

PUTTING GOD FIRST

“...that in all things He may have the preeminence.” Colossians 1:18

A group of Theological students were given an assignment to rearrange the Ten Commandments in order of priority. There was general consensus that the most important commandments should be: *“You shall not murder.”* They also agreed that the second most important would be: *“You shall not steal.”* The third most important commandment was: *“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.”*

However, there was a division as to which was the least important commandment. Half of the students felt that the least important commandment was: *“You shall not commit adultery.”* The other half selected *“You shall have no other gods before Me”* as the least significant. After some further discussion the class agreed to put the *“You shall have no other gods before Me”* as the least important of the Ten Commandments.

That’s an interesting commentary on the perspective of those Theological students. When the Lord Jesus Christ was asked which was the greatest Commandment in the Law, Jesus replied: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great Commandment.”* Matthew 22:37-38

At a Christian conference a discussion ensued over the Ten Commandments. One delegate commented that he didn’t find the Ten Commandments very challenging or useful for his personal sanctification, because they mainly dealt with extreme sins like idolatry, adultery, stealing and murder. He was puzzled over the lack of mention of more serious sins such as pride, selfishness or bad temper, which we struggle with on a regular basis. An older delegate observed that the Commandments were not specific enough. A woman delegate expressed her opinion that the Ten Commandments were *“too negative.”* She would have preferred the Ten Commandments to present positive advice on life, how we could live our lives reflecting the Beatitudes, or the Fruit of the Spirit. This would have surely been *“more relevant”* for Christians, she felt.

In this age of anti-nomianism, such pervasive hostility to and ignorance of the Law of God even dominates our Theological colleges and Christian conferences.

Christ Jesus expressly affirmed the Law, emphatically taught the Law, perfectly kept the Law and saved us in terms of the Law. The Ten Commandments are the source and summary of every other passage in the Bible about Holy living, and they cover every conceivable sin. Each Commandment actually covers a whole family of sins. And although the Commandments are mainly expressed in negative forms, they are also implicit commands to perform the opposite positive virtues. The Ten Commandments actually present us with God’s code for holiness.

Contrary to the opinion of the Theological students who assigned God’s first Commandment to the last place, the first Commandment is the most important Commandment. As Almighty God, our Creator and Eternal Judge, God demands first place in our lives, and it is only right that He should do so.

As our loving heavenly Father, God does not want us to waste our lives on falsehood, deception and spiritual poison. God knows what is best for His own children. He desires that we become the very best people that we can be, developing all the potential that He has placed within us to become successful sons and daughters of the living God. We will only find true peace and fulfillment when we give God His rightful place in our lives.

When God revealed the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai He declared: ***“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 20:2

When God declared: ***“I am the Lord”*** he affectively ruled out pantheism, polytheism, and New Age thinking.

When God said ***“I am”*** He revealed that He is a person. God is not, as the pantheist teaches, *“an impersonal force.”* Actually pantheism is the worst form of religion because if *“all is God”*, then there can be no distinction between good and evil. If *“everything is true”* then nothing is false. If *“nothing is false”* then everything must be true. Evangelism would be irrelevant and there would be no ultimate Truth of which anyone could be certain. If *“God is all and all is good”*, then a drunk driver running a red light, and killing an innocent child, would be morally equivalent to Florence Nightingale dedicating her life to caring for the sick and suffering.

When God called Himself ***“I”*** He also exposes the inherent lie of polytheism. Polytheism believes in many gods. However, God didn't say *“we are the Lord your gods,”* He declared: ***“I am the Lord your God.”*** He is the one true God. There is no other. Those who worship the gods and idols of the pagan world are actually bowing before demons in disguise (1 Corinthians 10:20).

God's revelation on the mountain also ruled out new-age thinking which is nothing but the old lie of the serpent in the Garden of Eden when he said ***“...you will be like God...”*** Genesis 3:5

C.S. Lewis wrote: *“We are halfhearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered to us. We are like an ignorant child who wants to keep on making mud pies in the slum, because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday by the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”*

Matthew Henry, commented that the first Commandment, does not only refer to pagan idols: *“To love, to desire, to delight in, or to expect any good from, any sinful indulgence is prohibited. Equally, we are not to allow any person or created thing, however valuable or excellent, to rival God in our affections. All atheism, infidelity and irreligion is opposition to God, an attempt to be independent of Him. The proud man is his own idol because he worships himself and expects others to do the same. The covetous man makes a god of his wealth, which he loves, depends on and expects happiness from. The sensualist by his practices worships deities as filthy as any seen in a pagan temple.”*

We are commanded to ***“set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.”***

Our first duty, and our soul's first need, is to place God first, and above all else, in our lives. Those who crowd God out of His rightful place in their lives, do so to their own detriment. If the One True God is not on the throne of your life, you will never know true, lasting peace and joy.

The Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy, was wealthy and successful beyond imagining. He was honoured and acclaimed worldwide for his writings. Yet, despite all of his wealth and fame, he was dissatisfied and felt empty. One day, while walking in the countryside, he came across a peasant whose face beamed with joy, peace and contentment. Leo Tolstoy later testified that he immediately realised that this man, although he clearly possessed very little in this world, yet he had a joy and a peace that eluded the successful and celebrated Tolstoy.

Leo Tolstoy could not get this joyful peasant out of his mind. He concluded that the difference between himself and this peasant was that the poor man knew God, while he did not. This began the journey that ultimately led Tolstoy to Christ. He later wrote: *“To know God and to live is the one and the same thing. God is life!”* Without a relationship with God we are spiritually dead.

The Larger Catechism of the Westminster Assembly summarises the **Sins Forbidden** in the first Commandment as: the sin of Atheism (“*The fool has said in his heart there is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works.*” Psalm 14:1);
the sin of idolatry;
the sin of omission or neglect of any duty due to God;
the sin of forgetting God;
the sin of having false opinions about God (“*To whom then will you liken God? By what likeness will you compare to Him?*” Isaiah 40:18);
the sin of having unworthy or wicked thoughts about God;
the sin of curious searching into His secrets; the sin of hatred of God (Romans 1:30);
the sin of self-love (2 Timothy 3:2);
the sin of self-seeking (“*For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus*” Philippians 2:21);
the sin of inordinate setting our mind, will or affection upon things other than God (“*Do not love the world or things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 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.*” 1 John 2:15-16);
the sin of unbelief (“*Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God*” Hebrews 3:12);
the sin of despair; the sin of hardening our hearts (“*But in accordance of your hardness and your impenitent heart, you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God*” Romans 2:5);
the sin of pride; the sin of tempting God (“*You shall not tempt the Lord your God*” Matthew 4:7); the sin of praying to, or worshipping saints, angels or other creatures (“*You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve.*” Matthew 4:10);
the sin of consorting with the occult (“*And the person who turns to mediums and familiar spirits, to prostitute himself with them, I will set My face against that person and cut him off from his people.*” Leviticus 20:6);
the sin of making man the lord over our faith and conscience;
the sin of resisting and grieving the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51; Ephesians 4:30);
the sin of discontent and impatience with God’s dealings.

The Westminster Assembly’s Larger Catechism summarises the **Duties Required** in the first Commandment as follows: the duty to know and acknowledge God to be the one true God (“*Serve Him with a loyal heart and with a willing mind; for the Lord searches all hearts and understands all the intents of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will be found by you; but if you forsake Him, He will cast you off forever.*” 1 Chronicles 28:9);
To worship God (“*O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. For He is our God and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of his hand.*” Psalm 95:6-7);
To glorify God (“*Give unto the Lord the glory due to His Name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.*” Psalm 29:2);
To think about God;
To meditate on God;
To remember God;
To honour God;
To esteem God highly;
To believe God;
To trust God (“*Trust in the Lord forever, for in the Lord is everlasting strength*” Isaiah 26:4);
To delight in God (“*Delight yourself also in the Lord and He shall give you the desires of your heart.*” Psalm 37:4);
To rejoice in God (“*Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, you righteous; and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!*” Psalm 32:11);
To obey God and submit to Him;

To walk humbly before God (***“He has shown you, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”*** Micah 6:8.

In the light of the first Commandment, we should examine our hearts. What, or who, is first in your life? What is of greatest importance to you?

Where do you spend most of your time and money on?

What do you think about the most?

What are you most excited about and enthusiastic for?

If, after an honest examination of your own heart and mind, you realise that God does not have first place in your life, then you need to re-order your priorities in the light of Eternity.

“It is appointed to men once to die, and after this the Judgment.” Hebrews 9:27

The day will come when we will have to stand before Almighty God and give an account of our lives.

Abraham, the Father of the Faithful, proved that God was his first priority (Genesis 22:1-14).

When the people of Israel were unfaithful to the Lord by seeking to worship both the Lord and the false gods of Canaan, Elijah challenged the nation: ***“How long will you falter between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.”*** 1 Kings 18:21

Joshua challenged the people of Israel: ***“Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. Whether the gods which your fathers that were on the other side of the river, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”*** Joshua 24:15

God revealed to Hosea that when His people sought to worship Him, and the idols of the nations, that was like Him having to marry a prostitute.

Daniel, and his three friends, remain inspiring examples to all of us what it means to obey the first Commandment. When the emperor Nebuchadnezzar set up an idol of gold and commanded everyone to bow down and worship it, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow. When they were threatened with being thrown into the fiery furnace, they responded: ***“Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.”*** Daniel 3:17-18

When King Darius of the Medo-Persian empire issued the decree that for thirty days anyone who prayed to any god other than the king was to be thrown into the lions den, Daniel continued to worship God alone. And God preserved Daniel in the lions den.

As the Apostle Peter declared: ***“We ought to obey God rather than men.”*** Acts 5:29

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