

**Bible Text:** Exodus 20:1-3  
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Our Scripture reading this evening is Exodus 20:1-17.

And God spake all these words, saying, I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments. Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee. Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.<sup>1</sup>

Thus far the reading of God's sacred Word.

Dear congregation, with God's help we want to consider with you this evening the law of God, God's gracious law. This morning you heard about gospel. Tonight we want to hear

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 20:1-17.

about law and see how those two also relate to one another and serve one another. Hence the theme of this sermon: God's gracious law.

I ask your attention for the opening verses of Exodus 20.

And God spake all these words, saying, I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.<sup>2</sup>

And also Lord's Day 34 out of our Heidelberg Catechism, question 92. What is the law of God? And then is listed the 10 Commandments which we have just read in your hearing. Question 93. How are these commandments divided? Into two tables, the first of which teaches us how we must behave towards God, the second what duties we owe to our neighbor. Ninety-four. What doth God enjoin in the First Commandment? That I as sincerely as I desire the salvation of my own soul, avoid and flee from all idolatry, sorcery, soothsaying, superstition, invocation of saints or any other creatures and learn rightly to know the only true God, trust in him alone with humility and patience, submit to him, expect all good things from him only, love, fear and glorify him with my whole heart so that I renounce and forsake all creatures rather than commit even the least thing contrary to his will. And 95. What is idolatry? Idolatry is instead of or besides that one true God who has manifested himself in his Word to contrive or have any other object in which men place their trust.

With God's help, then, we want to look with you at God's gracious law in three thoughts. First, its far reaching purposes; second, its focused parts; and, third, its foundational principle spelled out in the First Commandment. God's gracious law, far reaching purposes, focused parts, foundational principle.

Well, we all realize, don't we, dear congregation, that we need rules in life. We need laws. Society could not function without laws and we would not do very well either.

So naturally we realize this. But do we realize the far reaching comprehensive purposes that God fulfills through his law which we also call the moral law, the Decalogue, the 10 Commandments? All these terms are synonymous with each other.

Well, I want, by way of introducing these 11 Lord's Days on the law, to just spend a few moments with you looking at eight or nine major purposes of the law that you would get a feel from the outset that what we are about to embark on in these Lord's Days is not just something that gets in the way of the gospel or something that is trivial or something that you don't understand why we read it every Sunday morning, but something that is major and significant and wide in scope and profound in depth and glorious in height. That is why the Puritans call the law God's grace. Hence the title of this sermon: God's Gracious Law. It is introduced by grace. The Lord thy God comes to you. It is followed up by grace. But I want to show you tonight that even the contents are gracious as well.

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 20:1-3.

So what are these purposes?

Well, number one, the 10 Commandments reveal the character of God to us. That is a wonderful thing. If you are a Christian, you want to know, don't you, who God is. And we just read that definition tonight from the Westminster Larger Catechism of what God is in his glorious attributes. For the law sheds light. It throws a spotlight on the character of God. It teaches us about his attributes, about his tastes, his likes, his dislikes. It teaches us much about the living God and his ways and his preferences and his commandments, his covenantal character. Again and again this law says, "I am the Lord thy God, oh Israel. I want to give you my law to show you who I am so that you will worship me in accord with what I have revealed myself to be in the Word and in the law of God."

So God reveals himself not only in gospel, but also in law.

Secondly, the law defines sin for us. John says, "Sin is the transgression of the law."<sup>3</sup>

The 10 Commandments, therefore, fence us in to obedience and simultaneously define what disobedience is as anything that transgresses these commandments. And God knows how badly in our day in particular when so many people think that it is up to individuals to decide what is wrong or right, what is good or what is bad. How desperately we need God's definition of what sin is.

Thirdly, the law teaches us that each sin condemned in the 10 Commandments—all the thou shalt nots—actually command an opposite positive virtue. You see, every thou shalt not has a thou shalt. Every time you read a commandment like "Thou shalt not kill,"<sup>4</sup> it means thou shalt treat thy neighbor kindly and not injure him and be faithful and merciful to him.

A fourth thing the law teaches us is that each sin mentioned represents a whole family of sins and, therefore, we are not talking just about 10 very particular sins, but we are talking about 10 huge areas, 10 spheres, if you will, of our lives and one commandment being picked out from each of them. And then within that one commandment, one particular sin being picked out as common to that sphere that is focused upon to represent how we should live in that particular sphere of our lives.

So how does that work out in practice? Well, let me just give it to you briefly.

Commandment number one deals with God's person, who to worship.

Commandment number two deals specifically with God's worship, how we are to worship.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 John 3:4.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 20:13.

Commandment number three deals with God's name, whose name we are to worship.

Commandment number four deals with his day, when we are to engage in public worship.

So commandments one through four really focus around this theme of worshipping God, who and how and when and whose name.

Now the second table of the law which deals with how we are to behave towards our neighbor is structured similarly.

Commandment number five deals with the whole gift of authority, the whole gift of authority.

All of life is structured by authority, isn't it? God has given authority to his Son. His Son exercises authority through the Word. The Holy Spirit applies authority to every sphere of life—parent over child; husband, headship over wife; employer over employee; school teacher over student; office bearer over church member. Every area of life is structured by authority. But God just singles out one. Boys and girls, honor your father and your mother, as representative of that area.

Commandment number six is about God's gift of life. We have one commandment, "Thou shalt not kill,"<sup>5</sup> but it really refers to the whole area of life, promoting the life, the well being of our neighbor.

Commandment number seven focuses on God's gift of marriage, the whole area of marriage and family life. It flows out of it. God targets just the most gross sin in that relationship, says, "Don't commit adultery." But the positive is: Do treat your wife with love. Do you treat your husband with respect, a gift of marriage.

Commandment number eight, the gift of property. Don't steal from other people. Respect each other's possessions.

Commandment number nine, the gift of speech. Speak the truth. Bearing false witness is just one little area related to our tongue, but it is a key area, isn't it?

Commandment number 10 is related to God's gift of providence in our lives. We are not to covet other people or what they possess.

And so when you take these 10 huge areas in our lives, area of marriage and family, property, speech, providence, life itself, authority as well as worship, the 10 Commandments really cover everything, don't they? All relations to God and to man.

So the 10 Commandments have far reaching purposes. Their intent is to govern our lives to help us along, first of all, as believers. I will talk more about that later, to live a Christian life. They are not in the way.

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<sup>5</sup> Exodus 20:13.

Yes, the law can be used to convict us of sin and to beat us to Christ. That is the first use of the law, the evangelical use of the law. That is another use. But they are really there to help us.

Well, number five. The law demands perfection. The law is a hard task master. Now I am talking about the convicting use. The law says, Galatians three, “Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.”<sup>6</sup>

That is pretty extensive.

So here is another far reaching purpose of the law. It condemns us. It kills us. It destroys us. It is a hard task master.

Martin Luther said, “The law is always out to kill me.” He is speaking about the evangelical use to drive you, to beat you to Jesus Christ, to draw you, to allure you, to show you that you can stand before God without the gospel. And so the law, in this sense, you see, does, indeed, stand in the way. It does bar you from the gates of heaven to keep heaven from sinful intruders and to make sure that the standards are clear that no one unforgiven, unwashed, unblessed by the gospel will enter in.

Number six. The law condemns us in order to open the way for grace to us. In a sense, you see, the law seems cruel because it kills us. It kills our righteousness. It exposes who we are. But it does that in order to be kind to us, in order to drive us to the end of the law which is Jesus Christ, so that through law and gospel we are driven and drawn to the Savior to understand that we need the love and the pardon of God, that there is now way we can hope to enter heaven on our own merits. But it is all about Jesus and his obedience and his righteousness.

Number seven. The law also has a civil societal use. It helps restrain sin. That is one of the problems in anarchistic societies where the law doesn’t function anymore. People do that which is right in their own eyes. You have seen it happen in the Middle East right now along with all these... all this opposition and riots. People are just breaking open windows of stores and they are transgressing the Eighth Commandment and stealing things and taking them away to their homes. It is uncontrolled, you see.

Well, normally God by the kind use of his law restrains people. Some people, of course, are not restrained. Some people go out and murder and they rob banks and do all kinds of awful things. But most people have some sense of law that speaks. It is written on their hearts also, not just on the... in Exodus 20. And that law functions to allow society to continue the way it is. Otherwise society would just be a total disaster and chaos.

And then, eighthly, and the primary use of the law, the primary use of the law is to help us walk the Christian life as I hinted at already.

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<sup>6</sup> Galatians 3:10.

Now here is the difference between Martin Luther and John Calvin. You need to understand this if you are going to understand the Reformed Faith. Luther who underwent very serious conviction for many years before he had liberty in Christ always viewed the law as primarily our foe. It kills me. It convicts me. It condemns me. The law is my enemy and it drives me to Christ. And while in that sense it is my friend, Luther would say. But Luther gave a much more minor role to the law's function after you became a Christian. He did say at one place, "The law is like a stick." And this is a beautiful statement of Luther. "The law is like a stick. God first uses it to beat me to Christ and then having found salvation in Christ he puts it in my hand as a cane to walk with."

Well, that is exactly what Calvin would have said.

But Calvin said—and this is where he differs from Luther—walking with the law as a cane is the primary use of the law, not the secondary use as Luther said.

So they are both agreed on this. There are three purposes to the law. Number one is the evangelical, convicting us to drive us to Christ. Number two is the civil use to restrain us from sin as a society. Total agreement there. Number three is the law as a rule of life, as a guide for a Christian. That is where they differed in emphasis.

Now interestingly, the first person to use the language, the theological language that is now so common called the third use of the law laws Luther's right hand man, Philip Melancthon. And Luther did not like the usage of that language. He was afraid that if you put too much emphasis on the third use of the law that after you have come to know the gospel, that Christians would build their salvation again from the law, that they would abuse it in some kind of Legalism. And that is possible, of course.

You can come to the gospel—as you heard this morning with some of the Galatians—and they were prone to go back to the law to find their salvation in the law again. Luther was afraid of that. So he said, "No, no. Let's keep the primary emphasis of the law, the convicting initial usage."

Calvin said, "No. The Bible shows us the primary usage is the third use of the law."

The primary usage of the law, for example, in the Psalms is not to convict us and lead us to Christ of the first time, but it is to live out of the law. Think of Psalm 119. One hundred and seventy-four out of the 176 verses have the word "law: in it or statues or judgments. It means the same thing, basically, or Word. One of those words that refer to law and the whole psalm is exalting the glory and the beauty of the law in the Christian life so that David could say, "O how love I thy law!"<sup>7</sup>

But now why does a Christian need that? Why can't we just say we are done with the law? Certainly we are one with the law for justification because we are justified only

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<sup>7</sup> Psalm 119:97.

through the obedience of Jesus. He has obeyed the law for us. He has paid the penalty of sin for us. If we are believers it is all in Christ. We died to the law for justification. But why can't we just die to the law of sanctification and do what William Huntington, J C Philpot and men like that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century said? They were practical, doctrinal Antinomians in this sense. They weren't practical Antinomians, thank God. But they were doctrinal Antinomians in this sense.

They said, "We don't need the law at all. The only thing is love. We will just love spontaneously out of the gospel. We are done with the law."

Well, that is not what Paul said. Paul said in Romans seven that the law is perfect and good. It exposes us. We have to live by it. In fact, we should be transformed to live according to the law.

You see, Calvin put it this way. He said, "Even after we have been at the cross and we are saved, we are prone to become spiritually lethargic and lazy and backsliding."

He said it actually this way, rather bluntly. "We are prone to become donkeys again," is what he said.

And the Lord takes the law as a goad to goad us forward again. So we don't become complacent in our marriage or with our property or with the whole area of authority and become sloppy in our Christian living, but so that we are continually examining ourselves, continually wanting to be more Christ like, continually wanting to honor God through obedience to his law. And so this third usage of the law is very important. This is how a Christian walks.

Well, let me give you an example that I gave to you many years ago, but fits here as well. One time I was in the far West at... staying by a farmer and I woke up in the morning and found the father and the mother in the home weeping. And, of course, I asked them what was wrong.

And they said, "Well, didn't you hear all the commotion last night?"

I said, "No, not at all."

And they said, "Well, something terrible has happened. Accidentally we left our gate unlocked and our horse which is fenced in by the fence and the gate broke open in two o'clock in the morning, went through that open gate, ran out into the road and a car only comes by at that time of the day once an hour or so, but just in God's providence that car was coming and the horse ran in front of the car. The car swept up its legs and the horse's body fell through the windshield of the car and killed the 18 year old driver, instantly dead.

A tragedy.

You see, the problem was the horse wasn't fenced in. And what God does in his law is he lovingly fences in his people. He says, "You shall live by my law. It is a gift."

It wasn't a gift to that horse to allow it to go outside of the boundaries reserved for it.

Think of God had said, "Ok, now you are a Christian. Now you don't need my law anymore. You don't need the rule, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery'<sup>8</sup> or 'Thou shalt really love thy wife fully and shall not flirt in any way, but be totally devoted to her.' I just trust it will come spontaneously to you from my gospel."

Well, that is a very idealistic view of renewed human nature which is still battling the old nature. We didn't have any trouble with the old nature. Maybe then we wouldn't need this fencing in. But it is the gift of God to put a fence around us and to say, "Thou shalt not commit adultery."<sup>9</sup> "Thou shalt not flirt with other women. Thou shalt not gaze upon another woman lustfully or thou hast committed adultery in thy heart," Jesus said. That is the gift of God so that we know our boundaries and we can honor God and stay within his limits and don't break out of his fences.

Actually, every sin is a breaking open of the fence of God and it is obnoxious in God's sight. And so we need this law and its far reaching purposes.

Have you ever looked at the law this way? If you combine these eight purposes you have a tremendous gift of God, a blue print, if you will, how to live out of the gospel.

The Puritan Samuel Bolton put it this way. "The law sends me to the cross for salvation and salvation sends me back to the law to learn how to glorify God in his salvation."

And this is freedom. That horse doesn't have freedom when the fence is open. That is bondage, because it is destructing. And it is that way with every area of life, isn't it, maybe excluding modern art because it seems to have no rules and it is a disaster. But historically art has its rules, its guidelines. And when an artist obeys the laws of art he can produce a beautiful portrait. If he disobeys the laws it is a mess.

The same thing with marriage, the same thing with child rearing, the same thing with you young people in terms of your parents. You disobey "Honour your father and your mother,"<sup>10</sup> you don't honor them, you disobey them, your life will become a mess. You will hurt yourself. It is a gift of God we have law. But it is particularly a gift of God when we want to truly obey the law out of love for God because we want to please him and do his will. Well, we have got clear directions. What a blessing God gives us clear directions.

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<sup>8</sup> Exodus 20:14.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Exodus 20:12.



One of the greatest parental flaws that we exercise so often as parents is we don't give our children often as clear directions as they should get from us. So mother says, "Johnny, go clean your room."

Johnny goes in and he picks up four or five things from the floor and he thinks his room is clean.

"Did you clean your room, Johnny?"

"Oh, yes, I cleaned my room."

Mother comes in and says, "Your room is not clean. You have got 15 minutes of quiet time. You are being punished. Your room is not clean."

"What do mean it is not clean? I don't see anything that is not clean," says Johnny.

But his mother does.

But if the mother had come and said, "Johnny, I want you to pick up every single thing that is on the floor right now. I will come back in 10 minutes. I want you to pick up everything that is on the floor." That is very clear.

Johnny must obey. Everything will be picked up off the floor and there will be no confusion.

See, what God does with his law is he comes to us and he says, "I am giving you specific guidelines to know what pleases me. And so here is my gift to you. I don't leave you in the dark about how to live. My law is my gracious gift to help you live out the gospel."

Now God gives us this law, as we hinted at already, in two parts, two tables. One table in our relationship to him and one table in our relationship to men. Now those two parts are very focused. The first part, as we have seen, is focused on worship, worship, worshipping God, being God centered, being God focused. That is what we call our vertical relationship in life with a living triune God. And so that is the first and the greatest commandment.

But the second, Jesus said, Matthew 22:37-40, like unto it is that we should love our neighbor as ourselves. So the first table says love to God, second table says, love to our neighbor.

Now what is the focus here? Well, the focus is love. And how do you love? Well, you love God.

Ralph Erskine has a whole wonderful sermon on this. He says, "You love God when you obey him, when you serve him, when you fear him, when you are focused on him, when you submit to him, when you delight in him. You love God when you are God obsessed,

when you are God centered, when you are God focused. You love God when you want to glorify him in every area of your life and you want to say about everything you do, everything you say, everything you think, ‘Oh, God, bring my every thought into captivity to thy obedience, to thy law.’”

So when you love God you just love him as he is. And you can’t think of how he could be any better. You know, if you truly love your partner you could say to your partner, you know what? If I were to sit at a computer and type up 100 things about what I am looking for in a woman or what I am looking for in a man and spit them all out and then I compare you to that list you are better than the whole list because it is you and I love you. It is not just a bunch of qualities I love, but I love you as a person.

And, you see, that is what the law and the gospel in the hands of the Holy Spirit teach a sinner who falls in love with God in the deepest and most profound sense of the word. We learn to love him as he is. And, yes, more than this list of attributes, this definition was wonderful from the Westminster Larger Catechism, but it falls short, doesn’t it? God is much more than that. I love him much more than his attributes if that is possible even though his attributes are God. It is just something I can’t put into words. He is all together lovely. He is all together desirable in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so when I focus my life on loving God and worshipping God, that is when, by the grace of God, I am obeying the first table of the law. That is the goal.

So now you understand that the law’s goal is not just to be a checklist and say, “Well, did you obey the sabbath today?” And you check it off, yeah, yeah. I went to church twice. Yeah. I went to family living class. Yup. Came here even in the evening when it snowy out and most people didn’t come. I was here. Passed the test.

No, no. Keeping sabbath is about worshipping God. It is about resting in Jesus. The word sabbath means rest. It is all about that Shiloh we heard about last week. Resting in Jesus.

Now don’t go the other extreme and say, “Well, because it is not a checklist, therefore the actual things I must do are not necessary. That is what other people say. That is what we call Antinomians, people against the law, disregard the law. They say, “Well, the main thing is to rest in Jesus and I rest in Jesus. I am a Christian so I don’t need to go to church. I mean, I am a Christian, but who needs church, really? I mean, I don’t believe that you have to go to church to be a Christian.

Never mind that God says it in Hebrews 10:23-25. Yeah, I believe the Bible, but, you know, I don’t want to be so strict. I just know that God loves me and I love God and everything is ok.

No, no, no. God guides us by law. God has rules. Society has rules. Family have rules. You have got to live by rules, you see. But the rules are not to be obeyed because you have to do it, but because you love God. That is where the focus lies.

Ok. So your mother, boys and girls, “Tom, I want you to take out the garbage.”

“Oh, do I have to? Yeah, ok, I’ll do it.”

Tom goes shuffling off. He grabs the garbage and kind of a sigh and stuffs it in and then goes around the house and the mother is thinking, oh, man, this is a pain in the neck even to ask him. I would almost rather do it myself because he is so unwilling.

Well, did he obey her or he did not obey her? No, he did not obey her. His feet did obey physically. The checklist was obeyed, but the heart wasn’t in obedience. And, you see, that is what the law is looking for. God is looking for heart obedience. He focuses on this.

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God above all thy heart with all thy mind, with all thy soul. This is the first great commandment.”

So what does it mean to love your neighbor as yourself? The second table. It means to treat your neighbor—that is what Jesus said—treat your neighbor according to the golden rule. Do unto him as you would have done to you.

Again, it is more than a checklist, you see. It is going the extra mile. It is showing kindness. It is giving the second cloak, Jesus said. It is loving your neighbor, really wanting your neighbor’s reputation to be uplifted, wanting your neighbor to [?] health and strength and joy, to experience love and life. So you pray for your neighbor because you love your neighbor. You reach out a helping hand to your neighbor because you love your neighbor. You are a good Samaritan to your neighbor because you love your neighbor. Then you obey the law.

So love is the focus of the second table as well as the first.

And what Jesus says in Matthew 22 is these two tables actually come together in this word love. In fact John puts it this way. You can’t have one love without having the other love. You can’t say you love God and then hate your brother. If you hate your brother, you are actually not loving God because God created your brother in his image and therefore you are only deceiving yourself. You think you love God, but you really don’t love God.

You can say with your mouth you love your husband, but if you are always thinking about another man you don’t really love your husband, do you? You may go through the motions. But the love is lacking, because your mind would be fixated on your husband.

And, you see, that is what the Lord is saying here. In all these different spheres of life, these 10 spheres of life related to the 10 Commandments, it all boils down to one global sphere of loving God and loving my neighbor and those two have so much overlap even

among themselves that you can't do one without doing the other. You can't love your neighbor truly without loving God.

Oh, you can be a good Samaritan hourly to your neighbor and can donate 20 million dollars if you have it to build a hospital and have your name put on the outside of the building and mean it fairly well and you really like to see people helped. But if you don't love God, you are really doing it for yourself and your own reputation. It is not out of pure love.

So the various parts come together unto this focus and the camera lens gets very sharp on this. Do you love? Love God and love your neighbor. And it is particularly the first commandment that hones in on this and says, "You shall have no other gods before me."

True love means, number one, number one, that is what you can say in your personal relationships with your husband and wife I hope. My wife is number one. And my God is number one. My wife is number one in human relationships. My God is number one in my spiritual relationship. These two come together, see? If you can't say that tonight something is seriously wrong in your life. You need to know what it means to love God and to love your neighbor. God will tolerate no other gods. God will not tolerate being number two in the life of a Christian. For God to be number two in the life of a Christian is for a Christian to be backsliding seriously backsliding.

So the commandments, then, are divided into two tables. Question 93 says the first of which teaches us how we must behave towards God, the second what duties we owe to our neighbor. But then comes the first commandment, question 94, which is the foundation for the whole law. Hence, its foundational principle.

And that foundational principle is simply this. You must flee all idolatry and give me supreme worship.

"Thou shalt have no other gods before me."<sup>11</sup>

I want you to understand that the word "before" here does not mean beside, beside me in terms of priority. Like, well, we have got god number two a little bit under God number one and the living God is number one and so there is other gods. No. God is saying, "No other gods before me." That is, no other gods in my presence. No other gods. You are always in my presence. Therefore, no other gods at any time. You shall not commit idolatry. And what is idolatry? Well, what is what 95 tells us. Idolatry is instead of or besides that one true God who has manifested himself in his Word to contrive or have any other object in which men place their trust. Anything you put on par with or above the living God is committing idolatry.

Now how important is this? Well, it is very important. That is how question 94 begins. What does God enjoin in the First Commandment? That I, as sincerely as I desire the salvation of my own soul avoid and flee from all idolatry.

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<sup>11</sup> Exodus 20:3.

Now why in the world does our instructor begin that way? He is talking about God and then suddenly he talks about the salvation of my own soul.

Well, you see, what he is saying is this. As our instructors approach the law of God they say something like this. "The desire to have a life close to God, the desire to live truly godly converted life is inseparable from the desire to glorify God. Again, you see, the vertical and the horizontal, my salvation, my life here in this earth is inseparable from the vertical desire to glorify God.

You can't live, really live without desiring to glorify God. And you can't really live without being converted here on this earth, really live. So the two come together.

You know, there is this huge debate, this huge debate in Church history about the difference between the way the Heidelberg Catechism begins and the Westminster Shorter Catechism begins. The Westminster Shorter Catechism says the purpose of life is glorify God and to enjoy him forever. You see, Westminster people often say, "This is a God centered focus."

Do you see that? Glorify God.

The Heidelberg Catechism begins with what is your only comfort in life and death. It is man centered, poor beginning.

That is a false dichotomy. Actually the Heidelberg Catechism in question six as it begins to unfold what it means it says this. "God created man good after his own image that he might rightly know his Creator, heartily love him and live with him in eternal happiness to glorify and to praise him, same thing.

And the Westminster Shorter Catechism goes on to explain what true conversion is and repentance and faith and justification actually in greater detail than the Heidelberg Catechism.

So this is a false dichotomy. What is actually going on here is it is just the initial approach. Do you want to approach it from a God centered perspective or do you want to make it attractive to the natural man and say do you want true comfort? Well, here is the only true comfort, by glorifying God and living wholly and sincerely unto him.

So here you have the same thing, you see. How can I glorify God? How can I worship God? Well, if I desire the salvation of my soul I will avoid [?] all idolatry. You can't separate the two. God's glory and my salvation are interfaced. If I am really seeking my own salvation I am seeking God's glory. If I am really seeking God's glory I will want to live a saved life. It works both ways.

So this is actually a perquisite to this whole answer. You can't even begin to answer obedience to the First Commandment. If you don't desire to live to God's glory, don't desire the salvation of your own soul.

Now you say, "Well, of course, I desire that."

But do you? Do you really? Does the way you spend your time, the way you put your focus on divine things throughout the week, does it really show to your husband, to your wife, to your children, to your parents that you desire the salvation of your own soul, that you desire the glory of God? What is it? What is it that you really desire? Are you committing idolatry?

Our instructor has a list of things here about how you can commit idolatry and when you first read this list I think most of us come off pretty good, at least we think we do. It says don't commit sorcery. I don't know how many people in church are using different forms of magic. Don't commit soothsaying and attempt to imitate God's omniscience, that God knows everything. Not many of us are playing horoscopes or going to fortune tellers or palm readers or engaging in astrology I should think. It means avoiding superstition. I don't think too many of us are involved in superstition, disobeying Deuteronomy 18 where God warns against not going to witches and charmers and familiar spirits for these are an abomination to the Lord. These things, of course, are all wrong, invocation of saints and other creatures. I haven't met too many people in our church that are praying to Mary or Peter. Don't know of anyone, really.

So it seems like we come off pretty good. But don't forget, this is a document that is time bound as well. The Reformers had just come out of allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church and most of their people were former Roman Catholics and so some of these issues were still very real just like ancestor worship is still very real among Christians, for example, in Africa where to us it is bizarre.

So each age has its own idols. And we have got plenty of that in our day. So it is better, I think to spend a little more time on those than on the older ones.

What about greed, materialism? Do we place more emphasis in our lives on possessions than on God working for possessions, for example? Or what about food? Physical desire is for food or sex or other pleasures. God says your god can be your belly. Are you committing idolatry with temporal things as you eat or in your physical desires?

Ephesians five tells us that idolatry is committed all kinds of ways through what is called being a whoremonger, being an unclean person, being a covetous man who is an idolater. And none of them, it says, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ. Idolatry is so serious that it excludes us. If we don't worship God above everything else it excludes us from the kingdom of God, says Paul.

And Romans one tells us that idolatry means giving our adoration to the creation rather than the Creator. There is a Puritan by the name of David Clarkson. He writes this

amazing statement. He says, "Secret soul idolatry is when the mind and heart is set upon anything more than God, when anything is more valued, more intended, more trusted, more loved or endeavors more of any other thing than God. So anything can be an idol, anything you put above God."

You can make yourself to be an idol. That is what Nebuchadnezzar did. Or we can do it spiritually though we refuse to sacrifice ourselves for God. When we think that we are smarter than the Bible and we reason away truths in the Bible and we disobey them and don't deny ourselves and take up the cross and follow God. We are committing idolatry.

So often we are good at reasoning our way out of things when our conscience is smiting us just a little bit and we reason it is ok according to the Bible. We try to reason out the Scriptures instead of just obeying the Word of God.

My friend, the Bible is a lot smarter than you are and so is God, the author of the Bible. If you don't want to commit idolatry, I hope you don't, you have got to obey the Word of God. You have got to bend your knee, bend your mind, bend your soul in obedience to the Word of God.

What about your computer? Could that be an idol? Could your idol or your web be an idol? Does it crowd out, overwhelm, cancel time for God's Word and prayer? Could you make your spouse an idol, your children, your parents? It is possible. If you put them above God. What about sports? Sports is a huge idol in America today. People have got to watch games and players and strategies and got to watch people who are making millions and millions of dollars playing some games. And often they play them on Sunday as well and we support them or we participate. And some people have no trouble watching a two hour ball game when they have trouble an hour and a half church service. Does that say anything to you?

Your cell phone can be an idol if you can't wait till the end of the worship service to check a text message. You see, idolatry is so insidious. It can even cloak itself in religion and piety. Your own mind can be an idol if your confidence rests upon you being right in your beliefs instead of resting on Christ's righteousness.

The church can be an idol. Whenever you think of other churches you mock them or you put them down, all of them. You act like there is no truth anywhere else. Wow. Your own church can be an idol or when you fear that people in church and conform to their opinions more than you fear and obey God, then man can be an idol like the book written recently which is titled *When God is Small and People are Big*, you see, then people become an idol. Or ministry can even become an idol for office bearers that were elated when everything goes well and we are crushed when things don't go so well, because it is all about us and not about God.

Now you see why Calvin said, "Man's heart is a factory, a perpetual factory of idols."

You know, John Bunyan in his book has all kinds of names for these idols. They are different characters in *Pilgrim's Progress*. And I thought, well, if Bunyan were alive today in our vast city, our vast metropolis of Mansoul and Grand Rapids, I think he would have new names of new idols.

There would, of course, be the old idol Mr. Self, but there would be Mr. Scientific Reasoning, Mr. Screen Face, Mr. Always Please His Wife, Mrs. My Kids are My Life, Mr. Sports Fanatic, Miss Text me Now, Mr. I Am Always Right, Mr. Divisive Arrogance, Mrs. Afraid to Be Different, Reverend Sacrifice Everything For Success and on and on it goes. We are full of idolatry. And God hates it.

The city of idols is the city of destruction. Therefore John advises us, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols."<sup>12</sup>

But how? How do you do that? Well, our instructor goes on and says, "I must rightly know the only true God." You do that through the Word, of course. God reveals himself through his Word. And through his Word and by his Spirit you can rightly know God. And what a blessing that is to rightly know God. That is what life is all about, to know God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent is eternal life.

But our instructor goes on and says, "Trust in him alone."

That is how you break the back of idolatry. You trust God. You trust God unconditionally. You heartily submit in humility and patience to him, he says. Trust in the Lord forever. Trust in the Lord Jehovah for everlasting strength, Isaiah 26 verse four says.

How do you break idolatry? By the grace of God you say, "I am going to trust God no matter how bad things get, no matter how overwhelming they are. Even if the water goes over my head, Lord, help me to trust you," over and over.

You see, you cling to God as your greatest friend when he seems to come against you as your greatest enemy. That is the way to break the back of idolatry. But then he goes on and he says, "Expect all good things from him only."

You say, "Well, everything is God focused. My trust is in him. My knowledge is of him. I expect everything of him." That is how you break the back of idolatry. You don't expect things from this earth. You don't expect things too much from people. You don't expect too much from possessions. Your real expectation is from the Lord. And then love him, fear him, glorify him with my whole heart. That is how you break the back of idolatry. You give your heart over to the Lord.

My son, my daughter, give me your heart. And you love him and you fear him and you glorify him and you use the means of grace to focus on him so that you can grow in knowing him.

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<sup>12</sup> 1 John 5:21.



Flee idolatry.

Well, by now I know what you are thinking. You are thinking I am afraid my whole life is nothing but a sin against this commandment. And, you know, that is not a bad feeling to have. We do need to search our hearts.

Yes, but you say, “Can you give me some practical guidelines? Give me four or five practical guidelines how to really in a practical way beat back this monster, idolatry.”

Well, let’s do that in closing tonight.

Number one, grieve over and hate your idolatry.

Do you know what William Greenhill, a Puritan, said? He said, “We cry out against Roman Catholics as they set up images and bow to them, yet we are greater idolaters ourselves if we love the world and the things of the world.”

If you put your heart in the world and its toys and trinkets, my dear friend and all its new inventions, if you put your heart there, you are acting like a spiritual prostitute. An idolater is a spiritual prostitute with respect to God. That is why the Lord complained against Israel in Ezekiel six.

“I am broken with their whorish heart, which hath departed from me, and with their eyes, which go a whoring after their idols.”<sup>13</sup>

Be convinced, be persuaded of the heinousness of breaking this First Commandment which is foundational to the whole law.

Have no other gods before the living God. Be determined that the living God shall be number one for you.

That is the only way to happiness.

If you are out for yourself, if you are out... well, you think your husband should treat you better, your wife should treat you better, other people should treat you better. You are complaining about this. You are complaining about this and you get angry about this, you get angry about that. You are making an idol of yourself. Wake up. See your problem. Confess your guilt to God and to man and seek the living God as number one. Don’t destroy yourself through your wretched self idolatry.

Number two, give right views, right views of earth and heaven. You see, idolatry only exists through illusion and deception.

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<sup>13</sup> Ezekiel 6:9.

David Clarkson said, “The overvaluing of outward things is the birth and the food of all soul idolatry.”

Let your thoughts often represent to your souls the vanity, the emptiness, the uncertainty, the dissatisfaction, the deceitfulness, the unprofitableness of your choicest worldly enjoyments and the vexation of spirit that attends upon them.

Everything you enjoy in this life will soon be broken down. The car you make an idol of, perhaps, young man, will soon rust or break down or cost you an arm and a leg. People that are praising you now, well, it won't be long probably and they will turn to criticism. That young woman you think is so stunningly beautiful and you have got to have her, a few years from now she will be old and wrinkled.

You see, everything in life breaks down. It is only God and heaven that abide. Everything of earth, you have a right view of earth. Everything of earth is temporary. It is not worth putting your heart into it. It is worth putting your heart into God. Meditate on the glories and the treasures of heaven where nothing rusts, where no one robs you or rips you off, where no one sins and no one suffers and no one dies and no one grows old, in the New Jerusalem, the heavenly Zion. Everything will shine with a soul ravishing glory of God and his love will prevail. Heaven is a world of love. Hunger after that. Get a real view of heaven. Get a right view of earth and you will turn from your idols and you will be a true pilgrim on this earth on your way to glory.

Number three, guard your heart with respect to all lawful pleasures. You heard me right, not unlawful, lawful pleasures.

David Clarkson said that our lawful comforts are the most dangerous snares, because, you see, the conscience doesn't bother us with those things and God gives us, after all, the bible says, all things richly to enjoy. God's creation is good. We should receive these things with thanksgiving.

But too easily we put our heart into these things, good things, lawful things, lawful relationships and we rationalize away our idolatry towards them. That is why Jesus said, “He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.”<sup>14</sup>

So periodically ask yourself. Am I putting too much emphasis in any lawful pleasures for the sake of Christ's kingdom? And say it to yourself so that you will remind yourself again and again, Lord, these things are not my god. They are just a small g. And they shouldn't even be that, but thou art my God alone.

And finally, fourthly, sprinkle your conscience daily with the blood of Christ. You see, every sight of your idolatrous lust should be countered by a sight of Christ's cleansing and atoning blood. His blood is the almighty cure of the penalty, the power and the pollution of all sin.

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew 10:37.

John Owen put it this ay. He said, “Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of your sin and make use of all the spiritual disciplines in the process, the Word, good books, prayer, spiritual fellowship. Look to the Spirit to bless them and then use all of these means to look to Christ as the fullness of grace sufficient for all your needs. And then rejoice in Christ and focus upon Christ and seek your forgiveness in Christ. And the gospel will then fan your flame of love for Christ and will seat him more and more on the throne of your heart and you will begin to beat back by the grace of God idolatry in this life, never perfectly. But, oh, woe is the man who isn’t working at it, beating it back and longing of the day when Christ will be all in all.”

Amen.