

You shall have no other gods before me

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A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 15th January

"And God spoke all these words: 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. "You shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20.1 – 3)

Introduction

These words form the introduction to the Ten Commandments, and contain the first commandment. As we consider these verses together, I want us to answer these questions:

1. Who is speaking?
2. What has he done?
3. What does he want us to do?

1. Who is speaking?

The first question is "Who is speaking?" The answer to that question, clearly, is that it is God who is speaking. Verse 1 says, "And God spoke all these words." God himself spoke out of the cloud at the top of the mountain to all the Israelites who were gathered around the mountain.

But note also what God says about himself. He says that he is the "LORD". Notice that the NIV, in common with most English language translations, has the word "LORD" in block capitals. This signifies that the Hebrew word that he used here is the special name for God which is Jehovah or Yahweh. The meaning of this name is found in Exodus chapter 3 verse 14. God was calling Moses to go back to his people and bring them out of Egypt. Moses asked God what he was to say

when the Israelites asked what God's name is. God said to Moses "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites. I AM has sent me to you." The Hebrew for Yahweh sounds very similar to the phrase "I am who I am", and is derived from it. So God speaks to the Israelites to give the commandments as the God who is who he is. What does this mean? It means that:

- He is Eternal. God is who he is. He has always been.
- He is self-sufficient. He is who he is, and he does not need anybody or anything else;
- He is sovereign. He is who he is. He is the King. He is ruling over all things. He is working all things out for his own purpose.
- He is Almighty. If God is who he is, he can also do what he wants to do. Nothing is too hard for him.
- He is the creator of all things. The God who says "I am who I am" is the God who had the power to bring all things into being by the word of his command.
- God is the only God. He is the only One in the whole universe who can truly say "I am who I am"

Because it is Jehovah God, the Almighty God, the Creator and ruler over all things, who speaks, we must obey him. If it were just a man, or even an angel who had spoken, he might be safely ignored. But we cannot possibly ignore what Almighty God says. If we try to do so, we shall have to give an account to him.

So it is God, the "I am who I am" God, who is speaking. But notice also that he says to the Israelites "I am the LORD *your God*". He is their God. He is in a special relationship with them. He had entered into a covenant with them. A covenant is a solemn and binding agreement or contract. An example of a human covenant is marriage, where a man and a woman commit themselves to each other for the whole of the rest of their lives. God had entered into a similar agreement with the people of Israel. He had brought them out of Egypt, to be his very own special people. He gave them great privileges. But he expected something in return: that they should love and serve him.

What was true for the Israelites is true for us who are believers in Christ. God has entered into a covenant with us, the New Covenant. This covenant has been sealed with the blood of Christ. He has made us his people. If Jehovah God is our God, it is right and proper that we who are believers, more than anyone else, should obey his holy law.

So, the one who is speaking is the LORD God, Jehovah, who has entered into covenant with his people.

2. What has he done?

The second question I want to ask of these verses is, "What has God done?" We see the answer also in verse 2: "Who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."

God had brought the Israelites out of Egypt. They had been under the tyranny of Pharaoh. Their whole environment had been dominated by false religion and idols. They had been in spiritual darkness and confusion. They were enslaved and treated cruelly and harshly, being forced to build cities for Pharaoh.

But now they had been brought out of Egypt. They were delivered from the rule of Pharaoh. They now had God's Word. They were free to worship God as he said.

This corresponds to what God has done for us who are Christians. He has delivered us from the spiritual equivalent of Egypt, which is the dominion of Satan, and brought us into the kingdom of Christ. We have been brought out of idolatry and made able to worship the true God. We have been brought out of confusion and darkness into the light of God's Word. We have been redeemed from slavery to sin and set free to serve Christ. As Paul says, God has "rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1.13 – 14).

God's law is binding on all men, because all men are made by God. But we who have been so greatly blessed under the New Covenant have an even greater responsibility, not a lesser responsibility, to obey his law.

3. What does he want us to do?

The third question is, "What does God want us to do?" The answer is, to obey his law, as summarised in the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments can be grouped into two groups. The first group, which consists of the first four commandments, is about our duty towards God, which as our Lord said, could be summarised by a command given in the book of Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 5, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and all your strength." The second group, which consists of the last six commandments, is about our duty to our fellow men, which, again as the Lord said, is summarised by the command found in Leviticus 19.18, "love your neighbour as yourself". Notice that our duty towards God comes first. Our duty towards our fellow men springs from our duty towards God.

The first commandment, which is the one we are considering here, is the gateway to all the others: God says, "You shall have no other gods before me." No other gods must take the place of Jehovah God. We should trust him, love him, worship him, fear him, and him serve him above everything and everyone else.

There are a great many so-called "gods" that people worship. But they have no power. They are utterly unable to help those who worship them. They are dependent upon those who make them. Yet we are so perverse that, left to ourselves, we will give worship to anyone or anything rather than to the true God of the Bible, who created us.

For some people their gods are religious gods. They make gods out of animals, or trees, or the sun, or the moon; or they pray to their ancestors; or they put their trust in occult powers such as astrology and spiritism to give them guidance for their lives; or they pray to the so-called saints and Mary.

Many others who are not religious at all make gods out of the things of this world. Many make a god of their own pleasure. For some, food is their god. For others their home is their god, or their career, or their own status. Others make a god of people. They live for their husband or wife, or their boyfriend or girlfriend, or their children. Many today treat celebrities as their gods.

It is absolutely crazy to give up the worship of the true and living God for gods that are no gods at all. Yet this is what we all do, in one way or another. Why do we do it? Because in our sinful pride we do not want to bow the knee to God. We do not want to give to him the worship and honour which is due to him.

But God says that this must stop. We must turn from loving and serving other gods. We must put him before all other claims on the affection of our hearts. What are the ways in which we must do this?

– We must believe in his existence. Atheism is the ultimate insult to God. Even the demons believe in God's existence, even though they do not worship him. If you say that you are an atheist or agnostic, then, whatever else could be said about you, you are breaking the first commandment. Many people say something like this: "I am not a religious person. I am not sure that there is a God. But I am a good person. I help people out when they are in need. I would never harm anyone." The problem with this is, by God's standard, if you do not believe in God existence you are breaking the most important commandment of all.

– We must trust him. Not only should we believe in his existence, we should also believe what he has said in his Word. Instead of trusting in false gods which cannot save, we should place all our confidence in him.

– We must receive Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. The apostle said to the Athenian idolaters that in the past God overlooked the sin of idolatry, "but now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17.30). We must repent of our sin and trust in Christ to save us from our sin. Jesus said "He who receives me receives the one who sent me (Matthew 10:40)." You cannot properly honour God if you do not properly honour his Son. God has commanded us in Psalm 2 verse 12, "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him." This is where so many go wrong. They say that they believe in God and want to serve God. But they will not accept his Son. They say that Jesus was just a good man, or just a prophet, but they will not honour him as the eternal Son of God. If you do not worship and honour Christ, you do not truly worship and honour God the Father.

– We must honour God with our lips. We should bring him our worship and praise. The angels in heaven are continually worshiping him, and saying "Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD Almighty, the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6.3). The creatures around the throne in heaven never stop saying "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come" (Revelation 4.11). This is why praise and thanksgiving form an important part of our meetings together. But we should not confine our praise of God to when we are met together. David says "I will extol the LORD at all times; his

praise will always be on my lips" (Psalm 34:1). What is continually on your lips? Is it praise of Almighty God, or is it muttering and complaining, sourness and moaning? The writer to the Hebrews says, "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise — the fruit of lips that confess his name" (Hebrews 13:15).

– We should honour God with our money. Probably most Christians know that they should give away some of their money. But do you know why you should give? To help those in need? Yes of course. To provide for the ministry of the Word? Yes, that is very necessary. But what we sometimes forget is that the primary reason for giving is as an offering to God. Paul says that the gifts that were sent to him at Rome by the Christians at Philippi were "a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God." All the material things that we have are entrusted to us by God, and should be used for his glory. A proportion of what we have should be given back to him as an expression of our gratitude to him for the wonderful gift he has given us in Christ. How much should you give? In the Old Testament God said that believers should give a tenth of all they earn. That command is not repeated in the New Testament. Instead we are urged in the New Testament to consider example of the Lord Jesus, who though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, so that we might become rich. If we take this seriously, it is hard to see how we can give less than a tenth. We may consider it right to give much more than a tenth.

– We should honour God with our lives. Not only should we worship God with our lips and with our money. We should also worship him by offering our whole lives as a living sacrifice. Jesus said, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46). It is no good saying that we worship and honour Jesus, if we do not obey him. The same principle holds true for God the Father. The apostle Paul urges us, "in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship" (Romans 12:1). This is why all of the other commandments come under this head. We honour God by obeying his commandments in our lives.

– We should love him with all our heart. God is looking not just for praise from us. He does not want just our gifts of money. He does not want mere outward conformity to his laws. He wants the devotion of our hearts. He complained about the people in Isaiah's day, "These people come near to me

with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Isaiah 29.13). As humans we are capable of loving only one thing or person at a time. If we allow other things to take first place in our hearts, the love of God will be squeezed out. Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money” (Matthew 6:24).

4. How should we respond?

How should we respond to what we have been seeing here?

First of all, we must examine ourselves to see if we really are Christians. If you have become aware through reading this that you have no real love for God, it may well indicate that you are not converted. When a person is born again a love for God is born inside him. Although he still sins, at the “bottom line” he loves God because the Holy Spirit is in him. Have you been born again? If not, you will never begin to be able to obey this commandment, or any other commandment. Come to God. Confess your sin to God. Ask Christ to save you. Ask him to give you the Holy Spirit.

What if you are a Christian? What should you do in the light of what we have seen here? Here are some suggestions:

- Examine yourself, to see if some secret idol or pleasure has taken the place that God should have in your life. Has unbelief, or a rebellious attitude, or complaining taken hold in your mind and speech? If so, repent, and seek God for forgiveness.

- Meditate on the attributes of God. Think about his majesty, his power, his eternity, his sovereignty, his love, his holiness, his righteousness.

- Keep on reminding yourself that the things and the people that this world thinks are so important are of no consequence. They are just powerless man-made idols.

- Dwell on what God has done for you in Christ. Think about the depths to which he was prepared to go, even to the point of being separated from the Father on the Cross, so that you can have eternal life. There is nothing like meditating on the Cross to re-ignite our love for God.

– Keep short accounts with God. Keep watch over your soul. As soon as you see wrong attitudes and behaviour starting to come in, repent and ask God for forgiveness.

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