



Jen Wilkin



TEN



WORDS

TO



LIVE



BY

*Delighting in and Doing
What God Commands*



“In this short book, Jen Wilkin takes the reader through the Ten Commandments with her characteristic depth, wisdom, and clarity. Whether you have studied the Bible for decades or it is brand new to you, this book will help you to understand what these ancient words mean for you today. This book makes me covet Jen Wilkin’s amazing gifts of writing and teaching while giving me the tools to combat the coveting. Don’t steal this book, but get it any other way you can, and you’ll be glad you did.”

Russell Moore, President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty
Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

“Jen Wilkin leads us to look at the Ten Commandments anew—welcoming obedience from a place of love and delight for the Lord, rather than fear and dread. For the believer set free in Christ, this is a reminder that the good news produces good fruit.”

Ruth Chou Simons, *Wall Street Journal* best-selling author,
Beholding and Becoming and *GraceLaced*; artist; Founder,
GraceLaced Co.

“In *Ten Words to Live By*, Jen Wilkin does what she does best: taking Scripture and making it plain; taking theology and revealing its everyday, here-and-now practicality. And once again, we remember that God’s ways and his commands are for our good. Once again, we remember that his words are life and health and peace.”

Hannah Anderson, author, *All That’s Good: Recovering the Lost Art of Discernment*

“Jen Wilkin has provided a fresh and timely guide through the Ten Commandments. She draws out their significance to those who follow Christ, giving us a mouth-watering vision of what life can look like as we follow the good words of King Jesus.”

Sam Allberry, pastor; author, *7 Myths about Singleness* and *Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With?*

“I try to read everything Jen Wilkin writes, and this book is another example of why. I found myself informed, challenged, and encouraged, and I think you will too.”

Andrew Wilson, Teaching Pastor, King’s Church London

“Jen Wilkin has provided a clear, insightful, and accessible explanation of one of the most important sections of Holy Scripture—the Ten Commandments. With ease and verve she helps us understand the heart of God’s laws and how they are given to bring us life. Highly recommended!”

Jonathan T. Pennington, Associate Professor of New Testament, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“What I appreciate most about Jen Wilkin is that as she teaches the Bible, she also teaches us how to read the Bible for ourselves. That’s exactly what she does in this book with one of the most important and yet misunderstood parts of Scripture—the Ten Commandments. Far from being cringe-worthy rules from a grumpy God, we learn that God’s commands are beautiful and lifegiving, revealing the pattern of Christlikeness that we can experience by God’s grace. Reading this book will help you not only to know the Ten Commandments but also to love them, delight in them, and ultimately live by them.”

Jeremy Treat, Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Reality LA, Los Angeles, California; Adjunct Professor of Theology, Biola University; author, *Seek First* and *The Crucified King*

“I’ve studied and preached the Ten Commandments over the last thirty years, but *Ten Words to Live By* helped me to see new truths and consider fresh applications. This book is biblical, thoughtful, and deeply practical. Jen Wilkin masterfully brings the ancient summary of the law to daily life. Regardless of your background with studying the Bible, read this book. You’ll be led to appreciate the Ten Commandments and how much we need them today.”

Mark Vroegop, Lead Pastor, College Park Church, Indianapolis, Indiana; author, *Dark Clouds*, *Deep Mercy* and *Weep with Me*

Ten Words to Live By

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*Delighting in and Doing
What God Commands*

Jen Wilkin

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THE TEN WORDS

Exodus 20:2–17

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

✦ **COMMANDMENT 1**

“You shall have no other gods before me.

✦ **COMMANDMENT 2**

“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 or 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 the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

✦ **COMMANDMENT 3**

“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.

✦ COMMANDMENT 4

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

✦ COMMANDMENT 5

“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

✦ COMMANDMENT 6

“You shall not murder.

✦ COMMANDMENT 7

“You shall not commit adultery.

✦ COMMANDMENT 8

“You shall not steal.

✦ COMMANDMENT 9

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

✦ COMMANDMENT 10

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.”

Romans 13:8–10

“Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Introduction

Remember to Delight

*For this is the love of God, that we
keep his commandments. And his
commandments are not burdensome.*

I JOHN 5:3

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT the law of God in all of its life-giving beauty. In the church today there exists a great forgetfulness about the role of the law in the life of the believer. This book is an exercise in remembrance.

Far back in the earliest pages of the Old Testament, in Exodus 20 and then again in Deuteronomy 5, an ancient people in a distant land were given the *aseret hadevarim*, the Ten Words. What the Torah and the rabbis called the Ten Words, you and I know as the Ten Commandments. Given to Moses on Mount Sinai, inscribed on tablets of stone by the very finger of God, these ten laws were intended to serve the Israelites as they left behind pagan Egypt and entered into pagan Canaan. They comprise the moral law of the Old Testament, undergirding its civil and ceremonial laws.

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Moses assured those people, the nation of Israel, that obedience to these Ten Words would result in life and blessing:

So be careful to do what the LORD your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left. Walk in obedience to all that the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess. (Deut. 5:32–33 NIV)

The Ten Commandments are perhaps the best-known example of moral law, informing law codes into modern times. Though most people know about the Ten Words, few can actually enumerate them. One well-known survey found that, while Americans struggled to recall the Ten Commandments, they could name the seven ingredients of a Big Mac and all six members of the Brady Bunch with relative ease.¹ In my experience, not many Christians are able to name the Decalogue's ten "key ingredients," either. Can you name them all? Should you be able to?

When the Ten Commandments are not forgotten, they are often wrongly perceived. They suffer from a PR problem. They are seen by many as the obsolete utterances of a thunderous, grumpy God to a disobedient people, neither of whom seem very relatable or likable. Because we have trouble seeing any beauty in the Ten Words, forgetting them comes easily.

¹ Reuters Life!, "Americans Know Big Macs Better Than Ten Commandments," *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, October 12, 2007, www.reuters.com/article/us-bible-commandments/americans-know-big-macs-better-than-ten-commandments-idUSN1223894020071012.

Law and Grace

Perhaps you have heard the statement “Christianity isn’t about rules, it’s about relationship.” It is an idea that has enjoyed popularity in recent decades, as evangelistic messages increasingly emphasized a personal relationship with God, one made possible through the grace that forgives our sins against God’s law. In many ways, this evangelistic approach seeks to solve the PR problem I have noted. It trades the grumpy Old Testament God of the law for the compassionate New Testament God of grace.

Thus, law and grace have come to be pitted against one another as enemies, when in fact, they are friends. The God of the Old Testament and the God of the New have been placed in opposition, when in fact, they are one and the same. God does not change. His justice and compassion have always coexisted, and so have his law and his grace. Herein lies our forgetfulness. Rather than seeing the sin of lawlessness as the barrier to relationship with God, we have steadily grown to regard the law itself as the barrier. We have come to believe that rules prevent relationship.

So, is Christianity about rules, or is it about relationship? The Christian faith is absolutely about relationship. But while that faith is personal, it is also communal. We are saved into special relationship with God, and thereby into special relationship with other believers. Christianity is about relationship with God and others, and because this statement is true, Christianity is also unapologetically about rules, for rules show us how to live in those relationships. Rather than threaten relationship, rules enable it. We know this is true from everyday life. Imagine you are a substitute teacher at an elementary school. Which kindergarten class would you rather substitute for: the one with established and

respected rules posted on the bulletin board, or the one without? Rules ensure that the one in charge is honored, and that those in her charge look to the interests of others as well as their own. Without rules, our hopes of healthy relationship vanish in short order. Jesus did not pit rules against relationship. It was he who said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”²

Christians have been taught, with good reason, to fear legalism—attempting to earn favor through obedience to the law. Legalism is a terrible blight, as evidenced in the example of the Pharisees. But in our zeal to avoid legalism, we have at times forgotten the many places the beauty of the law is extolled for us, both in the Old Testament and the New. Blessed, says the psalmist, is the one whose delight is in the law of the Lord.³ While legalism is a blight, lawfulness is a blessed virtue, as evidenced in the example of Christ.

We should love the law because we love Jesus, and because Jesus loved the law. Contrary to common belief, the Pharisees were not lovers of the law; they were lovers of self. This is why Jesus says that unless our righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:20). Legalism is external righteousness only, practiced to curry favor. Legalism is not love of the law, but is its own form of lawlessness, twisting the law for its own ends.

When the Scriptures condemn lawlessness, as they repeatedly and vehemently do, they condemn both the one who ignores the law and the one who embraces it for self-righteous ends. Note

² John 14:15

³ See Ps. 1.

the words of the apostle John: “Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4).

The very definition of sin is rejection of law. What, then, is lawfulness?

Lawfulness is Christlikeness. To obey the law is to look like Jesus Christ. While legalism builds self-righteousness, lawfulness builds righteousness. Obedience to the law is the means of sanctification for the believer. We serve the risen Christ, “who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14).

So, it is my fervent hope that this book will increase your zeal. There are good works to be done by the people of God, not out of dread to earn his favor, but out of delight because we already have it. That favor is our freedom, a freedom from slavery better understood when we remember its foreshadowing many years ago in the time of the Ten Words.

A Feast in the Wilderness

Before God speaks the law to Israel from the top of Sinai, he speaks deliverance to Moses from the burning bush. Israel was in the throes of bitter toil. Four hundred years in Egypt had rendered them slaves with no hope of freedom. But the bush speaks. Yahweh makes known his plan of great rescue. Moses is to go to Pharaoh with a request: “Please let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God” (Ex. 3:18).

Let us go. It will become the refrain of the next sixteen chapters of Exodus. Seven times, Moses will bring the words of God to

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Pharaoh: “Let my people go that they may serve me, that they may make a feast to me in the wilderness” (Ex. 5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3).

A feast in the wilderness. An act of worship. Something heretofore out of the question. Bitter servitude to Pharaoh had made blessed service to God an impossibility for Israel. How could they serve both God and Pharaoh? Obedient worship to the King of heaven cannot be offered by those enslaved in the kingdom of Pharaoh. *Let us go.*

But Pharaoh is a stubborn master. Why would he release them to serve another master when they are serving him? With ten plagues, Yahweh breaks the rod of Pharaoh and delivers his children through passageways of blood and of water. Ten great labor pains, and a birth: the servants of Pharaoh find themselves reborn into their true identity as the servants of God. Let the feasting begin.

But hunger and thirst are their first companions, and they grumble against God. He meets their needs with living water and food from heaven, a foretaste of the provision awaiting them in Canaan. And at last they draw near to the foot of the mountain, the place God has called them to for the purpose of worship, sacrifice, and feasting.

God descends in thunder and lightning, and gives them not the feast they expect, but the feast they need. He gives them the law. The law of Pharaoh they know by heart, but the law of Yahweh is at best a distant memory to them after four hundred years in Egypt. He does not give it when they are in Egypt, for how could they serve two masters? No, instead, he waits, graciously giving it at the point they are finally able to obey. Come to the feast. Come

famished by the law of Pharaoh to feast on the law of the Lord. Come taste the law that gives freedom (James 1:25).

Many years later, Jesus would speak to his followers of their own relationship to the law. *No one can serve two masters. Be born again by water and blood. Hunger and thirst for righteousness. If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*⁴ Jesus shows himself to be the true and better Moses, leading us to the foot of Mount Zion to trade the law of sin and death for the law of love and life.

It is for freedom that Christ, the true and better Moses, has set you free.⁵ We are moved from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light, from the dehumanizing law of the oppressor to the humanizing law of freedom. We find ourselves in the wilderness of testing, nourished on the bread that came down from heaven, longing for a better home. How then shall we live? Hear the words of Paul:

For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. (Rom. 6:19)

For those in the wilderness, the law is graciously given to set us apart from those around us, and to point the way to love of God and love of neighbor. The Ten Words show us how to live holy lives as citizens of heaven while we yet dwell on earth. For the believer, the law becomes a means of grace.

⁴ Matt. 5:6; 6:24; John 3:5; 8:36

⁵ Gal. 5:1

Encouraging Words

Rules enable relationship. The Ten Words graciously position us to live at peace with God and others. The Great Commandment, the one which Jesus says sums up all 611 of the general and specific laws of the Old Testament, bears this out:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself. (Luke 10:27)

The Great Commandment is the underlying principle for all right living. Not surprisingly, the Ten Words follow the same pattern of Godward lawfulness first, and manward lawfulness second. The Ten Words are encouraging words, meant to give us hope—hope that we will live rightly oriented to God and others, hope that we will grow in holiness.⁶ They are not given to discourage but to delight. They are no less than words of life.

But take note: they are not words of life for everyone. For the unbeliever, obedience to the Ten Words can yield only the deadly fruit of legalism. As the author of Hebrews makes plain, “Without faith it is impossible to please [God]” (Heb. 11:6). These words bring life only to those who have been joined to Christ through faith. Our relationship has been purchased by the perfect obedience of Christ to the law. The life of Jesus fulfills the prophetic words of Psalm 40:8: “I delight to do your will, O my God; / your law is within my heart.”

He who delighted in the law of God offers it to those who trust in him, that they might delight in it, as well. And so that

⁶ Rom. 15:4

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they might please God. With faith, by the power of the Spirit, it is possible to please God.

I propose that we determine not just to remember the Ten Words, but to delight in them, to see beauty in them, to seek encouragement from them, and to live by them. They stand ancient and timeless, as for ransomed Israel, so for us: a feast of righteousness spread in the wilderness, fortifying our hearts for the journey home.

The First Word

Undivided Allegiance

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 slavery. You shall have no other gods before me."

EXODUS 20:1-3

EVEN AS A LIFE-LONG TEXAN, I can acknowledge that Texas is a funny and wonderful place. We decorate our homes and yards with Texas flags and Texas-themed artwork. By the time our children graduate from high school, they will have studied Texas history for two solid years. They will have sung our superlative-laden state song ("Texas, our Texas! All hail the mighty State!") at every high school football game and every major sporting event. Not only that, but in addition to pledging allegiance to the American flag, they will have begun each school day by honoring

the Texas flag: “I pledge allegiance to thee, Texas, one state under God, one and indivisible.”

I don't hear similar fervor from those from other states, decorative or declarative. I suspect that is because Texans take pride in the unique fact that we inhabit the only state that was once a nation unto itself. The War of Texas Independence was kind of a big deal for us. Do we remember the Alamo? Yes . . . yes, we do.

Remembering a history of a costly liberation shapes the Texas psyche. Pledging allegiance to our state—and our country—reminds us that we all owe our duty to an authority greater than ourselves. We understand ourselves to be in submission to those who make the laws, and therefore to the laws themselves.

The same was true of Israel, and the same is true of every follower of the one true God. The reality of a higher authority explains why the giving of the Ten Commandments doesn't actually begin with the utterance of the first commandment. Instead it begins with a brief history lesson recalling a costly liberation and establishing who is in charge: “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 slavery’” (Ex. 20:1–2).

A mere fifty days earlier, Israel had departed Egypt in the wake of the ten plagues sent to accomplish her release. Fresh in their minds would be the memory of those dark days—the Nile running thickly red, dead frogs heaped in stinking piles, swarms of blighting insects, hail, diseases, darkness, and death. Having gathered them at Mount Sinai, in thunder and smoke God reminds his people that it was by his mighty hand alone that their liberation was accomplished. Israel's only contribution to her freedom was to arise in obedience, as those walking from death

to life. God introduces the Ten Commandments to his people by identifying himself as the Lord *their God* and prompting them with “Remember Egypt.” Why? Because before Israel can pledge allegiance to Yahweh alone, she must recall her costly deliverance.

That deliverance entailed not just leaving behind the land of Egypt, but leaving behind the ways of Egypt. Each of the ten plagues was more than just a dramatic sign to Pharaoh that he must release the Hebrews. Each was a symbolic defeat of an Egyptian deity. Osiris, whose bloodstream was believed to be the Nile, bleeds out before his worshipers when Yahweh turns the Nile to blood. In reverence to Heqet, the frog-goddess of birth, Egyptians regarded frogs as sacred and not to be killed. Yahweh slays them by the thousands. Egyptian gods governing fertility, crops, livestock, and health are all shown to be impotent before the mighty outstretched arm of Israel’s God. In the ninth plague of darkness, Yahweh demonstrates his rule over the sun god Ra, whom Pharaoh was believed to embody. And in the final plague, the death of the firstborn, God shows himself supreme over the entire Egyptian pantheon by demonstrating his power over life and death.

One God toppling all rivals.

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt. The message to the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai is clear: before you can obey me as the God of the Ten Words of life, you must revere me as the God of the ten plagues of death. The response required is obvious, too. If the God who toppled all rivals in Egypt has brought you out of Egypt by his mighty outstretched arm, the only logical response is to obey the first word: “You shall have no other gods before me.”

Remember your costly deliverance. Pledge allegiance to me alone.

Only One God

The first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me,” is spoken in the language of a sovereign to a servant. There can be no dual allegiances when it comes to serving Yahweh. By commanding a singular allegiance, God does not merely assert that he is superior to other gods. Nor, in the plagues, does he merely demonstrate that he is stronger than other gods. He declares that they do not exist. They are nothing more than the vain imaginings of a darkened mind. The first word is more than a prohibition against worshiping lesser gods; it is an invitation into reality. “I am the LORD, and there is no other, / besides me there is no God” (Isa. 45:5). Why should Israel worship no other gods before God? Because there are no other gods.

Maybe that seems obvious. God has just routed his people’s greatest enemy and put their nonexistent gods to shame. But the truth that there is only one God to be worshiped must settle deep into the bones of the people of Israel, for God has brought his children victoriously out of polytheistic Egypt for the purpose of leading them victoriously into polytheistic Canaan.

After four hundred years in Egypt, polytheism would be more familiar to Israel than the monotheism the first word expresses. It would feel more natural than the singular worship God commands, as sin in comparison to righteousness so often does. The land just across the Jordan beckons with the comfortable familiarity of many-god worship. The likelihood that Israel would return to the familiar is high.

The call to monotheism would not be a new idea to Israel at the foot of Sinai. The creation account of Genesis 1 contains the implicit command to worship only God. Like the ten plagues, the

six days of creation are purposely worded to topple any notion of worshiping sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, sky, plants, animals, or humans. All of the heavens and earth are shown to be derivative, dependent upon, and in service to the God without origin who effortlessly speaks them into existence.

But God's people forget that pretty quickly. As early as chapter 35 of Genesis, we encounter a cautionary tale of divided worship among the children of God. It seems that between his exile in Paddan Aram and his return to Bethel, Jacob and his family had picked up a few household idol stowaways in their saddlebags. Though God has not explicitly commanded it, Jacob knows the idols must go:

So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves and change your clothes. Then come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone." (Gen. 35:2–3 NIV)

The presence of idols among Jacob's family points to the operation of a "both-and" mentality: yes, we will serve Yahweh, but also, just in case, we will offer devotion to these other gods, as well.

Dual allegiance. Can you relate?

This mentality hides in the baggage of believers today just as it did in Jacob's family three thousand years ago. It's an age-old expression of what James 1:8 refers to as double-mindedness. Double-mindedness occurs not because we *replace* God with an idol, but because we *add* an idol to our *monotheon* so that it

becomes a *polytheon*. The repeated refrain on idolatry throughout Israel's history will not be that she ceases worship of God *entirely*, but that she ceases worship of God *alone*.

An Expansive Obedience

The children of Yahweh today are not so different from the children of Yahweh then. Like Israel, we affirm that there are no other gods verbally and intellectually, but not practically. Practically, we live as polytheists. Our idolatry is a “both-and” arrangement: I need God *and* I need a spouse. I need God *and* I need a smaller waist size. I need God *and* I need good health. I need God *and* I need a well-padded bank account.

In our minds, we rationalize that the “both-and” still offers God some form or degree of worship, so everything must be okay. Yet, according to Genesis and Exodus, to cease to worship God alone is to corrupt any worship still offered to him.

In Matthew 6:24, Jesus teaches us that “no one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.” We may think dual allegiance is desirable, but Jesus assures us it is not even possible. We are created for single-minded allegiance. We are designed for it. We are made in the image of one God, to bear the image of one God. We cannot conform to both the image of God and the image of an idol.

We are not designed to be polytheists, nor can we sustain the weight of a many-God lie in our minds. When we cling to God-and-_____, we become “unstable in all [our] ways” (James 1:8).

It often takes a crisis to point out our folly. There is nothing like a financial crisis to teach us our worship of money and comfort

in addition to God. There is nothing like a wayward child or a divorce to teach us our worship of having a perfect family in addition to God. There is nothing like the aging process to teach us our worship of health and beauty in addition to God.

It is at just such a crisis point that we find Jacob ready to expel the household idols. Penitent, he has just come face-to-face with his own failures. His daughter had been violated, and his sons had responded with terrible vengeance when he himself failed to seek justice. Jacob is a man broken of his self-reliance and soured on his own cunning. He is a man familiar with crisis. He is a man at last learning to pledge allegiance to God alone.

Whatever instability may be needed to bring us to repentance, the final solution to our practice of polytheism is found in Jacob's story: "So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods they had and the rings in their ears, and Jacob buried them under the oak at Shechem" (Gen. 35:4 NIV).

Jacob could have destroyed the idols in any way. He might have burned them, thrown them in a lake, or hacked them to bits. Instead, he buries them under a landmark tree known as a place of idol worship. Determined to put the past behind him and live in the truth that God is his only hope, Jacob symbolically holds a funeral for the idols in the very place they were typically worshiped.¹ With pointed irony, the place for idol worship symbolically becomes a burial ground for it.

Do not miss the moral of the story: to rid ourselves of our idols, we must put them to death.

¹ Bill T. Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 137.

Burying Our Both-Ands

Jacob holds a necessary funeral, and so must we. The apostle Paul urges us to do so:

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, *which is idolatry*. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. (Col. 3:5–10)

Notice Paul describes a list of idolatrous behaviors quite similar to the sins we will find forbidden in the Ten Words. Paul does not mean for us to put to death behaviors only, but the idols of the heart that hide behind them. He is urging believers to be students of our behaviors as indicators of what (or who) we worship in addition to God.

The first word serves as the umbrella statement for the other nine. If we obeyed the first word, we would automatically obey the others. It establishes the proper posture before God that enables the proper motives and behaviors to obey the other nine.

We were created in the image of God. The more we worship an idol, the more we will conform to its image. To put to death an idol is to be restored to the image of God.

Like Jacob, we must bury our idols. By the power of the Spirit, we must bury our both-ands, and keep them buried, learning from

our past mistakes and growing in righteousness with each passing day. The first word prepares us for the other nine by demanding our undivided allegiance to the God of our costly deliverance. Without that pledge on our lips and in our hearts, all obedience to the commands that follow will be an exercise in empty moralism. The first word is a pledge of allegiance to the kingdom of God, here and now.

On Earth as in Heaven

Remember how it all began? In Eden, the first commandment was perfectly validated and perfectly obeyed. In that pure haven for that brief interlude, there were no other gods before God. Image bearers bore his image undiluted and undefiled. But dual allegiances sprang from the double-tongued lisp of the serpent. Adam and Eve succumbed to the lure of God-and-fill-in-the-blank, and Eden's pure worship was lost. We feel the loss of it every day—battling for single-minded devotion, seeking to obey as our single-minded Savior taught us and showed us to obey.

One day his kingdom will come in fullness, on earth as it is in heaven. That day, single-minded and whole-hearted allegiance will be fully restored. In the New Jerusalem, we will at last and once again have no other gods before him. The apostle John describes for us what this final haven will look like:

The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, like clear glass. The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. . . . And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. (Rev. 21:18–19, 23)

It's quite an eye-popping description.² At first glance, it seems that pearly gates, gem-encrusted walls, and streets made of gold are meant to stir our excitement to live in a place where opulence abounds at every level—a place so splendid that it outshines the sun. But John's description of the New Jerusalem is meant to tell us something more. It takes the things we esteem the highest in this life and reduces them to the level of commonplace. All of these elements—gold, precious stones, the celestial bodies, rulers, crowns—are what humans throughout history have worshiped, the stuff of our dual allegiances. These are the idols of this world.

The New Jerusalem is a first-is-last place, where the things we have exalted will be cast down to the level of their real worth: as mere metal and stone, as mere human authority, as mere created lights that move at the command of their Creator. It is a place where precious metals and stones are trodden under foot as common road dust, where our crowning personal honors are cast at God's feet, where the people and objects and institutions to which we have ascribed our worship will fall from their lofty places.

It is a place whose inhabitants at last obey the first word: "You shall have no other gods before me." It is Eden restored.

Jesus, who kept the first word in every way, taught his followers to pray that God's kingdom might come "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). Why wait until the next life to count

2 Portions of the following first appeared in my article "Heaven Shines, But Who Cares?" ChristianityToday.com, August 20, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/september/wilkin-heaven-shines-but-who-cares.html>.

as worthless what God counts as worthless? Why wait until the next life to esteem what God esteems? The first word invites us into the blessed reality of no other gods *now*. It is our undiluted worship that marks us as his children in a crooked and depraved generation.

Today is the day for toppling our idols of power, wealth, security, and comfort. Now is the time for treading in the dust the gods of our sinful desires. To live this life unbound to the things of earth is to anticipate the indescribable joy of an eternity in which every earthly pleasure bows to the pleasure of being finally and fully in the presence of the one and only God. Choose this day whom you will serve. Pledge your allegiance.

Verses for Meditation

Psalm 86:10–12

Isaiah 45:5

Matthew 6:24

Colossians 3:5–10

James 1:6–8

Revelation 15:4

Questions for Reflection

1. Before reading this chapter, how would you have rated your obedience to the first commandment? After reading it, how would you rate yourself? What insight accounts for the change in your diagnosis?
2. What idol are you most tempted to worship alongside God? What are you hoping to control or avoid by this dual allegiance?

THE FIRST WORD

3. What current sinful behavior can you trace to worshiping something alongside God? How does forgetfulness of your costly deliverance factor into the way you respond to temptation?
4. In the introduction, it was noted that laws help us live in community. How does the first word help the children of God to live in community with one another? How does double-mindedness harm Christian community?

Write a prayer asking God to help you to obey the first commandment. Confess where you have harbored dual allegiances and worshiped other gods of your imagining. Ask him to help you live as a citizen of his kingdom today and every day. Praise him that he is God unrivaled. Thank him for your costly deliverance.

*“For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments.
And his commandments are not burdensome.”*

1 JOHN 5:3

Christianity isn't about following rules, it's about a relationship. The rise in popularity of this phrase coincides with a growing disinterest and misunderstanding regarding the role of God's life-giving, perfect law in the Christian life. Rather than the source of joy it was intended to be, the law is viewed as an angry god's restrictions for a rebellious people.

In *Ten Words to Live By*, Jen Wilkin presents a fresh biblical look at the Ten Commandments, showing how they come to bear on our lives today as we seek to love God and others, to live in joyful freedom, and to long for that future day when God will be rightly worshiped for eternity. Learn to see the law of God as a feast for your famished soul, open to anyone who calls on the name of the Lord.

“Jen Wilkin has provided a fresh and timely guide through the Ten Commandments. She draws out their significance to those who follow Christ, giving us a mouth-watering vision of what life can look like as we follow the good words of King Jesus.”

SAM ALLBERRY

pastor; author, *7 Myths about Singleness* and *Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With?*

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