

The First Commandment: No God but God

Exodus 20:3

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus chapter 20. Today we come to the first word of direction in the ten words, or Ten Commandments. We've spent a number of weeks in Exodus chapter 19 and in Exodus 20 verses 1 and 2, giving introduction to these ten words and now we finally come to what Jesus called the first and greatest commandment. I want to say two or three words of introduction.

First I want to remind you that there have been divisions amongst people as to how the commandments themselves ought to be numbered and divided. Jews and Christians number the commandments differently. Protestants, Lutherans, and Catholics number the commandments differently. The content, of course, is the same. The debate is how should these be divided. The pattern we are going to follow today is the traditional protestant pattern for numbering the commandments. I think there are good reasons, biblical reasons behind that particular numbering, but just for the sake of disclaimer I wanted to make that publicly known.

Let me also say that it is important for us to remember that these commandments and this command is for the New Testament church as well as for Old Testament Israel. We are not simply engaging in an interesting, but obscure historical study today about what they, way back then, used to think and do. These things are relevant for us today. Jesus Himself obeyed this command. Jesus Himself explicitly fulfilled His obedience to this command when He was tempted by Satan in the wilderness as recorded in Matthew chapter 4. Jesus Himself obeyed this first and greatest command when Satan tempted Him to worship him, responding to Satan that it was not proper to worship anyone other than the Lord your God. He explicitly quoted and taught this commandment in His moral teaching and you will find other New Testament writers as well such as Paul and John repeatedly referencing this commandment. This is not something from the dusty past that needs to be consigned to the bin of history. It is something that is relevant today, it is something that is taught by Jesus, by Paul, by John, by the New Testament writers and it is a standing requirement for Christians today.

Now, let me also say that you may think that the issue of worshiping other gods or idolatry, or atheism is irrelevant. You say, "Well I'm not an idolater and I'm not worshiping other gods. I'm not a polytheist, and I'm not an atheist so this commandment really doesn't have anything to say to me." I want to assure you that this matter is perennially relevant. Indeed, idolatry is the great challenge to true religion in every age. Idolatry is the great challenge to true religion in everyday life. We live in a day and time where the most popular form of unbelief known to us, especially in the intellectual circles, is still atheism. We think that maybe the New Age is the greatest challenge to unbelief. Yes, the New Age and various forms of spiritualizes are major on the market, but still in Christian minds, the challenge of atheism looms large in our concerns. The fact of the matter is, there have only been a tiny number of atheists in the history of the world, and even today amongst the general population, all the poles continue to tell us that atheists are a tiny minority. But idolaters are in abundance and idolatry is always the great challenge to true religion in every age. So, let's hear from God's holy and inspired word in Exodus chapter 20 verse 3 and learn of His commands.

"You shall have no other god before me."

Amen. Thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired and inerrant word. May He write it's eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

Our Lord and God, by Your Spirit help us to understand Your word. Even more by that same Spirit, enable us to flee to Christ and by His grace to walk in the way of the truth and righteousness. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Israel always struggled with idolatry. That may be hard for you to believe, knowing the importance of monotheism to Israel, and reading the pages of the New Testament, where the Jews of the day that Jesus and his disciples and their successors bumped into, seem to be firmly committed to the oneness of the one true God of Israel, the only-ness of the one true God of Israel. But if you read Old Testament history, you'll realize that the Jews struggled from day one with idolatry. Abraham, the father of Israel, the father of the Hebrew people, was born in an idolatrous nation in an idolatrous culture, in an idolatrous society, in an idolatrous family. Abraham's father was an idolater. We have every reason to believe that Abraham himself, in his younger days before the encounter with the one true and living God, was an idolater. We certainly know that his descendants continued to struggle with it, for when we turned to Genesis 31, we find that when Jacob and Rachel are fleeing his father-in-law, Laban, that Rachel brings with her the household gods. It almost gets her in really big trouble.

Moses, of course, has already struggled with Israel's allegiance to the gods of Egypt around them prior to Exodus chapter 20, and that will continue to be a struggle that will be manifested in Exodus 31 and 32 and the incident with the golden calf, after the Ten Commandments are given. And even at the end of Joshua's ministry, it is recorded for us in Joshua 24, on that day when Joshua

gave that stirring message and said, "Choose you this day whom will you serve." The people said, "We will serve the Lord." And you know what Joshua said? "No you won't and no you haven't. You have served gods of your own making. You have served the gods of the nations around you, you're doing it right now and these words you have spoken to me will be a testimony against you because you're idolaters." At the end of the age of Israel's nation state, the prophets are still talking with Israel about idolatry. Isaiah and Jeremiah and the later prophets all address Israel about this. It's that because they are concerned about the pagan polytheistic nations around them, it's because they are concerned for this problem in Israel.

Israel struggled with idolatry, but as we've already seen in Exodus, Israel was saved to worship. To worship the one true God, to worship the one true God only. Israel had a problem with Idolatry, but she was saved to worship. You say, isn't that quaint, we don't have that problem anymore. It's precisely the same today. We struggle with idolatry even though we were saved to worship. We exist as believers to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, but we struggle with idolatry and that is just one reason why this first great word from God in His ten commands is so relevant for us today. I'd like to look at it in two parts. I'd like to look at the negative, and then I'd like to look at the positive. I begin with the negative because that's how God began.

I. Believers are called, in life and worship, to live in complete loyalty in and love of the One True God.

God begins this commandment with these words. "You shall have no other god before Me." This commandment has a prohibition and it has a positive directive. It has a negation and it has something that is forbidden, and it has something that is required or commanded. It begins by reminding us that we are to love and serve and worship no other god but God. In other words, believers are called in our life and worship to live in complete loyalty to and love of the one true God and Him only. That's what we're called to.

Notice how God begins His commandments. The Lord uses an emphatic word for *no*, an emphatic form for *no* here. Remember, it's God Himself speaking and He makes it clear that there is an absolute prohibition about having gods before Him. You shall have *no*, is the same language used else where in the holy Scripture to describe the exclusive relationship in marriage between a man and a woman. You shall have *no* other wife. You shall have *no* other husband. The two of you shall become one flesh forsaking all others. You will keep only to her, only to him. This is the language of exclusive covenant loyalty and so this is obviously a command that pertains to God's people's exclusive loyalty to Him as Lord.

It's timely because Israel had problems with idolatry and infidelity throughout her history. It's timely for us because we still struggle with this. When God says, you

shall have no other gods before Me or before My face, He doesn't mean, 'I have got to be first on the pecking order. You can have 26 gods as long as I'm at the top of the list.' He's not saying you can only come into my house of worship and worship me, but out there you can have as many other gods as you want. When He says, 'you shall have no other god before My face,' He is saying not that you may simply not have other gods ahead of Me. or that I have to be on top of the list, but that 'you may not have other gods instead of Me. along side of Me, or in addition to Me. I will brook no rival.'

By the way, my friends, one of the questions that you need to ask yourself, and it's sort of a four part question, as you study the commandments, "What does this commandment teach me about God? What does this commandment teach me about the Lord Jesus Christ? What does this commandment teach me about the Christian and his duty? What does this command teach me about the church?" Those questions will elucidate the commandments for you. They will be very helpful and one of the things that we learn about God, even in seeing this commandment, is that He is a God who will brook no rival. He is a jealous God. "You will have no other gods before Me," doesn't mean that God is to be the first at the head of the pantheon, but that He must be alone in our devotion.

This command obviously entails that we would worship and acknowledge only God as God. My friends, this is not just a problem for the Old Testament believer. You may say, "I have never bowed down before a totem pole, I've never set up a household shrine and worshipped it." Nevertheless, idolatry is a standing problem for you. It seems to me, my friends, that the great struggle of Christians in our church is that of divided loyalties. We want to be Christians, and at the same time, walk in comfort and agreement with the unbelieving world and culture around us. We want to simultaneously say we are on the Lord's side and we are on the world's side. We want to correct Jesus, who says, "You cannot serve God and mammon" and say, "Oh, yes you can, I'm doing it right now." This commandment is convicting us that that is, in fact, idolatry. This commandment calls us to single hearted, single minded, undivided loyalty, service, love, devotion, and worship of the one true God.

There are many ways that I could illustrate that challenge to us. In fact, we don't have time to adequately illustrate how challenged we are in regard to idolatry and in regard to the breaking of this commandment, but let me just suggest two or three this morning. First of all, we live in a world that is committed to at least two principles, pluralism and relativism. Relativism says there is no absolute truth. Pluralism says that the only way you can live in harmony in a society where people have different beliefs is to adopt relativism as your starting point. In other words, relativism says there is no truth, pluralism says the way to live together with people who differ is to acknowledge there is no truth. That's the only way. Then pluralism and relativism look over to the church and say, "Hum...you're exclusive and that's the one sin left in our society." The one sin left is saying that there is absolute truth and that sin matters. My friends, your children and your

grandchildren are bombarded from every side in this culture in the classroom by that mindset, and it pushes them away from obedience to the one true God.

Here is one way that works out. Young people who are Christians and are being taught in Bible believing churches that the one true god is their true god will say, "Ok, I believe that, but you know I have a Hindu friend, and a Muslim, an atheist friend, and they see it differently, so this is how I'll put it. 'The one true God is the one true God for me, but who am I to say for them.'" It sounds humble, and it sounds nice, and it sounds tolerant, but it is actually pushing them away from faithfulness and fidelity to the one true God and to obedience to this commandment. And if you're not talking with your children and grandchildren about that challenge, you're not talking with them about the greatest challenge of the day to the Christian, who must respond to the person who says, "We can accept you Christians as a part of this society as long as you will admit that you do not have absolute truth and that your God is not the only God, and that Jesus is not the only way of salvation, you can be a part.

You see, our society can accept anything except an absolute. Absolutes are absolutely out. As long as you are a relativist, you are absolutely in, but the society doesn't want absolutes. The society wants you to say, "Ok, I'll worship God in my way, you worship god in your way, we'll all get along. " The Christian's response is, "No, you worship god in your way, I'll worship Him in His." In other words, the Christian, while tolerating those who disagree, and by the way, Christians invented toleration so we know something about it. The Christian says, while tolerating those who disagree, because we are respect the image of God in them, because we recognize total depravity and the notorious effects of it in wanting to get our way, and because we recognize it we don't want anyone converted to Christ by the sword. Such is not possible. We tolerate those who differ, but we do not say that their belief is no different from ours. We say, "I differ from you, and I believe that what I believe is the truth and that you are wrong and I still love you." There is a world of difference between that and what this age wants us to do. So, relativism and pluralism challenge us in regard to this commandment.

Liberalism in our own time challenges us against this commandment. Liberalism basically allows our human judgment to stand over the word of God and over God and redefine Him. Liberalism says, "Our human rationality and judgment and sense of propriety sometimes needs to correct misinformation and misconceptions that are given to us in the Bible, which is, after all just an outmoded book written by people of an ancient culture who were trying to describe what God was like in their own fallible way and therefore we can correct it and we should correct it." So God can be remade in our image. One man said that God created man in His own image and ever since man has been trying to return the favor. This generation works hard at that, to make God, or to remake God in their own image, to scale Him down, to make Him more accessible, to make Him more likable, to make Him less intrusive.

I've shared this with you before, but I'll give you the direct quote now. Mark Dever, in a doctoral seminar in seminary tells us that this happened. "I had made a statement in a doctoral seminar about God. Bill responded politely but firmly, that he liked to think of God rather differently. For several minutes Bill painted a picture for us of a friendly deity. He liked to think of God as being wise, but not meddling, compassionate but never overpowering, ever so resourceful but never interrupting. This, said Bill in conclusion, is how he liked to think about God. Mark replied, thank you Bill for telling us so much about yourself, but we are here today to study about God."

Now, that is not just a problem that is relegated in the ivory towers of academia. That is a problem that you see in life, day after day, where people are ready to redefine God simple by what they feel like at the particular time that you are talking to them. That my friends, presses us against loyalty to God and obedience to this first commandment. God defines Himself. We don't define Him. We worship God as He defines and reveals Himself in the word. Not as we would have Him.

What other things challenge us in this command? Could it be the pursuit of pleasure or popularity or sensual feeling? Materialism, fashion, fame, self, all of these things can become a rival to God. Let me speak to the students for a moment. You high school students and college students. Some of you are seeking fulfillment right now in the use and abuse of alcohol, some of you are seeking fulfillment in inappropriate and unbiblical and immoral sexual expression, some of you are dying for popularity and you would do anything for it. All of these things are symptomatic of idolatry. Now you say, "Oh come on, you are totally over the top."

Listen to me for a moment; let's take the instance of folks who are engaging in underage drinking and the use and abuse of alcohol. Let's just forget for a minute that it is illegal. That's a point, but let's forget that for a minute. I have found that those underage that are engaged in the use and abuse of alcohol are often trying to do two or three other things. First of all, they are trying to fill some sort of a void in their life that is missing. Second of all, they are doing it because they are dying to be accepted by their friends. Thirdly, they are doing it because they desire to gain the pleasure that results from the feeling of inebriation or drunkenness. In all those ways, they have made an idol of themselves and they do not worship the one true God.

Some of you may be here who were drunk last night and God in this passage says, I will brook no rival. I am God, I am the only God. I am the only source of satisfaction, I am the only source of security. I am the only source of affirmation. Those things are to be found in Me. I am your Shepherd. In Me you do not want. You do not go anywhere else for those things. Oh my friends, Matthew Henry a long time ago said, "What ever is esteemed or loved, feared or served, delighted

in or depended on more than God, that, what ever it is in effect an idol." Think about that my friends. What is your idol? Is it your marriage or your family, your happiness or your career or your friendships, or your children, or what ever else? Anything, even good things, can become idols if they are ultimately loved, ultimately wanted, ultimately desired, ultimately striven for, ultimately aimed for, and ultimately thought of the most.

Let me ask you a question, "What do you love the most? What do you desire the most? What do you want the most? What do you strive for the most? What do you aim for the most? What do you think of the most?" Let me tell you, the answer to those questions will tell you who your god is. That which we love and serve and desire and long after and aim for and strive for and think of the most is our god.

Now my friends, it's not just savages out in the wilderness bowing down to sticks and stones that commit idolatry. It's nicely dressed Christians in pretty churches in comfortable pews. We must look at our own hearts and ask, "Has idolatry taken us?" That's just the first part. There is the prohibition that's the negative side.

II. Believers are called, in life and worship, to live in complete loyalty to and love of the One True God.

Here is the other side. Here is the positive side. What is the positive side? We are to worship God and God alone. Believers are called in life and worship to live in complete loyalty to and love of the one true God. We are to worship Him. *The Shorter Catechism* is right, our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. There are two ways in which Moses and Paul say that this needs to be done. We are to worship God corporately as we gather with the saints, but we are also to worship God in all of life. Psalm 29, that we quoted at the beginning of the service, in our call to worship, gives us a beautiful description of the corporate worship of God. What is it? Giving to the Lord the glory due His name. That's what it means to come together with the saints and praise and worship Him, to give to Him the glory that is due His name, to acknowledge Him to be worthy of praise and to give our praise to Him.

Let me ask you a question. Is that what corporate worship is for you? If that is what corporate worship is all about for you, do you come here bent on fulfilling the agenda to give Him praise, or do you come here as a sermon taster, not sure whether I like that sermon or not today. Or a hymn taster? Hated three or four of those hymns. Or a worship style preferrer? What do you come here for? Do you come here to give God praise, or do you come here as a critic? Or are you someone who is apathetic and going through the motions? Or merely fulfilling the forms.

This command calls us to wholehearted corporate worship, but it also calls us to worship in all of life. In Romans chapter 12 verses 1 and 2, the Apostle Paul basically tells us that this is what God wants us to do in light of the fact that He is the Creator and is our Redeemer in Jesus Christ. He wants us to give our whole selves to God as an act of worship. Can I put that provocatively? Paul in Romans 12 verses 1 and 2, when he says, "I want you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, as your reasonable service of worship." When he says that, he's basically saying, "Don't give Jesus your heart, He wants more than that. He wants all of you. He wants the totality of what you are. Give Him all of you in all of life, that's all He wants."

You see, salvation is the free gift that costs you everything. In calling us to worship, God is calling us to give the whole of ourselves all of the time in His service. After all, that's the great theme of the Exodus. From Exodus 4:13 on, more than a dozen times God repeats to Pharaoh, "Let My people go in order that they may serve Me and worship Me." We are redeemed to serve and worship the living God. God has saved us to be a people who worship Him and only Him with our lives and with our lips. This is a command to worship God and God only.

My friends, in a few minute, in a few seconds we are going to go to prayer. As we do, pray that God would enable you to make Him your Shepherd and realize that this command cannot be fulfilled, and has not been fulfilled by you and that apart from Christ it would never have been fulfilled. And thank God that in Him it has and that by Him you are enabled to walk in righteousness. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we realize just thinking about this command how far short we have fallen. So we thank You for the Redeemer who obeyed this command for us and we thank You for the grace which He grants to us by the Holy Spirit that we might walk in this way of righteousness. Give it to us, we pray, and enable us to call You our Shepherd and to say that other than You we have no rival desire. We desire You above and first. This we ask in Jesus name. Amen.

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