

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

Exodus 20:1-3

By Andy Manning

The title of the sermon is “The First Commandment.”

This is week 2 of our sermon series on the Ten Commandments, and today we’re going to study the first commandment.

The first commandment essentially forbids us from worshipping any other gods but the one true God, Yahweh.

On the surface, it may not sound very relevant to you.

You probably are not tempted to worship other gods like Allah, or Baal, or Molech, or Zeus, or Ra.

So you might be quick to check this one off the list and move on to the second commandment.

But this morning I’m going to show you that this command is very practical to us today.

We are all tempted to worship false gods; they are just not the same gods that the Israelites were tempted to worship when the Ten Commandments were initially given.

And at the same time, I want to teach why this commandment is so relevant.

The bottom line is this. You are a worshiper. Everyone worships. Atheists worship. Agnostics worship. We all worship.

The question is who or what?

If you worship the God of the Bible, you will find life and liberty and joy and eternal life, but if you worship any other god, then you will find slavery and misery and destruction.

Let's begin by reading the text. Turn to **Exodus 20:1-3 (CSB)**.

1 Then God (*Heb. Elohim*) spoke all these words (*The Ten Commandments are often referred to as the Decalogue, which is Greek for Ten Words*):

2 I am the LORD your God (*Yahweh your Elohim*), who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery.

3 Do not have (*Do not have a relationship with*) other gods besides me (*lit. before my face; in my presence*).

If I had to pick the one thing that I want more than anything from wife it would be exclusivity. I want to be my wife's only husband; her only man; her only romantic love. I want all of her for myself. And if you asked Lydia the one thing that she wants more than anything from me, it would be the same – exclusivity.

It's the same with God. God deserves and desires our exclusive worship. He created us. He redeemed us from sin, Satan, and hell. He is the only true God. He deserves our exclusive worship all for Himself.

Ant that's what the first commandment is all about. **The first commandment requires exclusive, wholehearted worship to the only true God, Yahweh.**

I like how **Philip Ryken** put it. "Some things are not meant to be shared. A bite-sized candy bar, for example. Or a unicycle. Or a piece of confidential information, like the answers to a test. Or to take an even more serious example, the exclusive love between a husband and wife.... There are times when even God refuses to share.... This is especially true when it comes to the prerogatives of his deity. God will not share His glory with any other god."

One person explained the first commandment like this. “The first commandment tells us that we are to have no other gods but God; He is to be the exclusive object of our worship; the ultimate object of our love and desire.”

The **Heidelberg Catechism**, written in 1563, explains the first commandment like this. “What does Lord require in the first commandment? That I, not wanting to endanger my very salvation, avoid and shun all idolatry, magic, superstitious rites, and prayer to saints or to other creatures. That I sincerely acknowledge the only true God, trust Him alone, look to Him for every good thing humbly and patiently, love Him, fear Him, and honor Him with all my heart. In short, that I give up anything rather than go against His will in any way (Q94).”

The **Westminster Shorter Catechism**, written in 1647, explains it like this:

Quest. 46. What is required in the first commandment?

Ans. 46. The first commandment requireth us to know and acknowledge God to be the only true God, and our God; and to worship and glorify him accordingly.

Quest. 47. What is forbidden in the first commandment?

Ans. 47. The first commandment forbiddeth the denying, or not worshipping and glorifying the true God as God, and our God; and the giving of that worship and glory to any other, which is due to him alone.

The first commandment includes four duties.

Four Duties Of The First Commandment

1. You must have a God.

The first commandment condemns atheism – the belief that there is no God; and agnosticism – which is not choosing a God.

Agnostics don't say there is no God; they just they don't know. But that just means that they refuse to choose a God. They are indecisive.

Our culture is dominated by atheism.

Phil Johnson said “Atheism is the state religion of America.”

Atheism is cool; religion is out of style. Atheism is smart and intellectual; religion is ridiculous.

Atheist Bill Maher even made an anti-religious documentary and called it “Religulous.”

Richard Dawkins says, “Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence.”

Atheists wear their beliefs like a badge of honor; people of religion are embarrassed of their beliefs and often hide them.

Atheists today are angry and aggressive and have a goal to wipe out religion. They are not just unbelievers; they hate religion.

There are now many atheists who have become famous simply because of their promotion of atheism. Richard Dawkins; Christopher Hitchens; Sam Harris.

These men think they are the smart ones, but **Psalm 14:1** says, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There’s no God.’”

Just about everyone believed in God or the supernatural up until the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century.

Then, with the coming of the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason, or the Modern Age, or Modernity, the intellectual elites taught that there may be a god, but no one can know for sure, because the only things that we can know are the things that we can experience through the senses.

Since that time, belief in God (in the West) has become less popular, and atheism has become more popular.

But the Bible teaches that there is a God.

It doesn't try to prove God's existence; it just assumes God's existence.

The very first words in the Bible are, "In the beginning God (Gen 1:1)."

And Romans 1 tells us that people intuitively know that there is a God.

This why you can see the religious impulse in mankind ever since the beginning of human history.

Even today, while atheism is becoming more popular in the West, the vast majority of people in the West and around the world believe in God.

The existence of God is obvious. It is necessary. It makes no sense to not believe in God.

Let me give you **the three most common arguments for the existence of God.**

First, **the cosmological argument** says that something cannot come from nothing.

How do we know there is a God? Because there is something rather than nothing.

Where did the earth and the sun and the stars and the universe come from? The big bang? What caused the big bang?

To explain the existence of the universe, there had to be a first cause, a first mover, a self-existent God to get it all started.

Second, **the teleological argument** says that design is proof of a designer.

When you look at your cell phone, it is obvious that it had a designer. Someone with a lot of intelligence had to put it together. It is so complex.

What is more complex? A cell phone or the human body?

The human body. Your DNA, digestive system, nervous system, and cardiovascular system are infinitely more complex than an iPhone.

And so if the iPhone obviously had a designer, then it's obvious that the human body had a designer, too.

Third, **the moral argument** says that the moral law in our hearts proves the existence of a moral law giver.

Sometimes an atheist will say, "I don't believe in God because if God existed He wouldn't allow all the evil in the world."

But how does the atheist know that what he sees as the evil in the world is actually evil?

The answer is that he just knows, and we all do. We all instinctively know right from wrong, to one degree or another.

We all have the moral law written on our hearts.

Where did that come from? There must have been a moral law giver.

Let me put it another way. If you agree that there is such a thing as evil, then there must also be good. If good and evil exist, then there is a moral law. If there is a moral law, then there must be a moral law giver.

So the first duty of the first commandment is that you must affirm the existence of God.

Hebrews 11:6 says, “Now without faith it is impossible to please God, since the one who draws near to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”

2. You must worship the right God.

The first commandment doesn't just require that you have a god; you must choose the right God.

Who is the right God?

The preface to the Ten Commandments tells who the right God is. The preface is found **Exodus 20:1-2**. “1 Then God spoke all these words: 2 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery.”

The preface tells us **four truths about God**.

God is Yahweh.

Sometimes people pronounce it Jehovah.

Yahweh is God's personal name.

The word Yahweh literally means “to exist; to be.”

It means that God is self-existent. God is the only uncreated being. He is the only eternal being. He has no beginning. He has no creator.

This means that everything that exists came from God's hand.

In the New Testament we learn that Jesus is Yahweh when He said in **John 8:58**, “Truly I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.”

And then the New Testament goes on to reveal that Yahweh is the **Triune God**. He is one God in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; one God in three distinct, coequal, coeternal persons.

Second, God is good.

Notice He says “I am the Lord your God.”

How did God become the Israelite’s God? He chose them. They didn’t choose Him. He chose them.

It wasn’t because they were more righteous and numerous than the other nations. It was simply because God loved them (Deut 7:7; 9:4-5).

And the Bible says that God loves you.

1 Peter 5:7 (NIV) says, “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”

Psalm 86:5 says, “O Lord, you are so good, so ready to forgive, so full of unfailing love for all who ask for your help.”

Psalm 86:18 says, “But you, O Lord, are a God of compassion and mercy, slow to get angry, and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness.”

Third, God is our Savior.

Notice that God said, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery.”

Just as God saved the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, He sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to save us from slavery to sin, Satan, and hell.

John 3:16 says, “For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”

Jesus came to earth and died on the cross for our sins and rose again, and whoever believes in Him will have eternal life.

Fourth, God is great.

God said, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery.”

Delivering the Israelites from the hand of Pharaoh was not small feat.

Pharaoh was the most powerful man on earth.

Egypt was the most powerful nation on earth.

Yet God sent 10 horrible plagues against Egypt;

and then as the Israelites were being chased by the Egyptians, God parted the Red Sea so that they could cross on dry land.

After passing through the Red Sea they entered the wilderness, and God provided for their needs by giving them manna from heaven, and water from the rock.

God proved Himself over and over again to be not only a good God, but to be a great God.

The Bible teaches that Yahweh almighty, omnipresent, all-knowing, all-wise, the creator of the heavens and the earth, sovereign and in charge of everything that goes on.

In **Mark 10:27** Jesus said, “... All things are possible with God.”

It's not enough to choose a God; you must choose the right God. The right God is Yahweh, the one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit, creator, ruler, and Savior.

3. You must not worship other gods.

The first commandment doesn't merely command you to choose the right God; you must only worship the right God.

You must *only* worship *Yahweh*.

This verse prohibits two things.

You must not worship other gods instead of Yahweh, and you must not worship other gods along with Yahweh.

Yahweh is to be your only God.

Philip Ryken wrote, "God will not share the stage with any other performers. He refuses to have any colleagues. He will not even acknowledge that he has any genuine rivals."

Phil Johnson said, "God has no competitors and he will tolerate no pretenders."

When the Israelites lived in Egypt for over 400 years, they eventually adopted the false gods of the Egyptians.

The Egyptians worshiped the gods of the fields and rivers, the gods of the light and darkness, the gods of the sun and storms. They worshiped the gods of war. They worshipped idols in the form of man and animal. Some of these gods were Osiris, the god of the underworld/afterlife; Hapi, the god of the Nile River; Ra, the sun god; Min, and the god of virility and fertility.

And God knew that the Promised Land was filled with people who worshiped false gods such as Baal, the god of rain and fertility who required prostitution and self-mutilation, and Molech, who required child sacrifice.

And so God told them, you can only worship me.

Now we aren't tempted to worship those kinds of false gods, but that doesn't mean that we aren't tempted to worship false gods of the twenty-first century.

There are several questions we can ask to help us identify our own gods.

First, who is in charge of your life?

Or who do you really wish to please in life?

Whoever is ultimately in charge of your life is your god.

One author wrote, "Is God in charge of your Mondays, your work, your relationships, your comings and goings, your dating life, your success quotient, your aspirations and dreams, your amassing of things, your money, or is some other deities in charge? Are other things and people dictating your decisions?"

The answer to that question might not be someone else, but you. You are in charge of your life. And that means you worship yourself.

Second, who or what do you put first?

Duane Christensen wrote, "Anything that relegates the relationship with God to second place functions in effect as 'another god.'"

You might believe in God, but if you are willing to disobey God for someone or something else, then He is not your God; that other thing is your god.

The most popular gods today are sex, shekels, and stomach.

And then there are the other three, pleasure, possessions, and position.

And finally, football, the firm, and the family.

Many people are willing to disobey God in order to get one of these other things.

That shows that those other things are your gods.

Third, who or what would you be unwilling to give up for God?

Or what would cause you to resent God if He took it from you?

Maybe your reputation. Your career. Your health. Your finances. A loved one.

That is your god.

If we are going to follow the first commandment, God must be in charge; God must be first.

4. You must worship Yahweh.

Finally, the fourth duty of the first commandment is that you worship Yahweh.

Not only must you avoid false worship, or the worship of other gods, but you must worship Yahweh.

Why does God command us to worship on Him? Is He insecure? Is He needy? Does He hate competition?

First, God commands us to worship Him because He is the only true God.

To worship anything else is to worship creation rather than the creator.

Deuteronomy 4:39 says, “Today, recognize and keep in mind that the Lord is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other.”

Second, God commands us to worship Him because He deserves our worship.

He made us. He provides for us. He keeps us alive. And He gave us eternal life through Christ. It’s only right and just that we worship God.

Third, God commands us to worship Him because He is worthy.

The more accurately and clearly you see who God is, the more you will worship Him, because He is worthy to be praised.

He is almighty God; all-knowing; omnipresent; all-wise; sovereign; eternal; immortal; He is love; He is holy; He is just; He is perfect; He is merciful and compassionate; He is slow to anger; He is gracious and generous; He answers our prayers; He cares for us; He is always near.

Fourth, God commands us to worship Him for our own happiness.

We were created to worship God.

Augustine said, “You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.”

We were created with a God-sized hole in our hearts, and no matter how hard we try to fill it with other things, we won’t be happy and fulfilled unless with let God fill it.

Everybody worships something.

John Piper wrote, "Everyone in the world worships something.... All people value something high enough to build their lives around it."

You can't avoid worshipping.

You can either worship God, or you can worship a false god like sex, and money, and pleasure, and career.

Erwin Lutzer said that every god demands allegiance, wants to take over, will dominate and control, and will enslave. Every god, including the true God.

Now you were made to be ruled and controlled and dominated by Yahweh.

When you worship Yahweh you will find true joy and freedom, because freedom is not doing what you want, but doing what God made you do, and wanting to do what God made you to do.

But the worship of any other god only leads to destruction.

Mark Driscoll said that the USA is supposed to be the land of the free; instead it is the land of the slaves. It's just that we don't call it slavery, we call it addiction.

- "I'm addicted to alcohol." You're a slave to the bottle.
- "I'm addicted to drugs." You're a slave to the substances.
- "I'm addicted to gambling." You're enslaved to the high and the potential windfall you pursue.
- "I'm addicted to my reputation." You are a slave to the god in the mirror.
- "I'm addicted to body image." You are a slave to your appearance.
- "I'm driven by my GPA, by my income, by my position at work." You are enslaved to your performance.

Mark Driscoll said that "the only freedom we have is the freedom to choose our master."

You will worship. You will have a master.

Will it be the God who loves and liberates, or the a false god who enslaves and destroys?

Mark Driscoll went on to say, “You can’t live free until you realize that there’s only one God, and you’re not Him. You’re not the center of the universe. You’re miserable because you’re worshiping yourself; you were made to worship and glorify Him. When you make yourself the center, you make yourself miserable. God doesn’t say, ‘Most important thing, you. Everything else will orbit around that. You sit on the throne, I’ll be the butler, you make your requests, and we’ll call that prayer.’ God demands to be the top of our priorities and the center of our lives. God is not going to be a part of your life; He wants to be God over every area of your life.”

So what does it mean to worship God?

First, to worship God means to love Him with your entire being.

Jesus said this is the first and greatest commandment in **Mark 12:30**. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

This means love God with every part of your life, and also wholeheartedly.

God doesn’t want part of your life, He wants it all.

And He doesn’t want half-hearted, lazy, casual, laid-back love. He wants wholeheartedness.

Second, to worship God means to adore Him.

To have deep, passionate affection for Him.

To desire Him more than anything else in the world.

Psalm 63:1 says, “God, you are my God; I eagerly seek you. I thirst for you; my body faints for you in a land that is dry, desolate, and without water.”

Psalm 42:1-2 says, “1 As a deer longs for flowing streams, so I long for you, God. 2 I thirst for God, the living God. When can I come and appear before God?”

To worship God is to see Him as the most beautiful, the most amazing, the most desirable, the most awesome, the most glorious thing in the world.

Third, to worship God is to praise Him.

If you truly adore God and have deep, passionate affection for Him, you can't hold it in.

True worship has to come out in your words and songs.

Psalm 44:8 says, “We boast in God all day long; we will praise your name forever.”

To praise God is to compliment God, to verbally and musically declare His goodness and greatness, and your love and devotion to Him.

Fourth, to worship God is to thank Him.

The Puritan **Thomas Watson** calls thanksgiving “the congratulatory part of prayer, when we give thanks for mercies received, which is the most excellent part of prayer. In petition, we act like men; in giving thanks, we act like angels.”

1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, “Give thanks in everything; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”

Fifth, to worship God is to talk to Him.

Talking to God is called prayer.

Thomas Watson defined prayer like this: “What is prayer? It is an offering up of our desires to God for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ.”

To worship God is to talk to Him in prayer, often, and always, in all that you do.

It is to carry on a conversation with Him at all times and in all places.

Sixth, to worship God is to obey Him.

In **John 14:15** Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commands.”

God loves it when you sing His praises, but only if you back it up with obedient living.

God loves to answer your prayers, but He will not reward disobedience with blessings.

Seventh, to worship God is to put Him first.

Jesus explained true worship very clearly in **Luke 9:23**. “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me.”

To deny yourself means to put God’s will before your own.

And to take up your cross means to be willing to do God’s will no matter the cost.

God wants to be so important to you that you are willing to give up everyone and everything you have if He calls you to it.

To worship God is to be willing to face the fiery furnace, and the lion's den, and the guillotine for His sake.

To worship God is to not allow anything to hinder your relationship with God, or to take the place of your relationship with God.

Eighth, to worship God is to serve Him.

Go back to **Luke 9:23**. "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me."

What does it mean to follow Jesus? It means to devote your life to His service; to His mission.

And what is His mission? Primarily it is the Great Commission, to go into all the world and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey Christ's commands.

Conclusion

Mark Driscoll said that the second most important decision in life is who you marry. The most important decision is who you worship.

Who is your God? Have you made a conscious decision to make Yahweh your God, and to worship Him, and to worship no other gods?