us from worshiping growth, recognition, money, comfort, political access or control. Teach us to tell the truth even when truth is costly.

Help us carry this question honestly: What receives from me what belongs to God? When You expose bondage, remind us that You are the Deliverer. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

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