

# The First Commandment: No Other Gods Before Me

## Exodus 20:1-3

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Last week we began our new series on the Ten Commandments. Implicit in the Ten Commandments is one commandment, called by Jesus the greatest commandment, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*" (Matthew 22:37) The Ten Commandments are necessary because we fail at the Great Commandment.

We looked at the role of the Law in the life of the New Covenant Christian and saw that it is a map, a muzzle, and a mirror: a map to guide us in what a life lived to God's glory looks like; a muzzle to restrain us from acting as sinfully as our sin nature would take us; and a mirror to help us see how sinful we really are. The Law can't clean us, only condemn us; but it can lead us to Christ, who alone washes us clean and makes us righteous in the eyes of God.

While loving God is the Great Commandment, the first commandment is first for a reason. It is the commandment that defines all the others. It says in the negative what the Great Commandment says in the positive. Let's see it.

God is speaking from the mountain to the gathered nation of Israel. "*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.*" (Exodus 20:1-2)

God doesn't begin with commandments; he begins with *relationship*. And God said, "*I am the LORD your God.*" The Law only makes sense in the context of relationship with God—God and his people; God and his chosen nation; The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

He restates his name. Remember, it was on this same mountain that God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush. He sent Moses back to Egypt to lead Israel. Moses asked him, "*If they ask me 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?'" "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM [Yahweh] has sent me to you.'*" (Exodus 3:13-14) What is God's name? Yahweh. It means, *I AM*. As in, *I am the self-existent one*. He restates that name on the same mountain in Exodus 20: *I am Yahweh your God*.

*Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.* (Exodus 20:2) The power of the plagues and the Red Sea crossing was fresh in their minds. God redeemed them out of literal slavery and bondage. It was a national redemption and a picture of the personal redemption that would come later by faith in Jesus who takes us from our bondage in sin and places us in the spiritual Promised Land.

I am the covenant-making God who has shown my love, power, mercy and grace by bringing you out of Egypt by my power and will, saving you from bondage and saving you to freedom. Then comes the first commandment: "*You shall have no other gods before me.*" (Exodus 20:3)

## What is a God or an Idol?

Right away we are confronted with a problem. Are there other gods? If so, who are they? To be clear, when we say "little g" gods, there are not actual sub-gods. 1 Corinthians 8:4 says, "*There is no god but one.*" This is a term describing non-gods that we make god-like as we look to them for what only the one true God can provide. These are called gods or idols in Scripture.

Many of us conjure up images in our minds of ancient people bowing down to a carving or a statue. That goes on today in India where they believe in some 300 million gods and have various grotesque carved forms they literally worship. The Israelites were very familiar with gods as the Egyptians had many gods they worshipped. One source said there were 44 male gods and 32 female goddesses in Egypt. Famous ones include Ra, Anubis, and Apis whose form Aaron would later replicate in the famous golden calf.

Idolatry is outward and inward. The outward can be anything or anybody. But on the inside, in our hearts, it has always been the same thing over thousands of years. There are millions of different idols and gods, but always the same cause—the deifying of me.

God wastes no time in confronting the inward cause of all the outward idol worship. "*You shall have no other gods before me.*" (Exodus 20:3) "Before me" literally means *to my face* or *before my face*. The phrase seems to be used in Scripture for taking another wife while the first one is still living. How well does that go over?

Right now the wives are thinking, "*If my man did that, I'd make him so miserable he'd wish he was a eunuch.*" Right. Why? To covenant to love one exclusively but then love another is adultery of the heart. That is how we worship a false god. We deify something in our lives that isn't God and then we put that something or someone in a place of priority and affection ahead of God. What is God saying? You shall not have any love, any worship, any person, any priority that in your heart is who you actually love, trust, adore, or obey more than him.

"A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart. As I have often said, the trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol...That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God." (Martin Luther)

"It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give. A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living." (Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, p. xvii-xviii)

Our fears often indicate our idols. What makes you afraid? What would happen if that thing or person was suddenly out of your life? Would your life cease to have meaning or purpose? Behind that fear is a god; an idol. Our obsessions are also good places to look for idols. If you say, "I must have \_\_\_\_\_ to be happy," that's an idol.

We see from these definitions that the real issue for God at Sinai wasn't so much the outward but the inward.

It's critical to understand that the root of all this idolatry is not actually the god or idol itself. It may look like I am deifying my children or my career, but in reality I am deifying me. It's

about me. Everything is all about me. The god is merely the projection of my ultimate desire to glorify, worship, and enthrone myself.

Even the ancients were doing this. The Greco-Romans had their pantheon of gods, as did the Egyptians and Philistines. What were their gods? Zeus and Apollos and Aphrodite and the Baals and Ashtaroth. They were simply icons of sex, money, food, and control. We think the idol was the thing they made to represent the god. The icons they created were grotesque female shapes with multiple breasts or images shaped like genitalia or animals, etc. They didn't worship these gods as much as manipulate them for self-gratification. The ancients sought to control the gods through offerings or child sacrifice or cutting or whatever to control the god. And if I can control the god, then who really is god? I am.

Our modern idols can be anything or anybody. In fact, most of our idols are in and of themselves good things. You might be trying to think of some bad thing you are worshipping. Rather, think of a good thing that you have elevated to an ultimate thing. Health. Marriage. Family. A friendship or relationship. Career. Opinion of others. Materialism. Having Children. Having perfect children. Food. Personal comfort. Sex. Technology. Digital presence or image on social media. Money. Recreation. A hobby. A sport. A dream.

How can I know where my idolatrous struggle lies? Where do I put my time? What do I serve with my talents and efforts? To where does my money flow easily and generously? Trace your thoughts, trace your time, trace your money and that trail will lead you to the real god of your heart. Hidden behind that god will be "self."

These are all things that in their proper place are good gifts from God, but when we turn the good to an ultimate—when the loss of that thing would alter our identity or happiness—now we are bowing in our hearts to the idol. We have put another god before God and the name of that God is me.

Take a moment. While none of us would like to say we are idolaters, we all have things or people that compete in our priority list with God. Take a moment. Can you identify the God competitors in your heart? How about if I tell you a few mine? People's opinion of me. Being viewed as successful in ministry. There are a few others that would embarrass me to share.

What are yours? Go right now and tell a non-family member what your idols are...STOP! If you were willing, it might not be an idol but more of a temptation. If you are dying at the thought of telling anyone, that probably is your idol.

### **The Gospel and Treasuring God More Than Anything**

Remember, every negative command has a corresponding positive one. If we are not to love or enjoy or treasure anything ahead of God, what is the positive of that? You shall love, treasure, and enjoy God! The *Westminster Catechism* question 1 asks, "What is the chief end of man? The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." That is the first commandment.

God created us. He knows how we are made for maximum joy derived from God being our ultimate love and priority. Idols on the other hand are slave masters. Idols empty us. Idols destroy us. Idols promise happiness but they never deliver. An example from this week is the baseball player, Alex Rodriguez. Rodriguez has been arguably the best baseball player of his generation. He has earned \$325 million in career salary alone. He has lived a very public hedonistic lifestyle and enjoyed being a filthy rich, handsome bachelor in New York.

Yet scandal and steroids have plagued him. This week he was given a year-long suspension from baseball. When he returns he will be 40 years old and may never play again. His reputation is completely sullied. He will likely never see the Hall of Fame and is grouped in with other steroid era liars and cheaters.

Would you trade places with Alex Rodriguez? How about Lance Armstrong? How about examples like Whitney Houston and Michael Jackson? These are people who have all the things that we don't and we think, "If only I had that...." Yet, what do we see? Idols destroy us. And for us common folk, we may not have a public scandal but idols wreak havoc on our families and relationships and decisions. Why? Humans are incapable of deriving ultimate meaning from anything but God.

C.S. Lewis makes this point on the difference between first things and secondary things. First things are things that God designed to be first in our hearts, primarily himself. Secondary things are good things for us as long as they remain secondary. The crisis arises when we make a secondary thing a primary thing. Now we are asking too much of the secondary thing which eliminates our ability to enjoy the first thing and the second thing.

He gives the example of pets and wives. A pet can be enjoyed as a secondary thing. But when you make the pet the center of your world, now you lose the joy of God-worship and the proper joy of having a pet. A wife is a great blessing and a gift. But if you make a wife the center of your world, arrange all your hopes, dreams, and worship around her, the marriage will be devastating because God never made a wife or a husband who can provide what only God can provide. (C.S. Lewis, *First and Second Things*)

Do you see the grace of God in the first command? Enjoy me! Love me! Worship me! Trust me! Obey me! And with me as your treasure, all else can be pleasure because you love and enjoy everything for my sake.

The other nine commands flow naturally from this first one. If God is first, I don't diminish his glory by a man-made version of him. I don't profane his name. I prioritize worship and service with a Sabbath. I honor authority over me in my father and mother. I love his image in everyone. I guard his gift of sexuality. I don't steal from others, I give. I reflect his truthfulness in my words and actions. And I don't look at anything someone else has and think, "If I had that, I'd be happy." God is my first and my best and the source of my happiness.

This is all kind of depressing. Why? Of all the commands we have failed, this one we have broken the most. Does anyone always and without fail love God more than anything?

*Wait, I see that hand. What is your name? Jesus? Could you give any proof that God was your ultimate and you obeyed him fully? What's that? I'm sorry I couldn't hear. You died on the cross because he asked you to? What about before you died? How do we know you never had another priority ahead of God? You were resurrected? What does that prove? God accepted your sacrifice for our sin? What is your name again?*

His name is Jesus.

It's one thing to understand the Law; it's another to understand how God's grace and forgiveness flows to us. How are sinners forgiven for disobeying the first command? There was one whose whole life was lived totally for the glory of God. He always put God first. He never derived hope or meaning from anything in this world. Every day he truly and fully worshiped his heavenly Father.

When Jesus died on the cross, he died for our sin of violating the first commandment. The bad news is that it is a sin. The good news is that Jesus died for it. This doesn't mean we shouldn't strive to love God first but it does mean we don't have to pretend we always have. Believe in Jesus and be forgiven for violating the first commandment.

The other important implication here is not simply that there is forgiveness through Jesus, but we have a new life in Christ. Part of that new life is the joy of living with God priorities. How often we hear people describe salvation like the blinders came off. Now God is their God, not money or power or family or whatever. To see our brothers and sisters truly enjoy God and through him, to enjoy everything else is wonderful.

To truly enjoy God and enjoy his good gifts and enjoy living as a Christian, what a gift! Remember the question, "What is man's ultimate purpose? To glorify God and enjoy him forever." Do you believe the very best life to be lived is the one lived with God first? Do we look at the ungodly and think, "That's where it's at! Oh, to be them"?

A Christian wouldn't trade a thousand worlds and all their fleeting joys for the new life we have in Christ. *You shall have no other gods before me.* You shall enjoy me more than anything.

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