

Love God, Love Neighbor

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A comedian asked people on the street to name the Ten Commandments. Most couldn't name one. The Ten Commandments is one of the most well-known but least understood documents. Most see it as a moral document, but it's actually part of a larger covenant establishing our relationship with God and one another. The first four focus on our relationship to God; the last six on how we relate to one another. Jesus: love God; love neighbor. Generally, we recognize the importance of the second set—love neighbor—but struggle to grasp the importance of the first set—love God. But actually, you can't really carry out the second half without the first half. We can't really love our neighbor, if we don't love God, but if we truly love God, we will love our neighbor.

No Other Gods

First commandment: [You shall have no other gods before me](#). Now you'd think this would be obvious to Israel after witnessing YHWH's single-handed defeat of Egypt's gods. But remember Israel lived under polytheistic Egyptian rule for 400 years, immersed in a society that worshipped scores of gods represented by frogs, gnats, the sun and moon. They've been following YHWH for three months. So, even though YHWH overthrew the gods, their influences and beliefs don't disappear overnight. *It's one thing to get out of Egypt but another to get Egypt out of you.* So this first command gives them crystal clarity: *You shall have no other gods before me.* Why? Look what he says in the prologue, [I am the Lord your God](#). I am *the* Lord your God, not I am *a* lord among the gods. It's an absolute claim that shatters the ancient near eastern paradigm—many gods for many things (polytheism)—for one God over all things (monotheism). So the first reason to not have any other gods is because there really are no other gods. And if that's true, it would be self-demeaning to worship something that doesn't exist. To devote yourself to something unworthy of worship. Object: I don't believe in polytheistic worship, but on a practical level, we worship many gods; we just don't name them. In the HBO series, *Mare of Easttown*, Mare a detective played by Kate Winslet tries to solve abduction and murder cases in a small, Pennsylvania town, where she knows everybody. There's *Richard* a divorced, burned out writer; *Enid*, whose daughter has been missing for a year; *Kenny*

who's strung out, and *Mare*, who works like crazy to bury the grief of her son's suicide. Everybody is dysfunctional! Why? *They devoted their lives to something that couldn't uphold their devotion, unworthy of their worship.* Richard's devotion to his writing success wrecked his marriage. Enid's devotion to her missing daughter makes her cruel toward detective Mare. Kenny's devotion to drugs leads him to lie and steal from those he loves. And Mare's devotion to her work, to justice, is pushing *everyone* who cares about her away. Every character worships: success, family, escape, justice. Things that, for the most part, aren't bad, but when worshipped make them bitter, uncaring, cruel. Their worship is self-destructive. Why is this show so popular? Because it resonates, resonates with how idols wreck *our* lives. What idol resonates with you: success, family, escape, justice? What thing you devote yourself to that, time and again, cannot uphold your devotion? YHWH comes along and says, You weren't made for those gods; you were made for me exclusively: *I am the Lord your God.* Why him? *I brought you out of the land of Egypt*, out of *enslavement* to other gods. We worship him because he's absolute, yes, but also because *other gods won't save us.* They can't. That's what Exodus has been showing us. Only YHWH can save. Only the Lord can snap an idol's destructive power.

No Graven Image

How does this work? The next commandment: *You shall not make for yourself any carved/graven image* (4). It was commonplace to engrave images in the ancient world. Since you couldn't see the gods, you made a visual representation, often a wooden image overlaid with gold. These images depicted gods that presided over some aspect of life. In Egypt, the frog depicted goddess of childbirth, or a winged-disk the god of the Sun. So the worshipper paid homage to the various gods in various parts of their lives: childbirth, crops, sun, rain. But problem is this fragmented their lives. So many gods to keep up with, anxiety producing. Spending time in polytheistic Asia, where there are millions of gods, I noticed many people I met were very worried about pleasing the gods, so they put out food and water, morning and evening, to appease them. Were not much different. We have **images** we strive to please: a certain look, a balanced family, a killer career, a model cause, a spiritual life—little images we feed day and night. Up early, late to bed to serve the image. Then we put it on IG. The thing is, devotion to many images will wear you out. It's

psychologically destabilizing, anxiety producing, *peaceless*. I think of friends so weighed down by the drive to be the perfect parent, spiritual leader, loving spouse, hustling professional, that they crash every few months. Why crash? In the words of Jen Wilkin, “[We cannot sustain the weight of a many-God lie in our minds.](#)” We’re not made to serve many gods. It’s a fool’s errand. Why, then, do we do it? Well the thing about making images is that you get to decide which image you pursue. You **control** the image, and that’s what graven images were about in the ancient world, power. You could serve, compel, manipulate them to get what you wanted. *You use the god to get what you want.* So the characters in *Mare of Easttown* use work, family, drugs, justice, sexuality to get what they want. And if you boil it all down a common thing they all want is love, perfect love. They want someone to come along and love them with such depth, power, and consistency, that it overwhelms all the faults and flaws of their lives. *Richard* wants *Mare’s* love to overwhelm his career-marriage failures. *Enid* wants the love of her missing daughter to fill hole in her heart. *Mare* wants a love that will swallow up the death of her son. But the painful reality is: no one can give it to them. No one has a love strong enough to heal the other’s brokenness. So *Mare* says to *Richard*, *I just can’t be what you want me to be right now. I’ve got to get my mess together.* But *this* is where the Lord shines. He’s not a cold, unloving image that can’t love you back. But he’s also not a wooden toy to use for your own power. *He’s actually total power and perfect love combined.* He says, [‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians \(power\), and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself \(love, 19:4\).](#) He snaps the destructive power of idols, and at the same time swoops down to lift us up—where?—and [brought you to myself. To myself.](#) He’s powerful to save us from idolizing, yes, but also loving enough to fulfill and heal our brokenness. Total power perfect love, which comes into crisp focus in Jesus, conquers and exposes all false gods in an act of sacrificial love and resurrection power. Why? *To bring us to himself.* That’s why we shouldn’t worship other gods. Made for him.

Love Neighbor

This brings us to the second half of the Decalogue: honor parents (family), don’t commit adultery (marriage), don’t lie or steal (community), don’t covet. Jesus summarizes this as *Love your neighbor*. Put others first not your desires. You might not agree with your parents but how can you honor them? You might lust after another person but how can you love

your spouse? You may be jealous of what someone else has, but how can you serve them? Love moves the commands from opportunity lost to opportunity gained, from what I don't have to what I can give. Love sacrifices, serves. Sacrificial service is something I aspire to, but if I'm honest I often keep track of. When I was thinking about this, I confess I thought about big acts of service I've done: getting a dog for the kids, taking in a foreign exchange student, donating a kidney. And it struck me that I still don't get it. True service isn't countable; it's instinctual. *When Jesus says whoever would be great among you, he must be your servant; he didn't say he must do acts of service.* What Christ is looking for is not just service but a servant. Someone who has become so devoted to him they've forgotten their acts of service. They *are* a servant. And that's why these neighborly commandments come second not first, because we can't truly serve others if we're not devoted to God. But if we truly worship God, we'll sacrificially love others. Why? Cross and resurrection. Perfect love, total power. We desperately need to worship a power and love outside ourselves for the strength and love to serve others. And that is precisely what God gives us. He swoops down like an eagle and says: *Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation* (5-6). When I swoop down to bring you to myself, I give you a new status. Treasured possession. The *personal*, royal treasure of a king. *My treasured possession.* You're my crown jewel he says. I shower you with perfect love and power, and if that's true, if we're the King's treasure, we can honor our parents, love our spouse, serve our church, love our literal neighbor.