

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND THE MORAL LIFE

Session II

The First Commandment:

“You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3 = Deuteronomy 5:7)

I. Old Testament Meaning

1. This commandment disallowed the worship of other gods beside the God of Israel and established the precedence of Israel's God over other god. Its most radical meaning is expressed in Isaiah 44:9-22.

2. Exodus itself does not indicate that there are ten commandments; Deuteronomy 4:13 and 10:4 are the source of the notion of “ten words”.

3. The Ten Words do not themselves constitute the covenant but are, rather, a symbol for it.

II. St. Thomas Aquinas (*Catechetical Instructions*)

1. This commandment is related to the love of God and is violated in four ways:

a. by an implied or explicit pact with the devil through the use of magic or the failure to worship the one true God. After 1 Corinthians 10:20 Aquinas sees the choice as not being between God and the gods but between God and demons—to not worship the former is to already be in the service of the latter. Practices such as divination, fortune telling and astrology constitute at least implicit pacts with the devil.

b. by accepting the idea that heavenly bodies can control our destiny—the denial of human freedom and of providence constitute idolatry.

c. by worshiping the elements of creation—various determinisms (economic, genetic, psychological—or by using the things of the earth wrongly (after Ephesians 5:5 and Colossians 3:5).

d. by worshiping ancestors: children; civic, national and cultural heroes; family position; ourselves. “They worship themselves as gods, for by seeking the pleasures of the flesh, they worship their own bodies instead of God” (note Philippians 3:19).

2. Why should we love and adore God alone?

a. Because of the simple recognition of who God is (Isaiah 8:19).

b. Out of gratitude for God's generosity: God “is the maker and giver of all good things”.

c. Because of the promise made at our baptism to renounce the devil and to be faithful to God (Hebrews 10:28-29).

d. Because of the terrible burden of serving the devil (John 8:34). This burden is the opposite of the yoke of Christ (Matthew 11:30). One sin leads us into others.

e. The incomparable nature of the reward (Matthew 22:30).

III. John Calvin (*Institutes of the Christian Religion; Sermons on the Ten Commandments*)

1. The tendency to worship something other than God is the chief consequence of sin: “as soon as God’s name is mentioned, our mind is unable to refrain from lapsing into some absurd invention” (*Institutes*, II.viii.16).

2. “...we cannot ‘have’ God without at the same time embracing the things that are his. Therefore, in forbidding us to have strange gods, he means that we are not to transfer to another what belongs to him” (*Institutes*, II.viii.16).

3. We have four principle duties with respect to this commandment:

- a. Adoration
- b. Trust
- c. Invocation
- d. Thanksgiving

4. It is not enough merely to abstain from false gods; our minds must actually be devoted to the living God. We are “to contemplate, fear and worship his majesty; to participate in his blessings; to seek his help at all times; to recognize, and by praises to celebrate, the greatness of his works—as the only good of all the activities of this life” (*Institutes*, II.viii.16)

5. The source of much impiety is the thought that we can evade God’s notice. In fact, God’s eye “gazes upon the most secret recesses of our hearts.”

6. The only thing which allows this commandment to be kept is *piety*: “the pious mind does not devise for itself any kind of god, but looks alone to the one true God; nor does it feign for him any character it pleases, but is contented to have him in the character in which he manifests himself” (*Institutes*, I.ii.1).

7. This commandment presupposes the falling away from God; it is a commandment given to *sinners*. “...seeing that he has created the world because of us, that he has destined and consecrated everything to our usage, that he has implanted his image in us to the end that we might be immortal...when we see all this, would we not be more than stupid if we failed to be enraptured with an ardent desire to worship our God and to devote ourselves and everything to him? (*Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, Sermon 2).

IV. Martin Luther (*The Large Catechism*)

1. What is a “god”? “A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else that to trust and believe him with our whole heart.”

2. The purpose of this commandment is to require “true faith and confidence of the heart and thus to fly straight to the one true God and cling to him alone.”

3. “...if anyone boasts of great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family and honor, and trusts in this, he also has a god, but not the one, true God.”

St. Peter's Anglican Church, Tallahassee, Florida
Fr. Michael Petty

4. "To have God, you see, does not mean to lay hands upon him, or put him into a purse, or shut him up in a chest. We lay hold of him when our heart embraces him and clings to him."

5. "Even now there are proud, powerful, and rich pot-bellies who, not caring whether God frowns or smiles, boast defiantly of their mammon and believe that they can withstand his wrath. But they will not succeed. Before they know it they will be wrecked along with all they have trusted in..."

V. Reflections and Questions

1. Seen from the "backside" this commandment makes it clear that we have a positive duty to protect and nourish our faith. In what ways can this be done?

2. This commandment could also be seen as forbidding two extremes. On one hand, we must avoid despairing of salvation and on the other we must avoid presuming upon God's mercy. Which is the more likely tendency?

3. In traditional expositions of this commandment it is usually emphasized that what must be avoided is acedia or spiritual sloth and the qualities that tend to accompany it, ingratitude, indifference and lukewarmness. In what ways does acedia manifest itself in your life and in the life of the Church?

4. The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) defines idolatry in this way: "It is, instead of the one true God who has revealed himself in his Word, or along with the same, to conceive or have something else which to place our trust" (Question 95). What are some of our idols?