## GOD'S TOP TEN (Part 1) EXODUS 20:1-17

And God spoke all these words, saying: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. "You shall have no other gods before Me.

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

"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.

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

"Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you.

"You shall not murder.

"You shall not commit adultery.

"You shall not steal.

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's."

Did you hear about the millionaire groom?

He told the pastor officiating his wedding that he'd be paid on the brevity of the ceremony. If the pastor got long-winded he'd receive a token \$5 for his services.

Whereas, if the pastor didn't waste words, and got right to-the-point, he'd get a generous gift of \$5000.

On the wedding day, when the couple reached the altar, the pastor looked at the groom, and then nodded toward the bride, "Take her?" The groom said, "I do."

Then he turned toward the bride, and gestured at the groom, "Take him?" She also said, "I do."

The pastor pronounced, "Took!"... and that was it!

The whole wedding ceremony was accomplished in just five words... Indeed, brevity can be beautiful!

And that's certainly true of the Ten Commandments.

In just ten statements, God covers ever facet of spiritual and social relations. The scope of the Ten Commandments is universal. They apply to all men, in all places, at all times, in all cultures, in all circumstances. One author writes, "There's something self-contained and final about these commandments."

One night at dinner, a father pulled out his Bible and shared a devotion with his family. The passage he read included the Ten Commandments, but he went a little long. He had lost the attention of his preschoolers.

In an effort to pull them back in, he asked his 5 year old, "How many commandments did God give Moses?"

Little Seth shook his head... "Too many!"

Man-made religion will major on the minors, and minor on the majors. It makes a big deal out of the minutia, and amplifies the trivial. It makes obedience to God complicated and cumbersome. But that's not God's desire. He boils down our priorities to just ten.

It's obvious that only God could've authored these Ten Commandments. Consider the chance of a man, or group of men, coming up with a standard so *simple*, yet so *sweeping*. The Ten Commandments contain just 297 words... A recent federal government directive to regulate the price of cabbage contained 26,911 words.

Man's tendency is to complicate whatever he puts his hands too. I've heard it said, "We have created 35 million laws trying to enforce ten commandments."

When God composed the Ten Commandments He made them simple, to-the-point, easy to understand, applicable to all - yet comprehensive in their coverage.

The Jews refer to these ten injunctions as "the ten words," or "the ten sayings." Sometimes they're called "the Decalogue." When Israel camped in the Sinai the mountain quaked, God descended in smoke and fire, and provided His people ten precepts or mandates.

God redeemed His people from Egyptian slavery. Now He'll teach them to live a holy and happy life.

In ten bursts of brilliance and brevity God addresses ten essential topics: faith, worship, reverence, time, authority, life, purity, property, speech, contentment.

Master God's Ten Sayings and the concepts behind them, and you'll be successful in every area of life.

It's interesting, *God wrote the Ten Commandments with His own hand.* Exodus 31:18 tells us, "When (God) had made an end of speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moses two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God."

The Ten Commandments were written on two plates of stone, and thus divided into two categories.

The first tablet, which consists of the first five commandments, deal with man's relationship with God.

The second tablet, which contains the second five, deal with man's relationship with his fellow man.

Which reminds me of the day when Moses went to God, and asked Him, "Lord, we're a sick people. We need some serious help. What can you prescribe us?"

God, the Great Physician handed Moses the Ten Commandments, and told him, "Take these two tablets, and if you're not better soon, come back and see Me."

Hey, the reason so many people take pills is because they've never taken to heart these two tablets.

Go to Washington DC today and you'll find the Ten Commandments on most of our national monuments.

They're engraved in the floor of the National Archives... A bronze statue of Moses stands in the Library of Congress... The face of Moses is directly across from the speaker's chair in the House of Representatives... Moses and the Ten Commandments are on the facade of the Supreme Court building... They're even carved into the Court's wooden doors...

Yet posting them is not enough. We need to obey them. Over the next two weeks that's what I want to encourage us to do... we'll take each of our two tablets.

Read with me the First Commandment, verses 2-3...

God says, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me."

The Hebrews had just departed a land of idols.

The ancient Egyptians deified nature, animals, even the pharaoh. They recognized 20,000 different gods.

And while in Egypt, even the Hebrews had developed an attraction to many of these gods.

In Joshua 24:14 the next generation is commanded to "put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the LORD!"

Realize, the ten plagues were God's assault on Egyptian idolatry. Turning the Nile to blood... the proliferation of frogs... the death of the firstborn... even the diseased cattle were not plagues chosen at random - each targeted a different Egyptian deity.

The Nile was considered sacred by the Egyptians...

The goddess Heqt was personified as a frog...

Pharaoh and his firstborn heir were viewed as divine.

Believe it or not, the Egyptians even worshipped bulls and heifers... *Holy cow*, what a mistake!

The ten plagues Charlton Heston brought on Yul Brynner and the Egyptians were designed by the true God to show His supremacy over their Top Ten idols.

In other words, God dared the forces of evil to a showdown, and then blew them out of the water.

The Israelis who left Egypt had a fresh start, with a vivid demonstration of the reality and supremacy of the true God fresh on their minds. God immediately tells them to never again worship anything other than Him!

Now fast forward 3500 years to modern times - after we've walked on the moon - and invented speed of light communications - and developed medicinal marvels that render many diseases obsolete. Today, when you hear Moses had *two tablets*, you think iPads.

After such technological advancement you'd think the human race would've outgrown its taste for idols, but not so. All over the world idolatry still abounds...

In India, Hindus worship 300 million gods and goddesses... In Sri Lanka 100,000 Buddhists flock to pay homage to Buddha's tooth... Muslims worship Allah, the moongod of ancient Arabia... New Agers ascribe divine powers to "mother earth..." Even some disciples of Rome bow to statues of the Virgin Mary...

In fact, I read of two ladies in Denver, Colorado who years ago founded, "The Church of the Risen Elvis."

They were modern day idolators. They made a god out of Elvis Presley. They enshrined an Elvis doll above an altar, and then adorned it with candles and flowers.

They raised their hands - chanted Elvis' name - held special services whenever there was a so-called Elvis sighting - they even prayed to the dead singer. All for a man who admitted, "I ain't nothing but a hound dog!"

Now, I'm pretty sure, none of you are going to run off and join the Church of the Risen Elvis. But there are other more subtle ways to fall into the snare of idolatry.

Billy Graham said, "Whatever you love most - be it sports, pleasure, business, or God - that is your god."

Arthur Wallis, made this statement, "An idol may be defined as any person or thing that has usurped in the heart the place of preeminence that belongs to the Lord." In short, you can make an idol out of anything - a person, possession, pleasure, position, philosophy.

Take for example **possessions**. What some folks call "toys," God may view as "idols." I'm sure you've seen the bumper sticker, "He who dies with the most toys wins." A man's toys or treasures can be his god.

If you want to know if you're in danger of idolatry track down how you've been exhausting your assets.

Do you spend more *time* on your toys or God? Does more of your *money* go toward your toys or God? Who gets the majority of your *thoughts* - your toys or God?

We can also make idols out of **people**. We put people on a pedestal - athletes, heroes, entertainers.

You can worship a boyfriend, or girlfriend.

I've even seen new parents drop off their little idols back in the nursery. Their whole world revolves around their idol. Don't misunderstand, parenting and marriage are both wonderful and good, and godly, but our relationship with God should always take precedent.

American author Oliver Wendell Holmes put it bluntly, "Men are idolators, and want something to look at and kiss and hug and throw themselves down before; they always did, they always will; and if you don't make it out of wood, you must make it out of words." A noble cause, or a philosophy, or someone's dream - can become an idol. Even *ideals can be idols*.

Years ago a preacher named "Bud Robinson" paid a visit to the Big Apple. He was shown the glitz and glamor of NYC. After his trip he prayed, "Lord, I thank You for letting me see all the sights of New York. And I thank You most of all that I didn't see a thing I wanted."

God's Commandment #1 instructs us not to make anything else in our life more important to us than God.

The Second of God's Top Ten is in verses 4-6...

God commands, "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the

third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments."

The First Commandment clarifies the *object* of our worship - whereas the Second Commandment instructs us on the *observance* of our worship.

It's not enough to simply love and worship God... If we're sincere in our devotion we'll love and worship God in the way He wants to be loved and worshipped.

The breakthrough in my marital life occurred when I realized that if I really love Kathy, I will love her in the way she wants and needs to be loved. *This was hammered home several weeks after our wedding...* 

My new wife was in a funk. She was upset with me. One night I brought her flowers. Another night candies.

Finally I asked, "Honey, what's wrong?" Tears welled-up. She whimpered, "The yard looks like a jungle. You never mow the grass. You don't care about our home."

I've never enjoyed mowing grass. Equating lawn care with the state of my marriage was the farthest thing from my mind. But I had to learn that to my wife what spoke love wasn't roses or candy, but a freshly manicured lawn. And rather than argue... I went out, mowed the grass... and we've lived happily ever after.

Here is the golden rule in relationships. If you love someone - your wife, or parents, or kids - you'll love them in the way they need and desire to be loved.

This is what idea lies at the heart of the Second Commandment - there are ways God desires to be worshipped, and there are ways He doesn't want to be worshipped. And if you love Him, you'll please Him.

People try to love and serve God in ways convenient for them, rather than in ways He wants to be loved!

In Exodus 20:4 the Almighty commands us, "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them."

Certain Puritan and Amish groups have interpreted this injunction as a prohibition against all expressions of art and illustration... They say a painting, a photo, a sculpture is a graven image, and forbidden by the Second Commandment... Some Orthodox Jews in Israel frown on you if you try to take their photograph...

But if this is the correct interpretation of the Second Command, then God breaks His own law later in the book of Exodus, when He constructs the Tabernacle.

Craftsmen embroider angels into the sacred curtain.

In fact, the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments were kept in the Ark of the Covenant, on which sat two angels made of gold - another example of divine art.

I believe there's nothing wrong with a painting or a snapshot – or *any* visual, tangible image - just as long as that image is not used or relied upon in worship.

God is spirit. According to Jesus in John 4:24, "those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." The worship of God should be spiritual - not tangible.

God knows we are fleshly, physical people. We like to grab and touch to believe but that's not how God wants us to relate to Him. Thomas said of the risen Christ, he'd believe only if he could touch His scars. But when Jesus appeared, He told Thomas, "Because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." God wants us to relate to Him, and worship Him, by faith - not by touching, or tasting, or seeing...

As one author puts it, "God is not an aspect of nature, but a reality greater than the universe. He admonishes us not to drop our eyes down to nature for an "easy fix"..." God wants us to rise up to the next level, and train ourselves to relate to Him spiritually.

Realize this was the intention behind the golden calf. Rather than represent a false god, and violate the First Command, it was an attempt to worship God through a graven image - a violation of the Second Command.

But it quickly deteriorated into brazen idolatry...

Moses was on the mountaintop. The people in the camp grew restless. They wanted something tangible to aide them in their worship. In Exodus 32:4-5, after Aaron constructed the holy cow, he told the people, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!... Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD."

The Hebrew word translated "LORD" is the covenant name for God, "Yahweh." Now, if Aaron had made a different god why did He constitute a feast to Yahweh?

The calf was intended to represent the one true God who had brought Israel out of the land of Egypt... but notice how quickly that concept deteriorated...

This is the reason for the Second Commandment. God knows we're too rudimentary - too earthbound.

The moment we allow a physical image into our worship *the symbol* takes the place of *the substance*.

The *relic* becomes a substitute for the *reality*. *Icons* quickly become *idols*. Trinkets and beads, supposedly *aids in worship*, quickly become *objects of worship*.

Did you hear of the brash, little boy who was busy drawing. His mom asked, "What are you working on?"

He said, "I'm drawing a picture of God."

She gently scolded him, "Son, it's impossible to draw God. No one knows what He looks like!" The boy fired back, "They will when I get through with this picture!"

If we had a picture of God - trust me, it wouldn't take long for us to worship the picture, instead of God.

Because we're physical people we are far too easily attracted to the physical. The Second Commandment teaches us to aspire higher – to worship God in spirit.

It scares me when I find a person whose worship of God is dependent on a mood or specific environment.

I get concerned when I hear, "I can't worship God unless I'm in a certain style of church building..." Or "I can't worship God unless there are candles and incense..." Or "I can't worship God unless I'm outside, under a tree..." Or "I can't worship God unless I'm wearing my bluejeans, and singing praise songs..."

If we've learned to worship God *in spirit*, then we can worship God anywhere, anytime, in any situation. We should be able to walk into this room some Sundays, and never sing or say a word and still worship God.

God is spirit, and He wants to be worshipped in spirit and truth. A graven image reduces God to whatever aspect of His character we depict. Thus, the way to worship God is not to *reduce Him*, its to *exalt Him!* 

The first commandment insures we worship *the right God* - while the second insures we worship Him *rightly.* 

The Third Commandment is in verse 7. God speaks to His people, then and now, "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain."

In the Bible names are important. A name denotes a person's character. Often, a name reflected his nature.

It reminds me of the Indian Chief that grew tired of his name. It was too long. He petitioned the court for a change. The Judge asked, "What's your name now?"

He said, "Chief Screeching Train Whistle."

"And to what name do you want to shorten it?"

The Chief folded his arms, stuck out his chest, and said proudly, "Toots." From "Chief Screeching Train Whistle" to "Toots"... That's a pretty clever alteration.

But understand, God hasn't petitioned the court for an alteration to His name. He likes His name "as is."

"God" speaks of His infinite power and sovereignty...

"Lord" of His supreme and unrivaled authority...

"Jesus" means "Jehovah is Salvation" - what a perfect name for our living Lord...
"Christos" in Greek and "Christ" in English is the translation of the Hebrew "Messiah"
- the Hebrew name for the King of all kings.

Use any of these precious names flippantly, or disrespectfully, and you not only insult the person of God, you degrade the nature and character of God.

Realize, there're three ways to take the name of God in vain – through **profanity**, or **frivolity**, or **hypocrisy**.

Profanity is when you couple the Lord's name with an unflattering expletive, or use His sacred name as an expletive itself. It blows my mind that this is a problem.

Why do people hit their finger with a hammer, and shout with disgust the wonderful name of Jesus?

How did that association ever get started? The name of Jesus should remind us of blessing and peace - not anger. I have no doubt this was originally Satan's idea, and he's been successful in spreading its practice.

I know folks who string together the words "God" and "dam," without even thinking about what they're saying.

And this may be their greatest crime – they disgrace the name and nature of God, without thinking about it!

Who would want to dam his fellow human in the first place? Do you really wish damnation on anyone?

And even if you were so cold and callous that you would want to send a person to hell, understand *God would never want to dam a human being!* God loves us, and died to save us! Romans 8:34 tells us, "Who is he who condemns? (It's not Jesus) It

is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us."

Frivolity is another way to take the Lord's name in vain. Treating His name in a trite and careless manner is affront to who God is! Referring to God as "the man upstairs" or "the big guy," belittles the King of Creation!

When a person is caught by surprise, and gasps, "O my God!" without really crying out to God Himself - that's an example of a frivolous use of God's name.

Making God the brunt of a joke is also frivolity.

As is using Christian cliches with no thought as to their real meaning - "Well, bless God" or "Hallelujah" - without really praising God, or wanting to bless Him.

And a third way to take the Lord's name in vain is hypocrisy. In Luke 6:46 Jesus says, "Why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things which I say?"

We take the Lord's name in vain when we talk about Him - and how much we love Him, or want to serve Him - then never take the first step to actually do so.

Prayer without practice. Creeds without commitment. These are hypocritical uses of God's precious name.

There are people who go to church every Sunday, and would never say a vulgar word, who will be shocked to realize they've been taking the Lord's name in vain for years. Famous preacher G. Campbell Morgan once wrote, "The blasphemies of the Church are infinitely worse than the blasphemies of the street."

The Fourth Commandment is in verses 8-11...

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

This Fourth Commandment could well be the most violated of all ten. It's amazing how far we've fallen in the observance of the Sabbath. I've heard it put this way, "Our great-grandfathers called it *the holy Sabbath...* Our grandfathers called it *the Sabbath...* Our fathers called it *Sunday...* We call it *the weekend.*"

When God created the heavens and earth He did so in six days, and on the seventh day He rested. From the very beginning God knew man needed a day off.

Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath." God created and designed humans to function best, by resting one day in seven.

Any archer knows, "The bow that is always bent ceases to shoot straight." You need to loosen the string, on occasion - relax the tension on the bow - or else it'll warp and crack. The same is true with us.

If we're constantly under the gun our perspective will warp - our psyche will crack - even our health will fail.

Years ago Pennsylvania minors used mules to haul coal. Many of the animals lived their whole lives underground. They never saw daylight, and before long they

became blind. The minors discovered that the key to saving the animal's eyesight was to bring them above ground one day in seven. The mining mules were brought up from the mines each Sunday.

That's why you need to come above ground each Sunday. Leave behind the darkness of the office, the daily grind, the oppressive world – and get some light.

Bask in the light of God's Word, enjoy the fresh air of worship, rediscover heaven's viewpoint. You need it... God commands it... at least one day in seven!

The Fourth Commandment tells us, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." But what does that really mean? How do we keep one day in seven holy?

Remember, the word "holy" means "to set apart, or treat as special." The other six days are devoted to work, but one day needs to be special. The Hebrews sat aside the Sabbath for two activities: pray and play.

God intended for the Sabbath to slow us down - give us time to kick back - and remember why we work so hard and stay so busy the other six days of the week.

In his book, "Confessions of a Former Sabbath Breaker," Eugene Peterson writes, "Keeping a Sabbath is simple and easy: we pray and we play, two things we were pretty good at as children, and can always pick up again with a little encouragement and if we can only find the time. But we don't have to find the time, it is given to us. A day a week. A Sabbath. A day to pray and play. God's gift." For your sake, for your family's sake, take one day in seven, and make it a Sabbath!

And the last commandment on tablet one - the Fifth Commandment is in verse 12. God says, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you."

Generally speaking, parents are smarter than kids, even teenagers - and if the kids respect their parents and listen to their advice they'll live longer and better.

God says so right here!

Now there are some Bible scholars who place this commandment on the second tablet - along with the commands that deal with our relationships with our fellow man - but I believe it appeared on the first tablet.

For your relationship with your parents is in many ways interconnected with your relationship with God.

I believe the Fifth Commandment belongs on the first tablet of the Law for a special reason. If you can't obey an authority you can see, *your parents* – then how are you going to obey an authority you can't see, *God?* 

Respect for one's parents is critical to a child's ability to obey and respect other types of authority in their life.

If a child doesn't obey and respect his parents, he probably won't end up obeying and respecting his teacher, or coach, or the police, or his boss - or even God. You learn to honor God by honoring your parents.

And this is an important realization for parents.

Supplying a younger child with food, and clothing, and protection, and education, and entertainment are all a part of parenting, but not the most important part.

If a father and mother aren't teaching their child obedience and respect they're not doing their job!

A parent's primary purpose is not to win his kid's friendship, or make his kid happy, but to teach their child obedience and respect - how to honor authority!

And don't mistake obedience as the ultimate goal.

Everybody loves an obedient child, but a compliant child may obey - and still not learn the bigger lesson.

Kids need to be taught the concept of authority. Honor is a combination of obedience and respect.

It's possible for a child to obey a parent without respecting them. A parent can bribe, or threaten a child into obedience, without ever receiving their respect.

When Paul quotes Exodus 20:12 in Ephesians 6 he uses a Greek term for the word "honor" which means "to prize." Kids need to be taught to prize their parents?

Are we there for our kids? Do we love them, and encourage them, and help them through tough times?

Do we discipline them promptly and effectively when warranted? Do we set a godly example for them? Do we live out what we believe? If we as parents act honorably it'll make it easier for our kids to honor us.

When my oldest son, Zach, was just a tot I asked him one day, "Son, what do you like most about Dad?" He said, "When you wrestle with me." "And Son, what do you not like about Dad? "When you spank me."

Well, I was feeling bold that day so I decided to go a step further. "Son, what do you like most about Mom?"

Zach's eyes lit up, "When she cooks me breakfast."

Then I really mustered up some courage, "Okay Son, what do you like least about Mom?" Zach thought for several seconds, then he answered, "Dad, everything Mom does is good!" There's a son who prizes a parent!

If we're brave enough to discipline our kids, and teach them how to obey and show respect - and at the same time conduct ourselves in a way that'll cause our kids to prize us - I think it's a pretty safe bet that they'll grow up prizing God's authority in their lives as well.

"Honor your father and mother..." is not only the child's command, it's also a mother and father's goal.

Children keep the Fifth Commandment by obeying and respecting their parents... Whereas, parents keep it by teaching and insisting on obedience and respect.

Let me sum up this AM with an interesting story...

In 1997 the city government of Managua, Nicaragua funded a project to name the city's streets, and number the buildings. For the prior 25 years the city of 1.5 million people had functioned without street names and addresses. *Imagine the confusion for out-of-towners*.

In 1972, a devastating earthquake turned the city into ruins. After the killer quake new streets were never named, and the buildings never numbered, until 1997.

That meant for 25 years there were no formal addresses, directions were based on landmarks and natural features - like "go to the third street after the lake." Getting around in the city was nearly impossible.

And this is what life is like without God's Top Ten.

Without the Ten Commandments there's no moral compass - no way to get your bearings. Lifestyle decisions end up a guessing game - a shot in the dark.

Without "God's Ten Sayings" we're destined to suffer from trial and error. That's not the way you want to live!

Don't you desire to build your life on rock solid wisdom? Embrace God's Top Ten as guidelines for your life, then ask the Holy Spirit to help you live them!