

The First Commandment – No Other Gods

If I were to ask you what document was written by God, you might say the Bible. And you would be correct, but the Bible is in fact, the product of men, with differing personalities and styles, whose writings were inspired by the Spirit. There is only one document in the world that was written directly by God. That document is the Ten Commandments.

The Ten Commandments were written in stone, not by Moses, but by God Himself.

And when He had made an end of speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moses two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God. (Exo 31:18)

The Ten Commandments have become a foundation of societies built on Judeo-Christian principles. People with only the vaguest idea of religion still know what the Ten Commandments are, or at least remember a few of them.

We'd need another hour or two on its own to explain all the purposes of the Ten Commandments, how the rest of the Law relates to them, and how they affect the New Covenant Christian. Let me just summarise it this way: The Ten Commandments were a contract between God and Israel. Christ the superior Lawgiver has given a new and higher law in the New Covenant. However, each of the Ten Commandments still finds an application for the modern Christian. In studying them, we learn of what God desires from the people He calls His own. They are not all God has to say on how to please Him, but they are very foundational. As we study these, we'll find ourselves in a much bigger pool of truth than we thought because each command unlocks many other doors of truth.

I want us to dive into studying the first commandment, which is foundational to them all: You shall have no other gods before me.

And the average person hears that, shrugs, and says, well, I don't have any idols sitting on the shelf at home. I believe in the one true God, so I can put a nice green tick next to the First Commandment.

Not so fast. The first commandment is given negatively. But later on in Deuteronomy, it is given positively.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! 5 "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. (Deu 6:4-5)

Now if you remember from our study of Mark, one day a scribe came to Jesus and asked what the first and greatest commandment is.

Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, "Which is the first commandment of all? 29 Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. 30 'And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. (Mar 12:28-30)

On that day, Jesus told the man what the big idea is. He used His divine authority to summarise the most important idea of all Scripture by quoting Scripture. And surprisingly, He didn't quote John 3:16, or Genesis 1:1, or the Great Commission. Instead, he quoted a Scripture which is still prayed by Jews around the world.

Jesus said the Greatest Commandment of all is the positive form of the first of the Ten Commandments. You shall love God above all else. No other gods before God.

So let's ask a few questions. Why does God get to say, no other gods before me? Second, what does it mean, to have no other gods before Him? Third, how is it possible to have no other gods before

Him?

I. The Motive For Worshipping God Alone

The scribe has asked for the most important commandment. A command contains an imperative – an action – do this, or don't do this. The commandment would be “You shall love the Lord your God...”

But Jesus does something strange. What does Jesus begin his answer with?

Does He jump to the commandment? No. He does not begin quoting at Deuteronomy 6:5. He begins by quoting from verse 4: “Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

Verse 4 is not a command, it is a statement. It does not tell you to do anything (besides pay attention to its statement), it tells you something about God. Why would Jesus have done that?

Jesus began with verse 4 of Deuteronomy 6, because it is the foundation of and the basis for verse 5. The statement about God is the reason for the response to God. The doctrine, the teaching about God is the basis for the duty. To put it another way, only if you understand the significance of the statement “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one”, will you understand what it means to love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul and strength. Remove verse 4, and all you have is a command to love God intensely. But verse 4 explains who this God is, what it is He deserves, and what it means to love Him with all your heart, soul and strength.

Let's read it again: Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!

Yehovah is our God, Yehovah is one. But equally valid, and I think more compelling would be to translate it this way: Hear O Israel, Yehovah is our God, Yehovah *alone*.

In fact, we know that that is how Israel understood it because of the scribe's response.

Mark 12:32 So the scribe said to Him, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He.

The scribe doesn't say, “You're right Jesus, there is one God and He is one Person.” The scribe says, “There is one God, and there is no other besides Him. He is unique. There is one God, our God, Yahweh, and no one else but Him.”

There are two profoundly important statements in there.

- 1) There is only one God.
- 2) Jehovah is that one God.

You've heard of the fundamentals of the faith. Well, this is the most fundamental of all the fundamentals. Only one God exists, and He is Jehovah. Ultimate love is based upon that statement. Once we understand what that means, we'll understand why we should love Him with all the heart, soul and strength.

Why must you love God ultimately? Because that's how you love a god, and there is only one God. Quite simply, because there are no competitors. There is nothing in the universe which deserves the status of a god, except Yahweh. There is nothing and no one else that the human heart should trust in and worship and honour as a god. It is not simply that Yahweh doesn't want competitors, in the real sense, Yahweh doesn't have competitors!

So let's ask a sub-question. What is a god?

The simplest answer is, a god is what a human being worships. Whatever you worship, whether it is one thing or many, those things are your gods. That leads us to another question. What is worship?

We already have a clue in those words of Deuteronomy: all your heart, all your soul, all your strength. The way you relate to a God is not half-hearted, not double-minded, not ambivalent. The way you relate to a god is with an ultimate kind of love.

We worship something as a god, when we regard that thing or person as an ultimate end, not just as a means to something else.

Let's illustrate. Let's say there is a man who loves a particular brand of car polish. Does he love car polish in an ultimate sense? No. He loves what it does. He loves it instrumentally. When it is used up, he throws away the can. He loves what it does. What does it do? It makes his car shiny. He loves a shiny car. Does he love his shiny car as an end in itself? No, he loves what a shiny car does. It attracts stares, glances, admiration from other people. Does he love stares as ends in themselves? No, he loves what those stares mean. You could say he loves that attention because of what it says about his status. What is the end point of his loves? His status. He loves his name as an end in itself. He does not go further than that. If you asked him, why do you love your status, he would not say, because it is a means to something else. He would probably just shrug and say, because I love it. His status is an ultimate love to him. It is his god. Your god is what you love as your ultimate good.

Many people make a god out of a relationship – a boyfriend, girlfriend, wife, husband. Many people make gods out of their children. Some make gods of having more money. Some make a god out of a car or a piece of jewellery or a computer, or a sport. Some make gods out of succeeding, some make gods out of sexual pleasure, some make gods out of drunkenness or drugs. Some make gods out of their appearance, or their intelligence. Some make gods out of computer games, their gardens, their holiday homes, their prize collection. These things or people or goals become things they live for.

The human heart is an idol factory. Our sinful natures make it possible for us to seize upon anything, and say, "This, this by itself will fill the void! I will give myself for this, and live for this, it will bring me satisfaction. I will pursue this and live for this!"

This is God's defence of loving Him ultimately: no other god is a real god! No other god exists in reality. There is only one member of the class God – and it is Jehovah. In fact, God's name even suggests this idea. "Yahweh" "I AM" suggests God is saying, I am the only one in the universe who is not simply an instrument or a means for someone or something else. I am not someone who is explained as an agent or means for something beyond Me. No, God is simply, I AM.

God says, do not have any other gods in your life. Grant Me alone that place, because I alone am God.

Now, at this point, the whole human race looks at God sceptically. Every human being takes that fruit from the tree, agrees with the serpent that we can be gods to ourselves by our own hand. We are not so sure that God, by Himself, can be God to us. We turn to other things, things created. We exchange Creator for creature. We look to things made to fill the void. That's why God charges Israel with two crimes in Jeremiah

For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, And hewn themselves cisterns-- broken cisterns that can hold no water. (Jer 2:13)

God says not only did you commit adultery, by forsaking your true love, you turned to what can never satisfy. You went from best to worst.

You see, false gods are always jealous, treacherous and destructive.

Every god is jealous, and wants you to love it with all your heart, soul and mind.

Jesus, in fact, taught this. He said, *“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other.”* Matthew 6:24

You take a woman who has made a god out of her appearance, and out of money. To get money she has to work long and hard hours, toiling away. The god of money does not let her spend much time improving her appearance. However, the god of her appearance demands she spend much time in the mirror, in the gym, at the cosmetic section, reading magazines. So she does, and limits how much time she spends at the office. When she serves one, she cannot serve the other. Both gods war for her time. And in fact, in order to pursue appearance she must use up some of her money. She must rob that god to satisfy this god. When she gets money, she cannot be on a sunbed or on a treadmill. Her gods are jealous.

It is with this tension that we polytheists live. We try to balance the various gods in our lives, knowing they are jealous, and doing our best to resolve the tensions.

It is not only that the true God is Jealous. Any god in the human heart is jealous, and permits no rivals.

False gods are not only jealous, false gods are **treacherous**. False gods always abandon the worshipper at some point.

You see the woman who lived for her children. Everything was about her children's health, and children's development, and education. She loved her husband and loved God, but she lived for her children. That was her god. And one day her children leave the house. She is devastated, confused and feels rather betrayed. She put everything into these gods, and now they are gone. Where is her return? Where is her satisfaction?

The man who trusts in money finds it abandons him in the end. It either is taken from him, or it betrays him with its inability to bring lasting satisfaction. The immoral relationship betrays you, the honing of a perfect body betrays you, the marriage to the perfect man or woman betrays you, the attainment of a position ultimately betrays you. You see, false gods betray you because they lead you to believe they can be to you what only the true God can be to you, and then in the end, they always fail.

Broken cisterns that can hold no water.

Ever wonder why God is the **true** God? Because a true God will not turn out to disappoint in the end.

False gods are also **destructive**.

Psalm 135:15-18 *The idols of the nations are silver and gold, The work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; Eyes they have, but they do not see; They have ears, but they do not hear; Nor is there any breath in their mouths. Those who make them are like them; So is everyone who trusts in them.*

What do false gods do to you over time? They make you as hollow, shallow, empty as the things you worship. You have spiritual eyes, but you see little. You have spiritual ears, but you don't hear much. Idols shallow us, dull us, dilute us. One of the potent effects of idolatry is to make us satisfied with so little. The one who has made trashy soap operas her god, finds her heart shrinking.

Eventually, she is not tempted by the thought of seeing glory, she just wants to see if Electra is going to finally get together with Blain. C.S. Lewis said we end up like children who want to keep making mud pies in a slum, because we don't understand what it means to have a holiday by the seaside.

God wants His people to know, He alone is worth this kind of ultimate love And whenever something other than God is put in His place, it disappoints. False gods cheat us – they promise they will do what only God can do, but they turn out to be hollow. They do not satisfy like God does. They are not trustworthy like He is. False gods are treacherous. False gods always abandon the worshipper at some point.

He alone is God. He alone is worthy. He alone can satisfy us. That's why He is justifiably Jealous. God's jealousy is not a petty rivalry. God's jealousy is a Just claim as the only rightful occupant in that place in the human heart designed to worship the only true God.

This is the reason God gives. But we want to understand more. What does that mean?

II. The Meaning of Worshipping God Alone

If a god is one that we love ultimately, then we should not love God as a means to something else. Because whatever it is I am looking for beyond God is actually my god.

Ken gives Barbie a gold necklace, and Barbie loves Ken. Ken gives Barbie a house by the ocean and Barbie loves Ken. Ken gives Barbie an unlimited credit card and Barbie loves Ken. Ken stops giving things to Barbie, and Barbie stops loving Ken. What does Barbie love?
God gives me health, and I love God. God gives me a job and enough money, I love God. God gives me healthy children, and I love God. God protects me and my loved ones, and I love God. God gives me a certain quality of life, and I love God. And if God takes any or all of those things away, then what?

Is God a Cosmic Cash Cow? Is God a Prozac Pill? Is God a good luck charm?

Is the Christian life just a means to fix up your marriage, help with your finances, help you budget your time, help you achieve financial freedom, give you personal peace and happiness, make you a successful person?

Is Christian worship a means for personal ecstasy? Is a worship service a springboard to losing yourself?

Is your quiet time all about you? Is a corporate worship all about you?

"If we love not God because he is what he is, but only because he is profitable to us, in truth we love him not at all." - Jonathan Edwards

Loving God ultimately is loving God for Himself. To have no other gods before Him is to have God as absolutely First in your heart. To love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength is to not seek to use God for some other end beyond Himself. We love God for His excellence, for His beauty, for His reliability, for His desirability. To love God ultimately is to love Him for who he is. He alone is God. He is delightful. He is trustworthy. He is covenant-keeping. Therefore we love Him.

There is a hymn we sing in our church.

My God, I love Thee; not because
I hope for heaven thereby,
Nor yet for fear that loving not
I might forever die
But for that Thou didst all mankind Upon the cross embrace;
For us didst bear the nails and spear,
And manifold disgrace.

But remember the image God used of a fountain? God is not telling us to forsake other gods because He is insecure, petty and egotistical. He tells us to do that because only He can satisfy. Those things are good in their place, serving as means to know Him, But when placed in God's place, they shatter and harm you.

Augustine said, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you."

III. The Method for Worshipping God Alone

Deuteronomy 30:6 "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live

Circumcision was the physical act by which a male Israelite was brought into the Abrahamic covenant. God uses that image and says, I will do a work on your inner man. I will take away the hardness of heart in you, I will cut away your unbelief, your stony heart, and I will enable you to love me this way.

God is telling Israel that they cannot reach the first commandment without a work of grace. God has to do something to them, before they will be able to meet this commandment.

The act of regeneration is where God begins new life within a person. He applies the atoning work of Christ to that person, wakes him up from his spiritual death. He justifies him. God removes the alienation and the condemnation that makes loving God impossible. He grants you a new heart that is inclined towards Him. He grants you His indwelling Spirit that cries out, Abba Father! He removes the guilt, and the shame, and the fear that went with it.

When does He do this? He does this at the time when we repent of living life for self. We repent of our idols, of our sin, and embrace Jesus Christ as our life and love. We look to Him to reconcile us to God and grant us a new heart.

To put it in New Testament terms, you need the gospel to fulfil the great commandment.

But let me finish with a word to the believer. There is something you can do, believer to grow ultimate love for God. Stay in Deuteronomy, look in chapter 10:16.

Deuteronomy 10:16 "Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.

Wait a minute. Didn't God say He would do that? Yes. But God calls on us to become what we are by faith. He calls on us to do what we cannot do without grace. It is God who gives you a new heart at the moment of conversion. But God also calls on you to keep renewing that heart of ultimate love.

You keep discovering and destroying your idols. Do you know the starting point of returning to God as first love? It is to discover and destroy your idols.

Let me give you some questions to help track down your gods. What do you worry about most? What do you fear losing the most? If you had to give up everything else to keep one thing, what would that one thing be? Sketch for me your idea of the good life. What is your small-h heaven? What does it look like, what are you doing, who are you with, what is the state of perfect life, happiness, flourishing?

Find out – why do I do this? Why do I enjoy this? Why do I want this? Why am I pursuing this? Why is this important to me? Why am I protective of this? Where you find that something has become an end in itself, something you have assigned absolute value to – it is an idol. It needs to be smashed, or put back on the altar, and given to God. Only then is it safe.

That is usually a very painful thing. Idols do not easily surrender their space. But ask God to apply the powerful work of the cross to your heart. Reckon yourself dead to all Christ died to, and yield to His power. Repent of giving a created thing the space that belong to God alone.

You wake up in the morning, and you come to the Lord, and however you say it, you say to God, my life is yours. My life is not about me. My family, my goals, my ambitions, my desires, my plans, my career, my health, my reputation – it is yours. I will not seek ultimate dependence in these things. You are my Rock and my high tower. I will not be devoted to any of these things ultimately, good as they may be. You alone are my Captain, My King, My Lord. I will not seek ultimate delight in your gifts, but I will use them as means to delight in the Giver. Isn't this what Jesus was teaching is at the heart of discipleship?

Luke 9:23-25 Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. ²⁴ "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. ²⁵ "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost?

Every day – it is not about me, it is about God. I destroy my idols. My life is God's, for God is my all.

The question before us all is not will I have ultimate love for someone or something. It is, where are you placing your ultimate love, and, will you place it on the only One who deserves it?

God in Himself is what we were made for. Nothing less than God's glory can satisfy the human heart, which is made in God's image.

Psalm 73:25 Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You.