The Heart of Worship

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[0:00] I know that back in St Andrews we get lots of different types of people coming to church. We get people who've been coming to church their whole lives and we regularly get people who are coming to church who are just checking out the Christian faith and I imagine most churches are like that and I'm sure in this room will be people along that spectrum of Christian experience.

Seasoned believers who've known and loved Jesus their whole lives and people who are just investigating things for the first time and all steps along the way. But I want to hazard a guess that whatever stage you're at on your Christian journey, I think that when we come to the Ten Commandments we find ourselves on familiar ground.
It's probably one of those bits of the Bible that if you're familiar with Christianity or the Bible at all, you've probably heard of the Ten Commandments.
It must be up there with Noah and the Ark and the Christmas story as famous Bible bits that everyone seems to know. And maybe you, like me, learned about the Ten Commandments in RE lessons at school.
Back in my day what we did was we'd have to do a project of writing out the Ten Commandments in an artistic way. And it seemed that there were two streams of thought on this.
[1:21] So one side would get gray cards that looked a bit like stone tablets and they would write out the commandments in kind of a kind of engraved style font.

And then the other half, the less artsy and gifted folks like me, we'd just print them off on our computers and then we'd get a tea bag and kind of wipe it over the paper to make it look all teasty and like an old, old bit of parchment.
Because they had comic sans back in Bible times and they also had tea bags to make things look really old. But whichever school of thought you belonged to, you'd end up with basically the same thing.
A bit of paper with a bullet point list of you shall not, you shall not, you shall, you shall. Or depending on your vintage, thy shall not, thy shall not, thy shall, thy shall.
But interestingly though, when we open up Exodus chapter 20, and when we look at this very, very familiar part of the Bible, we find that the first word spoken is not you or thou, it's I.
[2:25] Exodus chapter 20, verse 2, I am the Lord your God. The NIV gets it right and God spoke all these words.

We call them the Ten Commandments. More literally in the Hebrew, what we read here are ten words from God. And we might also think of them as ten invitations to gaze at his character together.
We might rightly think of them as ten charges to reflect on our own Christian lives and see how we measure up compared to what we're commanded to hear.
We also have the privilege of thinking of them as ten promises, ten assurances of the work that God himself is doing in us and will bring to completion on the last day, a day in which we shan't murder, we shan't steal, we shan't take the Lord's name in vain.
We call them this evening as ten selfies, ten ways in which God spotlights the way people ought to live in relationship with him as he turns the camera on himself and says, this, my people, is what I, the Lord your God, am like.
[3:47] So any time we turn to the Ten Commandments, as well as learning about how we live and what we ought to do, first and foremost, when we read any commandment or any part of God's law, we find ourselves going right to the heart of who God is and what he's like.

And therefore, we find that what's much more effective than a basic list of rules for governing how we live the Christian life is a more full knowledge of God, a deeper understanding of the character

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and purposes of our Creator, out of which we find obedience to him flowing all the more naturally, because as we see and understand more of who God is, we find ourselves more and more wanting to relate rightly to him.
That's clear in all of the Ten Commandments. Maybe it's most clear of all this evening as we dive into the first one. The aim in doing this is not that we all leave feeling guilty at how our hearts are divided and prone to chasing after other things, though being challenged on that is quite a good and healthy thing.
But no, our chief aim tonight is that we leave thinking, if this is what our God is like, well then how could I ever give my heart to another?
I've put it on the handouts like this, that the Lord is the one true God who alone is to be worshipped, and those will be our two big points to consider.
[5:33] So first, the Lord is the one true God. Verse 20, God spoke all these words, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

So as we've said, before a commandment is even issued, we get this great statement of self-revelation revelation from God. Just look at how he identifies himself.
The first thing we learn, he is the Lord. Those capital letters, they're not an accident, they're not a typo. It signifies in our English Bibles that Lord is a rendering of one of the names of God used throughout the Old Testament, Yahweh.
That is the name by which God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush way back in Exodus chapter 3, and so even here, by this relatively early part of Israel's history, it is already the name which is shorthand for the special relationship that God has with his people.
In other words, the God who has made special promises to Israel and bound himself to keep them, Yahweh is the God who will be their God, who will be with them, who will guide them, who will bless them.
[7:01] He is the Lord, and he's also the Lord your God. The word the Bible uses for special promises God makes to his people is covenant.

And a covenant is a mutual thing between two parties. So just as God has committed himself to them, they are bound to him, and they owe him their love, obedience, and worship.
I was talking to some friends recently about how your 20s is the decade of boundless potential.
I was chatting to some of my fellow sad 32-year-olds who've got kids and thinking how much easier life used to be. But when you're in your 20s, it's the decade of great potential. The younger people among us, the people who are looking tired after the youth conference, you may be thinking to yourself about the next 10 years or so, I wonder if one day I'll have a husband or a wife.
Things like that. That could potentially be anybody, if that's what the Lord has for you. Then, of course, that changes if you do get married. You go from thinking about having a husband or a wife to your husband, your wife.
[8:13] If I introduced Jody to anybody this morning, I didn't say, this is Jody, she's a wife. That would be really weird. No, I said, this is Jody, my wife. I'm Jody's husband.

This is Billy, my son. I'm his dad. There's a level of specificity. I am bound to one specific person as a husband or as a father.
Obviously, multiple if you've got multiple children. And it's similar here. God doesn't say, I am the Lord, a God. Not even, I am the Lord, a very, very powerful God.
But I am the Lord, your God. Not just a small g, generic God, one of any number of deities that they could choose to follow or not.
No, very specifically, Yahweh, the God who has made covenant with his people, a God who knows them intimately, and to whom they are uniquely and intimately and exclusively bound.
[9:21] And so we're already starting to get into the implications of this commandment, aren't we? If we think back to that marriage metaphor for a second, there are things that Jody and I will do around the house because we know that's what pleases the other person.

It would be really weird, for example, I don't think it would go down very well if I were to say, well, no, I haven't emptied the recycling. But, you know, there are lots of wives out there who don't mind at all about the recycling being emptied or not.
Because I'm not trying to please otherwise, I'm trying to please my wife. The last time I preached on this passage, I realized that I hadn't actually emptied the recycling in the week before.

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This week, happily, I have. So we'll call that growth and the work of the Holy Spirit. We, of course, want to do things which invite the pleasure of and are appropriate worship then to our God, the God who has covenanted himself with us.
And that's shown all the more clearly in the final thing God says about himself. Because even more specifically, he is the God who has rescued his people.
[10:30] That's the second thing to notice here. Not just his identity, but also his saving actions. Excuse me. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

Precisely because he is the covenant God, he is the God who alone can and the God who alone has rescued his people from slavery.
If I were to ask you what's the most significant event in our nation's history, I'm sure we'd have a bit of a discussion, maybe even a debate for the history geeks among us. We may even have a bit of a debate about what nation I'm talking about.
That's a matter for another time. But we might say something along the lines of World War II. Maybe for some, it would be Bannock Burton. Or maybe even for some, the recent global pandemic as the most seismic thing that's happened to our nation.
If we were to put the same question, though, to an Old Testament Israelite, there would be no hesitation and no debate. What's the most significant event in your nation's history? Easy. The Exodus.
[11:42] We thought a wee bit about this this morning. The Exodus, God delivering his people from slavery in Egypt. That is the most seismic event, the most seismic saving act that God has performed in the history of his people.

The time and again throughout the Old Testament, he keeps coming back to it. He keeps reminding his people of it through all of their highs and their lows, their golden years under David and Solomon and their times of national crisis and idolatry.
We see this refrain. I am the God who brought you out of Egypt. I redeemed you from slavery. It's used both as an immensely comforting reminder of the sheer depths of God's love and steadfastness of his commitment to them.
It's also used as a rebuke in the times when they forget his love and kid themselves that other gods are just as good.
But then remember where we are in Exodus 20, gathered around the foot of Mount Sinai. For these people, the Exodus is not just the most seismic event in their history. It's the most seismic event in their very recent history.
[13:02] As they hear these words from the Lord being delivered for the first time, as they hear the words, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, let's put ourselves in their shoes.

We'd hear that. We'd instantly think of things that had happened very, very recently. Maybe we'd think of the promise God made to Moses back in Exodus 3, the thing that set this whole chain of events in motion, that Moses would deliver God's people and bring them to the very mountain around which we now stand.
And we would think, our God is so faithful. Or maybe as we heard the voice thundering from the mountain, saw the cloud and the fire and heard the trumpet blast, we would remember this is the God who defeated Pharaoh's magicians.
The God who showed the so-called gods of Egypt to be utterly false and totally inept. And we'd think, our God is so powerful. Maybe the very mention of Egypt would have brought the whole journey back to us, every stage in vivid detail.
The stench of lamb's blood as we smeared it over our doorposts. The wail of anguished Egyptian families mourning the loss of their firstborn sons.
[14:20] The thrill of excitement but tinged with fear as we crossed the boundary out of Egypt only to find that Pharaoh's soldiers were chasing after us. The hopelessness of finding ourselves trapped between them on the one side and the sea in front of us.

And the wonder and disbelief and awe as the sea parted in front of us and we crossed over with dry feet. Maybe we'd remember that elation being replaced by confusion and fear.
What now? Where will we go? How will we eat? And then the reassurance that the God who has delivered us shows himself to be the God who continues to provide as he provides manna and quail and water, everything that we need.

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Maybe we'd remember all of these things and think Yahweh, the Lord our God, is so good. He is so gracious.
He has given us everything even though we don't deserve it. And all of that just underlines again that the Ten Commandments are not given to Israel to earn their standing before God.
[15:33] If you are here tonight as someone just investigating Christianity, please do not read this list as ten points to be a good person and good enough for God. These words are given after God has already saved them, already given them everything they need.

They've done nothing to earn it. And he's not laying that demand on them not. He already loves them. He is already committed to them.
And he gives these words as a gracious way of revealing himself more to them. The same grace by which he saved them is the grace by which he now reveals more of who he is and how they can live in the relationship he has brought them into.
He alone has done all these things. And he alone is worthy of their worship. And that same dynamic is actually at work in us as believers today.
We ask an Israelite at Mount Sinai, how do you really know that God loves you and is definitely for you? And they would say the Exodus. For us today, the answer to that question is, of course, the cross.
[16:47] That's where we see definitively that God alone can deliver us, not from an earthly king, but from the power of sin and death. And that he alone has done that.

How do we know, really know that God loves us and is for us? We look at the cross. Not at our feelings, which chop and change, but at the cross, where we see so clearly and definitively that God truly is for us if our trust is in Jesus.
And so for those of us who do know Jesus, who delight to follow him before we consider what the demands placed on us by the first of these ten words is, we just need to dwell a while on that wonderful truth.
To remember that these are not burdens laid down by an impossible to please God, making us jump through hoops to win his favor.
No, we need to remember that these are gracious ways that the God who loves us, the God who gave his son for us to deliver us, the God who in Christ has made us his own, these are the ways which that God who has revealed for us to live in right relationship with him as our response to everything that he has done.
[18:11] That needs to be the starting point for all of our obedience to him. After all, if the Lord alone is the true God who has saved us, it makes perfect sense that he alone is worthy of our undivided worship.

That brings us to our second heading this evening, the Lord alone is to be worshipped. And maybe the elephant in the room as we read these first few verses of Exodus 20 is the words other and before.
Is God suggesting that he actually is one among many gods? That there are loads of other gods who they could worship, but it's okay as long as they worship him the most?
A couple of things to help us get our bearings on this. First of all, throughout scripture, God makes it clear that he is the only God, the true God and the living God.
And even if we glance down to the next couple of verses, we see that he expressly forbids the worship of other false gods through idols and images. Now, we are better thinking of before me here as in my presence.
[19:30] Remember, Israel are on their way to the promised land, a land in which there are many, many other gods being worshipped already. And here Yahweh, their God is saying, when you get there, when I get you there into the land, the land into which I am bringing you in my steadfast love, when you get there, don't go chasing after other false gods and rub that in my face.

So the first and most obvious implication of this commandment is that no other god is to be worshipped instead of Yahweh. What might have been harder for Israel, and I think certainly harder for us, is that verse three isn't just saying no other gods instead of, it's also ruling out other gods and as well as Yahweh.
Don't know if you've noticed, but it's a very popular concept in our society today, that religion is all about a take it or leave it approach. If you find bits that work for you, take them and run with them.

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If you don't like bits, then ignore them. Pick and choose all that you like from whatever worldview or religion or philosophy fits the way you want to live. As long as you're being a good and kind person, it doesn't matter.
We know, though, that's not just a modern problem if we know our Bible history. There are, of course, times in the Old Testament where Israel turns their back on God completely.
[21:03] You also find lots of instances where they claim to be worshipping Yahweh, their God, while also worshipping Baal and Ashtoreth and the gods of Canaan.

And that's where the no other gods before me comes in. Here we have Yahweh telling his people that he's not just to be worshipped a bit. If you can fit it into your schedule as you see fit in your terms.
No, he is to be worshipped rightly. That would have involved for them a lot of very practical instructions that are unpacked later in the Old Testament. Instructions about sacrifices and temples and tabernacles and those kinds of things.
But those practical instructions were never meant to be merely practical. The passage from Deuteronomy that we had read earlier puts it like this.
That God's people are to love him with their heart and soul and mind and strength. That God's people are to love God with every part of themselves all at once.
[22:12] That's how total their devotion towards him needs to be. And so the whole of the rest of the Old Testament is one very long, very sad history of Israel failing to do just that.

Instead chasing after other gods at every opportunity. Even as they might have been going through the motions of worship practically.
But before we get too much on our high horse about Israel. When we think of it in those terms. We also see how far short of this commandment we ourselves fall. I would guess that as Christians today. We probably do find it easy enough not to worship other gods instead of the God we worship.
I don't imagine any of us are going to go home tonight and pray to anyone else other than God our God. Who's revealed himself in the Lord Jesus. The God who we've been singing to all night.
[23:20] What about as well as? When we think of it in terms of heart, soul, mind and strength. We see that the same root problem which beset Israel is alive and well today.

And for us it will present itself in the form of countless other small g so-called gods. With which we divide our attentions to the Lord Jesus.
And on that sphere there will be at least as many of those things as there are people in this room. If not many more. We won't spend our time listing all of the things which can divide our devotion. And distract us from worshipping God. But we will just acknowledge that that is a thing. We'll call it out. And spend a bit of time reflecting on why that is.
Why do we do it? Why do we spend a weekend at the youth conference getting really fired up listening to Graham Daniels? Why do we spend a Sunday gathering in worship with God's people?
[24:25] Singing his praises. Hearing his word. Encouraging one another. And we find ourselves not conceiving of how we could ever give our heart to another. Or divide our attention away from our God.

We find that by Monday morning we've grown strangely cold. Why does it happen? Sometimes it's really boring. It's the everyday concerns.
We leave church feeling on a deep spiritual plea. And feeling that we just delight to live for and worship God in every aspect of our life. Only to get home and find that the heating hasn't come on. Or back to student flat where the heating will never come on. And find that our joy and enthusiasm seeps away in the cold. And on a more serious plea.
And maybe it's the real anxieties and burdens of the week ahead. That we leave church feeling so close to God and encouraged by his people. As we turn around in bed on Sunday night.
[25:24] We find our minds fixating on the many anxieties and burdens which lie ahead of us this week. That really difficult situation at work. The real prospect of being let go or the company going under.

That real prospect of university not working out the way we want. Or even just the real pressure of the many exams standing between us and finishing this summer.
Or maybe another week of caring for family members with real and pressing and urgent needs. Who we want to love but find ourselves so tired from giving our all to them.

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Or even the real pains of life that come. The pines of grief and loss. Of illness. Of mental health struggles.
The long dark night of the soul. We find that we're so caught up in these things. Understandably so. That our desire to. Our delight in worshipping our God.
[26:26] Is just slightly choked out. Or then maybe there's the question of our desires as well. We want now more than anything.

We desire now more than anything to worship our God. But we also find our hearts are prone to wonder. And desire too much of the good things God has given us.
And desire wrongly things which God has forbidden us to have. And we find that actually our devotion is choked away from desire to please the Lord.
And our hearts chase after other things. We try and fill the void in our hearts. In spite of God's word telling us that all that the world offers us is utterly false.
The point is there are lots of things. That can choke out our desire to love God. And to worship him alone.
[27:24] And they can therefore subtly or overtly begin to divide and damage our hearts. And dampen our desire to worship from Sunday to Sunday.

To all of which I want to offer two questions by way of challenge. And also some words of comfort. The challenge questions are these.
Am I guilty of not worshipping God wholeheartedly? Because I've not fully grasped or don't sufficiently remember all that God has done for me.
All those wonderful things we reflected on earlier. Those things which are pictured in the Exodus. I'm made vividly real in the coming of the Lord Jesus. Fully accomplished redemption in his son.
Do I just not allow myself to remember these things enough day by day? Am I in a position where I haven't even really fully understood them for the first time?
[28:29] If that's the case, please do keep coming to your life groups. Keep coming to speak to your elders, to Joe. They would love you to be asking those questions, I'm sure. And the second question to reflect on.

Am I guilty of not worshipping God wholeheartedly? Because I don't dwell enough on the many gifts that he's blessed me with. This is a challenge for me.
I find myself prone to dwelling on and accentuating the negatives. Bemoaning all the things that I don't have. Instead of praising and thanking God for all the things that I do have.
The many material comforts he's blessed me with. The many relationships that he's blessed me with. Which are a source of such great joy. I'm sometimes guilty of not sufficiently thanking him for these things.
And allowing them to draw my heart to rejoice in him. To even find ourselves thinking of the many gifts that God has given us.
[29:27] To serve and to build up his people. But turning them into badges of honour which are all about us. And not about how kind he has been to use us.

These are challenging things. It's good to reflect on them. And it's right that as the Lord reveals ways in which they describe us.
That that leads us to repentance. And to asking God to help us to worship him more fully. With more devotion. With greater exclusivity.
Those are the challenging questions. But as we come towards a close. A word of comfort. It's right that we're challenged by those things.
But wonderfully. We know that we worship rightly. In spirit. And in truth. If we are in Christ. And so even as we reflect on the challenges.
[30:24] The ways in which we know that we fall short. We also know that we don't need to tie ourselves in knots. Or to strain really, really hard. To really love God this week.

No, it's important to remember. To see who God is. And what he has done. He alone can. And he alone has. Delivered us.
By sending his son. Another vital thing that these commandments do. Is that they point forward. To the Lord Jesus. And while I measure myself up.
Against the first commandment. And find inevitably. That my heart is pitifully. Disgracefully divided. Well I'm drawn to see. That the Lord Jesus heart.

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Was fully bound up. In love for. And devotion to. His father in heaven. There was never a day. Where the Lord Jesus found his heart divided.
[31:21] Never a day. When he offered him anything less. Than whole hearted. Than whole hearted. Fully devoted. Fully devoted. Worship. And so it's by gazing at the Lord Jesus tonight.

That we can have. Great confidence. In spite of the many ways. That we know we feel. Great confidence. That he. Did not feel. Will not feel.
Cannot feel. Our standing before God. Is entirely based on what Jesus has done. Rather than on how I perform.
On any given day. Given day. And it's also by gazing. At Jesus. That we have. A vivid reminder. Of how. Even though we fall so far short.
God himself. Does not waver on his commitment. The steadfastness of his love. Towards us. I want that word of comfort. To remind us.
[32:18] That he. Graciously. Hears our prayers. Where we know that we feel. Where we know that we need to ask. For more of his help. He delights to hear that. By his Holy Spirit.

Delights to help us. Each day. To grow. In our desire to. Worship him rightly. And wonderfully. To bring. That ongoing work in us.
To completion. On the day when Christ returns. And we do go to be with him. And know a world in which. We shan't have any other gods. A world in which.
We shan't steal. Or lie. Or murder. Or do any of these things. Because God himself. Has made all things new. Which leads us once again.
To remember. Our God is so faithful. Our God is so kind. Our God is so good. We will forget it through the week.
[33:17] But let's just capture the moment now. And remember. How could I ever. Worship another. If this. Is my God. God. Let's pray together.

To our God. Now then. Father God. We thank you for the Lord Jesus. We thank you that as we. Look at these ten words. Spoken to your people. Back then. And so relevant to us now. We. Are so aware of the many ways. In which we feel. To worship you as we should. And yet we give you thanks.
That. That. Christ our advocate. Makes our worship. Even our. Half-hearted. Worship. Acceptable. And even pleasing. In your sight. So draw our hearts.
And our minds. Towards him. In the rest of this day. And in the week ahead. And we pray. That you would be growing us. To. Be more and more like him. In how we. Delight. To offer you our devotion.
[34:14] And our praise. In every aspect of our lives. That when we feel. We pray. You would restore us. And we pray. That more and more. You would lead us. To delighting.

In worshipping you. With everything we say. And everything we do. As in Jesus name we pray. Amen.

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