

No Other gods

Exodus 20:3

[Phil Johnson](#)

This morning let's look at the First of the Ten Commandments, found in Exodus 20:3. These are the first words God Himself wrote on those tablets of stone: **"You shall have no other gods before me."**

Turn to Exodus 20, and let's review the opening verses of that chapter, to help fix the context of this passage in our minds:

And God spoke all these words, saying,

2 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

3 "You shall have no other gods before me.

Now remember the setting. This takes place at the foot of Mount Sinai, before Moses ascends the mountain to commune with God and receive the entire Mosaic code. The entire congregation was gathered there, prepared to hear from God, and they heard a voice that delivered these commandments so that all of them could hear. And it wasn't just a voice. There was thunder, and lightning, and darkness, and the whole earth shook. This was a terrifying experience for the Israelites. Look down at verse 18:

Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the

mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off

19 and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die."

They *begged* Moses to have God speak directly to them, so that Moses could be their mediator. The trauma of hearing God's voice directly was simply too much for them to take. And that is why, after the Ten Commandments had been delivered verbally like this, Moses went up the mountain to be alone with God and came back with the words of these commandments written in stone by the finger of God Himself.

The terror of that moment was palpable. Exodus 19:18 says, **"Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly."** These were no mere earth tremors. **"The whole mount quaked greatly."** I suppose it was more frightening than anything you or I have ever witnessed.

I think the most terrifying thing I have ever lived through was Northridge earthquake in 1994. It was as if the very hand of God picked up our condominium and shook it violently. This was like that. And imagine it with lightning, thunder, and the voice of God. All those things were happening when the voice of the Lord spoke to the Israelites,

and the place from which the voice seemed to originate is described in Exodus 20:21 as "**thick darkness.**"

The aura of fear and terror was deliberate. It was to underscore the majesty and awesomeness of God. Look at verse 20:

Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin."

21 The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

Verse 20 is intriguing. Moses begins by saying, "**Do not fear,**" but then he tells them God *wants* them to fear Him. See that? That's not a contradiction. It's talking about two different kinds of fear. One is a cowardly fear that makes you hate and avoid the object of your fear. And in *that* sense, we are not supposed to be afraid. That's what Moses meant when he said, "**Fear not.**" They shouldn't turn away or be repulsed by the terror of it.

But the other kind of fear is a healthy fear of God that recognizes His majesty and trembles at His presence and acknowledges His right to judge while at the same time acknowledging our own sinfulness—and confessing that we *deserve* to be judged. It's a fear that provokes a desire for holiness while it brings us face to face with our utter lack of holiness. That sort of fear is a powerful deterrent to sin, and

that is why Moses went on to say, "**God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.**"

And while Moses drew near to that thick darkness, the people of Israel backed away and stood afar off. So that is why after the Ten Commandments were delivered in the hearing of all the people, the rest of the law was given to Moses alone. And Moses then delivered the complete law to the Israelites as a kind of intermediary between them and God. That was the way the people of Israel wanted it.

Now I think you know the story, so you remember that while Moses was up on the mountain receiving the rest of the law, the Israelites remained at the base of Sinai, where they immediately broke the Ten Commandments by making and worshiping a graven image. That sense of fear they felt evidently dissipated quickly, and they grew bored while waiting for Moses to return, so in a fit of religious fervor they made an idol of a golden calf, named it Jehovah, and began dancing naked before that idol. And thus we see in a stark picture how strongly the fallen human heart is inclined to break the law of God. And don't think we are exempt. We can listen to and agree with a sermon about not having any other gods before the Lord in Sunday school, and before the day is over, we will indulge ourselves with all our favorite idols as if the Ten Commandments didn't matter.

So be forewarned; this First Commandment is short and simple, but it is very demanding, and very easy to violate. In

fact, because of our sinful tendencies, we cannot obey obey this commandment perfectly.

Incidentally, Deuteronomy 6:5 is a commentary on *how* to obey this commandment: "**You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.**" Jesus referred to that as the First and Great Commandment—so understand that unless and until you love the Lord perfectly with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, you have not really fulfilled the first of the Ten Commandments.

In other words, in this first commandment we instantly come face to face with how difficult it is for us to keep God's law. In fact, let's say it plainly: it is impossible for fallen hearts to obey this command perfectly. So right off the bat, before we get past the first Commandment, the law has utterly condemned us. And it's a reminder that one of the purposes of the law is to confront us with our sin and leave us with no alternative other than throwing ourselves on the mercy and grace of God.

Now, let's look at the commandment: "**You shall have no other gods before me.**" Here's an interesting fact about the grammar of this statement that is easy to miss in the English translation. "**You**" in the Hebrew is singular. In modern English, we use the second-person pronoun "you," which is ambiguous in number. It can be either singular or plural. In

King James English, they used the word *thou*, which is singular. This pronoun is supposed to be singular. "Thou." "**Thou shalt have no other gods before me.**" It speaks to us as individuals, and it concerns every one of us. This wasn't a general instruction to the nation to keep every idol but God out of their national pantheon. It was a command to *individuals*, forbidding them ever in any circumstances to set anything or anyone above God—or even alongside God—in order of priority.

It is addressed to *individuals*. And these people were just like you and me. They had a tendency to try to shift their spiritual responsibility off onto others. Obviously, they looked to Moses as the spiritual leader of the nation, and it would have been a natural thing for them to regard this as a commandment to Moses only, as their spiritual leader. If God had not addressed them as individuals, they might have simply washed their hands of any responsibility to keep this commandment individually. In fact, that is precisely what Aaron did when Moses confronted him over the golden calf incident. According to Exodus 32:21,

Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?"

22 And Aaron said, "Let not the anger of my lord burn hot. *You know the people, that they are set on evil.*

23 For they said to me, 'Make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up

out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'

24 So I said to them, 'Let any who have gold take it off.' So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf."

No one wanted to take responsibility for this thing. The people no doubt blamed Aaron, and Aaron blamed the people. And in the end, the story he told Moses was that it just happened. They threw gold into the fire and out came this calf.

But the commandments first were given in the hearing of all Israel for that very reason: God placed these duties on each person individually. And He underscored that by employing the singular second-person pronoun throughout, as if He spoke to each person individually, by name. That is why no one can ever escape judgment for having broken these commandments by laying the fault on someone else.

This first commandment is the foundation of all true religion. And if you were here last week, you will remember that we stressed the truth that all these commandments are exceedingly broad. We are not to take a minimalist approach to interpreting them, as if we could eliminate from them every duty except what is contained in the letter of the law. Instead, the commandments are categories under which are included and implied all our duties before God.

And this *first* commandment, in a wonderful economy of words, sets the stage for all the others by giving us, in one simple statement, an abundance of duties. In fact, there is so much here there is no way I am going to be able to cover it exhaustively in one message. So what I want to do this morning is give you an overview of the kinds of duties that are implied in this first of the ten commandments. And I hope you will appreciate the breadth of this commandment.

I also hope you'll find this intensely practical. This is not abstract doctrine. It isn't something for mere intellectual curiosity. This commandment places upon us a host of duties that have the most practical kinds of ramifications. If you came hoping just to have your thinking stimulated or your intellect challenged, set those expectations aside and prepare to be confronted with some practical duties that ought to effect every aspect of the way you live your life.

Here are four broad responsibilities this commandment lays on every one of us. (And I'll give these to you one at a time, slowly, so if you are taking notes, I will try to make it easy for you).

Duty number 1:

1. HAVE A GOD.

This commandment rules out atheism. This is a particularly relevant point for people in our generation. We live in an era of atheism. In fact, outspoken atheism has probably never been more common or more widespread than it is today.

Atheists today wear their unbelief like a badge of honor. Some of them try to be as shrill and obnoxious with their unbelief as they can. If you're 20 years old or older, you probably remember Madalyn Murray O'Hair. When I was a kid, she was in the news all the time. She wasn't an intellectual; she wasn't even particularly likable. She was just persistent—and completely committed to her cause. She was a screeching, abrasive, angry old crone who hated God and loved publicity and made atheism her god. She founded an organization, American Atheists, and for the past 45 years they have spearheaded a relentless campaign to eliminate God from civic life and public discourse in America.

Mrs. O'Hair suddenly disappeared in 1995. Not a single one of her atheist "friends" even reported her missing when she disappeared. Instead, they moved in and took over her home, her organization, and her assets. Six years later her body was discovered, burned and buried on a ranch in west Texas. She had been kidnapped, tortured for weeks, and finally murdered by a fellow atheist, acting out the logical ramifications of the amoral philosophy Mrs. O'Hair

promoted. The godless culture she promoted finally destroyed her. As Proverbs 1:29-31 says, "[They that] hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the LORD . . . [shall] eat of the fruit of their own way." "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man [or woman] soweth, that shall [s]he also reap" (Galatians 6:7).

Atheism is a destructive religion that breeds immorality and wickedness.

These days atheism has dozens of celebrity advocates, like Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins, and even several former evangelicals who have abandoned the faith. Atheism is being promoted as something intellectual and sophisticated. It is promoted in universities, on the Internet, and through the entertainment media. And it is quickly becoming the dominant philosophy of our society.

In the mid-1990s, when I first began to put Spurgeon sermons on the Internet, I was absolutely shocked to see what a large and devoted nest of fanatical atheists had already found a home on the Internet. Atheists are frankly more aggressive and more effective in using the new media to proselytize than the Christian groups are.

And the ranks of devoted atheists are swelling. Spurred on by doctrines like evolution, humanism, and naturalism, atheists cater to a society that hates the first commandment and does not want to retain God in its consciousness. It is *common* these days to see automobiles sporting atheistic

bumper stickers, including those mutated fish symbols that honor Darwin rather than Christ. It is *uncommon* to see any characters in movies and television programs who are portrayed as Christians—unless they are villains and caricatures who embody hypocrisy, small-mindedness, cruelty, or some other gross evil. Let's face it: we live in a society that hates the very thought of God.

Atheism has become the state religion of America, thanks to several Supreme Court rulings and a host of legislators who are themselves atheists.

All of that is the result of a deliberate rejection of the First Commandment. Hebrews 11:6 says, "**without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists.**" That is the very starting point if you want God's blessing. But the starting point for the atheist is the very opposite. Atheism is a purposeful violation of the First Commandment. And the bottom line is, atheists *choose* unbelief because they want anything *but* God to be worshiped. In the words of Romans 1:28, "**They [do] not like to retain God in their knowledge.**"

And that is merely *philosophical* atheism. There is also a kind of *practical* atheism that is widely practiced today, even by people who give lip service to God. Practical atheism is described in Titus 1:16: "**They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works.**" The truth is that many people who call themselves Christians are practical atheists—they live as

if there were no God. They deny Him with their works. They recognize that God exists, but they will not have Him as God over their lives. They do not obey His authority. They do not love Him. They will maintain a veneer of Christianity, or some other form of religion, as long as they can think as they like and do as they like. They will profess *belief* in God as long as they don't have to bow to His authority as God. They would never *say* that they are atheists, but that is exactly what they are.

This commandment rules out that kind of life. It demands that we have God *as God*. It demands therefore that we love Him and fear Him and make Him first in our lives. It leaves no room for philosophical atheism, which denies the existence of God, and it leaves no room for hypocrisy, which is the epitome of *practical* atheism.

Atheism is the religion of fools, according to Psalm 14:1: "**The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'**" The first commandment forbids that kind of foolishness.

So that is duty number one: Have a God. Here's duty number two:

2. HAVE THE LORD JEHOVAH FOR YOUR GOD.

Having a God isn't enough to fulfill this commandment. We must have the right God. Look again at verse 2: "**I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.**" And *then* he says, "**You shall have no other gods before me.**" God himself must be our God—the true God of Scripture.

Duty number 1 forbids atheism; this second aspect of the First Commandment rules out idolatry on the one hand and ignorance on the other.

Second Samuel 22:32 says, "**For who is God, but the LORD? And who is a rock, except our God?**" There *is* only one true God, and you must have Him as your God.

In Deuteronomy 32:39, God Himself tells the Israelites, "**See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.**" No one is greater than God, and therefore He demands to be *our* God.

Scripture is full of expressions that underscore the uniqueness of the one true God. Listen to 1 Samuel 2:2: "**There is none holy like the LORD; there is none besides you; there is no rock like our God.**" And Isaiah 44:6: "**Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.'**" Isaiah 44:8 adds, "**Is there a God beside me? yea, there is no God; I know not any.**" Isaiah 45:5-6 says: "**I am the LORD, and**

there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other."

From the beginning to the end of Scripture you will find statements like that. Isaiah 46:9: **"I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me."** First Kings 8:60: **"[Let] all the peoples of the earth . . . know that the LORD is God; there is no other."**

God has no competitors and He will tolerate no pretenders. Psalm 96:5: **"For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heaven."**

The gods that are elevated in our society for the most part are not idols made of wood or stone, but they are idols nonetheless. Our society has made gods out of entertainment, sports, money, material things, and a host of other diversions. Now, I am not suggesting that if you have a television set or follow sports you are automatically guilty of idolatry. But I will say this: The moment *any* of those things—or anything else—becomes more important to you than God, you *are* guilty of idolatry and you ought to take that idol off its throne.

Here's a test: ask yourself what thing in life would you be least willing to give up. Which of your hobbies or passions or pastimes would be the hardest for you to do without? What if God asked you to get rid of it? What if He

sovereignly took it from your life somehow? Would you give it up gladly and delight in the Lord, or would you resent Him for it?

See, God has the right to demand to be first in our lives. That's what we mean when we say He is *God*. And if you find yourself resenting God for withholding something from you, you have made that thing an idol. If there is anything you would refuse to give up for God, that thing has taken first place in your life, and you are in violation of the First Commandment.

And do you know what 1 Corinthians 8:4 says? "**We know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one.**" If something is so dear to you that you would be crushed if God took it away, be careful; that thing might be an idol in your heart. But it is nothing. In the broad sweep of eternity, nothing that you love is more important, or more worthy of your love, than God Himself.

I like Jeremiah 14:22: "**Are there any among the false gods of the nations that can bring rain? Or can the heavens give showers? Are you not he, O LORD our God? We set our hope on you, for you do all these things.**" Idolatry is the sin of allowing the gifts God has given us to become more important to us than the Giver. Remember that God made all these things, and 1 Timothy 6:17 says He "**richly provides us with everything to enjoy.**" But once we begin to enjoy what God has given us more than we enjoy God Himself, we have

violated the First Commandment, and we need to rid our hearts of idols.

Did you realize that hypocrisy is also a kind of idolatry? Listen to Ezekiel Hopkins, a Puritan writer. He said, "*When we perform duties of religion only to be seen and applauded of men, we make God only our pretense; but men our idols; and set up as many gods before Him as we have spectators and observers.*" I'll bet you have never thought of hypocrisy as idolatry before, but if you care more about what other people think than you care about what God thinks, God isn't really first in your heart.

Remember, I said that this duty to have the true God as our God not only rules out idolatry; it also rules out ignorance. To have God be a God to us, we must *know* Him, and our knowledge of Him must be true.

If you foster ignorance of the true God or ignorance of His Word, you are guilty of violating the First Commandment. The right worship of God presupposes that we *know* the Object of our worship. If you don't take time to learn the Word of God and know what God has revealed about Himself, you are doing no better than those in Athens who erected an altar to the unknown God. If your worship isn't grounded in a true knowledge of God, then your worship is really just superstition.

Christ was *rebuking* the woman at the well when He told her in John 4:22, "**You worship what you do not know.**" Zeal without knowledge is not a *good* thing. The Samaritans were worshiping God in ignorance; they had retained the name and some semblance of Jehovah-worship, but it was so mingled with confusion and error that it was tantamount to paganism.

Unfortunately, that is probably true of most religion that goes by the name *Christianity* in the world today. Some people have substituted tradition in the place of truth, and instead of studying to show themselves approved unto God, they allow some prefabricated liturgy or some robed priest to tell them how to go mindlessly through some ritual, and they think that's true worship. It's not. It is a violation of the First Commandment.

Other churches put entertainment in place of devotion to the Lord, and their worship services are designed for the pleasure of the congregation, rather than for the pleasure and glory of God. They cater to the human will rather than God's will. They have deposed the God of Scripture and set their own personal preferences in his place. That, too, is a violation of the First Commandment.

If God is to be your God, then you must know Him as He has revealed Himself, and that means you should take an active interest in studying about God.

A.W. Tozer wrote, "*The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him.*" And Tozer added, "*[that kind of idolatry] begins in the mind and may be present where no overt act of worship has taken place.*"

Think of that! When you think thoughts about God that are not worthy of Him, or when you imagine something about Him that is not true of Him, you are guilty of idolatry. And the only remedy for that is precise knowledge of the true God. If you are entertaining thoughts about God that are untrue of Him, you are not having the true God as your God.

Every Christian therefore ought to have a passionate interest in theology, because theology is nothing other than the study of God. Every Christian ought to have a passion for truth, because God is a God of truth.

Turn off your television set some evening and *study*. And I'm not suggesting you should read those trashy rapture novels. Read something that will truly feed your soul and bring you face to face with the God who reveals Himself in Scripture. Some of the best and most edifying literature I have ever read is writing that deals with the attributes of God. Stephen Charnock is superb in his classic, *The Existence and Attributes of God*. Tozer's *The Knowledge of the Holy* and *The Pursuit of God* are priceless. If you want a real treat, and a book that is both easy to read and rich in content, I suggest you read J. C. Ryle's book *Holiness*.

But above all, Study *Scripture* for yourself. It is your personal duty, not merely the duty of your pastors and teachers, to "**Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.**" You cannot have God as your God unless you know Him, and you cannot know Him apart from how He has revealed Himself in His Word. Don't take my word for it; study it for yourself. Don't rely solely on what you are taught in church to inform your knowledge of God. You must meet Him in his Word for yourself. And if you are not doing that, you do not have Him for your God.

So that is duty number 2: Have the Lord Jehovah for your God. Here is a third duty implied by the First Commandment:

3. HAVE ONLY THE TRUE GOD FOR YOUR GOD.

"Thou shalt have no other gods before me." Jesus said, "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him *only* shalt thou serve" (Luke 4:8). That forbids polytheism, or the worshiping of many Gods. It also forbids the kind of religion the Samaritans practiced, which is described in 2 Kings 17:32-33: "They . . . feared the LORD and appointed from among themselves all sorts of people as priests of the high places, who sacrificed for them in the shrines of the high places. So they feared the LORD but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away."

That is called *syncretism*—the practice of mingling false religion with true religion. And it is a *huge* problem in American evangelicalism today. People don't mind having God as their God. They just don't like the exclusivity of Christianity. They'll take God, as long as they can cling to their idols, too—whatever those idols are. And American evangelicalism, for the most part, seems perfectly happy to allow people to retain their idols as long as they give lip service to the God of Scripture. This commandment rules out that way of thinking.

I've confronted syncretism often in my travels overseas. Talk to the typical Hindu in India, and he is perfectly happy to embrace Christ as God—as long as he can simply add Christ to his pantheon of *other* gods. Roman Catholicism

worldwide practices the worst kind of syncretism, blending Christianity with whatever forms of religion it encounters, and that's why the Catholic Church has absorbed so many kinds of idolatry and superstition along the way. But this commandment rules out that kind of thinking.

Look at the wording of the commandment once more: "**You shall have no other gods before me.**" Now, in English, the meaning of the words "before me" is somewhat ambiguous. Someone might read it as if it simply meant that we must give God first place. "Don't set any other gods *above* me." That's what I used to think it meant when I heard the Ten Commandments as a child.

But in the Hebrew the meaning of the words is absolutely clear. "**Before Me**" means "before My face"; "in my presence"; "in my sight." It doesn't simply mean that God must be at the head of all our gods; it means that *no other gods at all are tolerable in His sight*. Having Him as our God means we must give up all other idols.

Modern evangelicalism often follows a practice that is antithetical to the spirit of this command. Modern evangelism often holds forth Christ as a God who can simply be added to our lives to make them better. We don't tell people clearly enough that if they have Christ as their God they will have to give up all their idols. In fact, there are entire churches today that structure their outreach to unchurched people so that they won't make unchurched

people uncomfortable with the claims of Christ. In effect, they tell them they can have Christ and keep their idols too. Some of those churches themselves have made an idol of entertainment.

But the First Commandment reveals a God who will tolerate no other gods or idols of any kind. He demands to be loved and worshiped exclusively, with all our hearts, souls, and minds. Those who want to add God to their lives without giving up every other idol simply cannot have God as their God.

I like the story of the Philistines, when they captured the ark of God in battle against the Israelites. They figured they could add the god of the Israelites to their pantheon, so they took the ark and put it in the temple of Dagon, who was, according to most accounts, some kind of fish-god, like a backward mermaid, with the body of a man and the head of a fish. And according to 1 Samuel 5:3, **"When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD."** But the Philistines weren't finished. Scripture says, **"They took Dagon, and set him in his place again. And when they arose early on the morrow morning, behold, Dagon was fallen upon his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD; and the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands were cut off upon the threshold; only the stump of Dagon was left to him."**

I love the humor in that story. But it has a very serious point: God will allow no other gods in His presence, and therefore if you would have Him as your God, you must rid your heart of all other idols. That may not seem very seeker-sensitive, but that is what the First Commandment teaches.

That is duty number 3. If you have lost your place, here's where we are: Duty number one is that you must *Have a God*. Duty number 2 is that you must *Have the Lord Jehovah for your God*. Duty number 3 is that you must *Have only the true God for your God*. And now here is duty number 4: You must—

4. HAVE THE TRUE GOD WITH SINCERITY AND TRUE DEVOTION.

Having no other Gods before God means that you must worship Him as He demands to be worshiped. And He demands our worship with a whole heart. Listen again to Deuteronomy 6:4-5, one of the most important verses in all of Scripture: "**Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.**" Remember Jesus, said that is the First and Great Commandment—the most important of all the commandments. And it is clearly implied in the First of the Ten Commandments.

We have already seen that this commandment rules out atheism, hypocrisy, idolatry, polytheism, syncretism, and ignorance. Now we see that it also rules out profaneness and half-heartedness.

What do I mean by "profaneness?" The word *profane* is derived from Latin words that mean "outside the Temple." Actually, the Latin phrase from which it is derived is *procul a fano*, which literally means, "far from the temple." It speaks of contempt for, irreverence toward, or neglect of that which is sacred. A profane person is someone who stays far from the temple—someone who does not care for that which God deems holy. He neglects or disregards it. That's why Esau is described in Hebrews 12:16 as a "**profane person . . . who for one morsel of [food] sold his birthright.**" He did not care about the birthright, even though it represented divine blessings. It was a spiritual thing, and he was a carnal man, so he ignored it; he scorned it; he deemed it unimportant; and he valued a mess of pottage—a bowl of lentil soup—more than he valued that birthright.

Profaneness therefore in biblical terms means the slighting or neglecting of things that are holy and sacred. That's a sin you don't hear preached against very often. But it is a clear violation of this First Commandment to neglect that which is holy. That is one of the clear ramifications of this commandment which orders us to set God above all else in

our heart and our affections, and to permit nothing that might become an idol to encroach on His rightful place.

Half-heartedness is the worst kind of profaneness. And that is made clear by the First and Great Commandment, "**You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.**" There is absolutely no room for half-heartedness or nonchalance. In fact, what this calls for is the polar opposite of indifference.

Let me put it in practical terms: To have God be our God is to choose Him as our portion. The psalmist wrote in Psalm 73:26, "**My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.**" That has a particular meaning in the context of the Old Testament. It speaks of our *inheritance*. Psalm 16:5-6: "**The LORD is my chosen portion . . . indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.**" A person's inheritance, especially in the context of Old Testament Israel, was something of immense value, something he set his heart on, that which he valued most of all throughout his entire life. The Israelite's inheritance usually involved a portion of land, and the land itself was at the heart of the covenant God made with that nation. And a person's "portion" became the place where he lived, the place around which his whole life revolved. It was something immensely precious to him—his portion.

And if we would have God be our God, we must *choose* Him as our portion, just as Caleb chose for his portion a

mountain that he had set his heart on for many years. We must say, as Jacob did in Genesis 28:21: "**the LORD shall be my God.**" We're called upon to make a deliberate choice, to embrace the God of Scripture as our God forever. "**Choose you this day whom ye will serve**" (Joshua 24:15). Remember when Elijah confronted the Israelites on Mount Carmel, he said, "**How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.**"

So we are called upon to choose him with our wills, to love Him with our whole hearts, to follow him with all our souls, and to serve Him with all our strength. There is no place for half-heartedness or indifference. But this First Commandment calls us to a whole-hearted, exclusive love and devotion. Anything less than that is not worthy of Him, and if you will not have Him with your whole heart, you simply cannot have Him at all.

That is the faith Scripture calls us to. A lesser devotion is not even true Christianity. That's why Jesus said in Luke 9:62, "**No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.**"

How does your faith measure up? Let's be honest: as I said at the very start, this commandment utterly condemns us all. Not one of us has lived up to this command. We're fallen and sinful, and our hearts are wretched, and we are not capable of perfect obedience to this command. It's the first

commandment in God's law, and the law condemns sinners; it cannot save them.

But the good news of the gospel is that Christ became a man—the perfect Man—and throughout His life, He did obey this commandment with absolute perfection. He was sinless. In the words of 1 Peter 2:22, "**He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.**" Hebrews 4:15 says He was "**in every respect . . . tempted as we are, yet without sin.**" Hebrews 7:26: He was "**holy, innocent, unstained**"—rendering perfect obedience to the law throughout His earthly life as a man. And then at the end of that life, He bore the full penalty of sin on behalf of those who believe, so that just as their sins were imputed to Him, His righteousness can be imputed to them. Second Corinthians 5:21: "**For our sake [the Father] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**" We get full credit for His perfect obedience to this command. That righteousness is imputed to those who believe. They don't earn it, because by definition they can't earn it, but it is graciously given to them through faith—full salvation and free forgiveness for every sin, beginning with the many ways we violate this commandment. That is the gospel.

Now, understand: that doesn't remove any of the duties that are implied in this commandment. It liberates us from the threat of judgment, because those who are under grace are no longer under the condemnation of the law. But, Paul

asks in Romans 6:15, **"What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!"**

Those who are truly saved love righteousness and hate sin, and this commandment spells out the very first principle of righteousness. So let's embrace the duties this commandment sets before us, and let's ask God himself to give us hearts that are full of love for Him, and let's strive to give the Lord first place in everything we do, say, think, and love.