

# The Commands of Christ

## The First Commandment

Part Eight  
*Exodus 20:1-3*

*With Study Questions*

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9/6/2009*

# The First Commandment

*Exodus 20:1-3*

**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 bondage. “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exodus 20:1-3).**

## **I. Atheism**

Many years ago a friend of mine, who was not a church-going man nor an openly professing Christian, told me about a date he had. He said, “Things were going pretty well, and she was really nice, but then she said she was an atheist. It freaked me out! How could anyone be an atheist?” In the mid-1800s, the great systematic theologian, Charles Hodge, wrote

It is the secret conviction of every man that his duty to God is his highest duty, as is evinced by the fact that the charge of atheism is one from which the human soul instinctively recoils.<sup>1</sup>

We live in a culture where the *new atheism* aggressively boasts of their dismissal of God. Atheism is worn like a mantle of intellect and integrity. Intellect in that they’re not simple enough to believe in God, and integrity in that they will not be bullied into believing through religious guilt manipulators. With the recent atheistic best-sellers, people are becoming much more comfortable with the notion of atheism. It is still, nonetheless, a notion that makes even the natural mind cringe. And there are some very good reasons for this.

## **The Sin of Unbelief**

One reason people recoil at atheism is because it is a sin. People react to professions of atheism the same way they might respond to professions of lying or stealing. Being a committed atheist is not morally different than being a committed thief. The first commandment forbids atheism, either theoretical or practical. What I mean by that is that it is a sin to be or live as

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 3* (Eerdmans, reprint 1989), p. 280.

an atheist. Unbelief is not a morally neutral position.

**Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God (Hebrews 3:12).**

How can something like unbelief be sinful? In the first chapter of Romans, Paul writes that **“what may be known of God is manifest in them (all men), for God has shown it to them” (Romans 1:19)**. Paul goes on to explain that man’s knowledge of God is **“clearly seen...so that they (all men) are without excuse” (Romans 1:20)**.

The knowledge that God exists is something that God has shown to all men and manifest in all men. The rejection of God (i.e. the violation of the first commandment) is sinful because, as stated above, men suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

The Apostle tells us that they are, therefore, without excuse. Men are as guilty in their rejection of God as they are in the violation of any other commandment (e.g. murder), because they inherently know that God exists and that He should be worshipped but suppress that truth in unrighteousness.

## **Illegitimate Objections**

We must keep this in mind in our witnessing. People who have intellectual objections regarding the existence of God (and here we must argue that Paul is writing about the Christian God) are actually putting forth a red herring or a smoke screen. I don’t think it would be right to initially accuse them of being insincere; they may be convinced that their objections are legitimate. At the same time, whether it is apparent to them or not, we know that somewhere in the recesses of their soul, they are denying what they know to be true. Somewhere in the conversation this should come forth.

For example, I may tell my eight-year-old that it’s time for bed. She doesn’t want to go to bed so she starts asking me if it’s okay to try on her new dress. I say “No.” She says, “But it’s my dress.” Now we start arguing about whether or not she should have the right to wear a dress that belongs to her. I begin arguing that I’m the one who bought her the dress so I have primary jurisdiction over the dress. She may be utterly convinced that she is in the right. I need to remind her (and myself) that the wearing of the dress is not the issue. The issue is that it’s time for bed and she knows it.

I am not saying we should not seek to answer objections to the Christian faith. What I am saying is that the conversation, at some point, needs to turn to the gentle confrontation that the person in question is denying something they know to be true.

These commandments are the essential criteria of what is moral and immoral. Unbelief is not merely an error or a mistake. It is a sin.

## II. Common False Gods

Another, perhaps more evident, violation of the first commandment is when we place our trust, or deposit the primary seats of our affections, toward any entity other than God. I won't spend too much time pointing out the obvious infractions of this commandment in an affluent, industrialized and materialistic culture. But let's beware of both the obvious, and not so obvious, ways we all might find ourselves stumbling when it comes to the first commandment.

### Obvious False Gods

There are some obvious false gods. It is easy to have the primary seat of our affections be drawn to blatantly sinful and unhealthy things, such as drugs, alcohol, illicit sex, gambling, violence, self-gratification, money, pride, etc. Many of these things are covered in the remaining commandments, so I won't go into detail here. Suffice it to say, John writes:

**For all that *is* in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world (1 John 2:16).**

### Not So Obvious False Gods

But there is another danger. In a very subtle way the primary seat of our affections can be drawn to good things such as our families, our health, political agendas, industriousness, etc. These may be good things, but they are not designed to be God. If we try to make them our God we will likely ruin them and ourselves.

When I officiate at weddings, I tell the husband (and the wife) that there is nothing on this earth that God has given him that is to be more important than his wife. She is number one. But that is a far cry from

allowing her to be God. It is precisely because he is answerable to God that he can love his wife properly. When God is acknowledged as God, the standard for love is measured by God. If another person is God, the standard for love is measured by the other person. Inevitably that will be a lower standard.

## No Hope For Tigers

I saw a special on tigers. The commentator lamented how they went from being revered as gods to almost being extinct. It was an interesting dilemma. If your god is a tiger, who kills whenever he is so inclined, you too (seeking to imitate your god) will kill whenever you're so inclined. But if you have a God who says you shouldn't kill whimsically, and that you ought to care for all creation, then the tigers have a chance.

## III. The God Substitutes

In an exhortation to the Thessalonian church, Paul writes,

**Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you received from us *instruction* as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you may excel still more (1 Thessalonians 4:1 NASB).**

Assuming we are not atheists, and assuming we are making every effort to avoid having material, temporal, or other created things seize the role of God in our lives, what steps should we take, in order to excel in our obedience to the first commandment?

## Knowing God

First, we must know who this God is to whom we are to give preeminence. In order for us to love God and keep this commandment we must not assign to others that which is rightly assigned to Him. We must know His attributes. We must realize that He is the Triune, all-knowing, all-powerful and ever-present Creator. To think that there are things out of the scope of God, or of God's decrees, is to grant that power to someone or something else and therefore violates the commandment. We must know and acknowledge that He is the creator, preserver and governor of all things.

To assign ultimate governing power to men or to Satan violates the commandment. Many believe that God's sovereignty is quelled by the will of man. Many believe that Satan is controlling the events of history and that this world belongs to him. Paul does call Satan the "god of this age" (2 Corinthians 4:4). But the fact that people (even an entire age of people) serve a false god doesn't make him God. This thinking is harmful to Christians and violates the first commandment. God is sovereign. He has ordained whatsoever comes to pass. Our Father in heaven wants us to know that nothing is outside of His power.

## **Faith**

Finally, we must have faith. It is not enough to merely know things about God, we are, by faith, to appropriate these things—to make them ours. To know that there is protection from the rain is quite different from getting under the protection. The acting out of this faith is demonstrated by pledging our love, fear, reverence, gratitude, submission and devotion to God.

Obedience to this commandment requires that we do this, not merely on Sundays or when it suits us, but every minute of every day. We are to have a constant sense of His presence, His majesty, His goodness and His providence. We are not to stray to the left or right one iota, ever. At this point we might be gaining an appreciation of how bad we are at keeping this commandment and how much we need deliverance from a covenant of works (*i.e.*, being saved by how good we are).

We are also to have a constant sense of our dependence, responsibility and obligation. The moment our path diverges, in mind, word or deed, one scintilla from our pledging to God our complete devotion, commitment, obedience and trust, we have violated this commandment. The moment we violate any other commandment, we have violated this commandment. He is the Lord and there is no other. We must realize the awesome demands of this commandment. There may be no commandment that reminds us of our need for a Savior as much as this one.

## **IV. The Foundational Commandment**

The acknowledgment of this commandment is the foundation for at least two major things:

## Morality

First, it is the foundation of all morality. This may be one of the reasons people cringe at atheism. If there is no God there is no objective or absolute morality. Everyone seems to agree in a thing called morality<sup>2</sup>. If it is genuine morality it must be (as we learned previously) above us all and outside us all. The violation of the first commandment removes the sense that anything is absolutely right or wrong. If God is not setting the standard for what is right and wrong, it just becomes the subjective opinion of men and women who, as we all know, have the stain of sin upon their judgments.

## Faith in Jesus

Finally, it is the acknowledgment that there is, in fact, a God—a God from whom we have strayed and to whom we should be reconciled. Jesus taught that our response to Him revealed our response to God. **“If God were your Father,”** Jesus taught, **“you would love me” (John 8:42a)**. It is belief in Christ that demonstrates a genuine belief in God and a desire to have no other God but God Himself.

We must ask ourselves if God is our Father and Jesus our Savior. We must ask ourselves who our master is because Jesus teaches we can't serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). The fact that I'm not very good at serving my Master doesn't mean I don't know who my Master is. It is during the process of serving my Master that I am continually reminded that my Master is and needs to be my Savior. But let's make no mistake. If Jesus is not our Master, He is not our Savior.

That being said, friends: it was Jesus, and only Jesus, who always did the will of the Father. It was Jesus, and only Jesus, who always acknowledged the glory of the Father. Jesus alone never strayed one iota away from this commandment. And it is Jesus who grants His victory to all who call on His Name. I pray that our study and understanding of God's law would enrich us and incline our hearts closer to our Blessed Redeemer.

## Questions for Study and Meditation

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<sup>2</sup> There may be disagreement in the particulars of morality but not in the existence of morality.

1. Is atheism a morally neutral position? Why or why not (pages 2, 3)?
2. How should our knowledge of this commandment effect our witnessing (pages 3, 4)?
3. What are some common false gods who seek our affections (pages 4, 5)?
4. How can a violation of this commandment have a subtle destructive effect upon the one's we love (page 5)?
5. If we wish to excel in keeping this commandment, what are some things we must know (pages 5, 6)?
6. Name some God substitutes (pages 5, 6).
7. Is mere knowledge enough (pages 6, 7)?
8. The first commandment is foundational for at least two things. What are they? Can you think of others (pages 7, 8)?
9. How does this commandment help you appreciate the cross (pages 7, 8)?