

Loving His Commandments

Part Three

The First Commandment-B

Exodus 20:1-3

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
pastorpaul@integrity.com
www.branchofhope.org
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Exodus 20:1-3

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

Review

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 eighteen-hundreds, 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.¹

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.

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

¹ 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.

No Other Gods

Of course, the commandment reads, **“You shall have no other gods before me”** rather than you shall **“You shall not be an atheist”**. The reason for this, simply stated, is that it is impossible to avoid having a god. One might say they don’t believe in God as the identifiable deity who created the heavens and the earth. Or a person may very well grant that there is some type of god (even some form of the Christian God) but leave it so ambiguously identified that their god can and will be transformed at a moment’s notice to suit their preference in the occasion.

In the 32nd chapter of Exodus, when the Israelites who had been delivered from slavery, grew impatient due to Moses’ delay, sought to redefine God. He would still be the God who brought them from Egypt (Exodus 32:4), but this god would be a gold bull-calf. A strong god but one who would do the bidding his master, his master people the ones who built him.

False gods, whether pagan or some dim replica of the true God or perversion of that which came from the true God, like the bronze serpent

that was designed to heal but then became an object of worship (Numbers 21:9; 2 Kings 18:4), or some person or idea, are legion. A person's god is the reason they get up in the morning. A person's god will determine the next thing they say, do or think. And when a person feel bad, it is because they have disappointed their god. And human despair is a consequence of serving a god who is neither wise, good, nor gracious.

Heaven help us if we find that our god is not infinite, glorious, blessed, perfect, all-sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, incomprehensible, everywhere present, almighty, all knowing, all wise, most holy, most just, most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.

For if our god is anything less than God, he/it will make foolish and dark demands, capitalizing on our flesh and folly, lead us to destruction and offer no redemption or way out. It is not merely common that the natural man will bow before his false gods, it is inevitable. The Scriptures are replete with accounts of people who follow false gods, kings, money, power, etc.

In Genesis 31:19 it is almost casually conveyed that Rachel had stolen one of "**her father's household gods.**" John Calvin utilized this passage as one prooftext for the nature of the sinful mind, when he wrote,

When he relates that Rachel stole her father's images, he speaks of the use of idols as a common vice. Hence we may infer, that the human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols.²

In the 16th century Calvin wrote words that apply no less today, saying,

The human mind, stuffed as it is with presumptuous rashness, dares to imagine a god suited to its own capacity; as it labours under dullness, nay, is sunk in the grossest ignorance, it substitutes vanity and an empty phantom in the place of God.³

² Calvin, J. (1997). Institutes of the Christian religion. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

³ Calvin, J. (1997). Institutes of the Christian religion. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

It is an obvious violation of the first commandment when we place our trust, or deposit the primary seats of our affections, toward any entity, thought or ideology other than the true 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.

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 convictions and 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 do 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.

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 you 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.

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, that is beyond God’s decrees and providence, 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. The Westminster Confession presents it nicely,

God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: (Eph. 1:11, Rom. 11:33, Heb. 6:17, Rom. 9:15,18).⁴

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. When we think this way we unwittingly violate this commandment. Paul does call Satan the “**god of this age**” (2

⁴ The Westminster confession of faith. 3, 1 (1996). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

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 opens the door to confusion and despair. 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 (James 1:19), we are to, by faith, appropriate (make them ours) these things, or more accurately appropriate Him. That is make Him our God. As Paul wrote,

For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thessalonians 1:9, 10).

We are to call on His Name (Romans 10:13), walk in His ways (Psalm 128:1) and trust in His salvation-a salvation which comes by Christ alone.

The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation (Psalm 118:14).

It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. 27 Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. 28 For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law (Romans 3:26-28).

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. We are to **“meditate”** upon Him and **“delight...in His law...day and night”** (Psalm 1:2). We would do well to ask ourselves-to take inventory-of our investments of time, energy, finance, contemplation or thought-life.

Are we owned by the various screens ever before our eyes? Are we anxious about the opinions of others and how we are perceived by them? Do we drink more deeply of Christ or of that libation at the end of a tiresome day? Do we **“taste and see that the LORD is good”** and rejoice that we are **“blessed”** when we **“take refuge in Him”** (Psalm 34:8)?

Who Then Can Be Saved (Mark 10:26)?

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 (being saved by how good we are).

This does not mean we should jettison the notion that we are 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.

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. 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 speck 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

1. Is atheism a morally neutral position? Why or why not (pages 2, 3)?
2. Why does the commandment read "no others gods" rather than "not be an atheist" (pages 3, 4)?
3. Review and discuss Calvin's quote on the human mind. What are ways we see this in our own culture or our own lives (pages 4, 5)?
4. If we wish to excel in keeping this commandment, what are some things we must know (pages 5, 6)?
5. What is the difference between knowing about God and knowing God (pages 7, 8)?
6. Since we can't keep this commandment perfectly, should we avoid trying to keep it at all? Explain your answer (page 8)?
7. In light of our inability, who then can be saved (page 8)?

