

CHAPTER 4
*You Shall Have No Other
Gods Before Me*
setting God as first in your family

Introduction

If you remember back to chapter one we studied the right way we are to understand and interpret the Ten Commandments. In the third rule to interpreting the commandments from *Westminster Larger Catechism #99* it was noted there will be overlap in the commandments. Nowhere is this principle more evident than in the first commandment. God begins the expression of his eternal, holy law by stating: “You shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:3). All misdeeds and sins essentially spring from the neglect of that 1st commandment. To say it another way, if we are able to grasp the significance of the first commandment, we will have laid a proper foundation for giving proper glory and honor to God in all areas of our lives. To model this in our families it is essential to teach your children that God is supreme in all of life. This goal can be accomplished in two ways: 1. Through teaching your children about the greatness of God from Scripture; and, 2. By insisting that God be placed first in their experience. We will look at each in turn.

Knowing God

First, and Central to knowing how to have no other gods before the one True God is diligent study of his Word. Obviously, if parents do not study his word, it will be impossible for us to lead their families. Therefore, as part of this chapter there is a call to faithfulness personal and family study.

God's Unique Position in the Bible

The characters of the biblical accounts constantly struggle between submitting to God and following their own desires. The first instance can be found in the Fall. In fact, the serpent's successful temptation of Eve forms the foundation for understanding the struggle of man to obey the first commandment. After tempting Eve by impugning God's honesty and his motives, Satan successfully leads her toward the sin he has already committed: the desire for autonomy. "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate." (Genesis 3:6-7). Eve follows Satan's lie sets herself up as the ultimate authority of what is permissible. In doing so, she simply establishes precedent for the rest of mankind. Whether it is Cain murdering his brother Abel, or David committing adultery with Bathsheba and murdering her husband Uriah, both commit the same sin. They disregard the clear instructions from God and follow their own passions or desires. In other words, they set themselves up as the final authority and replace the authority of the Lord.

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* also teaches the concept of the mind as central in our worship of God. In question 46, the catechism asks what is required of the first commandment. The following answer is given: "The first commandment requireth us to know and acknowledge God to be the only true God, and our God; and to worship him accordingly." There are three essential qualities to obedience to the first commandment: knowledge, agreement, and worship.

To know about God must come first, for a man cannot acknowledge what he does not know. The next question must therefore be, "How can anyone know God?" There are many different opinions about God. There are many different "gods" even in our own day and age. But there is only one true God who has revealed himself through two different methods of revelations: general and special.

General revelation is God's presence on display to mankind through his works of creation and his preserving work in history. The Bible teaches that God reveals himself so clearly in nature that all men know him through this general revelation, and know him so well that there is no excuse for their denial of his existence, power and authority:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For 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. (Romans 1:19-20)

This passage teaches that this general revelation is so clear that anyone who rejects God is willfully saying, “No!” to that which is clearly visible to him. Their rejection is not the result of not enough information, or perhaps a misunderstanding. It is the open and willful desire to reject God and his claims of authority. God’s supremacy is displayed in the very order of the created universe. In nature God is unmistakably known, yet in nature we do not learn anything about the specific events of God’s redemptive history. Those are contained in what has been dubbed special revelation.

Special revelation is that verbal communication that God gives to the world through the pages of the Scriptures. The pages of the Scriptures contain God’s gracious interaction with mankind to make the free offer of the gospel clearly understandable to all. God speaks to his creation through his special revelation, now contained in the pages of the Bible. This method is God’s chosen way of revealing his plan of redemption. He sets his saving work clearly before man. “‘You are my witnesses,’ declares the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior.” (Isaiah 43:10-11). God is known through passages like these. They tell of God’s uniqueness, not only as it pertains to his existence, but also as it pertains to his plan of redemption. No one is to have any other gods before him because he is the only God and the only Savior. However, the Christian life is more than simply knowing facts about God.

Revering God

Once God is known there must be some agreement with that knowledge. To recite facts is not equal to agreement. For example, I may know many facts about the Muslim religion, but I do not agree with its tenets. The same thing is true when approaching the Christian faith. Satan knows the truth of God’s word, but he refuses to agree with them. James 2:19 states, “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!” To obey the first commandment is to properly revere this God whom we know as our God. To properly obey the first commandment includes acknowledging he is the only true God by what we say, do and think. His unique standing must be recognized and life lived in light of that reality. God is to be worshiped and glorified.

These words set the Christian family on a very different path from the demons of James 2 who believe but refuse to bend their knee. They fail to acknowledge that God deserves their worship and

refuse to glorify him. It is in the acknowledgment of God that the Christian is distinguished from God's enemies. The people of God are set apart to worship and glorify this one true God. As parents, you have been given the responsibility of ensuring your children understand who this God is and what shape their behavior toward him should take. The only place the behavior of the Christian is explicitly spelled out is in the words of God's law. It is in his commandments that God establishes for the Christian how he desires to be loved, worshiped and glorified. Our glorifying God according to his word is how we honor the first commandment. We honor it in our own lives, but we are also God's agents to teach our children to do the same.

Teaching Your Children

Unfortunately, too often parents give away the great privilege to instruct their children in God's ways. And what is worse, too often, because of their personal neglect of God's word they have so little to offer their children in terms of spiritual food. The physical care of families is usually not neglected. Children are fed, clothed and kept relatively safe. They are not out playing in traffic, or having to spend their time foraging for food. God has richly blessed us in our western cultures with material provisions. However, more significant than the physical care of our children is their spiritual nourishment. That, I am afraid, is the greater point of weakness in Christian families. The remedy parents can offer to correct this neglect is a return to a robust, consistent and enriching private and family worship.

Private Worship

It is often easier to point the finger away from yourself when there is blame to be had. However, when it comes to leading children it is essential that parents point the finger at themselves first. In parenting it is important to always start with self-examination. When it comes to the first commandment, if the parents are not studying God's word, they will have nothing to pass on to our children. To teach your children means you must know and acknowledge it yourself. That is why Deuteronomy 6:5-6 are so significant to understanding verse 7: "You shall love the LORD your God with all *your* heart and with all *your* soul and with all *your* might. And these words that I command you today shall be on *your* heart." (emphasis mine). To be a faithful teacher to their children they must first love God with all their hearts and have internalized his commandments. The only way to be able to teach the word of God is to become its student.

Studying can take place in several ways and it will differ from person to person. However, one thing I know: if we do not open our Bible we are not its student. Having said that, there are several different ways in which we can study the Bible.

Bible Reading. There are so many resources that are available if we want to read the Bible. Reading plans of all sorts of different shapes and sizes. It is a good discipline to develop, even if we are just starting with ten minutes. Even if we do not read it at all now, we can begin by reading it a little every day. One note of caution on Bible reading plans: it is easy to begin viewing your Bible reading as a check-mark on a busy day. Reading God's word must be much more than that. As you read through the chapters of the Bible you should be trying to see the principle teachings of the Bible. In question and answer 3, the Westminster Shorter Catechism divides this teaching into two helpful parts: first, what we are to believe about God and second, what duty he requires of us. If we are reading with a view to growing in our understanding of God, or understanding of our duties toward him, it will keep us from a superficial and, even worse, empty reading. It is not in turning pages that God's will is made known to us, but in the reading of his inspired word to learn how we should glorify and enjoy him in our own lives.

Bible Memory. I was convicted in this area by my wife really. We begin our children's school-day with Bible. No matter what book is being studied, my wife has always insisted on Scripture memory as part of that day. That could take the shape of learning isolated important verses or chapters and books. Knowing Scripture from memory will help your children as they learn how to live as Christians. Verses will become so familiar that their meaning will, in many cases, become clearer. Their prayers will be strengthened as they learn to pray according to God's will. When Scripture is memorized, they will be able to make their words the same as God's in their prayers. Scripture memorization will also help in their meditation about God. Their minds will be filled with words from God's very own mouth.

Devotional Books. Although I would never suggest that your exposure to God's word should come exclusively through secondary sources, they can still be a help you. There are many devotional books that press home the truths of the Bible. They can be used to deepen theological understanding or awareness of sin. They can be used to renew joy in your redemption through Christ. The point is, sometimes these tools can be helpful in combination with our Scripture reading or to get us to think about God or the duties required of us by him.

These three examples deal only with our personal study. Of course our private worship of God will include prayer and, at times, other disciplines. However, I highlight these for us here because it is our knowledge that guides our action. Not because knowledge is god, but because our faith has an object. We do not have a faith in faith, but in the God of heaven and earth. He has revealed himself to us in Scripture and charged us to be about instructing our children in his word. It is specifically in our study that we are equipped to lead our children.

Family Worship

Family worship is one of the primary opportunities for parents to instruct our children. Parents will correct children when they do wrong. Rightly so. However, in those moments it is likely they high tensions will distract the children from the point being made. But at family worship parents have an opportunity to teach when they are not in the middle of a confrontation. They can open the Bible to teach what God tells about himself and how he is to be loved. It is easy for paralysis to set in when it comes to the practice of family worship. Fathers often do not know what they ought to do, so they end up doing nothing at all. But take heart! Family worship is not as hard as you may think.

Although the practice of family worship is not difficult, starting family worship can be quite a hurdle. In part this problem revolves around scheduling. Families have grown accustomed to other activities. So when families begin to try to implement the practice it can be a struggle because it is so new. Some are unsure of what they are trying to accomplish. Men are notoriously insecure and may wonder if even their wives can make any sense of what they are trying to teach, never mind the children. However, as we grow in private worship, our family worship will grow too. The weaknesses of the family's theology or practice will become clear when compared to God's word. Fathers will be able build on the foundation laid in their personal study to encourage their families in their walks with the Lord. Nevertheless, I have listed some starting points that can be used to establish family worship:

Book by book. When you are just starting to practice family worship you may want to take the book you are reading for your private worship and discuss it with your family. Another method is to follow your church's sermon series if they follow the "through the Bible" method in preaching. There are several advantages to following these suggestions. First, the material will be fresh in your mind since you will have just read it or studied it. Second, you can ask your children the questions you have already been thinking about and studying. However, more important than the selection of which book to study is that you begin. Do not wait until you think you have enough answers. If that is what you are waiting for you will never begin. Start, and keep the lessons simple. As you work your way through books you will have ample opportunity to cover a great breadth of topics, all of which will be helpful to your children. God's word is so rich and studying through a book together will help you grow in your understanding of God, preparing your family to live in obedience to the first commandment.

Topical. A good parent must be a good student of his or her family. Professional athletes make their sports look so easy because they have been diligent students, spending hours practicing the fundamental skills needed to play the game well. Young men trying to woo young ladies spend hours

trying to determine what will make young lady happy. So it is in our families. If you want to be an effective teacher of your children you must study their strengths and weaknesses. In some cases, these will be obvious. In other cases they will be manifest more gradually. When a sin becomes obvious in your family with little evidence of fruit, it is appropriate to correct or encourage them about these issues from God's word. Not only does it help the children realize that your house rules are based on God's word, but it will also help them to see you as one under God's authority yourself. These topics can be fairly short in duration.

These lessons, whether topical or through books of the Bible, will be a helpful evidence to your children that in your family, God's word forms the foundation for what you believe and how you live. Even if you struggle through the first efforts, know this: it is not the profundity of your lessons that your children will primarily remember. It is the fact that you sought to subject yourself to the Bible. But there is more to the Christian life than just study. Your study must result in some kind of action.

Translating Knowledge into Action

A thought on its own is nothing more than an answer to a Trivial Pursuit game. The book of James makes it clear that Christianity does not allow for a strictly intellectual faith. Our faith works itself out in action. Our works for the evidence of the faith we have in our heart: "But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works." (James 2:18). So we return to the first commandment: you shall have no other gods before me. This commandment is not just an idea, but it is an idea that works itself out in action and, by therefore by extension, parents have the responsibility to expect to see that commandment reflected in the lives of their children.

To set the framework for instruction to children, parents must lead by example. Parents can teach their children all day with their words, but unless their own actions confirm those words, they will be wasting our breath. If parents expect their children to have no other gods before the Lord, they must do the same thing. That does not imply that parents must be perfect. However, when they fail in their obedience to God, they must confess it before their children when appropriate. Children know their parents are sinful. By confessing sin parents teach children to recognize their own need for God's forgiveness. Confession is an acknowledgment that you have strayed from keeping the first commandment, but that you wish to return to its faithful observance.

To obey the first commandment effects all of life. There is no part of life that is unaffected by it. Whom or what man worships is identified through his actions. If worship is given to an idol like

work or self, those idols and their man-made demands will receive priority in the lives of its worshipers. If the God of heaven is worshiped, people will seek to live in obedience to his authority. It is in following this authority that the overlap in the commandments is seen. For example, whether God or our career is supreme will be demonstrated to children in how the parents organize the family's time. It will be seen in whether parents rejoice in the day God has set apart for his worship, which is the 4th commandment. To break the 4th commandment is to break the 1st commandment. God is supreme over our preferences. His lordship over the parents will be made apparent before children's watchful eyes by the way dad and mom interact with God's commands. All of us will fail in our obedience, and the grace of God covers all our sins. However, we must demonstrate to our children the same commitment the apostle Paul describes in the process of sanctification, or being made holy:

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12-14)

What parents set before ourselves and their children should not be the expectation of perfection. That would be an unattainable goal. But they should model constant striving, a desire to have no other gods before the One True God. Parents should expect it of themselves, and require it of their children too.

It has been my observation that the modern North-American parent struggles with enforcing this particular commandment in the lives of their children. There has been an acceptance of the world's approach to parenting: my child's happiness is my primary preoccupation. As a result, hobbies, relationships, schools, and part-time jobs are allowed to take priority over obedience to God's law. Of course, Christian parents would not ever say this about their children. In fact, they would not wish it for their children. However, the decisions made in parenting can teach exactly that. Often, parents are preoccupied with making children's wishes primary, even if it means sacrificing things that are more significant. Let me give a few examples that may seem fairly benign:

Recreations vs. church. Especially in North American culture use of sports and recreations is one of the main ways parents teach children that the first commandment is not really that important. When children are young they are encouraged to participate in sports for the benefits it can provide: physical exercise, learning co-operation and leadership, and others such lessons that can be properly learned. These benefits are found in sports and various recreations. However, if children do well they will inevitably be invited to participate in more serious levels of competition. These may demand Sunday practices and performances. Parents are driven to see their children succeed in sports, dance,

drama, painting, singing, and a host of different ways. To do so they even go through great expense and spend much time getting them to and from the events. However, these events become harmful to the child's understanding of the world when parents decide to take their children to an activity at the expense of God's worship. It is at that point the parent is asked to show his children which is more important. The child is offered two opportunities. The first is to join God's people in his day of rest. The second is to join their friends in a sport or other recreation. If the parent chooses the latter, he has sent a clear message to his child: the first commandment does not apply to sports and recreations. Worshiping God is fine, so long as it does not interfere with soccer. The center of that child's life is directed away from God and toward self-interest.

Participation in worship. Children will at times not see the benefit of participating in church life. Perhaps they would rather not attend evening worship. Maybe they would like to excuse themselves from the mid-week prayer service. Or it is possible that rather than sitting quietly and listening to Scripture during family worship, they would prefer to play their toys. These are situations that all Christian parents have likely faced. The parents may even argue with themselves as they consider what the best course of action may be. There may be a temptation to allow the child to withdraw from the activities of the church out of fear that they will not get anything out of the sermon. Or parents might be afraid their child will lose interest in church. Maybe it would be easier to have the children play instead of listening to God's word. But be very careful. If parents allow children to be uninvolved based on their assessment of the worship of God, they have just taught their children a value: "We only participate in God's worship if it is interesting or convenient or acceptable to us." In that way the parents have shown their family who their god really is, and it is not the God of Scripture. Instead it is the god of the happiness of their child.

Many other examples can be given in which the choice of the parents shows the child that God is not to be followed above everything else. The correction to this sin comes by re-aligning the family under the proper order of authority. When faced with a championship game and corporate worship parents must choose worship no matter how hard that may be for the child. They must labor to explain to their children that in their family God must come first. If they do not they are in essence telling their child, "It is okay to have other gods before your the Lord." In the same way, if faced with friendships that are causing doubts about the Christian faith in the mind of the child the parents must end the relationship or they are telling in essence telling their child, "Your preferences are more important than obedience to God's word." Parents must reinforce what they say by what they do and allow. They must permit no other gods before our loving Heavenly Father.

Conclusion

The first commandment sets the tone for all the other commandments. If Christian parents get this one right, they will have laid the proper foundation for obedience to the commandments that follow. However, to know how to obey this commandment fathers and mothers must apply themselves to diligent study of God's word. Without this study they will not know how they are to live in obedience to this commandment. And having equipped themselves with his word they must go about the business of working out their salvation in fear in trembling resting entirely on the power of God's Spirit to enable us to do so. As part of that process, parents, but especially fathers, must lead their families in the right practice, requiring that God is not slighted in the choices made in his family.

Study Questions

1. Explain the difference between general and special revelation. How might you use each to teach your children about God?
2. This chapter states that parents will only be able to lead their children in family worship in so far as they are being faithful in the own private worship. What are the recommended disciplines for private worship listed in this chapter? In what way is each beneficial?
3. This chapter encourages either a verse-by-verse or topical approach to family worship. Which do you prefer and why? Have you found any helpful resources in leading you in family worship?
4. Westminster Shorter Catechism #3 states that each passage of Scripture should teach us what to believe about God and/or what our duty to him is. Choose one of the passages listed below and identify the core message you would teach your children as part of family worship.

Ephesians 2:8-10

Romans 6:23

Philippians 2:12-13

Isaiah 53:6

Genesis 1

5. Think as husband and wife about one way in which your actions or permissions are opening the door to your children thinking that God may not be the first consideration in his life.

