

10 Commandments Series: 1st Commandment-No Other Gods

The Way of Reflection

Imagine you are an eight-year-old boy or girl, and you've just opened your main birthday present. It's a complicated mechanical toy, and it's got 36 pages of directions, and definitely some assembly is required. Mom says, Let's use these directions and figure out how this thing works. And you say, No, I can do it myself, and you leave the directions in your mom's lap, go behind the couch and start working on this present.

Twenty minutes later, you come out from behind the couch with tears in your eyes, and you say, This stupid thing doesn't work. Nothing fits right. I've already busted one piece. And your mom says, Let's take a look at those directions. So we've been given this amazing gift of life, and our first response might be, I can do it myself. I don't need any directions. And then things go wrong, and the parts don't fit, and things get broken.

The good news is that God has given us some directions, some guidelines. We don't have to figure it all out for ourselves. Barbara Brown Taylor puts words into God's mouth concerning the 10 Commandments: "Here is a way of life that works. Sink these ten posts in the center of your camp, hang a tent on them, and together you may survive in the wilderness. Ignore them and you flirt with your own destruction. Guard your life together. Guard your life with me. Here are ten rules that will help you do that. Please accept them as a gift from me. (Taylor, Gospel Medicine)

As Tom Long says, If God's rescue of us is the music, then the 10 Commandments are the dance steps. The 10 Commandments aren't meant to be weighty obligations; they're meant to help us dance the dance of life better.

I don't know if you are aware of this, but different religious groups count the 10 Commandments differently. They aren't numbered in the text. Lutherans and Catholics agree that, Don't have any other gods, and don't make any images are the same commandment. We figure they mean essentially the same thing. So that's our first commandment. The other Protestant denominations count those as the first and second commandments.

But if we combine the first two, to get them to add up to 10, we need to separate the coveting commandments. So at the end of the list, Lutherans and Catholics have two commandments about coveting: Don't covet your neighbor's spouse, and don't covet anything else of your neighbors.

So the commandment we are considering today is: You shall have no other gods before me. Now the chapter doesn't start this way. God 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." God says, This is who I am, and this is what I've done for you. And because of who I am and what I have done, I don't want you to have any other gods.

Joan Chittester, in her book, *The Ten Commandments: The Laws of the Heart*, says that this commandment decides the orientation of our lives. If God is first in our hearts, then everything else falls into place. I often think about the choice I made to leave a college I first attended in Southern California to transfer to a university in Northern California. Because I made that change, because I oriented myself in a new direction, I discovered the Lutheran church, I spent a year in Vienna, where my faith was challenged and reshaped, and I met Susan, my future wife. That move totally reoriented my life.

The first commandment orients our life. Who or what do I put my trust in? Is God my only God, or do I put other things there? Luther writes this in his Larger Catechism- What does it mean to have a god? or, what is God? Answer: A god means that from which we are to expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress, so that to have a God is nothing else than to trust and believe Him from the [whole] heart; as I have often said that the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol... That now, I say, upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god."

In what do I set my heart and put my trust? That becomes my god. When push comes to shove in my life, who do I rely on? Maybe another way to put this is, Is there something else that captures me? Is there something that enslaves me....Fear? Food? Rage? Lust? Shame? A need for control? A craving for more stuff? Brian McLaren, in his book, *We Make the Road by Walking*, says that it took

ten plagues to get the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt. And it took the Ten Commandments to get slavery out of the people.

So his paraphrase of the first commandment is: “Put the God of liberation first, not the gods of slavery.” Not fear, or greed, or a political ideology, either to the left or the right...Don’t trust in anything more than you trust God.

Now we Lutherans put the next couple of verses together with this commandment. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form that is in anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them...Most of us wouldn’t think to put any worth in an image that we would create.

But if we try to reduce God to some manageable size, isn’t that creating an idol? “God is in these doctrines, and only in these doctrines. God is only in my version of faith, but not yours.” If I do that, I’ve limited God to a version I can manage, that I can control. And if my version of God dehumanizes somebody else, then I’ve created an idol.

Now, we never get it right. We always have some idolatry going on in us. We always have a distorted image of God. Any time we try to name God, we get it wrong. We are growing in our faith; we are growing in our understanding. Gregory of Nyssa, an early church theologian, said that sin is a refusal to grow. Isn’t that interesting? Maybe if I refuse to let my understanding of God evolve, then I am separating myself from the God, which is what sin is. God wants to open my eyes wider, and I say, No, I’ve got it all figured out. And my idea of who God is ends up bring my idol.

By the way, the idea of God and what God commands evolves throughout Scripture. In Exodus, Moses says that when a slave is freed after seven years, he takes nothing with him. In Deuteronomy, the slave is called your brother, and you are to give him compensation when he leaves. In Deuteronomy, Moses says that God will bless those who obey the law, and curse those who don’t. In the book of Job, when his friends try to use this theology on Job, God says, That’s not the way I work.

The biblical story is the story of people trying to understand God, and their theology evolves throughout the story. And it's ok for our understanding to evolve as well. So please know that it's ok to ask questions, it's ok to push the theological envelope, it's ok to say to God, I don't get it.

We're singing a new song at the 10:45 service today called *While I Wait*. It speaks to waiting for God when we don't have the answers, when we don't get it, when the answers we thought we had nailed down don't work anymore. "Deep inside my heart, I know You've won, I know You've overcome. And even in the dark when I'm undone, I still believe it. I live by faith, and not by sight, sometimes miracles take time.

"While I wait, I will worship, Lord, I'll worship Your name. While I wait, I will trust You, Lord, I'll trust You all the same." Remember what Luther said, "That now, I say, upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god."

By the way, maybe you heard this commandment read this morning and part of it seemed harsh to you; it didn't sound like a loving God. "You shall not bow down to them (meaning idols) or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments."

Does God punish children for the sins of their parents? That doesn't seem fair, does it? The way I interpret this is that children often benefit, or they pay the consequences for their parents' behavior. If I misuse drugs or alcohol and have children, there is a chance that my children will be affected. Ask the adult child of an alcoholic. If you were raised in a family of an alcoholic, or a ragaholic, you might have some of these tendencies: fear of losing control of a situation; a tendency to bury your feelings, because when you grew up, feelings could be dangerous; you tend to be a perfectionist; you avoid conflict; you seek approval from other people in an unhealthy way. Those can be the consequences of being raised in the household of an alcoholic. That's an example of the sin of the parent is visited on the children. And it doesn't mean it has to keep going from generation to generation. We can break the generational cycle; we can receive healing through counseling and a support group and medication when it's needed.

And on the other side, when God's commandments are honored, there are values that are lived out and carried on to the next generations. Again, this isn't a guarantee, but the consequences of our lifestyles can live on as blessings or as curses in the next generation.

The sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow says that we pass along the values and ethics that we live by in the stories that we tell. He tells the story of Jack Casey, a volunteer fireman and ambulance attendant who, as a child, had to have some of his teeth extracted under general anesthesia. Jack was terrified, but a nurse standing nearby said to him, "Don't worry, I'll be here right beside you no matter what happens." She was still standing near him when he woke up from surgery. She had kept her promise.

Twenty years later his ambulance crew was called to the scene of an accident. The driver of a pick-up was trapped underneath his vehicle. As Jack crawled inside to try to get him out of the wreckage, gasoline was dripping on Jack and the driver, an incredibly dangerous situation because the crew was using power tools to try to extricate the driver.

The driver kept crying out how scared he was, and Jack kept saying to him, Don't worry, I'm right here, I'm not going anywhere, just like that nurse had told him so many years before. Later, when they were both out from the wreckage, the driver was incredulous that Jack had stayed with him. He said, You were an idiot. You know that thing could have exploded and we both would have been burned up. And Jack simply said, I couldn't leave you.

That's the way the commandments work. First comes the experience of being cared for, of being set free from fear or bondage. And then our lives are shaped around that gift. We respond to that act of love. God says, Look what I did for you. I brought you out of life into death. And we respond with acts of love and justice. Those are the commandments.

Do you remember that these ten words start with, I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery? That was Jack's experience. That nurse so many years before had been faithful to him. She had

rescued him from his fear. And twenty years later, in another situation of fear, he was able to be faithful to someone else.

God has rescued us and brought us into new life. And God says to us, Here are some ways to live this out. If God's rescuing us is the music, then the commandments are the dance steps. They are not meant to be weighty obligations. They are meant to free us to love and to serve. They are meant to free us to dance. Amen.