
The 1st Law of Life - part 1 of 2

"And God spoke all these words, saying: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Ex. 20:1–3).

This is the first and greatest commandment, and the one which comprehends all the others. It is the summing up of all whole law, for we read that the first and great commandment is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). "And the second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (v. 39). It is not separate from the first, but is included in it, since "love is of God," and only as the love of God is shed abroad in one's heart can one love his neighbor as himself. So to love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind,—that is, to have no other gods before Him,—is the sum of human duty. "There is no other God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live" (1 Cor. 8:4–6). Therefore, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:4–5).

The Law is a Relic of the Past

In these days the commandments are thought by many to be out of date. They are regarded generally as a relic of the past age and an inferior civilization. People think that Christianity has outgrown them, and has brought in larger and more perfect views of truth and duty. Ministers of the Gospel that have a very narrow experience, cannot instruct people as to what is comprehended in the Ten Commandments. Those who hold such views need to pray the prayer of the Psalmist: "Open my eyes, that I may see Wondrous things from Your law" (Ps. 119:18). It is their minds that are narrow, and not the commandment, for the "commandment is exceedingly broad" (v. 96). Therefore it is, as God said of Ephraim, "I have written for him the great things of My law, but they were considered a strange thing" (Hos. 8:12). "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether" (Ps. 19:7–9). Therefore **the one who regards the law as a strange thing, must be a stranger to conversion, righteousness, purity, and perfection.**

No soul, either in this world or in the world to come, whether man or angel, can get beyond this one precept, "You shall have no other gods before Me," or its other form, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." It is obvious that to get beyond this commandment would be to break it, since it would be having other gods before the true God.

As there are so many who think that the commandments are out of date, it is not surprising that they regard this one as not necessary. Of course they will admit that it is necessary to preach it in India and China and other lands where false gods are worshipped; but while not consciously disparaging it, they think that we stand in no need of it, since we do not worship other gods. This is a great mistake; there is not a Christian in any country who cannot say with Isaiah: "O Lord our God, other lords beside Thee have had dominion over us." "O Lord our God, masters besides You have had dominion over us" (Isa. 26:13).

Worship is Service

When Jesus repelled the temptation of Satan, He said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.'" (Matt. 4:10). So the Apostle Paul said to the ship's company with whom he sailed, "There stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve" (Acts 27:23). The distinguishing characteristic of the one who recognizes the Lord as his God, is service. Therefore the commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me," is simply, "You shall serve Me only." And so, as we have seen, it means that we shall love Him only, love Him with all the heart, mind, soul, and strength. Just to the extent that this is not done, has one other gods before Him. When we see the commandment in this light, we shall be forced to conclude that the proportion of people who violate it cannot be any greater in Africa, India, or than it is in America.

Who Can Keep the Commandments?

Just before Joshua died, he gathered all the people and the elders of Israel together, and recounted to them what God had done for them, saying, "Now therefore, fear the Lord, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the Lord! And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." And then he said, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for the Lord our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land

of Egypt, from the house of bondage, . . . We also will serve the Lord, for He is our God" (Josh. 24:14–18).

That certainly was a good declaration, but Joshua immediately replied to them, "You cannot serve the Lord, for He is a holy God" (Josh. 24:19). How this must have dashed the spirits of those Israelite; and yet it is true of us as of them, and it contains a wonderful promise, if we will but take it. It does not mean that God cannot be served, for Joshua had just said, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Paul declared that he served the Lord. But it does mean that only holy people can serve a holy God; and since God says to us, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve" (Luke 4:8), we may take it as the assurance that He will sanctify us if we will yield to Him, so that it will be possible for us to serve Him perfectly. The Lord "will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness" (Mal. 3:3). **This shows how we may keep the commandments. We do not keep them in order to be righteous, but God makes us righteous,—frees us from the bondage of sin,—in order that we may keep them. Only when God has cleansed the heart, and driven out every idol, can this first and great commandment be kept.**

Love Means Giving

All this shows the supreme importance of this commandment to everybody, everywhere, and at all times. "Love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:10), and love means giving. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." "He loved me, and gave Himself for me." "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). God showed His love for us in giving Himself for us. **Therefore we can show our love to Him only by giving ourselves to Him, and acknowledging His right to have sole control of us.**

When Paul said that he served God, he said also, "to whom I belong." Therefore the commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me," or its fuller expression, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength," means that we must give to the Lord our whole heart, our whole life, and every faculty of mind and body. "With all your strength," means not only all the strength that we now have, but all that we ought to have, all that is possible for God to exert through our bodies.

It makes a vast difference who handles an instrument. A very good instrument may do very poor work in untrained hands; but when the master takes hold of it, the result is different. So while we are weak, and we have made ourselves unnaturally weak through

our failure to serve God, we are to yield our members as instruments of righteousness unto God, that He may not merely receive from us the poor strength of which we are conscious, but that He may do through us exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power which works in us. Those who believe, will know the exceeding greatness of His power, according to the working of His mighty power which He wrought in Christ; and although we are now without strength, yet when in love and loyalty we yield ourselves to Him for service, His own mighty power in us will be counted to us as service which we have rendered.

Holiness is Whole Service

Hereby may we readily know whether or not we have other gods before Him. **If we are not ready to every good work, if there is any organ of our body or any portion of our mind not controlled by Him; if in any degree our will has not been completely yielded to Him; if we are servants of our own flesh; if any sinful propensity has dominion over us to any degree, just to that extent are we violating the first commandment.** And so we see that the keeping of this commandment means health, for there are many people who with sorrow say that they cannot serve the Lord as they would like to, because of their feeble condition. They are loaded down with different diseases, but God says, "I am the Lord who heals you" (Ex. 15:26), or "the Lord your Physician." He requires us to serve Him with our whole life, with our whole strength, and this means that He expects us to be whole, in order that we may serve Him perfectly. A whole person is a holy person, and since, as we have learned, only a holy person can serve a holy God, we have the assurance that if we will yield our bodies to His life, He will heal us so that we may give to Him whole service. If we do not do this, if we continue to violate the laws of life, thus weakening our bodies or any member of our bodies, we are worshipping other gods beside Him.

Day by day we pray or ought to, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Christ said, "The kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21). God is King over all the earth, for "the earth is the Lords and all its fulness" (Ps. 24:1), although His right to rule is not acknowledged in the earth. Even so we are His rightful kingdom, although He has not been allowed to rule in our hearts. So when we pray the Lord's prayer understandingly, we are saying to the Lord, "I belong to You; You rule in the midst of Your enemies, pulling down strongholds, casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."

We are a people of God's own possession. But evil cannot dwell with Him; therefore if there is filthiness of the flesh or spirit, He is crowded out from His rightful dominion, and

other gods are put in His place. "And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people" (2 Cor. 6:16).

Can we say to the Lord, "Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You" (Ps. 73:25)? To many this seems a fearful cutting off of all the pleasure of life, but that is only because they do not know Him, and that in His presence is fulness of joy. In Him all things consist, and without Him we have really nothing, for "there is none other God but one." "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32).

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Preparation for Christ’s Coming

The keeping of this first commandment is the necessary preparation for the coming of the Lord. “We know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:2, 3). **We shall then see Him as He is, because we shall have already been changed into His image by holding Him. Therefore to this end the message is proclaimed, “Behold your God!” No other God is to intervene to shut off the view.** Because the hour of His Judgment has come, we are to “fear God and give glory to Him” “and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of waters” (Rev. 14:7). This, we see, is nothing more than the repetition of the first commandment. We are to know Him only, and Christ came to declare Him. The commandment is life everlasting (John 12:50), and it is eternal life to know God. (John 17:3). Those who know Him will put their trust in Him, and when He appears will say, “Behold, this is our God” (Isa. 25:9).

The Essence of Heathenism

Christ said, “do not worry, saying, “What shall we eat?’ or “What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Matt. 6:31–33). The word “Gentile” means heathen, and the characteristic of the heathen is to be anxious, and to worry about temporal affairs. And herein many professed Christians show that they have not been wholly emancipated from heathenism. “Times are hard; coals are dear; work is scarce; clothes are wearing out, and we cannot see where the money is coming from to replace them.” They forget that their heavenly Father knows that they have need of all these things. By such expressions of anxiety and doubt, they virtually say that the God whom they serve is no different from the gods of wood and stone that the heathen worship. **“After all these things the Gentiles seek,” because they know that their gods cannot provide for them.** They know that they must provide for themselves, so far as their gods are concerned. “But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases” (Ps. 115:3). He is the Universal Provider. “He gives to all life, breath, and all things” (Acts 17:25). **To doubt that all things that we need will be supplied, because**

we cannot see how they are to come, is to be like the heathen who do not believe in a god that they cannot see.

The Sign of the True God

After Jesus had healed the man born blind, He found him and said to him, "Do you believe in the Son of God?" and the man said, "Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?" In like manner, when the commandment "You shall have no other gods before Me," is preached, men might say, "Who is this God, that we may worship Him?" God has provided beforehand the answer to this question. He says, "Moreover I also gave them My Sabbaths, to be a sign between them and Me, that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them" (Ezek. 20:12) and "hallow My Sabbaths, and they will be a sign between Me and you, that you may know that I am the Lord your God" (v. 20). The true God is the God who sanctifies, and delivers from the bondage of sin. He delivers and sanctifies by His creative power, which is made known through the Sabbath. **For when He had made all things new, He rested, and when we are wholly passive in His hands, we rest in Him, having been made new.**

The one great question of the ages is, "Who is God?" It was first introduced when Satan said, "I will be like the Most High," attempting to put himself in the place of God. The same spirit he instilled into his angels, so that there are multitudes of false gods. Everyone who follows Satan is filled with the same spirit, the spirit of self-seeking, self-exaltation. But it is not in this way that men know God, or become like Him. Christ, who is the manifestation of God, says, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:29). God reveals His divinity in the gift of His only begotten Son, who gives His life for the redemption of the world. By self-surrender, the complete denial of self, we become acquainted with God. Only by self-abasement are we lifted up into the high and holy place, to dwell with Him who inhabits eternity.

Satan has done everything that he could do to hide God and His power from men. The Sabbath, which is God's memorial, he has made the busiest day of the week, the day on which, humanly speaking, it seems most inconvenient to rest from labor. And right here is the strongest test as to whether men recognize and worship the true God. Is He able to give life? Can God clothe those who trust in Him? Can He give bread in the wilderness? How many fully convinced of their duty to keep the Sabbath, have come to this point and have wavered and turned back; and yet they profess to believe in God as the Saviour of their souls, the One who will keep them alive throughout eternity. But do they believe? Does one really trust God for his soul's eternal salvation, if he cannot trust Him for the support of his body for this short life, which is but for a moment?

The Psalmist said: "I made haste, and did not delay to keep Your commandments" (Ps. 119:60). In this is shown true worship of God. There are many who come face to face with the Sabbath law, who say that they will keep it as soon as they can get their business into proper shape or can dispose of it. Some have debts, and think that they must continue their present employment which they regard as sure, until they get their debts paid. Then they will be prepared to keep the Sabbath. But that does not indicate such trust in God as must characterize one who worships Him only. There is really no difference between the one who waits till he can pay the debt of a hundred pounds, and the one who says, "I am a poor man, with nothing to live on; as soon as I have one hundred pounds in hand, then I can serve the Lord without fear of coming to want." So when he does begin his supposed service, he is not really trusting God, but what he himself has done. **All distrust of God, even to the slightest degree, is a violation of the commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me."**

Deliverance from Egypt

What a grand thing it is to know that God is a holy God and that He has power to save. This is the sum of the whole matter, and we end where we began: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." **But some will say, "We have not been brought out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Then it is time you were.** Do not deceive yourselves with the thought, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone;" for "whoever commits sin is a slave of sin." One of the names of Egypt, the name which the Lord gave it, is Rahab; which means pride, boastfulness. (See Isa. 30:7, NKJV). **Egypt is a synonym for self-exaltation and defiance of God.** The king of Egypt said: "Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the Lord." God makes Himself known to us when we are in the bondage of sin, and delivers us that we may serve Him. We cannot serve Him while we are the servants of sin. "You cannot serve God and mammon."

When God brings us out of bondage, we find that the commandment which we thought was a grievous yoke is liberty itself. So far is it from being a yoke of bondage that only free men can keep, it gives freedom; "for the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2). Those who seek His precepts are sure to walk at liberty. **And so the commandment, instead of being an arbitrary rule, is a glorious promise. Instead of telling us merely what we must or must not do, it gives it to us and makes sure to us all the holiness that it would have us render.** The power by which Rahab (Egypt) was broken (Isa. 51:9-11), and all the enemies of the Lord scattered, casts out from us all strange gods.

Compare Ex. 20:1-3, which we have quoted so often, with Ps. 81:8-10. We find that God, who delivers from bondage, says: "O Israel, if you will listen to Me! There shall be no foreign god among you; nor shall you worship any foreign god." **We listen to Him, and we are free, and henceforth sin shall have no dominion over us.** All other gods have held us in the most degrading bondage; they have made us to be hateful and unlovely. **But God, who is altogether lovely, makes us free as Himself, that we may worship Him in the beauty of holiness.** Then He says, "You shall have no other gods before Me," and we delight in the assurance, for we know that He means, I am your God and I have called you by name; you are Mine; henceforth I will defend you from every false god; **I will be responsible for your freedom, so long as you listen to My words.** I will protect you from the roaring lion, and from the sin that crouches at the door. Nothing shall by any means hurt you; I will care for My own, and save you from the fury of the oppressor. And we in turn will say, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1). "Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; "For Yah, the Lord, is my strength and song; He also has become my salvation' " (Isaiah 12:2).

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