

No Other Gods

In the name of him who rose triumphant over sin and death, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: Throughout the forty days of Lent in preparation for today, in our evening devotions we've been counting down backwards through the Ten Commandments. I personally found the journey to be a helpful spiritual discipline to reveal the enormity of my own sin and thus the need for the forgiveness Jesus suffered and died to achieve for us on the cross. I pray that you too found the journey beneficial in this regard. And if you weren't able to make it here for the services or if you missed some of them, I encourage you to get your hands on the sermon series for use in your own devotions. They should be available soon on the church webpage. And if that doesn't work for you, let me know and I'll get them to you another way.

That having been said, today at long last we come to the journey's end and a review of the First Commandment. It is the command of God upon which all the others depend, because if we don't begin by recognizing the primacy and authority of the Law-giver and his right of rule over us, then we're not going to feel obligated to do anything else he has to say. But to fully appreciate this great first command, we need to go back to the context in which it was originally given.

So place yourself at the foot of Mount Sinai. You're standing there with the Israelites, some two million in number. A month and a half ago, you were all slaves in Egypt – then considered a superpower among the nations of the world. All appearances told you that the pantheon of the Egyptian gods were mighty indeed. Look at the way these gods had blessed their people and made them so strong. Look at their vast wealth, their military might, their immense knowledge and wisdom, the glory of their civilization. Think about the temples of these gods: massive structures of stone. Their ruins still inspire awe among people of our day. Imagine what they looked like to uneducated slaves who lived in mud huts 3500 years ago. And the idols of these gods: the huge, ornate images of Horus and Ra, of Osiris and Isis, and so many others; their imposing forms exuding a sense of power, making you feel weak and pathetic by comparison. Small wonder we're slaves to these people. If we had gods like theirs, maybe we'd be strong too. But as it is, what do we got? Just one God who's remembered mostly in some family stories that have been handed down for the past 400 years. We've got no temple. We've got no idol. We've got nothing to look at. Our God can't be seen. Oh, he talks big. Says he loves and cares for us. Makes lots of promises about what he's going to do for us ... later. Always later. And in the meantime we suffer under the hands of cruel taskmasters who put us to work serving them and their gods. The situation for us was beyond hopeless.

But then a little more than a year ago this guy Moses shows up. Used to be a big wig among the Egyptians, but had to flee the country on account of a murder charge. Now, forty years later he's back. Says he's on a mission from God – our God, the Lord. Says that now's the time: God's going to set us free, get us out of here, and give us a land of our own – a land better than Egypt: richer, more fertile, flowing with milk and honey. Sounds great. Everybody's happy. We're all slapping Moses on the back when off he goes to talk to the Pharaoh to tell him that our God says it's time for us to go. Go get'm, Moses! But things don't work right. Instead of letting us go free, the Pharaoh doubles our work load. He has us beaten when we can't keep up. Gee, Moses, thanks a heap. Exactly what we needed: another disappointment from our God. Let's kill Moses and go back and tell Pharaoh how sorry we are. Maybe he'll back off.

It sounded like a good idea; but we didn't kill Moses. He talked us into giving him another chance. He said, "Now you are going to see what our God can do." And we were impressed. The Nile flowed with blood, then the frogs, the flies, the locusts and the hail – all the rest of the plagues. Our God displayed the power of his mighty outstretched arm over and over again. But he didn't set us free. Happened every time: when he heat was on the Pharaoh would cry uncle and say we could go; but as soon as the plague stopped, he'd change his mind. Same old story: our God delivers more disappointments.

But then came the big one: the Passover. While we feasted on lamb and unleavened bread, the Lord our God struck down the firstborn of Egypt. In the morning the cry among the Egyptians was so great the Pharaoh had to let us go. Their pressed gold and jewels into our hands, imploring us to just hurry and go before our God killed them all. We were free. Off we went rejoicing. Yeah, there was that little glitch at the Red Sea. Can't forget that. Ocean on one side of us, Pharaoh's army coming from the other side. Looked like the end for us. But sure enough, the Lord delivered again. Opened a way for us to go right through the sea. And when the chariots tried to follow us, the Lord dropped walls of water on them. They all drowned. Okay. We got it. We were wrong. Our God totally rocks. He kicked those Egyptian god's butts. He proved that they were useless and powerless – nothing to them. And since then he's been giving us food and water every day in this desert wasteland. He's really taking care of us.

And now he's come down upon the mountain before us. There's a thick cloud filled with fire and smoke. There's lightning flashes and thunder. It's really quite frightening. We are filled with a sense of awe and reverence we never felt looking at those mute and motionless idols back in Egypt. And now he does something no Egyptian god ever did: he speaks to us. He says, "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."

Now look: if you're standing there with the Israelites and you hear this, you'd be thinking, "Well of course not! Why would I want a god other than you? You are the God who saves. You are the God who's providing for me. You are the God who's taking me to the Promised Land. How stupid would I have to be to put another god, which is no god at all, before you? It would be insane." And that's the key to understanding this commandment. The Lord wants us to acknowledge and worship him as our one and only God not for his benefit, but for ours. We are the big losers when we turn away from him to gods that can't save, can't provide for us, and can't take us to the eternal Promised Land. The Lord wants to be our God for our good, not for his sake, because he knows that without him as our God, we lose ourselves. For us to turn from him really is insane.

But sin is insanity. It's believing lies rather than the truth. It's thinking that I can find true and lasting happiness in defying and disobeying the King of the Universe. It's thinking that I know what's better for me than God does. It's thinking this sin won't hurt me and that there will be no consequences to pay. It's thinking my ways are better than God's. That really is insane.

So, what does God require of us in the First Commandment? As we read earlier, he requires that we fear, love, and trust him above all things. Let's take those one at a time.

First, fear. A lot of people want to play that down and say fear in this context doesn't mean fear as in be afraid. God doesn't want us to be afraid of him. They say it has to do more with reverence and respect. They're wrong. You had better be afraid of God. Specifically, you had better be afraid of offending him. Jesus said, "Don't fear those who can kill your body. Be afraid of him who can destroy both your body and soul in hell." The trouble is we don't fear

God. We're not nearly fearful enough of offending him; that's why we do it so often. And we fear other things more than God. We fear what other people think: Ooh, I know this is wrong, but if I don't do this, my friends won't think I'm cool. We fear unhappiness: This could be my last chance; if I don't ditch my spouse for this other person, I may never be happy. We fear the future: If I don't cheat on this business deal, I'll never be financially secure. We fear lots of things more than we fear the Lord. And one of our biggest fears is death. We fear losing the ones we love. We fear that the whole life after death thing is a fairy tale and that our loved ones are gone forever and we'll never get them back. We fear our own deaths. We fear what may come next. This last week, 147 Kenyan Christians showed that they feared the Lord more than they feared death. They could have denied him. They could have said they were Muslims to satisfy the gunmen and save their lives. But they confessed Christ. Now they're martyrs. I wonder how many others didn't confess Christ when faced with death. We fear what we might do if forced to make that choice. The bottom line is this: If you fear something more than the Lord, you have a false god.

Second, God requires that we love him above all things. And here we want to use a biblical definition of love. It's not merely affection; not warm, fuzzy feelings. No, the idea is the willingness to devote and sacrifice oneself for the good of others. Your needs before mine. Now, strictly speaking, God has no needs. He doesn't need us to make sacrifices for his good. Instead, he asks us to show our love for him by serving the needs of others. Jesus is our foremost example. He showed his love for his heavenly Father (and for us) by serving our needs and going to the cross to suffer for our sins. And he commands us, "As I have loved you, so love one another." He even commands us to love our enemies. *That's* how we show our love for God. But we don't love God above all things. We love ourselves more than anyone or anything else. We're always putting ourselves, our needs, our interests above those of others. And that's a problem. If you love something more than the Lord God, you have a false god. And we all do. Its name is me.

Third, the Lord requires that we trust him above all things. This is maybe the hardest one, because there are all kinds of other things we like to place our trust in. We trust in our feelings: if it feels right, it must be right no matter what God says. We trust in our experiences – the things we see and know rather than the unseen things of God. We trust in our own human wisdom. We trust in science and technology and education. We trust in medicine: this will heal me. We trust in money and how much of it we've accumulated, and we fear that it might run out. We trust in our abilities and fear becoming disabled. We trust in other people thinking we couldn't live without them. We trust in our politicians: they'll make the nation better. Well, maybe that's not a good example. But again, if you trust something more than the Lord, you have a false god.

And by now it should be apparent that each of us has a whole pantheon of false gods enshrined in the temples of our hearts. So did the followers of Christ on that first Easter morning. They had been so sure about him. They had all confessed him as the Christ, the Son of God. On Palm Sunday they had hailed him as the Messianic King. They were looking forward to seeing the power of his mighty outstretched arm. And they knew that they were to fear, love, and trust him above all things.

But when he was arrested, they all showed something else. They proved that they feared death far more than they feared offending him. In fact, they were all offended by him. Peter denied even knowing him. They all ran off and hid. They proved that they didn't love him because they abandoned him and didn't show love to each other. It was every man for himself. They didn't trust him. He had told them exactly what was going to happen: how the Son of man

was going to be condemned by the religious leaders, handed over to suffering and death, and that he would rise again on the third day. He told them this repeatedly. And they didn't believe it. That's why on Easter morning the disciples are all hiding together for fear of the Jews, and the women are going out to finish embalming a corpse.

Our leader is dead. We thought he was going to save us. But the only arms he outstretched were on a bloody cross. Now he's gone. It's over for him. He's not coming back. Our enemies have won. They might soon be after us. This whole Jesus thing turned out to be one great big disappointment. Our God let us down. Again. If indeed he was really God after all. Our situation is beyond hopeless.

Or so it seemed; but then we found the tomb opened. When we looked inside, there was an angel there; an honest to God heavenly messenger who said, "Don't be afraid. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he's not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples that he is going before you into Galilee. There you will see him, *just as he told you.*"

And there they did see him. They were amazed. They had to admit they were wrong about it; but now they got it. Our God totally rocks. He beat sin and death for us. We failed him; but he didn't fail us. We failed to keep the First Commandment. But Jesus kept it for us. He feared his Father above all things. That's why he wasn't afraid to face suffering and the cross. He loved his Father above all things. He showed this by sacrificing himself for us and our sins. He trusted in his Father above all things. He was certain that after his suffering and death that he would be raised through the glory of the Father and that the Gospel of forgiveness and life through faith in him would be preached to all nations.

It all happened *just as he said it would*. And now this Gospel of salvation has come to us so that *we* believe. We believe that our God is the God who saves. We believe that it is he who provides for all our needs. We believe that he is taking us to the eternal Promised Land; and that on the Last Day he will raise us up from death to live in glory forever. Our God does it all for us. How stupid would we have to be to put another god, which is no god at all, before him?

Good question. Therefore let us repent of our stupid insanity and our sins of not fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things. And placing our faith in him and his Word of forgiveness, let us praise and give thanks to him now and forever, saying, Alleluia! Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed! Alleluia!) Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!