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WORSHIP

IDOLATRY

SWEARING

SABBATH

TEN WORDS

A PRACTICAL LOOK AT THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

HONOR

MURDER

CHEATING

STEALING

LYING

ENVY

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1

Worship

We were leaving the church parking lot after a Sunday night service. Andrea was in the passenger seat, and Makenna and Raylee were in the backseat. Makenna is our firstborn. She was already four years old and sprinting toward preschool. She could string sentences together into a story, but Raylee was only months old. So far she hadn't said her first word.

I began braking for the bright red light above me when I heard sweet music from the backseat. Raylee softly said, "Da da." I nearly shoved the brake pedal through the floor. "Did you hear that?" Andrea had a sweet smile on her face. She heard it. Up until that night, she was winning the "first word war." Years earlier, Makenna's first word was "Mama." But on this night, Raylee tied the score at 1.

First words matter. We remember them like they were five minutes ago. We tell every friend and follower on social media about them. We scrapbook about them. We frame them. New parents hear it all the time. "Has your little guy said his first word yet?" First words matter.

Moses didn't know it, but God was about to speak ten words. Ten commandments to form the foundation of his faith. What would God's first word be? They'd been wandering through the wilderness for a while. Maybe God's first word would tell them how to siphon water from the wilderness. Or maybe He would tell them how to read a map. Moses would have taken notes, but God

was taking notes for him. He didn't have to write, just listen. And God spoke the first word.

“You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exodus 20:3).

I guess we'll have to wait to figure out where to find water in the wilderness. Before God told Moses what to do and what not to do, He reminded them who He is and what He has done. “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exodus 20:2). Moses couldn't turn one drop of water into blood. He couldn't change Pharaoh's heart, but God could. And God did.

The grace of God was the only reason Moses and his merry band of millions were free. Without God, they would still have been building bricks with hay while the taskmasters towered over them, whips in hand, ready and willing to strike. But God set them free. Just in case Moses thought the magic wand opened the ocean, God reminded them He brought them out of Egypt.

But He did not just come to them to tell His people, “Do what I say, or else.” He revealed Himself to them by His name, YHWH (Yahweh, or Jehovah). God is who He is all by Himself, but He loves to be in relationship with us just because He loves us. He spoke to them with the authority of the God who created them and with the tenderness of the Father who loved them. God didn't want them to obey Him just because they were afraid; He wanted them to obey Him because they were thankful.

We obey God, and we obey the Word of God, but not because we're afraid He'll pummel us if we don't. We obey Him because we're thankful for who He is and for all He's done. Maybe God delivered you from drugs and drinking. Maybe He mended your broken marriage that others gave up on. He has certainly saved our souls. He's given us peace in chaos and joy in sorrow. God has protected us when we were in danger. He's forgiven our dark past and given us a bright future.

We sing a duet with the psalmist, He brought us up “out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay” (Psalm 40:2). He brought us out of our darkness into His marvelous light (I Peter 2:9). We could testify until next Halley’s Comet just remembering the blessings God has given us, the grace He’s shown to us. If you live for God only out of obligation or tradition, pour yourself some coffee, grab a notebook and pen, and begin to write out the blessings God has given you. He delivered Israel from Egypt; He’s delivered us from sin.

No other god could set the Israelites free, but that was not for lack of candidates. The Egyptians served over two thousand gods.¹ Nearly everything in Egypt was a god to them. One god protected pregnant women, another protected the king in battle, another brought the floods every year, one goddess helped needy people, another swallowed the sun god at dusk every day and gave birth to him at dawn every morning, and another kept the sky and earth separated so never the twain would meet.

The Egyptians worshiped crocodiles, birds, snakes, turtles, frogs, dogs, cats. I know some people love their cats, but I don’t know anyone who worships a calico. Day after sun-swallowing day, the children of God were surrounded by people who worshiped thousands of gods. Every day they heard thousands of Egyptians pray to thousands of gods, counting on those gods to keep them safe. They hung their hopes on all those gods, but there dawned a day when God had had it with how the Egyptians were treating His kids. They were about to come dangerously close to the one true, living God.

Moses stormed into Pharaoh’s office and stammered his short list of demands. After Pharaoh refused, God began raining plagues on Egypt. Each of the ten plagues was a direct attack on Egypt’s gods. And their two-thousand-plus gods could do nothing by themselves or together to save them or to stop God from setting His people free. Thankfully, those days were behind the Israelites,

and so was Egypt. But they still remembered all those days and all those prayers to all those gods.

God wanted Israel to know, no matter what they heard or saw over the last 430 years while they were slaves in the smelting furnace of Egypt, “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 New Living Translation reads, “You must not have any other god but me.” The New International Version reads, “You shall have no other gods before Me.” God could make that demand because there is no other god beside Him or before Him or above Him or like Him. God alone is God.

When we lived in Florida, we lived near Lake Jessup, just outside Orlando. Lake Jessup was popular with the tourists and some of the locals because it teemed with alligators. Tourists came to Lake Jessup in hopes of “seein’ themselves a gator.” Each time we drove across the bridge over Lake Jessup, I looked this way and that, and several times, I saw pairs of red eyes peeking above the water.

Alligators were crawling all over that lake, so I floored it across the bridge just in case any of those alligators had a hankerin’ for chasing cars. We were in Florida for five years, and I heard several gator stories. Some of the gators came on land hunting for food, and some of the guys went on water hunting for gators. However, I never heard one story of one person bowing down to worship an alligator. But the Egyptians did. The Nile River was Egypt’s life source, so they heard gator tales aplenty. Several of Egypt’s gods such as Sobek, Ammit, Ipy, Shepet, and Khentekhtai—pronounce at your own risk—were made in the image of crocodiles.

Since we don’t worship cats or crocs, can we just skip this first commandment and head to the second? Not quite. We often fall into the same trap the Egyptians did in worshipping other gods, we

just have other gods than they had. Over the years, I've seen good, godly parents take their kids to baseball, basketball, band, volleyball, soccer practice and miss church.

I know you mean well. I know you want your kids to be active and involved. I think that's great. I do too. I remember the day in junior high when I went to my dad and said, "Dad, I want to play football." I dreamed of playing wide receiver, sprinting past the defense, catching the ball over my shoulder, and tiptoeing into the end zone. But my dad pulled out the "no" needle and burst my dream bubble. "No, son. You can't play football. They'll snap you like a twig."

I wanted to protest. Show him how strong I was, how wrong he was, but he was right. I couldn't show off my muscles because I hadn't found them yet. I was little, weak, slow, and clumsy. Aside from that, I was a perfect fit for football. But Dad and Coach did concede and let me stand on the sidelines—right there on Friday nights, amidst all the shiny, silver helmets and bright, scarlet jerseys. I was the hydration engineer. I was the waterboy.

But I had a rule. If we had church, I was going to church. It wasn't because I was afraid God would turn Gatorade into blood; it was because I loved God and wanted Him to be first.

The first time it'll be difficult to tell the coach, "I'm sorry, they can't be there because we go to church." But if you don't, it will become easier to allow your kids to miss church. You would never say it with your words, but your actions say it for you. "Some things are more important than our relationship with God." If your children make the team but miss Heaven, they lose, no matter how many championships they win. We must teach the next generation—with our words and our actions—that our God is God and we will have no other gods before Him.

I've seen good, godly men and women sign up for more overtime and come to fewer prayer meetings. They wake up earlier

and go to sleep later just to make more money. In the busyness of business, they shelve their time with God for overtime at work.

These few, eternal words of the first word, ring in my ears: you shall have no other gods before Me. This was good for Moses. This is good for us. God's not concerned we'll start worshipping bullfrogs and bulldogs. But He knows us. He created us, remember? He knows if we're not careful to worship Him first and worship Him alone, we'll start worshipping money, position, power, pleasure, entertainment. And the pursuit of anything before or besides God becomes a god to us.

To every working man and woman and every working young man and young woman, let's be careful that our jobs and the money we make from them do not become a god to us. We have to work. If we don't, we don't eat. I love to eat. There are shift workers who have to work during church, and bosses call mandatory overtime from time to time on Sundays. God knows that. But if we're working more in this life just to have more, nicer, newer, larger, faster—then it's possible money and materialism have become a god to us.

Israel did well for a while. Fast forward through their wilderness wanderings, and they're sipping milk and slurping honey in the Promised Land. Everything is turning up roses for them until . . .

They wanted to be like their new neighbors and wanted their new neighbors to like them, so they started marrying some of their new neighbors. But their new neighbors didn't worship God like they worshiped God.

It took a while before they stopped worshipping God. At first, they added a roster of other gods to their worship card. The more the merrier. But when they began to worship other gods, even though they didn't stop worshipping the one, true God, their relationship with each other and with God fell apart. The next nine commandments build on the first.

The children of Israel forgot these few, foundational words of God's first word, "You shall have no other gods before Me." May the next generation say of our generation, "They remembered."