

Sermon 62, What Is Forbidden in the First Commandment, Exodus 20:2-3

Proposition: The first commandment forbids the sins of having no god, a false god, or a faulty version of the true God.

- I. You Shall Not Have No God
- II. You Shall Not Have a False God
 - A. At All
 - B. Even in Your Heart
- III. You Shall Not Misconstrue the True God
 - A. Heresy
 - B. Despair
 - C. Pride
- IV. You Shall Not Partially Commit to the True God

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we saw last time that the first commandment is fundamentally about relationship, about having God for our own. It demands that we commit to Him and do as in His sight whatever we do in His service. The first commandment sums up in itself all loving, knowing, believing, hoping, choosing, worshiping, and more. That is its glorious positive side. But stated negatively (as, indeed, the commandment is) it bans sin in general, and in particular bans all forms of idolatry. To have anything else other than the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as our God is to violate this first and greatest commandment. We're going to talk about what that looks like; in brief, we're going to see that this first commandment forbids the sins of having no god, a false god, or a faulty version of the true God; instead, it demands our total commitment and perfect love toward the only true God.

I. You Shall Not Have No God

These commandments are huge, utterly capacious. There are many ways into them, many things that they require and forbid. But one of the clearest implications of this command is this: It is a command against atheism. Put more provocatively, the First Commandment reads "You shall not be secular."

Yes, you heard that right. It is a sin to not have a god. It is a sin to say "Everything I desire and need is available within the closed horizon of this world. I don't need the transcendent; I don't need a god — not Yahweh, not Baal, not Mammon, and not anyone else. I am *homo self-sufficiencis*."

Brothers and sisters, thou shalt not be secular! Thou shalt not find that the world is enough, and that 80 years is all one can decently expect. I've mentioned before that James Bond is not a great theologian, but his statement that *The World is Not Enough* is perfectly accurate.

The sin of denying the transcendent, the sin of thinking that one's own little voice is enough, that no Word from outside the world is necessary or desirable, is a sin that cries to Heaven in our day. Millions of our neighbors are infected with it. In fact, perhaps half of the world's population (a huge majority in both the rich West, and in Japan, South Korea, and China), for the first time in history, functions as secular people who see no need for a God. Brothers and sisters, that is wrong. That is a sin. It may seem slightly better to just say "I am a secular person" than to forthrightly announce "I am an atheist." But the outcome is effectively the same either way. For every avowed atheist, there are millions of don't-know, don't-care people who see no need for organized religion and especially not for the God of the Bible in their lives. Those people are wrong. They are violating the first commandment. They are failing to love Yahweh with heart, mind, soul, and strength.

But of course, brothers and sisters, under this heading comes practical atheism as well. Many people profess faith in God, come to church somewhat regularly, and yet live as though God had no moral demands on them. Is that you? Yes, it's you, every time you sin. It's me every time I sin. Every time I look with lust, every time I overeat, every time I speak harshly to my child, or neglect to check on the parishioner who needs my pastoral care, I am living as a practical atheist. I believe in One God, the Father Almighty. I will confess that truth at the drop of a hat, or the request of a worship leader. I do it all the time. But whenever I give in to sin, I live as though I have no God.

II. You Shall Not Have a False God

But the mere having of a deity of some kind is far from sufficient to satisfy the demands of this commandment. This is not a command to be religious. This statement, "Thou shalt have no gods before me," is not the Bronze Age version of Dwight Eisenhower's quip "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith — and I don't care what it is." Yahweh God very much does care what it is. Having a false god is just as damning, literally, as having no god at all.

A. At All

You shall not have any kind of false god at all. This refers to all kinds of worshiped objects, both internal and external. The Bible mocks external objects of worship with the pejorative term "idols," literally "seen things" — a term that shows that, for Biblical religion, something seen is no proper object of worship. One thinks of Queequeg and his little carved image that he worships while Ishmael looks on in amazement. But this command also forbids internal idols, most of which are seen things anyway. You can worship money, and you can also see money. Most of your money is just a byte in a computer, anyway.

B. Even in Your Heart

But regardless of what you call it, functionally there is something you worship. If you are self-described "secular" and see no need for the transcendent in your life, perhaps you worship personal peace and affluence. Perhaps you worship the god within, meaning your latent human abilities and powers. Perhaps you worship the collective, or an ideology that promises peace on earth, goodwill to men (Marxism, Liberalism, Conservatism). I remember asking our former

neighbor “Do you believe in God?” and her responding, “I believe in the power of concerted human action.”

Brothers and sisters, whatever you call it, the thing to which you look for satisfaction and fulfillment in this world is your god. What if you have stopped believing in satisfaction and fulfillment? Then you are embittered and enraged at the god who prevented you from achieving them. All men by nature desire happiness, said Aristotle. The old Greek spoke truth. You may have given up on achieving happiness, but you still have some sort of God from which you expect it — or expected it. When that god didn’t deliver, perhaps you became a lapsed idolater. No matter. In your pride and rejection of the true God, you have become a bigoted and bitter worshiper of yourself, proclaiming with W. E. Henley “I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul!”

Brothers and sisters, most people are smart enough to admit verbally that a larger salary, a bigger house, a move to a new city, a vacation in Florida or the French Riviera, is not enough to make them happy. But most people are not smart enough to live out the truth that money, travel, pleasure, entertainment, romantic relationships, and the rest of what this world has to offer will never actually make them happy. They know that owning that dream home is not the key to happiness any more than the absence of dental problems is the key to happiness. All this the world well knows. But few know how to escape the trap of idolatry; few know how to actually look for peace, contentment, and satisfaction in Jesus Christ.

But if you’re not doing that, you’re looking for it somewhere else. You may be convinced that it doesn’t exist. You may be living a life where porn has become your substitute for joy. You may treat opioids as a stand-in for satisfaction. You may think of your weekend off, or your next trip to Laramie to watch the game, as the key thing for which you’re living. You may think that spouse and children and grandchildren are the most important things in life, where joy is truly to be found. But I guarantee that if you make any of these things your idol, it will let you down. More than that, God will judge you because you have adopted a god other than Him. The better the thing you adopt as your idol, the more damage it can do. Marxism makes fairness its idol and attempts to get to a fairer world by feeding envy (called “class warfare” in the Marxist parlance). Look at the damage that’s wrought. People who make family their all also have a special place in our cultural heart. We call them mobsters. *La famiglia* is everything to them, and they really don’t care that they are murdering, stealing, and corrupting cops to advance their family’s status in the world.

What other false gods do we worship? Our own pride and respectability, often defined by our status in the church or our faithfulness to Christian doctrine: that’s a major one for those who are serious about following God. That is shown when you are more concerned with your reputation as a God-fearer than with the substance of fearing God. Again, what’s wrong is not the actions per se, but the heart. Are you looking to your own goodness, your own church attendance and service, to save you? If so, you’re an idolater. Maybe you’re impressed with your own goodness in sacrificing for some other Christian non-profit. That can be an idol. So can your car, house, boat, bank account, medical treatments, skills, jobs, friends, contacts, magic, social media,

and just about anything else. People can worship the Bible or the carpet in their church. The human heart is a perpetual factory of idols, and they roll off the assembly line one after another, all day long.

Don't do it. Don't worship idols. It's a sin. They won't satisfy; they can't. You were made for more. You were made for Yahweh God, the be-all end-all, the first and the last, the ruler over the kings of the earth. And you were not only made for Him, but made to know Him as He truly is.

III. You Shall Not Misconstrue the True God

I've spoken to you about Murphy. If you know Murphy, you know that he is a Labradoodle with an exceptionally good attitude. And if you don't know that Murphy is a dog, you don't know Murphy. Similarly, if you don't know that God is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, etc., you don't know God. You can't know Yahweh without knowing Him as God. You can't know Jesus without knowing Him as God. In other words, the final piece of this first commandment is a command not to misconstrue the true God.

A. Heresy

How do we do that? The first way is by heresy, actively believing, teaching, and promoting false and incorrect statements about God. Imagine, if you would for a moment, that I had a habit of referring to my wife as "the 200 lb. boss." Now, would that be a sin against taking her as my beloved to have and to hold from this day forward? Definitely. She would not appreciate that, and neither would you.

Well, in the same way, if I speak wrongly about God, if I claim (say) that He is limited in knowledge and power, or that He is made of matter, or that He had a beginning and is subject to time and chance, or that He is monadic rather than Triune, then I am not worshiping and honoring the true God as my God. I still use the word "God" but I have smuggled in different and non-Biblical, that is, heretical content.

Thus, to deny that Christ is one person out of (or in) two natures? Heresy, and a violation of the first commandment. To deny that God is three persons jointly and entirely holding one substance? Heresy, and a violation of the first commandment. To deny that the church is the body of Christ and subject only to Him, not to the state? Heresy. And so on. Misconstruing God is a sin.

Some of this is ignorance; not all things in Scripture are clear in themselves or to every reader. Yet even ignorance is a sin, particularly when you have done nothing to mitigate or remove it. Being an accidental heretic is better than being a deliberate one, but it is still a sin.

B. Despair

More common, however, than sins of theoretical heresy are the sins of practical heresy. The most prominent of these are the twin sins of pride and despair. Both of these are related to self-righteousness and thus to your opinion of your standing before God.

Despair is the lie that even God cannot help you. It is the practical conclusion that you are so wicked, so far gone, that the Almighty's mercy cannot and will not reach you. This is the sin that says "What's the point in repentance? Why should I turn around? I am mired deeply in sin,

so deeply that I cannot get out. In fact, I'm not even sure I want to get out." Brothers and sisters, do not despair! You can only do so if you lack God for your God. If you have Him, you won't flinch when Satan whispers "Now, this is truly unforgivable. If your church knew about this, they'd kick you to the curb in a heartbeat." That is just another one of Satan's lies — his specialty. If you give in to despair, once more, you are guilty of practical atheism. Despair is the combination of thinking you need to save yourself and concluding that you can't do so.

C. Pride

Pride, on the other hand, is thinking you need to save yourself and believing that you actually can. This sin is just as deadly as despair; it is the "up" in the sinner's bipolar disorder, as compared to the "down" which is despair.

Brothers and sisters, don't give way to pride. This, I truly believe, is the most potent and most frequent violation of the first commandment. Instead of having God for our God, we silently adopt ourselves for our God. We love us. In self we trust. And so on.

Don't do it. Pride is a sin against God, a distraction from His worship, and an offense to His righteousness. You shall not walk in pride.

IV. You Shall Not Partially Commit to the True God

And thus, this command also forbids you partially committing to the true God. You cannot half-have Him for yours and half not have Him for yours. You cannot have one foot in Heaven and one in Hell. You cannot have this or that of the Devil in your heart or pocketbook.

How do we partially commit to God? We try to keep our options open. We want to know God, and trust Him — but we also want to have the opportunity to follow anything better that might come along. We want to be members with the right to leave the church at any time. We want to be able to get off the airplane if we discover that it's taking us into turbulence.

Brothers and sisters, you have to be all in. That's what the commandment says. You can't be almost pregnant and you can't be almost Christian. You either belong to God heart and soul or you don't belong to God at all.

I say all the time that it's not good to demand all or nothing because then you're going to get nothing. But God does demand all. Thank God that when we do swerve aside to idols, He forgives and welcomes us back! You see, the law as such is indeed an all or nothing proposition. If you break it even once, you're dead. If you worship an idol for a fraction of a second, you're going to Hell, even if you love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength for a hundred years without stopping. In an all-or-nothing system, you would get nothing and so would I.

But in Christ, you are credited with all. Jesus obeyed perfectly, and in Him, you did too. So what does this commandment mean for Christians? Not that if you sin you're dead. Rather, that you continue to be morally obligated to commit entirely and wholly to Yahweh your God. That commitment is shown not by never sinning, but by taking your sin to God and asking Him to deal with it in Christ. Here's what I mean: "the heart of Asa was wholly devoted to the LORD all his days" (1Ki 15:14), not like the heart of Abijam, who "walked in all the sins of his father which he had committed before him; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God, like the heart of his father David" (1Ki 15:3). The heart of David was wholly devoted to Yahweh,

even though he committed adultery and murdered. By the grace of God, I want it to not only said but to be actually true that my heart is wholly devoted to Yahweh, though I have looked at smut and yelled at my children and done many other things.

A partial commitment to God means that you try to hide your sin from him, and thus from yourself and from your brothers and sisters. A full commitment to God means that you confess your sin, also to yourself and to your brothers and sisters.

So if you know that you have been proud, that you have been despairing, that you have sought fulfillment in something besides the true and living God, what should you do? You should repent. You should rededicate your heart entirely to the living God. That is the sum of what the first commandment requires. It forbids idolatry; it demands obedience to and love for the living God. Have Him as yours, and know that in Christ, you have all of Him — despite your sin and failure, because your Savior has no sin and no failure.

Be committed to God with all your heart. Keep yourselves from idols. Amen.