

"THE FIRST COMMANDMENT: NO OTHER GODS"

I. Introduction

- A. Some of you may recall an embarrassing incident involving the Ten Commandments that took place several years back.
1. A congressman who had co-sponsored a bill to require the display of the Ten Commandments in the House of Representatives and the Senate was being interviewed by a popular media figure.
 2. When the interviewer asked the congressman to name the Ten Commandments, he was only able to come up with three of them.
 3. As sad as that was, surveys indicate that many Christians would not have done any better.
 4. We should be concerned about this.
 5. Ignorance of the Ten Commandments has tragic consequences.
 6. If we do not know God's own revelation of what he requires of us, we will simply do what seems right in our own eyes, just like Israel in the days of the judges.
 7. And there are plenty of professing Christians who are doing precisely that.
 8. I have had numerous conversations with professing Christians who, when confronted about how they were living in direct violation of God's law, said that God could not be against what they were doing since it made them happy.

- B. Make no mistake -- the Ten Commandments are absolutely vital to the Christian faith.
1. It is for this reason that I have decided to devote one sermon to each of the Ten Commandments as we make our way through the book of Exodus.
 2. Our topic today is the first commandment, where the Lord forbids us from having other gods.
 3. We will focus upon four things as we study this passage.
 4. First, we will set forth some basic principles for interpreting the Ten Commandments.
 5. Second, we will consider the significance of the preface to the Ten Commandments.
 6. Third, we will look at the meaning of the first commandment.
 7. And fourth, we will reflect upon the application of the first commandment in the Christian life.

II. Interpreting the Ten Commandments

- A. As we consider how to interpret the Ten Commandments, we should be aware of the fact that we have a tendency to underestimate what the Ten Commandments require of us.
1. We hear them read and we think, 'Well, I don't bow down to statues. I have never murdered anyone.'
 2. But we need to understand that there is more involved in keeping these commandments than merely following them by the letter.
 3. They have a larger extent than what is explicitly stated in them.

4. We know that this is true because of how Jesus expounded the law.
 5. Jesus taught that the prohibition against murder forbids us from even having hateful thoughts toward others.
 6. Jesus said that the prohibition against adultery also means that it is wrong for us to have lustful desires in our hearts.
 7. This shows that each of the Ten Commandments applies to all duties or sins of the same nature.
- B. Here are five general principles that help us interpret and apply the Ten Commandments. [summarized from Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 275-6]
1. First, every commandment has both a negative part and an affirmative part, regardless of whether it is stated negatively or positively.
 2. Where a duty is commanded, the opposite sin is forbidden.
 3. Where a sin is forbidden, the opposite duty is commanded.
 4. Second, God's commandments extend to all the parts of our being -- our thoughts, our wills, our affections, our words, and our actions.
 5. Third, the cause of our obedience needs to be love for God.
 6. Fourth, the goal of our obedience needs to be the glory of God.
 7. And fifth, God takes notice not only of what we do, but also of the manner in which we do it.

III. The Preface to the Ten Commandments

- A. We turn now to the first two verses of our passage, where we find the preface to the Ten Commandments: "And God spoke all these

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

1. Perhaps you tend to skip the preface when you are reading a book.
 2. This is one preface that you definitely do not want to skip because it sets the Ten Commandments in their proper context.
 3. Ancient covenants contained prologues that explained how the parties in the covenant came to be related to one another.
 4. This is what God is doing in verse 2.
 5. He is stating who he is and what he has done for Israel.
 6. What he says here underscores that the law at Sinai was not given in order to be a means of salvation for Israel.
 7. As we noted in our sermons on Exodus 19, Sinai was a national covenant, and there was a conditional element in it as far as Israel being able to retain her status as God's holy nation.
 8. Nevertheless, the Israelites were not being taught that they had to earn their salvation by their performance of the law.
 9. They had already been redeemed.
 10. He is their God and they are his people.
 11. Having rescued them from forced service to Pharaoh, the Lord now teaches them how they are to serve him as their true King.
- B. We should ponder the significance of the words, "I am the LORD your God."

1. There is no greater blessing than to have the Lord say to us that he is our God.
2. As Thomas Watson explains, "It is comprehensive of all good things. He is our strong tower, our fountain of living water, and our salvation. It implies the sweetest of relations. He is our Father who tenderly cares for us, and never dies... Consider the misery of those without God as their Father. What a sad condition in the hour of distress! A sinner without God will get by while his health and estate lasts, but when these crutches are broken, his heart must sink... What a privilege to have God as our God! What a happy condition when nothing can hurt you!... If God is our God, then our soul is safe. It is hidden in the promises, in the wounds of Christ, in the decrees of God." [cited in *Voices from the Past*, 249]
3. What comfort we can take in knowing that the living and true God, the God who created the heavens and the earth, the God who upholds the world and orders all of history according to his perfect wisdom -- this God is our God.

IV. The Meaning of the First Commandment

- A. We turn now to consider the meaning of the first commandment.
 1. God says, "You shall have no other gods before me."
 2. The essence of this commandment is that God demands our exclusive loyalty.
 3. He wants us to be devoted entirely to him.
 4. As the Heidelberg Catechism puts it, this commandment requires "that I give up anything rather than go against [God's] will in any way." [Q. 94]
- B. We can understand why the Lord would have given such a command to the people of Israel.

1. They lived in a polytheistic world.
 2. There were so many gods in Egypt that most of the Egyptian people probably didn't even know all of them.
 3. Of course, none of those gods were actually real.
 4. There are no other gods apart from the one true God.
 5. But man is always inventing gods of his own imagining.
 6. John Calvin described the human heart as an idol-making factory.
 7. This is why there are so many false religions in the world.
 8. They are the result of man's idolatrous tendencies.
- C. We might be inclined to think that this commandment would be an easy one for us to keep.
1. After all, you probably do not feel a strong pull to worship Allah or the God of the Mormons.
 2. But consider this definition of idolatry from the Heidelberg Catechism: idolatry is "having or inventing something in which one trusts in place of or alongside of the only true God, who has revealed himself in his Word." [Q. 95]
 3. And here is another definition from Edward Fisher: "whatsoever the mind of man is carried after, or his heart and affections set upon, either more, or as much as upon God, that he makes his god." [280]
 4. The essence of idolatry is loving something or trusting in something more than, or even as much as, the one true God.
 5. When we think of idolatry along those lines, we begin to see that anything can be handled in an idolatrous way.

6. Money, sex, power, entertainment, career, experiences, possessions, relationships, causes, agendas -- all of them can become things that we love or trust in place of or alongside of God.
 7. The first commandment asks us these questions: In what do you place your trust? What has your heart?
- D. It is significant that the Lord says, “You shall have no other gods before me.”
1. That phrase “before me” literally means “before my face.”
 2. As God’s redeemed people, we live in his presence in a special kind of way.
 3. He has bound us to himself in a covenantal union.
 4. This is a great privilege, but it also brings with it the responsibility of forsaking all other gods.
 5. The idea is the same as the phrase in traditional wedding vows, when the spouses promise to ‘forsake all others.’
 6. To worship another god is spiritual adultery.
- E. The first commandment confronts our tendency to make ourselves the center of everything.
1. This is what sin does to us.
 2. It causes us to curve in on ourselves, to be narcissists, to be lovers of self.
 3. As Martin Luther puts it, “man can seek only his own interests and love above all things. This is the essence of all his faults.” [cited in Horton, *The Law of Perfect Freedom*, 56]

4. In our flesh, we want to have the final say about our lives and about the choices we make.
 5. We take great offense when it is suggested that we don't have the final say.
 6. We think that God is there to serve us, that he exists to enhance our happiness.
 7. But the truth is the exact opposite of this.
 8. As it says in the Shorter Catechism, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." [Q. 1]
- F. I want to take a few moments now to reflect upon the things that are required of us in the first commandment.
1. First of all, it requires that we have a true knowledge of God
 2. We are not free to imagine that he is the kind of God that we might wish him to be.
 3. We have to know him as he has revealed himself to us in his Word.
 4. And because Jesus Christ is the summation of God's self-revelation, the God to whom we owe our full allegiance is the Triune God.
 5. Jesus is the only way to God, and it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that we are united to Jesus.
 6. Anyone who worships 'god' apart from Jesus is not worshipping the true God but an idol.
- G. The first commandment also requires us to trust in the Lord and to find our contentment in him.
1. As David says in Psalm 16, "The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of

blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips. The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance." (Ps. 16:4–6)

2. We need to delight in the Lord and in his will above all else.
 3. We need to seek communion with him, to rejoice most in him, to seek him in his Word, in worship, in the sacraments, in prayer.
 4. When the Lord bestows any blessing upon us, we are to express that it is from his hand and be thankful for it.
 5. When the Lord afflicts us in any way, "we are to express that we do remember and acknowledge him to be the Governor of all things, and most mighty, wise, and just, by humbling ourselves under his mighty hand." [Fisher, 277]
- H. As far as the sins that are forbidden by the first commandment, it clearly forbids all ignorance of God and all unbelief toward him.
1. If we doubt God's Word, failing to take its threats seriously or failing to rely on its promises, we are breaking the first commandment.
 2. If we trust in other things in place of or alongside of God, we are breaking the first commandment.
 3. If we fear man rather than fearing the Lord, we are transgressing this law.
 4. If we are impatient under our trials, if we are discontented with our lot, we are failing to keep this command.
 5. If we forget to express our thanks to God for his mercy and care, if we ascribe our successes to ourselves, we are not keeping this law.

6. If we love other creatures more than God or as much as God, we are falling short of what is required of us here.
7. If we lack joy in God, if we lack sorrow at offending God, if we lack zeal for God's truth, then we are not fulfilling this portion of God's law.

V. The First Commandment in the Christian Life

- A. We have really only scratched the surface, but I want to pause and ask you a question: how are you feeling now?
 1. If you had any illusions about your ability to keep the Ten Commandments, I hope that they have been dispelled.
 2. When we begin to consider the extent of what is required by God's law, we see that we cannot even get past the first commandment without realizing how woefully we fall short of it.
 3. The law exposes our sin.
 4. And in doing so, it drives us outside of ourselves to Christ.
 5. Only Jesus has perfectly fulfilled the first commandment, and he has done so on behalf of all who look to him in faith.
 6. Jesus never placed his trust or affections in anything above or alongside of God.
 7. The Lord was his portion.
 8. When Satan offered him the kingdoms of this world if he would bow down and worship him, Jesus said, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'" (Mt. 5:9-10)
 9. Jesus delighted in doing his Father's will.

10. He told his disciples that it was his food to do the will of the one who sent him and to accomplish his work. (Jn. 4:34)
 11. When he perceived that God's will was in conflict with his own human will, he prayed, "Yet not what I will, but what you will." (Mk. 14:36)
- B. Not only did Jesus perfectly fulfill this commandment on our behalf, he also died on the cross for our many transgressions of this portion of God's law.
1. Though he himself had never worshipped other gods, he was put to death as an idolater in our place.
 2. Because he did that, the law holds no terror to those who trust in him.
 3. Jesus has set us free from the law's curse.
- C. While this is true, it does not mean that the law has no place in a Christian's life.
1. We are no longer under law as a covenant of works, but we are still under the law as a rule of life.
 2. As Christians, our relationship to the law has changed.
 3. The law no longer comes to you and says, "do this and you shall live."
 4. Instead, the law comes to you as a friend and says, "because you live, do this."
 5. This is why John says in his first epistle that God's commandments are not burdensome for Christians. (1 Jn. 5:3)
 6. We have been set free from the crushing burden of being evaluated by God on the basis of our performance of the law.

- D. It is interesting that at the end of that same epistle, John makes an explicit application of the first commandment to the Christian life.
1. John did not believe that the law was no longer applicable to Christians.
 2. He writes, “we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” (1 Jn. 5:19-21)
 3. John says that in Jesus Christ we have saving knowledge of the one true God.
 4. But then he says that we need to keep ourselves from idols.
 5. This shows us that idolatry is a constant temptation in the Christian life.
 6. We have to remain vigilant.
 7. We have to be on guard against idolatry.
 8. And the best way to do so is to be continually renewing our faith in Christ and stirring up our love for God in response to his amazing love for us.

VI. Conclusion

- A. During his fifty years as the pastor of a congregation in Aberdeen, Scotland, William Still wrote a number of letters to his flock.
- B. In one of them, he warned that there is the real danger that some who have professed faith in Christ will be found on the day of judgment to have “nothing to show for years of Christian profession but a gradually waning interest in the things of God.” [*Letters*, 153]

- C. He went on to say this: "Think of it again – a decreasing interest, not only in the things of God, but in God Himself as you are carried inexorably on towards the great white throne of his judgment seat. It is a terrible thought, enough to stop you in your tracks, and to cause you to make a complete reappraisal of your life. Whatever the cost in rearrangement, including bravely coming to terms with loved ones, friends, not to say pursuits, pleasures and indulgences, you must turn to the Lord and give yourself afresh to Him." [*Letters*, 153]
- D. Christians, remember this: you are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ.
- E. He is the true God and eternal life.
- F. Keep yourselves from idols.