

No Other Gods Before Me

Exodus 20:1-3

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The first commandment is sharp, angular, and exclusive: *You shall have no other gods before me.* This first commandment lays the foundation for the nine that follow. There is one God, and this one God stakes his rightful and exclusive claim on our lives.

You shall have no other gods before me is a counter-cultural commandment. The wandering Hebrew people had come out of a culture in Egypt that worshipped many gods. Every culture around them was polytheistic. It was simply a given that there was a sky-full of gods. This was not even up for discussion in the great civilizations of Egypt or Babylon or Canaan.

So, the first commandment does not fall like sweet music on the ears of the ancient world.

The Bible has always been a book that challenges conventional assumptions about God, and it still does! The other cultures of the ancient world almost always welcomed new gods. If you wanted to worship the Hebrew God alongside the worship of Baal or Asherah or Marduk, that was fine. The false gods were always quite tolerant. But the first commandment cuts across that kind of religious thinking. It's abrasive and startling: *No other gods before me!* This God demands exclusive loyalty and worship.

Who is this God who stakes His claim on our lives this way? There are a number of hints hidden within the commandment itself.

First, there is a word that stands at the center of its structure, even though it comes at the end: *You shall have no other gods before me.* When Moses first encountered God at a mysterious burning bush, Moses asked God, "What is your name?" Moses was assuming many gods and he wanted to know which one was talking to him. God revealed His holy name to Moses. God said, "Say this to the people of Israel, Yahweh, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has sent me to you" (Ex. 3:15). *Yahweh* is usually translated *I Am*. It is a personal verb form.

So, this God who speaks to Moses is not an impersonal force as in Star Wars, but a personal God who knows us and wants us to know Him. This intensely personal God, the great *I Am*, through this commandment invites us into a personal relationship. No other gods before *me*.

Scholars date the Ten Commandments to about 1,300 years before Christ, about 3,300 years ago. And this commandment stood out, over against all the cultural expectations of that day. And you know what? It still does! It was a radical rejection of polytheism. And it draws to its logical and most sweeping conclusion in the great statement of faith that the Jews call *the Shema* (Deut. 6:4): *Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.* Ultimately, the first commandment is about the one God who gives undivided love to His people, and calls for the same in return.

The first commandment strikes modern ears as narrow and intolerant. But consider for a moment: isn't love, by its very nature, intolerant? Think of marriage for a moment. In a healthy marriage, husband and wife are exclusively devoted to one another, and will not tolerate rivals entering into the marriage bond. Is that intolerant? Yes, absolutely! Is it narrow minded? No, not at all. It's the nature of genuine love. There is an old traditional marriage vow that captures the exclusive nature of married love well: "I take thee to be my wedded wife/husband, *and forsaking all others*, I pledge thee my troth." A loving spouse does not say, "I'll share you with anybody." That's not love. That's indifference! Real love demands exclusivity. This is how God loves us – personally and passionately! *You shall have no other gods before me*. That little personal pronoun – *me* – shows us a personal God of love.

The second insight into God's character comes before the commandment. Who is this personal God? He identifies Himself: *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*. The context of the commandment is this historical fact: Israel was an oppressed minority in Egypt. They were held as chattel slaves of the Egyptian Empire. And God set them free.

They could not and did not free themselves. Nor did the Egyptians freely let them go. God set them free. God was stronger than the power of Egypt, and God liberated them. Then God led them through a bleak and inhospitable wilderness and gave them this Law we call The Ten Commandments. Who is this God? He says, *"I am the One who brought you out of slavery."*

The foundational assumption of the Ten Commandments is that devotion to the God of the Bible is not based on obligation, but on overwhelming gratitude. We ask, "Who are you, Lord?" And God's answer is, *"I am the One who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."* Throughout the Old Testament, Israel was charged to *remember*. God over and over told them to look back on their liberation from slavery so that they would never forget what God had done for them.

As Christians, we look back on the great events of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Every time we come together in worship we remember that Christ gave His life for us on the cross, His blood was shed for us. Jesus Christ, by His death and resurrection, has set us free from slavery to sin and self. 1 John 3:16 says, *By this we know love, that Christ laid down his life for us*. We ask, "Who are you, Lord?" And Jesus Christ answers, *"I am the One who saved you and set you free."* Do you see that the One who gives the commandment makes all the difference?

There is an organization called "The Parliament of the World Religions." A few years ago, representatives of over one hundred religions came together and agreed on a four-point code of ethics: "You shall not kill, steal, lie, or commit sexual immorality." Now, I don't want to rain on their parade, but that's just a list of rules. (Well, yes, I actually do want to rain on their parade.) Those are good rules, but does anyone really believe there is hope for this world in a new set of rules? Even a secular reporter who covered the event saw what was missing. He said, "The new commandments don't seem to have the binding effect of the old. The document makes no mention of God."

The Book of Exodus, on the other hand, is very specific: *I am the Lord your God who brought you out of slavery.* And God has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ to set us free from sin and self and reconcile us to God. God has saved us, and in gratitude we obey Him.

God is a *personal* God, a *saving* God, and third, the first commandment reveals a *liberating* God. The first commandment liberates us from the tyranny of false “gods” – their bluff has been called. There are not many gods, there is only One. This commandment is not just a warning – it is good news of liberation.

There is a deep human instinct to seek something to worship. Left to ourselves, we will give ourselves to, and attribute intimacy to, that which we most **admire**, or that which we most **fear**. And the tragedy of these false religions we make for ourselves is that they inevitably turn destructive and cruel. 1 Kings 18 tells the story of God’s prophet Elijah and his great contest with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Do you remember? The prophets of Baal slashed their own flesh with knives to get Baal’s attention. Today, how many people destroy their lives and their families on the altars of the false gods of money, sensuality, and human power? **But the God who liberates us from all that says, “You shall have no other gods before me.”** That is not bondage! It is the only real freedom! Our God is a liberating God.

We know this *personal, saving, liberating* God most fully in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus claimed for Himself all the authority of the One who gave the Law to Moses. He said, *“I AM the way, I AM the truth, I AM the life. No one comes to the Father except through ME”* (John 14:6).

Now, isn’t that impossibly narrow? Can we really say that Christ is the only way? Yes, we can and we do because He said it. Keep in mind, Jesus did not make this claim as bad news. It is good news! It is a call to humility and gratitude. In thankfulness, we confess that Jesus is the Way to God; Jesus is the Truth of God embodied in a man; and Jesus is the giver of New Life that we will find nowhere else. The earth-shaking truth is that Jesus Christ claims for Himself the exclusive devotion of the first commandment.

The first commandment is the foundation for all that follow: *No other gods before me.* Narrow? Yes! Uncompromising? Yes! And it is the best invitation you will ever receive, because it comes from the God who loves you so much that He will not let you settle for less than Himself.