

**YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS
IN MY PRESENCE**

Exod 20:1-3

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Perhaps the hottest religious topic of the 21st century in America is the Ten Commandments. The debate is not about what they say, but where they can be seen. Should the Ten Commandments be displayed in public? If yes, where? Notice on the screen in front of you these clips from the media depicting the battle over displaying the Ten Commandments in an Alabama courthouse.¹ Perhaps you have seen this billboard while driving on the expressway: “What about ‘Thou shalt not’ do you not understand?” —God.

The Ten Commandments by themselves are no magic force that will make us good. Simply seeing them and even knowing them is no guarantee that we will practice them. If seeing is believing, then believing should be seeing. In other words, if we say we

¹Power Point slides showing pictures from Lisa Stein, “The Week,” *U.S. News & World Report* (September 1, 2003) and Bob Johnson, “An Alabama Judge Fiery Defender of Monunment,” *Detroit Free Press* (August 22, 2003) of the Ten Commandments monument Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore refuses

believe them, then they should be seen in our lives. Our lives should be a public display of the Ten Commandments.

The first 3 verses of Exod 20 reads as follows (my translation):

Then God spoke all of these words saying: “I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods in My presence” (20:1-3).

According to the Jewish tradition, the first commandment is in fact the announcement: “I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” The second commandment is then: “You shall have no other gods in My presence.” Every other tradition, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Reformed Christian, and Orthodox Christian, say the Jewish one and two are to be taken together as the first commandment.

Whether or not seen as the first commandment, God’s words of self-introduction are of extraordinary importance. *First, they keep the law personally oriented.* Obedience results from an attachment to Yahweh rather than an adherence to a legal code for its own sake. “I am Yahweh, *your* God”—obedience takes place within a relationship with the living God. *Second, God’s introduction ties the law to the story of salvation.* “I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” The law is God’s gift to a redeemed people. God’s grace—rescuing the Hebrews from Egypt—precedes His law. The demands of law, as always in the Bible, follow the gift of God. The Ten Commandments, then, are not a means of salvation but are instruction on how the saved are to live-out their everyday lives. The Ten Commandments teach God’s people how to live as God’s people.

So, what does all of this mean for you and for me in the 21st century? What bearing does any of this have on the contemporary battle being waged over the Ten Commandments? And the answer is . . . *unless and until I know and confess that Yahweh is the God who brought me out of bondage, the Ten Commandments are nothing more than a sterile list of dos and don’ts that I may or may not choose to take seriously.* In the absence of a relationship with Yahweh, the Ten Commandments are as lifeless as the stone upon which they were first chiseled. We cannot understand the Ten

Commandments—the Decalogue—the “Ten Words”—apart from the worship of Yahweh the Lord God. The Ten Commandments are for those who are known by the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the God of Jesus Christ. The commandments are the way we learn to worship the true God truthfully, not the way we make American democratic pluralism work.

The Ten Commandments are not guidelines for humanity in general. They are a completely different way of life for those who know who they are and whose they are. Their purpose is not to keep American culture running smoothly, but rather to produce a people who are, in our daily lives, a public display that God has not left this world to its own devices. Before the Ten Commandments have anything to say about us, they have something to say about God. At the outset, these commandments announce loud and clear that the God who commands is *first* the God who loves us and who acts for us. The Ten Commandments show us how to respond to God with the love God has shown first.

The first commandment states: “You shall have no other gods in My presence.” Yahweh tolerates no rivals. To worship other gods is literally “to fly in the face of” Yahweh, to go “against” the One who brought us out of bondage. The most straightforward implication of the first commandment is that those who claim Yahweh as their God must center all of life, in every sphere, around one single loyalty. As in ancient times, so in modern times, there are other gods clamoring to be chosen. If we choose Yahweh to be our Savior, our love and our loyalty will show itself in the practice of the nine commandments that follow this one. But whenever we put what we want above what we know is right, we have broken the very first of the Ten Commandments.

There is another possible translation of the first commandment. We are probably most accustomed to this commandment saying something like, “You must not possess other gods.” An intriguing alternative translation is, “You must not become other gods.” Does this remind you of anything? Have you heard similar words before? Ah yes . . . the infamous promise of the snake in the Garden of Eden. He said to the human couple that with the eating of the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that you will “become like gods.” The prize, announced the serpent, is that “You will certainly become God!” Yahweh God, however, asserts that “You must not become another god over against me!”

The hilarious result of Adam and Eve's attempt to seize divinity is their sewing of fig-leaf aprons to cover their nakedness. Every Israelite hearing that, along with every person who lives in the warmer climates of the southern parts of the United States, would immediately burst out laughing. They know what fig leaves feel like. Perhaps No. 2 grade sandpaper might be a good analogy! We can only imagine how briefly the naked couple might be able actually to wear fig leaves next to the more tender places of their nakedness. Becoming God is in this wonderful tale far less than it is cracked up to be.

The first commandment, then, is nothing less than a summary of the Bible's most basic statement as to who God is and who we are. God is in control; we are not. God is mighty; we are weak. God is the liberator of slaves; we are the slaves. God is the savior; we are the sinners. God is God; we are not.

The Ten Commandments—what are we going to do with them? Until we come to worship the God of the commandments, it is not likely that we will do anything useful with the commandments. For it is the love of God that turns the law of God into a way of life. Apart from the worship of the true God, the Ten Commandments are spiritless words engraved in lifeless stone. Unless the Ten Commandments are written upon our hearts, it makes little difference wherever else that may be written.

So, what's the point of this sermon? Actually, there are two points. *First, we must stop trying to get something out of God and instead give our lives to God.* The Ten Commandments are first and foremost about God, and then about us. As we constantly come before the Lord God in worship and see Him in light of what He has done for us, we should realize that far too often we are selfish consumers who seek God for what we can get out of Him. In true worship, our idolatries are exposed—far too often we seek the gifts but do not serve the Giver. In true worship, we give ourselves to God for we are confronted with our own nakedness which we cannot hide. The question is *not*, Are the Ten Commandments relevant for our lives? The question is, Are our lives relevant to the God of the commandments? We must stop trying to get something out of God and instead give our lives to God.

Second, we must realize that idolatry is the assumption that salvation can come elsewhere than from the God who commands, "You shall have no other gods in My presence." Whether by means of other gods or by becoming our own god, it is idolatry

to think and to act as if salvation can be found apart from Yahweh. Autonomy, independence, self-sufficiency, to be our own gods, are often seen as the hallmark of modernity. Faced with the apparent meaninglessness of a world without God, we assume that a major modern task is to create or to impose meaning. In contrast, the Ten Commandments remind us that the meaning of our lives is given through the discovery that we are indeed creatures of a gracious God who gives us all the time in the world to live in trust with one another. Meaning is a by-product of listening to the God in the very first commandment. Yahweh, He is the Savior and there is no other.

Then God spoke all of these words saying: "I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods in My presence."

God has spoken. Is anyone listening?

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