

The Ten Commandments: There is Only ONE God

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Thornwell Lectures

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You may want to turn to Exodus 20:1-3 perhaps. That will be our base text and when Dr. Thomas asked about when the time I found out about this possibility, there were openings as to which one you might want to do and I chose the first commandment not because I wanted to be first on the list but because I found, find that when I would be sitting in worship services in our last pastorate, it always seemed that the prayer of confession that the commandment I had the most trouble with was the first commandment. So one may just as well tackle one's biggest problem, I suppose. So we look at the first commandment today.

Now there are two approaches that you can take when you come to the 10 Commandments and, indeed, to the first commandment and so on. These tend to, I suppose if you need symbols or something like that, either think of the George McClellan approach or the Robert E. Lee approach. If you take the George McClellan approach, the Yankee general of the Federal Army, one of them anyway, back in the war between the states you may remember that General McClellan was always very cautious. He always wanted to make sure that he had massed all the troops he could get. He was always sure that he, that his opponent had more than he did, but he always wanted to make sure that all the administrative work was done, all the war material was marshaled right to the place where it needed to be, all the plans were laid, and everything was just exactly in place and just perfect before he would wait a little longer. And then, of course, there's the Robert E. Lee approach which, well, I'm just gonna simplify it, you simply jump in and attack.

And I prefer the Lee approach to the 10 Commandments. I know you could do the McClellan approach, especially with the first commandment that you would try to lay bare all the details that we need to know about biblical law, that we should talk about covenants, that we should try to explain the various principles by which we interpret the 10 Commandments that we might say, indicate what the five views are of various Christians that they hold about the law of God, etc. etc., and then we would have two or three minutes to talk about the first commandment. So I'm reverting to General Lee basically. I just want to attack the first commandment and we'll pick up some scrub notes on the way as we go.

Let me just make one concession to the McClellan approach, if you want to call it that. Notice in Exodus 20:1 that it begins, "And God spoke all these words." That's very important. One of the problems in paganism was that they didn't know what God wanted. There's a pagan prayer we have that's kind of called, for want of a better term I guess, better terms, "Prayer to Every God," and in this prayer, this pagan worshiper is speaking to gods and goddesses. He's been afflicted with illness or some kind of affliction and he doesn't know why, he doesn't know which god or which goddess he has offended; he doesn't know which god or goddess has afflicted him; and he doesn't know why, he doesn't know if he's done something wrong and if he does, he doesn't know what that wrong is and he says all mankind's that way. None of them know what the gods or the goddesses want. Welcome to the muddled slop of paganism where the gods don't talk and they don't tell you what they want, but the first evidence of love from the God of the Bible is clarity, "And God spoke all these words." He tells you exactly what he wants and thanksgiving is due from you.

Now let's look at this commandment. You notice at Exodus 20:2 and 3 reads that when he spoke he said, "I am Yahweh, or the Lord. I'm Yahweh, your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slaves. You are to have no other gods beside me." There's our text. The first thing I want you to notice is the offense of this commandment. The offense of this commandment. Well, it does offend, "no other gods besides me." This God is intolerant and exclusive and inflexible. It's the sort of thing if you want, what you might say, a real-life sample, you can go to 2 Kings 1:1-8 and that's where the king of Israel, Ahaziah, has had a fall and he apparently thinks it may prove eventually fatal; he may be in his last illness. So he says to his lackeys, "Go down to Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, and inquire of him whether I'll recover." Well, God told Elijah to go up and intercept those messengers, and Elijah said something like this to them, "Is it because there's no God in Israel that you're going to inquire of Baal-zebub, God of Ekron? Thus says Yahweh, Therefore the bed to which you have gone up, you will not come down from it but you will surely die."

Ahaziah, he may be in his last illness. Doesn't he have some civil rights if he thinks that he may get some kind of comfort and consolation and relief and psychological peace, if he thinks that is his hope for these days happens to squat in a temple 45 miles away in Philistia, why deny him his civil right? Why, Kennedy and Roberts and Scalia would all vote for him, wouldn't they? Yeah, but this isn't a Republic here, this is a monarchy and Yahweh reigns and he doesn't have that right and so he forfeits his life. How offensive that God is like that and that's the offense of this commandment.

Now one Old Testament scholar, let me just run a quote by you and I don't usually agree with this one but he's right on this. He begins this way, he said, "This intolerant claim to exclusive worship is something unique in the history of religion." Got that? This intolerant claim, no other gods, this intolerant claim to exclusive worship is something unique in the history of religion, and he goes on to explain because in antiquity and in the Ancient Near East, the cults were on easy terms with one another and left devotees and worshipers a free hand to ensure blessing for themselves from any other gods as well. In other words, Marduk didn't get his nose bent out of shape, if he had a nose, he didn't get

his nose bent out of shape because you worshiped Chemosh for a while, or something like that. Ecumenicity was the name of the game. Pagans didn't get worked up about that. In fact, there's even a prayer that we have, a pagan prayer, that's called "Prayer to the Gods of the Night," and this prayer is a prayer asking for the gods of the night to assist the worshiper in this divination ceremony. Now why is he praying to the gods of the night? Well, because the gods of the day have punched out. They're not on duty and they're not gonna get upset because he appeals to other gods that happen to be working the night shift, that's the way paganism is. There's none of this exclusivity, none of this intolerance.

We like it a little better, don't we, when we've got the freedom and the wiggle room, sort of like Representative Fred Shwengel who was a Congressman from Iowa back a few years, and he was asked what his position was on prohibition and this was his response, this is what he called his stand, he said, "If when you say whiskey you mean the devil's brew, the poison scourge, the bloody monster that defiles innocence, dethrones reasons, destroys the home, creates misery and poverty, yea, literally takes the bread from the mouths of little children, if you mean the evil drink that topples Christian men and women from the pinnacles of righteousness, gracious living into the bottomless pit of degradation and despair, shame and helplessness and hopelessness, then I certainly am against it with all my power. But if when you say whiskey, you mean the oil of conversation, the philosophic wine, the ale that is consumed when good fellows get together, that puts a song in their hearts and laughter on their lips and the warm glow of contentment in their eyes, if you mean the drink that enables a man to magnify his joy and his happiness and to forget if only for a little while life's great tragedies, heartbreaks and sorrows, if you mean that drink, the same of which pours into our treasures untold millions of dollars to provide tender care for our little crippled children, our blind, our deaf, our dumb, our aged and infirm, and to build highways, hospitals and schools, then I am certainly in favor of it." That's the way we like it. We like it both ways. Let's not hem ourselves in but that's ground that Yahweh, the living God, will not allow you to have.

Do you hear the first commandment? He is an intolerant God, a dogmatic God, an authoritarian God. That is the offense of this commandment and this God, by the way, must therefore be the real God for no one would wish for a God like this, this narrow. If God is indeed the projection of our own wish fulfillment, who on earth would wish for a God like this and invent this kind of God? This God, then, the like of no other there was, must be the real God and the problem is that you can't run into the New Testament and say, "Oh, things are nicer here." Because, you see, when you run into the New Testament, you'll run into Matthew 10:37 and 38 where Jesus will say to you, "The one who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. The one who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And the one who does not take his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me." Is Jesus mad or something? Did you hear him? Who does he think he is? Do you see the assumptions he's making in Matthew 10:37-38? That is just Exodus 20:3 in another key. He is assuming that he must have the place of supreme affection in your life, bar none. Jesus is just as offensive as the first commandment of Exodus 20. That's the offense of the commandment and that runs slam up against the whole mentality of our age.

Now secondly, let's notice the paradox of this commandment. The paradox. This commandment, you know, what a paradox is, two seemingly conflicting elements and you can't exactly see how they go together but they do, and that's what you have in this commandment. You notice that this commandment is both a matter of grace and demand. There's part of the paradox. We know that Exodus 20 comes after Exodus 1-19, and in Exodus 1-19 you have the liberation of Israel from bondage in Egypt and from Pharaoh. So it takes place in the context of freedom. In fact, in verse 2, Yahweh says, "I am Yahweh your God, not your God because you chose me, but I am your God because I redeemed you from the house of slaves and from the land of Egypt. I set you free and therefore you are mine. That's why I'm your God." And so it's as if he's saying to them, "Yes, I have set you free and now you are free to obey my covenant law," verses 3 to 17. He said, "I have freed you from your slavery and now I am," paradox, "binding you to myself and to obey me." You go from, well, what you might say they were slaves, Pharaoh's slaves and now they become Yahweh's slaves. Oh, there's a great difference but nevertheless that's still the case. There's a new freedom because Yahweh has set them free but that leads to a new bondage in a sense in that they are committed and the demand is upon them to submit to his covenant law. That's the paradox.

So you enjoy life as a free people but you, there's a certain shape to that freedom, it's in obedience to Yahweh's commandments. That's something of the paradox, and of course, that comes up against, slams up against the contemporary attitude any kind of authority in our situation often is thought to be, to negate any kind of freedom. Every once in a while, I suppose, you run into people who say, "Well, I don't want to be bound by the conventions and be in bondage to the conventions of hygiene." So they don't brush their teeth, they don't take showers, they don't use deodorant, they don't change their underwear, etc. but they've only proven that they are slaves to their own stink when everything is said and done. Or you can see it another way. Someone may say, "Well, I don't want to be bound by all the conventions and demands of grammar and syntax and all that sort of thing. That's just the imposition of the pedagogical educational complex." If you can imagine someone saying that. And so they say, "I'm gonna talk any way I want to." So they say things like this, "Squashed sky the the dropped mailman from hamburger in a giant," rather than, "A giant hamburger dropped from the sky and squashed the mailman." Now that may sound incredible but at least it's coherent. You see, it's in the structure that you have true freedom. It's not opposed to that. It's in the order that freedom is preserved and, indeed, that's what the apostle says to you in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, it's the same paradox. "Don't you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you whom you have from God and you are not your own, for you're bought with a price, therefore glorify God in your body." You are not your own for you were bought with a price and it's the same paradox in Exodus 20, you're not your own, I've bought you, therefore you submit to my sway.

You see, grace sets you free, Exodus 1-18, but grace always has superglue on it. That's Exodus 20. That's the paradox. Now thirdly, let's notice the position of this commandment. The position of this commandment. In our Reformed calculations, this is the first commandment and here in verse 3, and there seems to be a certain primacy about

this commandment. Now I suppose there are some objections that someone could make. Someone might say, "Well, you know, why didn't the Bible or why didn't the Lord use a little more marketing savvy in putting out the 10 words, the 10 commandments?" Look, we've got the crises in the home, we've got interpersonal relationships and generation gaps, all this sort of thing, why didn't he start with commandment five? Why is commandment one number one? Why isn't number five number one? Or someone else would say, "Well, look, we have terrorism, we have abortion, euthanasia, all these pressing issues, why isn't commandment six number one? Why not start there?" Or Someone else would say, "Well, why not grab their interest, why not start with sex in number seven and get them hooked and then go from there? Why do we have, 'You shall have no other gods beside me'?" Well, because the first issue of the greatest importance is not man's need but God's place. This seems to be a foundational commandment beneath all the rest and I would suggest that Jesus thought that.

We go to Mark 10:17-22, you don't have to right now but you notice the reference, it's the young ruler passage, Mark 10:17-22 and you see there how Jesus thought this commandment was foundation. You remember the man said, "What good thing can I do or should I do to inherit eternal life?" And he's seemingly thinking something a little more than elementary. He seemed to get a little peeved, apparently. I know that's in the margin, it's not right in the text, but when Jesus mentions about half a dozen of the commandments and he said, "Eh, all these I've kept from my youth up. Let's get on to the good stuff. Let's get out of elementary school." Well, you can tell when he said that that he really didn't understand the commandments at all, but Jesus didn't argue that case with him, he rather said, "You lack one thing, go sell whatever you have," and this was instruction particularly to this man, "go sell whatever you have and give to the poor and you'll have treasure in heaven and come follow me." And the text says that gloom came over him. His jaw dropped for he had great possessions, and that tells you what Jesus was doing, he went after him at the level of the first commandment. He went underneath all the others and he said, "Here, let me give you a for instance of how you can test whether you're keeping the commandments or not." And of course, the truth was not that he had great possessions but that his great possessions had him. He was violating the first commandment above everything else and Jesus made him feel it. Jesus exposes him.

Do you remember what it says in that passage in Mark 10? It says Jesus loved him. Jesus loved him and proceeded to smash his idol which was his illusion of his own goodness. So he takes him back to this premiere commandment. It's as if Jesus sees it as the foundation of all the others and I would suggest that that passage in Mark 10 offers you some hope, that perhaps the most hopeful thing Jesus can do for you is to make you see what an idolater you are and what a problem you have with the first commandment. Our idols are not necessarily obvious, you know, most of them are a little bit subtle and we don't tend to see them. I don't have time obviously to go in and rattle down a checklist of some of these. Sometimes, you know, it's a matter of the grip that acceptance and approval of other people have upon us and that can be our idol.

There was a time when Florence Harding, now none of us probably remember her except in writing. She was the wife of Warren Harding who I think was our 20th President.

Before that he was a Senator from Ohio. When the Hardings came to Washington and so on, they began to get into some of the cliques and some of the socializing of some of the, well, the in-folks, and there was one woman, Mrs. McLean, I think, who was the owner of the Hope diamond perhaps, in any case, she introduced Florence Harding to some of "the set" and the cool folks and so on, and after she had been with them, Florence Harding would say to Mrs. McLean, "What did they say about me?" Isn't that sad to be in bondage to what other people think about you? It almost becomes your preoccupation and your deity.

Or it might simply be a very legitimate need that we have that is elevated out of its place to a position of a kind of a deity for us. Ed Welsh tells of a woman whom he calls Maureen and he said that she was a faithful Christian, she was in a difficult marriage and so on. She seemed to be a very self-effacing and exemplary wife but after years of strife in her marriage, she finally came to a counselor and she told her story. She would have a pattern of rage followed by depression and these episodes always came after her husband ignored her and that sort of thing. Well, what she found out, and this was Ed Welsh's point, he said as Maureen thought biblically about those experiences, she began to realize that she had begun to worship something other than God. Her idol was the god of being loved. Like most forms of idolatry, it had a religious and pious appearance making it difficult to detect. Now you say, "Doesn't a woman have a right to expect their husband to show her basic attention and affection, etc.? Is there anything wrong with that?" No, there's not, that's a legitimate need but Welsh's point wasn't Maureen came to see that she had elevated a very legitimate need and expectation to the level in which it was a fixation and a preoccupation, it became a god with you might say a small "g" for her.

We can elevate our needs to a level of deity and sometimes it may just be something peculiar to you that becomes your way up against the first commandment. It may not be something that other people may be bothered with, it may be peculiar to you. William Grimshaw was a pastor in the 1700s in Yorkshire, England, and he had a cow and he loved that cow because it wasn't susceptible to the disease and the plagues that a lot of the Yorkshire cows seemed to get, and he loved his favorite dish which was onions boiled in milk, and he always seemed to have plenty of milk from his cow. But then he noticed that when he tried to pray, he would think about his cow and so he decided, "I've got to sell the thing." So he had a guy come by and look at the cow and he was looking it over very carefully and was very suspicious because who wants to dump a cow that seemed to be in such fine shape as this one. You know, he thought there must be some hidden defect. And Grimshaw said, "Well, no, no, no, she follows me into the pulpit." He couldn't stop thinking.

Now you're not likely to have that kind of a problem and so on and it may be, but it was peculiar to him, but doesn't Exodus 20:3 taken to Mark 10:17-22 show us what we need? Don't we need to let Jesus do for us what he did for that man in Mark 10, keep exposing your idolatry so that you can keep continually repenting and renewing your obedience? Isn't that just what we need? That's the position of this commandment. It is so foundational.

Now fourthly, let's notice the depth of this commandment. The depth of this commandment and here I want to refer you to Deuteronomy 6:4-9. You have really an application of the first commandment. Deuteronomy 6:4-9. You're very familiar with that and I can't go into justifying the translation of verse 4, I know that if you look in your Bibles at Deuteronomy 6:4, you'll have about four different suggested translations and no one seems to be sure exactly of the proper one. I think that the best one is, "Hear, O Israel, Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone." That's a pretty good restatement of the first commandment and then it goes on to read, "And," verse 5, Deuteronomy 6:5, "And you shall love Yahweh your God with your whole heart and with your whole being and with everything you have," literally with your whole heart and with your whole soul, that is, with your whole being and literally with all your much-ness, that is, with everything you have, pretty all-encompassing. Now you say, "Oh no, no, Davis, I don't see that little word 'and' at the beginning of verse 5 in my text." Oh, you must have the ESV or the NIV because there's a little word "and" in the Hebrew text of the first part of all those verses from verses 4 to 9.

"Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone and you shall love Yahweh your God," and verse 6, and how do I know that I love him? Well, "His words which I command you will be upon your heart and you'll think about them and you'll weigh upon them and you'll ponder them and in your family circle whether you're sitting down or getting up or going to be or walking on the road, you'll be talking about Yahweh's words and commands, and not only that, you'll be repeating them to your children and they'll infect not only your family life but also your civil life within the gates." It's all connected but you wouldn't have a clue of that if you're reading the ESV or the NIV, for example, because they'll start a new sentence at verse 5 with no conjunction at all.

Now I don't want to rail at something, but thanks for letting me get this off my chest. We have these people, I think they must be called English stylists, because when you have a translation, sometimes they like to drop these conjunctions. I understand what motivates them. They don't like to begin sentences like that, and so sometimes if there's a lot of them, it seems to be so repetitive, doesn't it, to say "and, and, and, and." Why, they could say, "It's gonna sound like the Gospel of Mark if you do that. You know how Mark takes often that hyper-kinetic style about Jesus' life of ministry and he just goes, "and, and, and, and," and he takes you all over the place. We can't have that, we've got to have a little...." Well, no, I don't think so, I think we need to keep like the old RSV, keep all the "ands" in Deuteronomy 6. What I want you to see here is the depth it gives to the first commandment.

You, you see, "Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone," and the most important word, "and you shall love Yahweh your God with your whole heart and your whole being and with everything you have." Do you see what that's saying? That's saying that not only is Yahweh the only God and is your God, but he requires you to have a passion for him. It's just connected to it. I mean, there are folks who can say that they're God-fearing, I suppose, and believe in God, that they tolerate his existence, but that's not the point here in verse 5. It's sort of like someone saying, you know, a couple comes up to you and says, "We've been married 30 years." Well, three cheers for durability but what you want to

know from, let's say, the husband, not have you made it through 30 years but do you love her? Do you prize her? Do you enjoy her? Do you treasure her more than any other living person? Can you answer that? That's the depth of the matter. That's what's coming across in verse 5. Deuteronomy 6 is not satisfied that you be mildly pro-God. You see, the point is not do you acknowledge God, verse 4, but do you adore him, verse 5? Not does he have your approval, verse 4, but does he have your affections, verse 5? Not merely do you confess Yahweh as your God, verse 4, but do you crave him, verse 5? Do you see the depth of that commandment?

It's the sort of thing that comes across in Psalm 43 and it cuts me to the quick every time I read it because I have to say I don't know that I'm there. Do you remember when the Psalmists say, "Oh, send out your light and your truth," Psalm 43, "Let them lead me. Let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy." And I have to say to myself, "Davis, is that the way you regard your God? Does he take you like that?" That's the depth of the commandment.

It reminds me of something that happened, one of my brothers, I have four older brothers and number two brother was in high school years ago obviously, and we were living in Kansas at this time and my brother, who was probably 16 or 17, was riding with his friend who was driving his father's new car. Got that? Now as they're going down the street, some car got too close to them and side-swiped them going the other way. The guy never stopped, he just kept going. Now what do you do? Here you are, you're a couple of teenagers and the one driving the car, what's he supposed to do? He just goes back to his dad at home and says, "Oh, dad, you know, I had your new car out and a guy side-swiped me and didn't stop." No, you don't do that. So they did a u-bangy and they turned around and they took after that guy and there was a red light and there he was stopped at the red light. They got out of their car, they went up to that car, they opened the driver's side door and they grabbed hold of that guy and they started pulling him out and my brother Glen's words were, "He just kept on coming." I mean, it was a big guy. He seemed to be suddenly docile, though, apparently because there were a couple of brash high school guys who had the gall to pull his door open and start dragging him out so he didn't get feisty at all and he knuckled under. But I still remember my brother's words, "He just kept on coming."

Now that's the way it is in Deuteronomy 6:5. Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone, and he just keeps on coming. He demands all your affections, full blast. This is the depth of the commandment. Doesn't it leave us in sackcloth and ashes? Don't I have to say that I don't think I'm there? Don't I have to go back to my Savior and beg for forgiveness again and again?

I have a friend who told me of his, I think it was his ordination exam before presbytery, and you may know how some of those exams go. The presbytery will quiz you on all sorts of theology and so on. They may start with the doctrine of the Trinity and end up with your view of last things and a whole bunch of other stuff in between, and sometimes it can get a little cerebral. But then there's often a fellow in the presbytery that wants to cut to the quick and when it's all over and the examination is nearing the end, he'll say

something and this was the case in my friend's case, situation, one of the members of presbytery said to him, "Do you love Jesus?" Well, sometimes you need that question, don't you in the midst of it all? And he in utter sincerity said, "Yes, I do. I love him with all my heart, soul, strength and mind." Now he was in his own way being very sincere but there was a theological professor that happened to be there at presbytery that day, I know him, I've had him, and my friend knew him, and he came up to my friend after the presbytery exam was over at some point and he said, "You know, you prevaricated today in front of presbytery." His point being and it was a gentle rebuke, his point being can you ever say that you love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind? Don't you always fall far short of that? Don't you realize that's what is demanded of us and yet we don't go there with the consistency we need?

So doesn't this leave us in sackcloth and ashes? Doesn't the depth of this commandment point us to the need to cling to another who has obeyed in our place and whose merit can become ours?

Now then, finally, let me quickly indicate a fifth element, the gift of this commandment. The gift of this commandment. This commandment does contain a gift. One could say the commandment, "You are to have no other gods before, beside me," is really a promise in disguise? Isn't the Lord saying, "You shall have no other gods besides me because you need no other gods"? So Yahweh is saying to you in this commandment that he's sufficient for you, that he's enough, and if he was not enough, then he would have given you more, but if you're to have no other gods, then you need no other gods, he is sufficient. That's the positive side of the commandment. That's the kindness in this commandment.

You may have a hard time conceiving of a demand or a command being the gift. It's sort of like the time when Charles Spurgeon, 19th century Baptist preacher in London, had his pastor's college and he tried to keep a kind of a close eye on some of the lads and young men who were in the pastor's college and see how they were doing and so on, and he happened to notice with one of them that his clothing was quite worn, and so he said to him on one occasion, "I want you to run an errand for me. I want you to take this note to this address and I want you to wait for a reply." That's the demand, okay? So he did. Well, the address happened to be a tailor's shop and the reply happened to be a new suit and a new coat. You see, the gift was in and wrapped up in the demand and that's what you have here. When the Lord says, "You are to have no other gods beside me," isn't that really you need no other? Isn't that just another way of saying Psalm 23:1, "Yahweh is my shepherd, I will never lack anything"? Now notice that's a confession of faith. "Yahweh is my shepherd," not Marduk, not Ishtar is my shepherdess, not Amon-Re is my shepherd, "Yahweh and he and no other is my shepherd," and then the logical next step, "I will never lack anything." Isn't that the promise of the commandment? Isn't Psalm 23:1 sort of the Romans 8:32 of the Old Testament? Isn't this a gift that comes in the command?

So where does this take us? I think this drives us all the way to the last line of 1 John, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols."

Let us pray.

"Holy, holy, holy,
Though the darkness hide thee,
Though the eye of sinful man thy glory may not see.

Only thou art holy; there is none beside thee,
Perfect in power, love and purity."

Amen.