



The Ten Commandments

(5) “You shall have no other gods before me.” (2)

Exodus 20:1-3

Deuteronomy 6:4-5

Deuteronomy 13:1-4

Rev. Jerry Hamstra
Riverside ARP Church
February 11, 2018

Last time we considered the most basic implication of the first commandment. The commandment is, “You shall have no other gods before me.” And the most basic implication of that is that we must believe that the God of the Bible exists. If someone rejects the very existence of God, they are certainly not keeping the first commandment. And we saw that God expects us to believe that he exists on the basis of his self-revelation both in the creation and in the Word of God which is the Bible. The point is that when God speaks, he expects to be believed. He expects us to believe what he says about himself in the Bible.

Today we continue thinking through the first commandment. We believe that God exists. What does it mean to have no other gods before the God who reveals himself in the Bible? Well in those days there were lots of gods to choose from. The ancient nations among whom Israel lived worshipped many different gods. You may be familiar with some of their names from your Bible reading. Baal, Moloch, Chemosh, Dagan and Rimmon are some of the names that are mentioned in the Bible. These gods may have been imaginary beings. Or they may have been demonic beings. One thing they were not was divine beings. The Bible is clear that there is only one God who is the true and living God.

There is only one real God according to the Bible. He reveals himself as the creator. That means that everything else owes its existence to him. God then is unlike any other thing in the universe. And he is far above every other thing in the universe for every other thing is dependent upon him for its very existence. In Isaiah 45:5, God says, "I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God." The implication of this is that the other gods that we are not allowed to have as our gods are not true Gods. They are false gods. They are real in the sense that they exist in men's minds and they may even be demonic, but they are not divine. There is only one being who is divine and that is the God of the Bible. All other gods are God- substitutes or God-wannabes.

So, the first commandment does not say that the other gods do not exist at all. They exist as false gods. They exist as pagan gods. But they do not exist as divine beings because there is only one of those and he has revealed himself to us in the Bible. So, the first commandment meant that Israel was not to worship any of those other gods.

Now what does it mean to have a god? The first commandment says, "You shall have no other gods before me." God was telling the people of Israel that they were not to have any other gods besides him. What does it mean to have a god?

The second commandment gives us the beginning of an answer to this question. The second commandment says that we are not to make carved images. We will consider what that means for us in another sermon. But it also tells us that we are not allowed to "bow down or serve" these carved images. That helps us to know what God is taking about when he says that we are not to have any other gods. Having a god involves worshipping that god and it involves serving that god. What else? The OT also speaks of trusting in idols. In Isaiah 42:17 we read, "They are turned back and utterly put to shame who trust in carved idols, who say to metal images, 'You are our gods.'" Another verse in Isaiah fills out the picture. Isaiah 44:17 is part of a passage which describes an idol maker making an idol out of wood and verse 17 says, "[He] falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, 'Deliver me, for you are my god.'"

So, these are the sorts of things involved in having a god, bowing down to it and serving it, praying to it and trusting it. Let's consider each of these activities or attitudes.

First of all, worship. To have a god is to worship it. Worship is described as bowing down before the god. The idea is that of giving honor, or praising, adoring, and acknowledging the greatness and the power of the god. Worship in Scripture is a broad concept which involves both specific acts of worship such as making sacrifices and singing praises and living in such a way as to please the god. Service is closely related. Israel was often condemned for serving other gods. They acknowledged them as their gods and sought to please them in their lives. Then there is praying and trusting. Having a god is looking to that god to give you good harvests, heal you when you were sick and give you victory in battle.

So, having a god is looking to a supernatural being in worship and looking to that supernatural being to supply your needs and help you in the difficulties in life as well as seeking to please that supernatural being by the way you live your life. And we human beings seem to be hardwired to do this. Worshiping and serving some kind of god is part of the human condition. All human beings realize at some level that they are part of something that is much bigger than they are and that the control that they have over their lives is limited and there seems to be a deeply ingrained instinct to honor and praise that something. So that is a brief summary of what it means to have a god. And in the first commandment, the God of the Bible is saying that we are to "have no other gods before [him]."

Now this is expressed in a negative form. "You shall have **no** other gods before me." One of the things that this implies is that we are tempted to have other gods before the true God of the Bible. God told Israel not to have other gods before him because he knew that there was a powerful temptation for them to do exactly that. That temptation was there because they had sinful hearts. But it was also there because all the nations around them were worshipping other gods. Everyone else was going it. Having other gods was the norm in the world in which they were living. All the popular nations were doing it. The smart and the

powerful and the successful nations were doing it. Having other gods was therefore something that was very attractive to the people of God. Worshiping only one God was weird in that day and age. Worshiping this particular God was even weirder. He was a rather demanding God as far as lifestyle choices were concerned. He had very restrictive requirements for sexuality. There was a lot about worshiping other gods that was attractive for the people of Israel. That is why God put this command in a negative form. "You shall have no other gods before me."

But the negative requires the positive. Israel would not be keeping the first commandment if they just decided to have no gods at all. Suppose someone in Israel had said, "OK. We are not allowed to worship all those heathen, false gods. I just won't worship any god at all. I'll just live without any gods." Not only is that not possible for a human being, it is not an option in the light of the first commandment. The positive command is implied by the negative. We are to worship the true God of the Bible and him alone.

There are some very clear verses that spell out the positive requirements of the first commandment. Two of them we read as part of our Scripture reading. Deuteronomy 6:4–5, "4"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." And Deuteronomy 13:1–4, "1"If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, 2and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' 3you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. 4You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him."

Those two passages give us quite a list of things that are included in having the true God as our God, loving him with all our heart, soul, and might, walking after him, fearing him, keeping his commandments, obeying his voice, serving him, and holding fast to him. And even that is a partial list. We have already seen that having a god/God includes

worship and serving and trusting and depending upon. I could show passages for each of these things, but it would become tedious.

Having God as our God is a lot more than having him as part of our life. Having God as our God is a lot more than giving attention to God here and there, now and then. Having God as our God is life dominating. To keep this command, is to view all of life through the grid of having God as our God. The God of the Bible demands that he be the focus of our lives. The God of the Bible demands that he be the reason for our lives. The God of the Bible demands that loving him to be the motivation for every part of our life.

Think of what it means to love God with **all** your heart, mind, soul and might. The word "all" is the key word. It is utterly comprehensive. Our love for God is not only to be our highest love, it is to be expressed in and through every other love. It's not that we are allowed to love God 51% and all our other loves sharing the remaining 49 percent of our love. We are to love God 100% and all our other loves are to be sub-expressions of our love for God. In other words, our love for our wife or husband is to be an expression of our love for God. Our love for our parents is to be an expression of our love for God. Whatever other loves there are in our lives are to be motivated by our love for God.

The same applies to our minds. Every thought that we think is to be an expression of our love for God. Of course, we must think of other things. We have work to do. But the motivation for all our work-thoughts must be love for God because we are to love God with all our mind. When we are learning a new thing or figuring out the solution to a problem, we are to be loving God with all our mind. And the same applies to our might or our strength. We are to love God with all our might. Everything we do is to be an expression of our love for God. And anytime we do anything that is not an expression of love for God, we are breaking the first commandment. If we cut the grass only because we want the satisfaction of a nicely mowed lawn and we are not at the same time motivated by love for God, we are breaking the first commandment.

Having God as our God is utterly comprehensive. Loving, worshipping, pleasing, obeying God is to be 100 percent of our life. We are allowed to love other things, but only if they are part of our love for God. We are

allowed to do things for our own pleasure, but only if they are expression of our love for God. To have God as our God is to have every part of our being and every second of our lives focused on loving, worshipping, pleasing and obeying God. And any time we are not doing that we are worshipping something else and we are breaking the first commandment.

Now we will follow these ideas to the NT. The OT is part of the Word of God for us. It speaks to us with authority. But only in the light of the NT. In order to understand anything in the OT rightly we must understand in the light of the NT. Another way of saying the same thing is to say that we must understand the OT in the light of Jesus Christ. The OT is incomplete. It does not stand on its own. It points to Jesus Christ and can only be rightly understood in the light of Jesus Christ. So, it is with the first commandment.

Now Jesus confirms what the OT says about the first commandment. The clearest example of that is Matthew 22:37 where Jesus summarizes the first four of the Ten Commandments by saying “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This summarizes both the first commandment and the first four commandments because the first commandment actually includes the next three commandments. Indeed, it includes all the commandments. All the other commandments are really implications of the first commandment. Anyway, Jesus reaffirms what we have been seeing about the meaning of the first commandment. It involves loving God with all our heart and that as we have seen includes worship and devotion and service and obedience. Jesus teaches that all of what we have seen about the meaning of the first command from the OT applies to NT believers.

But there is something else that Jesus teaches about the first commandment. Jesus teaches that keeping the first commandment involves having him as our God. Jesus teaches that we are to give him the kind of worship and devotion that the first commandment in the Old Testament commands us to give to God. The reason for that as the whole New Testament makes clear is that Jesus is God. Notice the kind of commands that Jesus gives to his disciples and through them to us.

Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 10:37, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” Verse 38, “And whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” Verse 39, “And whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” This is just another way of expressing the first commandment – only now the God that we are to have is Jesus. The most precious things in life are our family members. We are to love Jesus more than them. Taking up our cross and following Jesus means being willing to die for him. The only way to find life is to lose our lives for Jesus’ sake. That means that we no longer live for ourselves but for Jesus. That is the first commandment using other words. Jesus is saying here that we are to have no other gods but him.

And significantly he does not see that as a contradiction of the first commandment as we have it in the OT. In one place Jesus says that we are to love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength and in another place, he says we are to love him more than anything else and that we are to give up our lives and live them for him. Different words. The same idea. And no contradiction because Jesus and his Father are one.

So, we have a beginning look at the first commandment. We are to have no other gods before the God of the Bible. We are to have no other gods before Jesus. That means loving him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. That means living our lives for him. It means worshipping him. It means trusting in him. It means obeying his commands. It means putting him first in our lives.

We need to work that out in more detail. Since the first commandment is so fundamental it will be helpful to spend a little more time with it. But from what we have seen so far it is clear that it is very extreme, and it is very demanding.

God is to fill the horizon of our lives. God demands literally everything from us. Having God as our God means that our lives are not our own. It means that no part of our lives are our own. It means that we exist for God. It means that every second of our lives and every thought that we think and every thing that we do is to be directed by love for God and

directed to pleasing God. Any time that is not happening we are breaking the first commandment.

That is pretty extreme. It is as extreme as it is possible to get. But is there any other way to understand loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength? Is there any other way of understanding living not for ourselves, but for Jesus? This is what the Bible teaches. This is what the first commandment means.

Now this may make it seem that God is selfish and oppressive. God has all the power and he demands that we keep nothing for ourselves and that we give everything to him. But that is as far from the truth as it is possible to get. You see, the bottom line as far as biblical religion is concerned is that God is the greatest good. There is nothing better for us than to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. There is no life more rich and satisfying than a life that is lived for God. And anything less than that is an impoverishment of our lives. The best and most joyful life is a life that is lived entirely for God. And to the degree that we do not live for God our lives are less fulfilled. That is the claim of the first commandment. Having God alone as our God is the best possible way to live.

But it sure exposes our sinfulness! Thinking about the first commandment exposes how sinful we are. This is why Christians often use such extreme language about their sinfulness. A person whose life is outwardly blameless will confess as Paul does in Romans 7:18, "For I know that nothing good dwells in me." When we understand what the first commandment actually requires of us, we begin to see how great our sin is. We do not even come close to loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. We break the first commandment constantly. At the very best we have only a small beginning of the obedience that God requires of us.

And yet having our sins exposed in this way makes Christ all the more precious to us if we are looking to him for our salvation. The first commandment is very humbling if we think deeply about it. But Jesus Christ has lived and died for the sins of all those who trust in him. That is a glorious truth. That is all the more reason to love Jesus with all our hearts as well as the Father who has sent him. We are more sinful that

we know. And yet if we are trusting in Jesus those sins are forgiven and we are right with God. Such is the grace of God in the gospel. The more we see the extent of our sins, the more wonderful we see the grace of God to be.

And from that basis we can seek to grow in the blessedness of keeping the law of God. Sin is destructive and dehumanizing. The law of God is the way of life. And believers are not only forgiven but renewed so that they are learning to experience the rich blessedness of the way that God has designed us to live.

Table meditation

The Heidelberg Catechism, in Q/ 115 asks this question. “Q. Since no one in this life can obey the Ten Commandments perfectly, why does God want them preached so pointedly? A. First, so that the longer we live the more we may come to know our sinfulness and the more eagerly look to Christ for forgiveness of sins and righteousness. Second, so that we may never stop striving, and never stop praying to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, to be renewed more and more after God’s image, until after this life we reach our goal: perfection.”

The law has two main purposes—to show us our sins so that we more eagerly look to Christ for forgiveness of sins and righteousness and so that we will long more and more for the grace of the Holy Spirit to keep the law. In the Lord’s Supper we are reminded and assured that Jesus gave his life for us so that we might be forgiven, accepted as righteous, and renewed and given the power for obedience.

The deeper we look into the law the more clearly we see the enormity of our sin. If we don’t think about what God requires of us all that deeply, we will say something like—“Of course I am a sinner; everyone is a sinner.” But if we understand a little of what it means that God requires that we love him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, then we see more clearly how serious our sinful condition is. We don’t even come close to what God requires of us. Our sins are a mountain of guilt. Each one of them is sufficient to condemn us forever.

And then forgiveness and acceptance with God is not something to be taken for granted. Then the question is, how is it possible for God to forgive such a sinner? Then perhaps we see a little of how awful and inexcusable our sins are. Then we need re-assurance.

And that is what the Lord's Supper is designed to give. Our Lord Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper because he knew that we would need to be re-assured on a regular basis that he did really give his life for us and that he really does offer himself to us as our Saviour. Jesus wants to share this symbolic meal with us so that we might be assured that though our sins are as scarlet in him we are as white a snow. By presenting the gospel to us in this symbolic form, Jesus is saying to us, as surely as you see me offer you the bread and the wine/juice, so surely, I offer you what they represent.

It can be disturbing to be reminded of how great our sins are. But in the Lord Supper we are reminded and reassured how surely Jesus give himself to us as the one through whom our sins are forgiven, and we are renewed to gradually become more like him.