

The Ten Promises: *You Were Made for Me Alone* - wk 2

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - Oct. 11, 2020

(Based on Rev. Darrell Johnson's sermon series *The Manufacturer's Specifications*)

We're continuing our *Ten Promises* series, based on Rev. Darrell Johnson's book of sermons titled *The Manufacturer's Specifications*. Today we're looking at the First Commandment. **"You shall have no other gods before Me."** You're welcome to open your Bibles to Exodus 20 where the Law is first given from Moses to God's people.

Darrell Johnson in his book tells us that one of the surprising facts of Biblical history is that nearly every great renewal movement in the Old Testament, nearly every great spiritual revival was caused on a human level by the re-discovery of these commandments, a re-discovery of the Law. Someone, a prophet or priest, finds a copy of the Law, reads it and is stunned into repentance and stirred into joy. The person then brings the copy of the Law to the king and his advisors who read the Law - the commandments - and are stunned into repentance and stirred into joy. The king then calls for a national assembly where the Law is read out loud and the people are stunned into repentance and stirred into joy. Amazing! It happened during the days of Josiah and Hezekiah and Ezra and Nehemiah. Why? Why would the reading and hearing of commandments generate a surge of new life?

Because the Author of the commandments, the God whose name is Yahweh, spoke the commandments to protect and enhance a life of freedom. Yahweh had freed

nearly three million Hebrew slaves from slavery and oppression, for a relationship with Yahweh and with each other. Yahweh spoke the Ten Commandments or the *Ten Words* to protect that freedom to enhance that freedom.

And why does Yahweh's Law accomplish this end? Because the God whose name is Yahweh is the Creator of all things. The Ten Commandments emerge from the Creator's nature and character. The commandments reveal who the Creator is! And the commandments reveal who we are. The commandments tell us who Yahweh created us to be. In the Ten Commandments, we have "The Manufacturer's Specifications." As Old Testament scholar, Terrence E. Fretheim, puts it, "*To obey these commandments is to be what one was created to be*" (Exodus, 1991, p. 223).

Without a doubt, the most critical of the Ten Commandments is the first: "**You shall have no other gods before Me.**" Get this one straight and all the others fall in line. "**You shall have no other gods before Me.**"

Now, you who learned the commandments in the Roman Catholic or Lutheran traditions might be surprised that, having said the first commandment is the most critical, I stopped at the end of "**You shall have no other gods before Me.**" For the Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions add to those words the words, "**You shall not make for yourself an idol,**" the words the Reformed tradition calls the second commandment. So that in the Roman Catholic and

Lutheran traditions, the first commandment is **“You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol; you shall not worship them or serve them; for I, Yahweh your God, am a jealous God.”**

The reason for the difference is that, whereas the Bible says there are Ten Commandments, or *ten words* (Exodus 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4 say that), the Bible does not number them. Example, it doesn't say, “This is number one, this is number two; this is number five, etc.” Thus different traditions number and divide the commandments differently. The Reformed tradition, along with the Eastern Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox traditions, separate having *no other gods before God* from *not making images and idols*, counting them as numbers one and two. Roman Catholics and Lutherans combine them as the first commandment and then separate the words about coveting into two distinct commandments: number nine, **“You shall not covet your neighbor's house,”** and number ten, **“You shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant...,”** etc.

Our Jewish friends break the commandments down into yet another configuration. They take the opening, line, the prologue, **“I am Yahweh your God...”** as the first “word.” They combine the Reformed tradition's one and two to form the second “word.” They keep the two statements about coveting as the tenth “word.” So thereby, they get *10 words*.

Now, clearly, commandments one and two, as numbered by our Reformed tradition, are closely related. They belong together. For one thing, they both address the same issue - our relationship with the Living God. For another, they are both theologically grounded in the same dimension of God's character - in Yahweh's jealousy. They both pose the fundamental issue of our lives: for whom will I live; whom will I serve; whom will I worship?

You see, in the first two commandments (as in the other eight), the Creator is telling us something about ourselves, something fundamental about ourselves, something deeply ingrained in our essential being. In these first two commandments the Creator is telling us that we are worshiping creatures. Birds fly in the air. Fish swim in the sea. Cats meow. Dogs bark. And human beings worship. Which explains why we cannot live without a hero.

We are created to adore and trust something or someone. It seems to be in our genes! Everyone has a god that she or he adores and trusts. It may not be a personal God like the One who comes to us in the Exodus, in the Law, in the prophets, and finally in and as Jesus of Nazareth. But everyone lives for some god, for something or someone of ultimate concern. It may only be oneself, but everyone adores and trusts some god. As the saying goes, *"He is a self-made man who worships his creator."*

We cannot escape this fundamental fact about ourselves. No one can jump out of her or his skin. We are the

creatures who worship. Indeed, every act throughout the day is an act of worship of someone or something.

Out of mercy and grace, to keep us from ruining our lives, the Living and Holy God speaks the first two commandments. God warns us of our propensity toward idolatry, toward adoring and trusting what is finally not God.

“You shall have no other gods before Me.”

By itself, the commandment is not teaching us that there is only one God. The Bible clearly teaches that there is only one Yahweh: the Trinitarian God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But that is not the burden of the first commandment. The burden of the first commandment is allegiance. God confronts us with the question *“not of theology, but of loyalty”* (Knowing God, 1973, p. 243). In other parts of Scripture, we do find Yahweh claiming to be the one and only God.

In Isaiah, for instance, **“I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me”** (Is. 44:6); **“Is there any God besides Me, or is there any other Rock? I know of none”** (Is. 44:8). But here, in the Law, God does not say, “There are no other gods for you to serve.” God says, **“You shall have no other gods before Me.”** The issue is not monotheism, belief in one God. The issue is exclusive allegiance to the one God.

“No other gods before Me.” “Before Me.” That is, “In My Presence.” “You shall have no other gods in My Presence.” And where is God’s Presence? Everywhere! Psalm 139:7, “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your Presence?” The Living God is present everywhere. *“You shall have no other gods before Me anywhere, anytime. You shall not let anyone or anything come between you and Me. You shall not let anyone or anything take My place in your life, anywhere, anytime.”*

I want to now dig deeper by asking four questions of the first commandment:

1) First question: Why does God give us this commandment, **“You shall have no other gods before Me?”** I ask the question because of the conviction that, if we know why God commands something, we are more likely to be willing to obey. So why? Because God is lonely and because we are not giving God enough attention? Because God is afraid? Because God is insecure? Because God is mean? Because God is an egotist, a narcissist, who constantly needs praise to feel good about God’s self? No!

Why then command us, **“You shall have no other gods before Me?”** Because God is telling us something about ourselves. Something we would never have figured out on our own. The Manufacturer is telling us that we were made in such a way that only the Living God can satisfy

the longings of our hearts. We were not only made by God; we were made for God.

In the first commandment, God is paying us an incredible compliment. Really? Yes! God is saying that we are so wonderfully made that only the infinite, holy, all-knowing, all-powerful, ever-present, wise, just, merciful, gracious, eternal God can fill us and fulfill us. Oh, what a dignity.

Which explains why God says in the Law, “**I, Yahweh your God, am a jealous God**” (Exodus 20:5). A jealous God. Really? Not in the sense we ordinarily use the word; not as a possessive, insecure, easily-threatened lover. God’s jealousy is God’s holy zeal to protect something supremely precious. ***“I am the God who is zealous to protect something supremely precious.”***

We were made for the Living God. Imagine that! What dignity! We were made for a loving relationship with the Triune God. We were made to enter into and enjoy the loving relationship that has forever thrived between the Father and Son and Holy Spirit. We are called to an exclusive personal relationship. And we are to let no other take God’s place. The good news is that God will not tolerate substitute gods coming between God and us, no matter however loving or wonderful or lovable they are. For God knows that all others cannot finally satisfy the longings of our hearts. All others finally leave us unfulfilled. We were made in such a way that only the infinite God can satisfy our finite hearts.

2) Second question: What happens when we disobey the first commandment? We lose! Simple as that. We end up living for lesser gods, false gods, who all turn out, in the final analysis, to be non-gods. And we spend our lives trying to milk the non-gods for what they finally cannot deliver.

Again, we are creatures who worship. We worship all of the time. We worship someone or something. It is either the Living God, or someone or something else. But no someone or something else can bear the weight of our human desire for worship. And we either end up being disappointed in the someone or something, or the someone or something ends up being drained and destroyed by our making the person or thing into the substitute God.

And when we disobey the first commandment, we find ourselves breaking one or all of the other nine.

3) Third question: How do we obey the first commandment? Once we have disobeyed, can we obey? Is obedience even possible? Not apart from grace.

How? By grace, we obey.

By admitting and owning the fact that we do not obey. By admitting and owning our bent toward idolatry. By admitting and owning the fact that we take what are not gods- our spouse, our children, our jobs, our possessions,

our technology, our money - and put them in the place only God can occupy.

And we obey by affirming that the Living God is in every circumstance, in every situation, present in every encounter with other people. We obey by seeking to see and hear and respond to God in every circumstance and encounter.

And we obey by asking ourselves, on a regular basis, tough questions. Questions like, "What is it that gives me a sense of security?" The answer is a potential God-substitute. "What do I fear?" Fear is always a good clue to one's idol. Primitive idols were often projections of what people feared. They would do anything to appease what they feared, so that the thing they feared would do no further harm. What do you fear? Losing money? Then money may be your idol. Rejection? So much so that you will deny your allegiance to Jesus Christ to be welcomed by the group? Then acceptance may be your idol. Do you fear death? So much so that you are willing to join our death-denying culture in its futile quest for everlasting youth? Then life may be your idol. Life? Yes, life. Even life can become a God-substitute. Even the desire for life, usually on our own terms, can come between us and God. "What do I fear?"

Another question to ask: "So who does the saving anyway?" Who saves us? Or, who fixes me and the rest of humanity? Technology? Education? Not a bad thing to

have. Prosperity? The church? Pastors? Your plan or routine? “Who does the saving?” The answers can lead to a potential God-substitute.

When we spot a God-substitute, we must deal with it. We must repent of it. We must move it out of its wrongful place, and into the rightful place. We must move it, or him or her, out of the center.

For, you see, we tend to relate to the Living God through the lens of our commitment to our idol. That is, I will relate to the true God only to the degree that the true God is good for my idol. I will, for instance, not allow myself to see other aspects of the true God if those aspects get in the way of serving my idol. If financial security is my real god, I will have to turn off God’s clear call to share my wealth with the poor. If being a well-liked preacher is my real god, I will have to avoid teaching truths about God that people do not like to hear. Anytime you or I have to turn off Biblical truths about God, or have to disobey God’s word in order to keep our relationship with something or someone we love, that someone or something has become a “god before God.”

4) Which brings us to the fourth question: What is God supposed to do when we disobey the first commandment? When Yahweh sees us living for or around another god, what is Yahweh supposed to do? God knows that the other god, however good, will ultimately let us down. So what is God supposed to do?

God can warn us that we are on the road to idolatry. God can woo us back. Both of which God does again and again.

And when we do not heed the warning or respond to the wooing, what is God supposed to do? Remove the idol! God moves the idol out of its wrongful place and puts it back in its rightful place.

Yahweh, the Passionate Lover of our souls, will do whatever it takes to keep us from ruining our lives serving other gods, no matter how good those other gods might be.

You may be thinking now of someone or something you loved, that was good, that God moved out of your life. Maybe it was a death, or the end of a relationship, or a job, or a status you had. I'm not saying that every time this is God moving it out of your life. We do have a lifespan to live as humans. There are things that come and go with the seasons. God does want good marriages: He's not going to take that away from us. The seventh commandment protects and enhances our marriages. God wants good family relationships, the commandments affirm that. God wants good work for us and good Sabbath rest, the commandments affirm that rhythm.

But still you might think that God in His mercy may be too severe, if He moves out of the center of our lives something or someone we love.

But I'll tell you something even more severe. It is if God would no longer care that we go after other gods; it's if God would leave us alone with our other gods. The more severe thing the Living God could do is to let us go on living with the wrong god at the center of our lives (Hosea 4:17). That would be severe judgment. For we were made for God - to enjoy life, to be fully human, when God, and God alone, lives at our center. We were so wonderfully made that we will never be satisfied with anything less than God in our hearts.

“You shall have not other gods before Me.” It is the first commandment. But because the Law-giver is the passionately zealous lover of our souls, it is also the first promise. He won't abandon us to our idols. The first commandment is the first of ten promises: **“You will have no other gods before Me. One day you will have no other gods before Me.”** This is good news. Out of mercy, God speaks the first commandment to keep us from ruining our lives. To put good things in their good places and to keep Jesus in our hearts, the right place for our loving God.