

# The First Commandment

**“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 eighteenth 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.”<sup>1</sup>**

Although there are societies of atheists that openly boast of their dismissal of the God hypothesis, atheism is still, far and away, a notion that makes, even the natural mind, cringe.

## **The Sin of Unbelief**

The first commandment forbids atheism either theoretical or practical. It is a sin to be or live as 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 this be? We live in a society that has placed ‘choice’ upon a pedestal to be worshipped. It seems to be a violation of human rights to deem it sinful not to choose God. How can something like unbelief be sinful? Because there is one thing that God has revealed to, and implanted in, every person—the knowledge that He is. Paul writes,

**For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the**

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

**creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse” (Romans 1:18-20).**

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. It is truly quite compelling.

### **A Four-Year-Old's Argument**

For example, I may tell my four-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. She may be utterly convinced that she is in the right. I need to remind her 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.

### **Stealing**

Another example might be if you had a friend who was continually lying and stealing. You might confront him on this issue and he might have all sorts

of justification for his behavior. He might even overwhelm you with his arguments. In the final analysis, though, you both know he is wrong and his arguments are illegitimate. This ought to be brought to his attention.

We must keep in mind that this is a commandment. 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 Gods**

Another, perhaps more evident, violation of the first commandment is when we place our trust, or deposit the primary seat 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, 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 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.

## No Hope For Tigers

I saw a special on tigers and how they went from being revered as gods to almost being extinct. I thought to myself, of course. If your god is a tiger, who kills whenever he is so inclined, you too 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 all-knowing, all-powerful and ever-present. 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.

## Chance

How easily we can find substitutes for God. To assign creative powers to chance, violates the commandment. When asked how the world came into being, the naturalist (or evolutionist) will often say 'chance'. But as R. C. Sproul has pointed out on numerous occasions, chance is not a thing. If I flip a coin there is a fifty percent chance that it will come up heads. It's a way we determine odds. But chance itself doesn't make it come up heads. To say the world came into being by chance is not merely a violation of this commandment, it's nonsense.

## **Nature**

To assign preserving power to nature violates the commandment. How often we hear the so-called scientific community, in their effort to remove God from the equation, give anthropomorphic (ascribing human characteristics to inanimate objects) descriptions to nature. We might here things like, “Through the grace of evolution such and such animal has grown strong.” or “As a result of the wisdom of nature the trees provided the necessary shade.” How can evolution be gracious or nature be wise? Why would the scientific community, which prides itself on pure, objective, rational thinking, all of the sudden become so sentimental and unintelligible? Perhaps because it is so obvious that there is wisdom and grace at work.

## **Satan, Men**

The two aforementioned examples have clearly found their way into the thinking of many Christians. But this final example may dominate present Christian thinking. 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. 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.

## **Unmatched Love**

We must know that He is the Creator and that we are the creation and the objects of His redeeming love. Refusing to acknowledge that we are His creation and the objects of His love is truly saddest state of man. The love of God is unmatched in the universe. We are to give the primary seat of our affections to the one whose love for us is without equal.

## **Faith**

Finally, we must have faith. It is not enough to merely know things about God, we are to, by faith, appropriate (make them ours) these things. 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 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. 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 two things:

##### **Morality**

First, it is the foundation of all morality. It is as simple as this -- if there is no God there is no morality. You might say, "It is not so obvious that there is a God but it is obvious that there is morality." You have not thought out your statement. 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 a God from whom we have strayed and to whom we should be reconciled. The first commandment is the commandment that draws us to Christ. Jesus says in John. 8:42, "**If God were your Father, ye would love me.**" It is belief in Christ that demonstrates a genuine belief in God and a desire to have no other God but God Himself. It was Jesus who always did the will of the Father. It was Jesus who always acknowledged the glory of the Father. Jesus 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.

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

## Questions for Study and Meditation

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