

No Other Gods

Exodus 20:1-3

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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 slavery.

“You shall have no other gods before me. – Exodus 20:1-3, ESV

In college, I took a class on the history of Ancient Israel. In the class, we saw an artifact recovered on an archaeological dig in Israel. It was a crude bit of artwork on a pottery shard found in the home of an ancient Israelite. It depicted a male and female figure and the inscription below the image read “YaHWeH and His Asherah.” This Israelite household had violated the first and second commandments by worshipping YaHWeH alongside the Canaanite fertility goddess, Asherah, and making an image of both of them.

My guess is that archaeologists will not unearth many such depictions from our culture today. But is there anything truly new under the sun?

Last year, Barna Research Group and Arizona Christian University polled thousands of Americans and asked them about their religious beliefs in a large worldview survey. Only around 7% of Americans responded in such a way that they could be classified as having a biblical worldview, and 88% of Americans had such a mixture of answers that Barna classified them under the worldview of “Syncretism,” basically meaning they had a buffet line approach to beliefs, taking a little of this and a little of that to create their own unique religious dogma.

The Introduction to the Ten Commandments

We find the Ten Commandments given to Israel directly by God Himself in Exodus 20. Exodus 19 sets the stage for the delivery of these ten words from God:

On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. ² They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, ³ while Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: ⁴ ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; ⁶ and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”

⁷ So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. ⁸ All the people answered together and said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do.” And Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD. ⁹ And the LORD said

to Moses, “Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever.”

When Moses told the words of the people to the LORD, ¹⁰ the LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments ¹¹ and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. ¹² And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, ‘Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death. ¹³ No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot;^[a] whether beast or man, he shall not live.’ When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain.” ¹⁴ So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people; and they washed their garments. ¹⁵ And he said to the people, “Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman.”

¹⁶ On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. ¹⁹ And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. ²⁰ The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

²¹ And the LORD said to Moses, “Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the LORD to look and many of them perish. ²² Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, lest the LORD break out against them.” ²³ And Moses said to the LORD, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, ‘Set limits around the mountain and consecrate it.’” ²⁴ And the LORD said to him, “Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the LORD, lest he break out against them.” ²⁵ So Moses went down to the people and told them.

The Ten Commandments

20 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 slavery.

³ “You shall have no other gods before me.

Later, God would write these Ten Commandments with His own finger on tablets of stone. Moses would throw these tablets in anger against the mountain when he finds the people worshipping a Golden Calf and God would ask Moses to make new stone tablets and He would write the Ten Commandments again on tablets of stone. So, God Himself spoke the Ten Commandments to His people with a powerful display of His majesty, power, and glory, wrote

them Himself on tablets of stone, and when they broke them, He wrote them again on tablets of stone.

I'd draw the conclusion from this evidence that the Ten Commandments are important. Wouldn't you?

Now, when God spoke the Ten Commandments, He didn't just immediately start by giving commands, and the introduction to the Ten Commandments is vitally important. God began by stating Who He was in Himself, Who He was to His people, and what He had done for His people.

God began by saying, "I am the LORD." That is – "I am YaHWeH" or "I am the I AM." YaHWeH speaks of God's self-existence, self-sufficiency, and eternal immutability – that is, God never changes. God always has been, is, and always will be all that He is without changing. He needs nothing from anyone. He is the only One who has the power of being in and of Himself. He is pure divine essence, pure divine being. Everyone and everything that is NOT God is temporary and contingent, dependent. You and I didn't create ourselves and we don't sustain ourselves. A few minutes without air and we die. A few days without water and we dehydrate and die. The universe existed long before we did. It doesn't need us; we need it.

If everything else is dependent, contingent, and temporary and God alone is eternal and self-sufficient with the power of being in Himself, that means that God alone is the source of ALL being, the creator and sustainer of all that is NOT God. As Paul put it in Acts 17:24-25: "*The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.*"

This is who God is Himself. He is the Great I AM. Who He is toward His people is expressed when He says, "I am the LORD, your God." How does the one true God become our God? Only because He chooses to take us to Himself and claim us as His own. He is our God because He has made Himself our God and has made us His people. He told the Israelites in Deuteronomy 7:6-8: "*For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.*" (ESV)

And what was true of Israel is true of the church today. In I Peter 2:9-10, Peter writes: "*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*" (ESV)

So, our obedience is rooted first in who God is as the LORD, the Great I AM, Creator and Sustainer of all, the eternal, unchanging, and all-sufficient One, and then it is rooted in the reality that He is OUR God. That He has pledged Himself to us and taken us to Himself. Third, the call of obedience is rooted in what God has done for us – *“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”* (ESV)

God had delivered His people out of slavery and bondage and the land of their oppression. He had done so through great signs and wonders. In Deuteronomy 4:33-35, God says to His people:

Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him. – Deut. 4:33-35, ESV

As great as the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt was, we have received a greater deliverance at a greater cost and through a greater miracle than anything the Israelites experienced under Moses. God has delivered us from sin and death, from the most terrifying and oppressive cruel masters of all and from the deepest and most profound slavery of all, and He has done so through the sinless life of perfect obedience, the willing substitutionary death, and true victorious resurrection of His one and only Son. Romans 5:8 tells us that God demonstrates His own love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

And Galatians 4:4-7 says, *“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.”*

Grounding our obedience in who God is, in who He is to us, and in what He has done to redeem us frees us to worship God from a heart of joyful gratitude. This removes and sets aside all improper, self-righteous, or self-serving motives for obedience:

1. We’re not giving God our obedience in the hopes that He’ll owe us something and have to pay us back in the future, God doesn’t need anything from us. We can’t really give Him anything because He’s the source of everything.
2. We’re not trying to earn God’s love, to prove ourselves worthy to be called His people. He’s made us His own by grace.
3. We’re not trying to work off the debt of our sin, to earn forgiveness or reconciliation. God has already forgiven all of our sin in Christ and has redeemed us from sin and death.

When We Fail to Worship God

And so, God commands us, in the light of who He is, who He is to us, and what He has done for us, to worship Him and Him alone. He says, *“You shall have no other gods before me.”*

In Deuteronomy 6:13-14, God told His people the positive version of this command: *“It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear. You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you.”*

In Matthew 4 and Luke 4, we read of Jesus being tempted by Satan in the desert wilderness of Judea. In Matthew 4:8-10, we read:

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written,

“You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.” (ESV)

So, before we can talk about false gods we’re tempted to worship, we need to understand what this commandment is commanding positively. We are to worship and serve the LORD our God. We are to live in awe and wonder, aware of His surpassing greatness and His wonderful goodness to us. We should see the world as His creation and give thanks and praise to Him for it. We should see our lives as gifts from Him and live them as an offering to Him. We should study, appreciate, and delight in the wonder of our salvation and give thanks to Him for it. We should ground our identity in who we are before Him and anchor our aspirations to His will and call upon our lives. We should live every day and every moment of every day in the light of the reality that He is God, that He is our God, and that we are His dearly loved and redeemed people.

And so, we must confess that so often we just don’t worship God as He deserves. We complain an grumble. We forget about God. We forget who He is and who He’s made us to be by His grace. We forget and neglect, and when we do so, we’re being foolish as well as disobedient.

When We Worship Other Gods

The nature of what it means to be human means that whenever we’re not worshipping God as God and our God, we’re worshipping something else in the place of God. When God says, “You shall have no other gods before me,” He doesn’t mean that it’s okay to have other gods in our lives as long as God remains the #1 highest-ranked God. In other words, He’s not saying that it’s okay for us to worship the modern equivalent of “YaHWeH and His Asherah” as long as YaHWeH is first and highest and Asherah is next to Him and a little lower than Him.

That’s why it’s helpful to start with the positive, as Jesus said: “You shall worship the Lord your God and Him ONLY shall you serve.”

So, what does it look like to have other gods? After all, we don’t keep household shrines to idols, do we? Or do we?

Anytime we strive after or live for anything other than God and His will for us, we are chasing and worshipping other gods. When we make His gifts our goals, when we root our identity in our

achievements or aspirations, when we absolutely **MUST** have what God has not yet chosen to give us, we are worshiping false gods.

To examine your heart in this area, think honestly about your “IF ONLY”s and about what keeps you from giving full thanks and living a life of joyful gratitude and contentment. What causes you to say “*IF ONLY I had . . .*” or “*IF ONLY I was . . .*”

What is it in your life that stirs in your soul greater admiration or joy than the Lord and His Gospel – who He is and what He has done for us?

Another way to expose your idols is to consider what makes you most angry when it is threatened and what are you prone to sin knowingly in order to gain or keep. These are your idols.

Forms & Foolishness of Idolatry

There’s another form of idolatry in addition to God-substitutes: It comes when we re-shape God after our likeness, according to our preferences. A well-known seminary professor was teaching his class about the attributes of God when a young seminary student interrupted him and said, “Dr. _____, I like to think of God as . . .” and “It seems to me that God is . . .” and “I see God as . . .” and “Well, the way I look at God is . . .” and he said a bunch of stuff that was subjective and culturally conditioned and not really biblical. When he had finished, the professor said, “Well, sir, thank you for telling us so much about yourself, but we’re here to talk about God, the one true God, the God who reveals Himself to us in the Bible.”

What we think about God, especially if it doesn’t come from Scripture, tells us more about ourselves than it does about God Himself. Such thinking is another form of idolatry, as it really is God-substituting, swapping out the God who is for the God we imagine we would like to worship, as God who looks very much like our best imaginations of ourselves.

God has revealed Himself in the work of creation and in the pages of Scripture, and responsible theologians and Bible scholars have plumbed the depths of Scripture to summarize what God reveals about Himself.

God’s classic self-revelation is found in Exodus 34:5-8:

The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.” And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. (ESV)

Great psalms like Psalm 103 and Psalm 145 unpack this definition of God and help us to see and celebrate His character more fully. A classic human summary of the nature of the one true God as taught in Scripture is found in the Westminster Shorter Catechism #4, which tells us, “God is a

spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.”

To imagine God in some other way is really to imagine some other god. And some other god is no god at all. Such a false god did not create anything, does not sustain anything, and cannot save anything.

The deadly foolishness of idolatry is unfolded powerfully in Psalm 115:

*Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!
Why should the nations say,
“Where is their God?”
Our God is in the heavens;
he does all that he pleases.
Their idols are silver and gold,
the work of human hands.
They have mouths, but do not speak;
eyes, but do not see.
They have ears, but do not hear;
noses, but do not smell.
They have hands, but do not feel;
feet, but do not walk;
and they do not make a sound in their throat.
Those who make them become like them;
so do all who trust in them. – Psalm 115:1-8, ESV*

We were made in the image of God to worship Him and to grow in His likeness. We were made to worship, and we are always worshiping, and we become like what we worship. That’s the deadly foolishness of idolatry. So, what is the solution?

Worship God.

That’s rather, obvious, huh? But sometimes we miss the obvious.

If we’re going to always worship something and worshiping God-substitutes that are no gods at all is deadly foolish, then we need to worship the one true God, don’t we?

A ship that is constantly prone to drifting away into dangerous waters needs to be solidly anchored to a rock that will not be shaken and will keep it where it needs to be. Our lives, our identities, our aspirations, our worship must be fully and continually grounded in God, the one true God.

So . . .

1. Begin your day with worship, praying and thanking God for who He is, who He is to you, and what He has done to save you.
2. Study the Bible to know God better and worship Him more deeply.
3. Gather with His people for weekly worship on the Lord's Day and don't miss it. Don't let your idols keep you from the worship of God.
4. Worship God privately, gather your household to worship God, and worship God with your spiritual family at church.

And, in worship throughout the day, give thanks to God in all circumstances and turn to Him in prayer in all trials. We find almost identical application commands given to us in Romans 12:12 and I Thessalonians 5:16-18

Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. – Romans 12:12

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. – I Thessalonians 5:16-18, ESV

We need to strive after this as the pattern for our lives: Rejoice (don't grumble), pray (don't worry or get angry), trust God and give thanks (don't get resentful or bitter). Can we just DO this by our own strength? No, it's the work of the Holy Spirit in us as we seek His strength and presence. But this pattern is not only a more obedient life that pleases God, it's also a far more pleasant life for us. For it turns out God gives us His commandments for our good because He loves us. So, let's seek Him for the grace and strength to obey and have no other gods before Him - for He alone is God and is good and loves us more than we know.