

## Women's Bible Study Fall 2010

10 Apps For Life: A Modern Look at the Ten Commandments  
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*God First: Exodus 20:1-3*

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Here's what I've been doing in the last couple of weeks.

**Monday 8/30:** Our daughter Emily calls with the news that she's engaged.

**Wednesday 9/1:** We fly to California with our youngest daughter Hannah. Only I believe what the Southwest website is telling me about a delayed flight, so we arrive at Minneapolis just in time to see our airplane take off. The reschedule eventually gets us there, after we land and take off in Chicago, Kansas City, Las Vegas, and Burbank.

**Thursday 9/2:** Spend 3 hours in Target buying all the things a college student needs for a dorm room.

**Friday 9/3:** We move Hannah into her dorm room. She manages to get the bed by the window, which justifies getting up at 6:00 am to get there in time. I say goodbye to her at 1:30, leaving her with her father. I then drive 230 miles to the Sierra Nevada mountains and camp overnight with my sister Gail.

**Saturday 9/4:** I hike 7 miles to Kearsarge Lakes carrying a 40 lb. pack of resupply food for my siblings, who've been on the trail for 2 weeks already. To do this we have to cross a nearly 12,000 foot pass. On the other side I meet up with the hikers, who are doing 160 miles of the John Muir Trail. There I camp overnight with my sister Tina.

**Sunday 9/5:** I get up in the dark at 5:30 am, hike 7 miles back over the pass, rejoin my sister Gail, drive 230 miles south to Azusa and say my final goodbye to Hannah. She kindly overlooks the fact that I haven't showered since Friday morning.

Next, I drive 30 miles to my mom's house. I shower and repack everything so it will fit on an airplane. I drive my rental car to Burbank airport. From there I take a shuttle to LAX and a redeye flight back to Minneapolis.

**Monday 9/6:** We arrive in Minneapolis at 5:20 am, but my body is telling me that it's 3:20 am California time. I take the shuttle to Rochester, arriving at 8:15.

There I make breakfast for our house guest and John. I go grocery shopping and buy food for ten people for a week. I cook frantically all day long. I pack up most of our household belongings and drive to Elizabeth Lodge, where 8 pastors and wives are arriving for a weeklong conference. I serve dinner and fall into bed unconscious at 9:30 pm.

**Wednesday 9/8:** I go into work for a few hours so I can put out the newsletter. I make an emergency visit to the eye doctor because I have the symptoms of a detached retina. Turns out to be something perfectly harmless.

The conference continues through Monday 9/13. Each day I'm cooking and participating in all the activities. Each day I drive back and forth to Rochester to look after Boots the cat and pick up all the items I forgot on Monday. From my cell phone while driving I keep track of Hannah's first week at college, Emily's visit to her future in-laws, and Nick's job search.

**Monday 9/13:** I give the final devotional to the group at breakfast. We clean up the Lodge. I return to my house and start work on this lecture.

**Tuesday 9/14:** Back to work at my job, which I've neglected since school started.

**Weds. 9/15:** And today, here we are, launching Bible study!

I share this with you, not so that you'll think I'm insane, although some of you surely will, but to let you in on what preceded my study of the Ten Commandments. It's been rather eventful lately, and yet what's been going on has helped me understand the first commandment. So let's begin by turning to Exodus chapter 20, verse 1, which we'll be studying today.

**“And God spoke all these words:  
'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.  
You shall have no other gods before me.’” (Exodus 20:1-3)**

Let's begin by looking at

## **I. The Context of the Commandments**

First, we see

### **A. A God who seeks**

The Ten Commandments appear in Exodus 20 after a long history of God's dealings with Israel. First he promises to make Abraham into a great nation. Then God fulfills that promise as Jacob produces the 12 tribes of Israel. By the beginning of Exodus the Israelites are a million strong, enslaved by the Egyptians. God hears their cries and delivers them through Moses. Although they are many they lack laws, government, a system of justice, formal worship. The Israelites need to be formed into a nation, a nation who will acknowledge God as their Savior.

Now, how does God turn them from an undisciplined rabble into a nation? God conveys what he wants them to know about himself. First, they see his presence in the pillar of cloud and fire. They see his power in their deliverance from the Egyptians. In Exodus 19 thunder and lightning cover Mt. Sinai. Boundaries are set around the mountain. The people consecrate themselves. An enormous trumpet blast is heard, while smoke and fire billow up from the top of the mountain. Only after showing them he is holy does God give Moses the Decalogue, or Ten Words in Exodus 20.

All these actions show a God who seeks his people, drawing them out from the society around them. He wants them to be different. And God continues to seek fellowship with us through his Son Jesus Christ. Just as he delivered the Jews from the slavery of the Egyptians, so God delivers us from the slavery of sin through Jesus.

The Ten Words, or Ten Commandments as we know them, become a shorthand form of the Law. The Law helps form the rabble into a nation, because it serves as a basis for society, but it goes beyond mere law by addressing internal attitudes like covetousness. The Law conveys God's

holiness by showing his standards in all the important areas of life: our relationship with him (1-4) and our relationship with others (5-10).

The Law also reflects God's character, by showing him as he wishes to be understood. We tend to describe God in our own image. But he is objective and unchanging. We may misunderstand or misrepresent God, but that doesn't change who he is. Although he desires that we know him accurately, the objective reality of who he is does not change whether or not we understand it. The Law teaches us about his character by showing us what is important to him – justice, integrity, community.

So the Law serves as the basis for turning Israel into a nation. It conveys his standards. It teaches us about his character by showing us his holiness. There's just one problem. The Law creates a standard which no one can keep. Why?

That's when we turn from a God who seeks to

### **B. A God who saves**

God uses the law to convey truth about himself and his character. Above all he is holy. If we want to approach a holy God we need to understand what holiness IS. The Apostle Paul helps us understand by explaining: **“Therefore, no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.” (Romans 3:20)**

In other words, God uses the law to make us understand what sin is. Unless we understand our sin we will not realize we need a Savior. The law makes us understand that sin is falling short of God's standard. Paul explains:

**“Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, ‘Do not covet.’ But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from the law, sin is dead.” (Romans 7:7-8)**

God uses the law as a springboard to propel us toward Christ, who perfectly fulfills the law's demands on our behalf and offers us his righteousness instead of our sin. Paul explains again: **“So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ...” (Galatians 3:24)** Paul says that the law was a “child minder” – a babysitter, a boundary setter, a tutor... a way to make us understand God's holiness and our own sinfulness, showing us our need for a Savior, because we could never keep the Law on our own.

As our Savior, Jesus **“...forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.” (Colossians 2:14)** What an amazing picture. The Jews have labored under the burden of the Law since the Ten Commandments, and now the Law has been nailed to the cross, where Jesus has dealt with its demands on our behalf.

But we might think, since we don't have to keep the law, we don't need it at all. That's not what Jesus thought. He says:

**“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” (Matthew 5:17)**

Obedience to God's standard is still required, but it's a bit different:  
**"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." (John 15:12)** And now we are to honor the Law, with the help of the Spirit, because the Law still reflects God's character and holiness, and because with the Spirit's help we can truly apply. So that's why we're studying the Ten Commandments. They will help us live in our new nature of holiness rather than our old nature of rebellion and sin.

In fact, we can understand all the Ten Commandments best by understanding and living out the first commandment: You shall have no other gods before me. The other nine commandments simply illustrate in various ways that first commandment. If God is first, then we won't make idols. We won't dishonor his name, we won't ignore his Sabbath, we'll honor our parents, we'll refrain from anger and murder, we'll treat our marriages as holy, we'll stop lying, we'll not steal or covet what belongs to others, because all of those actions go against the holiness of the God who comes first in our lives before anything else.

So that's the background. Now let's look at:

## II. The Content of the First Commandment

A week ago we dropped our youngest daughter, Hannah, at Azusa Pacific University in California. Azusa's motto is "God First". Unfortunately, they also have a tag line that reads: "Since 1899". I'm hoping they believe that God has been first a lot longer than the last 111 years! However, its Christian approach is one of the main reasons that Hannah chose this school, and we're delighted that she's at a place where they put "God First".

The first commandment reads: **"You shall have no other gods before me."** (Exodus 20:3). The NIV footnotes explain that "before me" means "in hostility toward me". In other words, God has no opponents and no rivals and he wants us to recognize that fact as central to every other statement that follows.

Now this isn't just a matter of us being partisan and backing God over, for example, Baal. In Minnesota a lot of people support the Vikings. But there are still a few, and maybe a couple of you cheeseheads are in this room, who support the Packers. In fact it must be awfully confusing to have your formerly beloved quarterback Bret Favre playing for the rival team! We understand in matters like football teams we're allowed to choose whom we want to follow, because they're all pretty similar. But God is not a regional god – he is universal. He is completely different from Baal or Moloch or Dagon.

Before God revealed himself to the Jews, worship was regional. Every tribe had its own deity. But God claimed the Israelites as his own by delivering them from slavery in Egypt. This immediately made him different. He delivered! He came through with power and he delivered them from the Egyptians.

This first commandment teaches us about God's nature and the fact that we owe him our allegiance and worship. People become like what they worship, so it's crucial to have an accurate understanding of who God is before we begin to worship him. God says, "I am first and only. There are no rivals and no opponents to my sovereignty in the universe and beyond."

For that reason God must be:

### **A. First in our Affections**

This is a tough one. The people we love are right here in flesh and blood. We love them either for who they are, or for what they do for us, or because they love us. The people we love often have endearing little quirks. Last week I spent a lot of time in an apron at Elizabeth Lodge, cooking. One day my apron caught on something and came untied. Along with that loose apron string came a little stab in the heart, for the only person who ever unties my apron is our daughter Hannah. She cooks with me and makes a game out of untying my apron just to see how long it takes me to notice. But Hannah is far, far away at college in California now. ***We love the people we love for who they are*** whether that means they untie our apron strings or make us laugh.

But we also love the people we love ***for what they do for us***. One of my sisters can galvanize any room she walks into. When Tina says “Hi guys!” I know that good times are ahead. So last week when I hiked up and heard her say “Hi guys!” I knew that good times would follow. At that altitude we weren’t allowed to have a campfire. By 8:00 pm the sun set and the temperature dropped to freezing so she, my brother and I huddled in our tent playing cards by flashlight. Good times, good times! Sometimes we love people for what they do for us.

And sometimes we love the people we love ***simply because they love us***. Who can resist the love of a friend who always cares? Who always offers to help, always prays for us, always extends grace? It’s easy to love someone who loves us.

But now think about how we love God. We can love God ***for who he is*** – almighty, sovereign, omnipotent. We can love God ***for what he has done for us*** – by giving his Son and purchasing our freedom from sin. We can love God ***for how he loves us***, sending his Spirit to comfort, guide and teach us. It might seem easier to love the folks in front of us simply because they are there in the flesh, but if we analyze why we love others we can see that God meets every single one of those criteria and more. I have an affinity of spirit with the people I love that makes us soul mates. But what greater soul mate can I have than Jesus Christ? Hebrews tells us “**Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity...**” (Hebrews 2:14) and “**Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.**” (Hebrews 2:11). He is our brother. He is our soul’s mate.

It sounds so abstract, so difficult to say that we must love God MORE than those who are so dear to us on this earth. But loving him more doesn’t mean feeling more for God than for our family. It means putting God first. When we do that, those other relationships stabilize and assume their correct place. Instead of pinning all our dreams on another person who cannot possibly live up to our expectations, we can love One who never changes and who always is there. Then we can love our humans in a way that does not burden them with perfection, that does not force them to assume the role that only God can fill - if we love God first.

To put God first also means that we must put God

### **B. First in our Treasure**

No one wants to admit that we love things more than people, but often our actions reveal that we do. Think of the person who spends 100% of their free time on the internet instead of speaking to the family who live with him. Think of the woman whose every waking hour is spent

dreaming about how she's going to furnish and decorate the house. And what is our attitude towards money? Money itself is never condemned in the Bible. It can do great good. But greed and selfishness are condemned, because piling up wealth gives us a false sense of confidence. We start to rely on our money rather than our God. **"For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." (1 Timothy 6:10)**

There's only one antidote, and that is to hold our money lightly, usually by giving a lot of it away, until it has no hold over us but simply becomes a tool for God's work. Jesus warned us in the sermon on the Mount: **"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:21)** So God must be first in our treasure.

Next, God must be

### **C. First in our Activities**

To put God first in our activities doesn't mean that we spend all our time at church or in prayer. But it does mean that we're always aware of God's presence. That helps in two ways. Considering God's presence can stop us from sinning. But it also enhances all the good by giving him the credit for putting those experiences in our life. When I hike I am aware of God's beauty and order in creation. I could hike without ever giving God a thought, and many people do. But putting God first means that he'll be hiking along with us.

What happens when we take God with us into all our activities? For me it means praying when I'm having a difficult conversation. It means asking God for strength when I still have hours of work and I am flagging. It means setting aside time to be with him alone to read or pray. **"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33).**

Putting God first in our affections, our treasure, and our activities can be tough, but at least those relate to tangible things.

But how can we put God

### **D. First in our Motivation**

Ah, here's a difficult challenge, because only God knows what motivates our outward behavior. To put God first in our motivation takes a lifetime of obedience and it requires us to love God.

Think about marriage. Marriage works when both parties put each other first because they want the other person to be happy. So if I ask John to go for a walk, he jumps up to go, because he wants me to be happy and he enjoys my company. I think. Actually, come to think of it, maybe he just likes walking! But if John asks me to go with him to Fleet Farm, frankly, I can't think of anything less appealing. However, I can see that he enjoys it and so off we go. Our motivation for these little tradeoffs is love. I'm not doing it out of duty, but love.

God is looking for love from us, not duty. Our new nature in Christ naturally inclines us towards what pleases God. But we can thwart that inclination by thinking and doing wicked actions that grieve God rather than please him.

So there are four practical ways to keep the first commandment: by putting God first in our affections, our treasures, our activities and our motivation.

What happens when we really begin to observe the first commandment?

### III. The Consequence of Keeping the First Commandment

#### A. I'm free of fear

Remember how God introduced the Law at the beginning of Exodus 20?  
**"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."  
(Exodus 20:1-2)**

With that statement God has proved his omnipotence. What local deity could deliver nearly a million slaves out of the hands of their oppressors? Who else could provide manna and water in a barren desert? Only the one true God. Exodus 20:1-2 gives God's credentials. It tells us why we can rely upon him, because he is a God of deliverance.

A God who delivers us is surely a God that we can trust to take care of us. And when we know that God is taking care of us we can be free from fear. John tells us that **"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment."** (1 John 4:18) Fear of punishment is gone; we're in a love relationship.

Why would we fear anything...If God is for us, who can be against us? So the first consequence of keeping this commandment is that I am free of fear.

A second consequence of keeping that first commandment is that we can heave a sigh of relief and say,

#### B. I'm not in charge

When God tells us to put him first he says that he has the ability to direct all things. God is not vying for first place...he IS in first place already. The first commandment just asks us to acknowledge it.

This is quite refreshing. I sometimes feel that I am carrying a lot of responsibility. But really, nothing comes onto my plate that God has not permitted to happen; I don't need to fuss and fret about the outcome because God is running the world, not me. To give you an idea of how this works let's take a peek behind the scenes and see what *really* happened over the past two weeks.

**Monday 8/30:**        *Emily's engaged.* We have prayed for this young man to come into her life since she was a baby. God has graciously answered.

**Wednesday 9/1:**    *We take Hannah to college.* The past 18 years have been spent raising this child to live a godly life once she's independent of us. Will she be able to? I have to trust God, because he loves her even more than I do.

**Friday 9/3:**        *Move in day.  
230 mile drive.  
Camping.*

I am thanking God for the safe journey and the chance to see people I love. This trip is a joyful group effort. Those who are hiking are able to do so only because they are being resupplied by those who aren't on the trip. God has placed us together in this family and I am so grateful for it.

**Saturday 9/4:**        *Hike 7 miles.*  
                              *Camp overnight at 10,500 feet.*

I fear that I'm not going to make it over the pass. I have to stop every 20 feet and gasp for air and pray for strength. Then I'm worried about finding the hikers. How can we meet up in thousands of square miles of wilderness? But by God's providence they emerge from their trail at the exact same second that we emerge from ours. God had this in hand all along. Two of them burst into tears upon seeing us because they have been so isolated...and because we're carrying chips and dip. How good it is to see them safe and healthy after 100 miles of hiking.

**Sunday 9/5:**        *Up at 5:30, hike 7 miles*  
                              *Drive 230 miles south*  
                              *Say goodbye to Hannah*  
                              *Take redeye home.*

I stop at the top of Kearsarge Pass to look for miles in either direction. How could anyone not see God's creative hand in this wilderness? My soul is filled up with beauty and I am desperately thankful to have been here. Later I give thanks for the miles of safe travel, for the timely connections, for the chance to see Hannah one more time before leaving.

**Monday 9/6:**        *Arrive 5:20 am.*  
                              *Shuttle to Rochester.*  
                              *Cook!*  
                              *Welcome guests to Elizabeth Lodge*

When the pastors arrive, I see lines of weariness and sorrow on several faces. These men, who have been in ministry for 34 years, have some difficult situations to live with. Two of the absent wives are too ill to travel. More than one is desperately sad. All of them are weary. But God changes all that throughout the week. He gives me strength and courage to be truly hospitable.

**Wednesday 9/8:**    *Eye problem. No problem!*

For a week I've been frightened of the physical symptoms in my eye, which were terrible at high altitude. I know that delaying treatment might cause loss of vision but am afraid that if I have surgery I won't be able to teach this week. I am thankful for a friend who gets me an appointment with the retina specialist on short notice. I am even more thankful to discover that my problem is minimal. God is caring for me during this busy time. Why was I so afraid?

**Through Monday 9/13:** *Cook. Clean. Participate.*

Throughout the week I'm buoyed up by the help offered by so many. My niece Laura comes out to cook with me one night. My friend Jacqui makes wonderful cookies and muffins. The Stanhopes lend us their large car. And the incredible blessing of Elizabeth Lodge itself works its healing in all of our lives as we pray, worship, discuss and play together. I thought I would remain

slightly apart from this group, whom I don't know well. God is teaching me about Christian community, which requires both transparency and brokenness.

**9/14/10:**        *Back to work.*

**9/15/10:**        *Launch Bible study!*

I know people are praying for me. I'm able to buckle right down to the lecture and able to ignore all the unpacked suitcases and boxes. God is good. He blessed me beyond measure in the past week. And because everyone else is pitching in all I have to do is show up and teach.

So these two whirlwind weeks, filled with emotional moments and lots of activity, were also filled with God's presence. It seems to me that the key to putting God first is to look always for his signature in every situation. By prayer, by praise, by worship, we give him the primary importance in our lives. And everything else just falls into line after that.

***WBS is a ministry of Autumn Ridge Church – Rochester, MN 55902***  
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