



The Ten Commandments

(4) “You shall have no other gods before me.”

Exodus 20:1-3

Luke 16:19-31

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This evening we begin the first of several sermons on the first commandment which is, “You shall have no other gods before me.” The very first thing that this commandment requires of us is that we believe that the God of the Bible exists. The first thing that both the Larger and the Shorter Catechism mention in connection with what is forbidden by the first commandment is atheism. That is pretty obvious, I think. We are to have no other gods besides the God of the Bible. That means that we are to have the God of the Bible. He is to be our God. All human beings are to have him as their God. We are not allowed to be atheists.

Now you may wonder why I think that it is necessary to deal with this subject in a sermon directed to a congregation of believers. Let me explain. I read a book many years ago about preaching that said something that has always stuck with me and has helped me in my preaching. It said that we preachers should not assume that some of the people to whom we are preaching are not struggling with some of the most basic and fundamental questions of human existence. I thought that that was very good advice. Just because we are Christians does not mean that we do not sometimes wonder if God even exists. I suspect that most of us have had that thought from time to time and there may be those among us for whom this is a live issue. And the rest of us can profitably consider how the Bible deals with this subject.

There is a whole category of memoirs about Christians who have lost their faith and embraced atheism. Many of these are written by former

pastors. And we can be sure that for everyone who has written and published their story of losing faith in God, there are many who have lost their faith in God and not written about it. It is something that happens and so it is worthwhile for us to give some attention to the whole question of why we believe that the God of the Bible exists.

A related reason for dealing with this subject is that it is harder to believe in the God of the Bible than it used to be in the western world. There used to be a time in our society, at least, when it was hard not to believe in the existence of the God of the Bible. If you were an atheist, you probably kept that a secret because it was obvious to most people that the Bible was true. The biblical worldview made sense to most people and you were odd if you did not believe it. So, there was a lot of support for holding to the biblical worldview because it was the way that most people around you looked at the world. That does not mean that everyone was a genuine follower of Jesus Christ, but the vast majority of people in the West through in terms of biblical categories.

That is no longer the case. While the number of people who claim to be atheists is relatively low, the spirit of our age is secular and what comes across in the media that we consume is the idea that belief in the Christian God is irrational. Some of the new atheists compare believing in God with believing in the Tooth Fairy, Mother Goose, or the Flying Spaghetti Monster. It is commonly assumed that science and evolution make it obvious that God does not exist and that no intelligent person believes in God anymore. Christians are often portrayed as holding beliefs that rational people long ago rejected. And all of that affects us. Whereas before, in the West at least, belief in God was supported by the spirit of the age, today the spirit of the age is a challenge to belief in God. For an awful lot of people and especially the shapers of opinion, belief in God is obviously false and those who continue to do so are considered naïve and gullible.

So, I think it will be worthwhile for us to consider the way that the Bible deals with the whole matter of belief in God. There are different approaches that one could take to the question of whether God exists, but there is only one approach that is appropriate for a worship service and that is to consider the biblical teaching. It is possible to give

philosophical arguments for the existence of God and such arguments have some value, but a worship service is a meeting between God and his people, and a big part of a worship service is God speaking to his people through his Word, and a preacher is not allowed to give a philosophical lecture in a worship service. So, what we are going to do is see how God in his word deals with this whole matter of his own existence. And interestingly enough the Bible actually has a lot to say about this matter.

First of all, there is the fact that the Bible claims that God has revealed himself to people by speaking to certain people who would in turn tell others that God had spoken to them and what he had said. Now we can believe that such things actually happened, or we can disbelieve that such things happened, but the Bible claims that they did. So, in Genesis 12:7 we read, "Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So, he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him." So, this is a biblical claim. The Bible claims that God exists and that he appeared to Abram and spoke to him. And this is what we find throughout the Bible. God appears to people, and he speaks to them and we have the accounts of these incidents. And we have the option of believing these accounts or disbelieving them.

Clearly quite a few people did believe them. These stories were preserved first by memory; then by being written down. And eventually what was written down came to be understood as the word of God – a communication from God to man. But let's look at some of these early appearances of God to various people and consider how these people were convinced that it was God who was speaking to them.

Consider Genesis 12:1 & 4. In Genesis 12:1 we read these words, "Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.'" And verse 4 says, "So Abram went, as the LORD had told him." I want you to notice a number of things from these two verses. First, Abram was not a believer in God before God spoke to him and told him to leave his home and go to the land that God was going to show him. We know this from Joshua 24:2 which says, "Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other

gods.” So, Abram is a pagan and God appears to him and speaks to him and tells him to leave his home and go to wherever God would show him. Second, notice that God just speaks to Abram and expects him to believe in him and obey. And Abram does obey. “Abram went, as the LORD had told him.”

Abram believed and obeyed on the basis of the words that God spoke to him. The words that God spoke to Abram convinced him of the reality of God and the authority of God and so he obeyed. There is nothing here of Abram philosophizing and coming to the conclusion that God exists. There is nothing here of God doing some miracles to convince Abram of his existence. God just spoke. We don't know how God spoke. It could have been in a dream. It could have been in audible voice. The text just says that God spoke, and Abram obeyed. God's words were enough to convince Abram of the existence of God.

And God expected to be believed and obeyed. God spoke with authority. Part of that authority was that he expected Abram to believe that he existed on the basis of his words, and part of that authority was that he expected Abram to do what he told him to do. By speaking to Abram, God was revealing himself to Abram and he clearly expected Abram to obey him.

Now, it is clear that God also expected Abram's family to believe that God had spoken to Abram and had given him commands and promises. God did not speak directly to Sarai, Abram's wife. He did not speak directly to Lot, Abram's nephew. But they believed the word that God has spoken to Abram. They went with Abram, leaving their homeland and going where God directed them. And we find this to be a pattern in the Bible. God speaks to certain people and those people tell others and God expects those others to believe the message that God has given them to convey.

We see this with Moses. Moses is walking through the wilderness tending his sheep and God speaks to him out of a bush that was burning without being burnt up. God says to Moses, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” God expects Moses to believe what he is saying. He gets the miracle of the burning bush, but the key is that God expects Moses to believe what

he says to him and he expects Moses to do what he tells him to do. In this case, he tells Moses to go to the people of Israel and tell them that God had appeared to him and to tell them that this God was going to deliver them from Egypt.

God enables Moses to do a few miracles to help the people of Israel believe what Moses is saying to them. If Moses throws his staff to the ground it will become a snake. And if he picks up the snake by the tail it will become a staff again. Also, if he puts his hand in his coat it will become leprous and if he puts his hand in his coat a second time will be no longer be leprous. But on the basis of this, God expects the people to believe that he exists and to do what he is telling them to do through Moses.

This is a pattern that we see throughout the Bible. God speaks to certain people and he tells them to tell others what he has said, and he expects those others to believe the message that he has given through his messenger. These spokesmen for God come to be called prophets. And God expects the people to believe the words that he tells the prophets to speak. And certainly, included in that is that God expects the people who hear God's words through the prophets to believe that he exists and that he is the kind of God he says that he is.

Listen to how the Lord speaks of this in Deuteronomy 18:18-19, ¹⁸"I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. ¹⁹And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him." So, God expects the people to believe the words of his prophets. This is how God has decided to communicate with human beings. He speaks to people like Moses and the prophets. He speaks about himself. He speaks about how he wants us to live. And he expects people to believe his word.

Eventually some of what God says to Moses and the prophets gets written down. Deuteronomy 31:24 says that Moses wrote the words of the law in a book and that book was placed by the ark of the covenant. And law here means more than law in the narrow sense. It means Torah, which include all that we have in the first 5 books of the Bible. The rest of what we have in our OTs is called The Prophets. The

prophets also wrote down the story of God's dealings with Israel from Joshua onward, as well as summaries of their messages and the whole collection comes to be known as the Law and the Prophets which is our OT.

Next, we come to Jesus. There is so much more to be said about this topic in the OT, but if we go there I won't have time for the climax of God's revelation of himself which is Jesus. Hebrews 1:1-2 sum up the whole Bible on this topic, ""¹Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..." Jesus is the climax of all the earlier revelation of God through the prophets. Jesus is the ultimate prophet. John 1 refers to Jesus as the Word of God. That means that he is the ultimate revelation of God and his will. John 1:18 says, "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known."

That means that Jesus is the ultimate answer to atheism. A key part of Jesus' mission is to make the Father known. Jesus and his message embody the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me." For what was Jesus' message? "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." Jesus came to proclaim the reign of God. What does that mean? It is a call to have God as our God. It is a call not to have any other gods than the true God. Jesus and his message have many other aspects, but at the basic level the announcement of the kingdom is an expression of the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me." And as such it is a condemnation of atheism. At the heart of Jesus's person and his message is the claim that the God of the Bible exists and that he is the only true and living God.

And Jesus himself is the heart of that message. In John 14:9 Jesus says, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." In John 10:30 he says, "I and the Father are one." Jesus Christ is the ultimate revelation of God. And so, the first commandment applies to having Jesus as our God as much as it applies having the Father as our God. In John 5:22-23 Jesus says, "²²For the Father judges no one, but he has given all judgment to the Son, ²³that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father.

Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him." When the first commandment says that we are to have no other gods but the God of the Bible it is saying that we are to have Jesus as our God as well as the Father.

And then Jesus goes on to say in John 5:24, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life." Here Jesus speaks about his word. Just as we have seen from the OT, God expects his word to be believed. Jesus expects his word to be believed. The focus is on the word and the authority of that word. It is true that Jesus performed miracles that confirmed his claims just as God did miracles in the OT from time to time to confirm his word, but the emphasis in the Bible is on the authority of the word of God which is also the word of Christ.

In John 5:24, Jesus connects hearing his word and believing on him with receiving eternal life, with not coming unto judgment and with passing from death to life. The stakes are very high. Not receiving Jesus' word results in not receiving eternal life, coming into judgment and remaining in a condition of death – spiritual death. All of this hinges on what we do with Jesus' word.

Now this is all contestable. It is possible not to believe. That is obvious because many people both in Bible-times and in our own time did not and do not believe. It is possible not to believe the word of God. That is obvious, but it is also significant. It means that God has chosen to reveal himself in a way that can be disbelieved. It is possible to reject the word of God. It is possible to be an atheist.

Now it is interesting to consider why God chose to reveal himself in a way that can be rejected. Sometimes atheists ask, "If God exists, why does he not reveal himself in a way that could not be denied?" In his book, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins has written, "If God existed and wanted to convince us of it, he could fill the world with super-miracles."

This is interesting in connection with our discussion. Dawkins is saying that there is not enough evidence for the existence of God. He is

suggesting that if God gave more evidence, people would believe in him. "If God existed and wanted to convince us of it, he could fill the world with super-miracles." Clearly God has not done that. He has spoke to various people and told them to pass on his message. He has sent Jesus to come as the revelation of God and his will. He has given us the Bible as the word of God. He has given miracles at various times to confirm the message. But he has not revealed himself in such a way that it is impossible to doubt his existence. God could have done that. God could have revealed himself in such a way that his existence would be impossible to doubt. But he has not done that. It is possible to deny that God exists, and many people do deny that God exists.

Now Dawkins' claim that there is not enough evidence for the existence of God assumes that if there were enough evidence then he and other atheists would believe. But he is wrong about that. According to the Bible, the problem is not a lack of evidence, but an unwillingness to accept the evidence which God has provided both in the creation and in his word. People do not disbelieve because of the weakness of the evidence. They disbelieve because they suppress the evidence that God has provided.

Paul addresses this matter in Romans 1:18-21, "¹⁸For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness **suppress the truth**. ¹⁹For what can be known about God **is plain to them**, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. **So, they are without excuse.**"

These verses say that God has revealed himself in the creation so that his invisible attributes, his eternal power and divine nature, are clearly perceived. These verses say that men suppress the truth that God has revealed in the creation. These verses say that the evidence is such that people are without excuse. People are not atheists because of a lack of evidence. "The heavens declare the glory of god and the sky above proclaims his handiwork." There is plenty of evidence. No one has an excuse to be an atheist. The problem is not the lack of evidence. It is that men in their wickedness suppress the truth.

Jesus addresses this truth with respect to the word of God. In Luke 16, he tells a story of a rich man who ended up in hell. The rich man wanted his brothers to be warned about what he was going through and so he asked Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers about hell. He was convinced that if someone would rise from the dead and warn his brothers about the danger of hell, they would repent. And what did Abraham say? "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead" (Luke 16:31).

Between the revelation of God in the creation and the revelation of God through his word and through Jesus the ultimate word of God, there is plenty of evidence for the existence of God and the message of God. The problem is not a lack of evidence. The problem is that wicked men suppress the truth. But the Bible insists that there is enough evidence so that they are without excuse.

Jesus' message in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus was confirmed in connection with his own resurrection from the dead. You see, someone did rise from the dead. Jesus rose from the dead. There were hundreds of people who saw him after his resurrection and testified of what they had seen. There is enough historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection that any other claim with that many eyewitness accounts would be accepted as factual by the scholars of today. Many of the facts of history are believed today on the basis of much less evidence. The response of unbelief to Jesus' resurrection confirms the truth of Jesus' words. "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead." Someone has risen from the dead and still they have not believed.

The fact of the matter is that we are all inclined to be atheists by nature. We all suppress the truth of God that comes to us from the creation, from Moses and the Prophets and from Jesus and the apostles. In 1 Corinthians 2:14 Paul writes, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." That is all of us by nature. The reason that there is atheism is not that the evidence for the existence of God is weak. The reason that there is atheism is that

human beings have sinful hearts that suppress the truth about God in the creation and in the word of God.

But Jesus came to change the hearts of his people so that those hearts become receptive to the word of God. 1 Corinthians 2:12 says of believers in Jesus, "Now we have received not the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God." And Jesus said in Luke 4:18 that he came to give sight to the blind.

God has revealed himself in the creation and he has revealed himself through Moses and the Prophets and Jesus and the apostles and he expects to be believed. He expects to be believed because he is speaking. Our WCF confesses this truth when it says in 1:4 "The authority of the Holy Scripture, because of which it ought to be obeyed, does not depend upon the testimony of any man or church, but entirely upon God, its author (who is truth itself); therefore, it is to be received because it is the Word of God."

There are other arguments for the existence of God. There are some wonderful books written showing the irrationality of not believing in God and the rationality of believing in God. And these are helpful and confirming. But this is not the focus of the word of God. In the Bible, we see God speaking and that speech is authoritative speech. We must believe because God is speaking to us in his word. There is no greater reason. We are to believe that God exists because God has told us that he exists both in nature and in his word. And when God speaks we are to listen and believe and obey.

"You shall have no other gods before me." This is a huge part of the message of the whole Bible. God calls us to have him as our God. That begins with believing in the existence of God on the basis of his word. And Jesus makes that possible because he came to change our hearts and open our eyes so that we might hear him speaking to us in the Scriptures and follow him.