

Worshiping the One True God

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“You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself any carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children...of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments” (Exodus 20:3-6).

The Ten Commandments are the cornerstone of all religion. Given in such a miraculous way from Mt. Sinai to that journeying band of Hebrews, they are a starting point and summary of the relationship between God and man. In their simple and straightforward way, they set forth what God expects of us, both in reference to Him and to our neighbors. On the surface they describe the fundamental laws which are necessary for people to exist in peace and harmony. These, or similar laws, can be found in every culture and race. Deeper down, they encompass every facet of truth which the Lord has revealed. They describe how the Lord reaches out to us, and how we might experience His eternal happiness.

We should not be surprised that the very first commandment declares that there is but one God. This is the key concept upon which all the rest of the commandments hang. Without first having a definition of God, everything else falls apart.

For how we conceive of God affects us eternally. It is so central to who we are that our place in heaven is said to be determined by how we think of the Divine. No, a test is not given when we first enter the spiritual world to see how much we know about God. It is not factual or intellectual knowledge which so strongly influences who we become. Rather, it is the concept of God which has permeated our lives, which has led us to embrace attitudes and make certain decisions, which gradually defines who we are.

For example, a person who imagines God as harsh and punishing, will tend to view this world as a testing ground. Pain, or punishment, will be seen as a negative message from God, just as worldly success will be seen as a positive message. But because evil appears to occur randomly, he could easily feel that God is unfair and capricious. He could also begin to treat others that way, thinking that it really does not matter.

An equally sad reaction occurs if a person imagines God as good but incapable of dealing with evil. Although he will feel affection for a God who does not punish, he will have an inadequate model for how to deal with evil. Such a person could easily fall into thinking that one misstep, one sin, will cut him off from a god who does not relate to evil. These unreal expectations cannot be met, so this person might easily give up in the face of hell.

The Ten Commandments stress the singleness of God as a beginning of understanding. Looking to *one* Divine gives a focus for our thinking and feeling. We can identify with one God and begin to appreciate His qualities. We also can feel a love for one which we cannot for several.

The command of having only one God reverberates throughout the Old Testament. Jehovah showed Himself time and time again as the only Deity, an apparent conceit that other gods of the time did not

claim! This was especially seen in the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. In the most graphic way possible, Jehovah demonstrated that He is the only God.

The New Testament echoes this fundamental principle. When a scribe asked the Lord what was the greatest commandment, He quoted Deuteronomy: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:29, 30). From these and many other teachings, it can be seen that the Lord Jesus Christ is the one God of heaven and earth—one Person, one Creator and Savior.

But all these teachings about the single God are just facts. They do not exist to control us or just to inform us about the Divine. They exist so that we might feel with our hearts and see with our minds our Lord and God. To obey the first commandment is to recognize the risen Lord in our lives. Whenever we see an idea that is true (meaning one which leads to good), or whenever we feel the presence of genuine love, we are sensing the one God.

We can distort the world by ignoring the Divine presence, or we can worship the only God by being receptive to Him. When we look about us and consider that nothing is unaffected by the Lord—that He knows all things, is everywhere, and has all power to do good—the Lord becomes more and more our sole God. We place Him before us; we see Him in a real and lasting way.

The warning about carved images (idolatry), applies when we allow anything to prevent us from receiving His life into ours. We are not likely to worship physical images, as the ancients did. But while we may not bow down before wood and stone, there are numerous other gods which call to us.

We can allow people to come between us and the Lord. Ancestor worship is not obvious in western culture, but it occurs when a person is locked into a profession or pattern of behavior by family traditions or expectations. Fawning over media sensations—politicians, actors, sports figures—can verge on worshiping false images. For when we accept the ideas they propose without seeking Divine direction or using our own rational minds, we have removed the Lord as our only God.

There are also many things of this world which can become idols to us. We are surrounded by incredible wealth, with the ability to purchase anything we really need, and much that we believe we cannot do without. Our five senses can be overwhelmed with the apparently unlimited number of pleasures this world holds. We can be seduced by all of this. We can become so preoccupied with all that money can buy that we subtly shift from worshiping the Lord to worshiping “things.” Idolatry exists whenever we focus our attention on superficial or natural things, for then the Lord is neglected and eventually forgotten.

But the most powerful idol of all is ourselves. Our wants, our desires, our goals can become so important to us that we sell everything we have to satisfy them, and not to purchase pearls of great price. The affection we feel for ourselves can divert us from the Lord and our neighbors. The more we think of ourselves, the more we pay attention to ourselves, the less time and energy we will have for the Lord.

All these are idols, which are then *likened* to important things. The Lord commanded that no likeness be made of the things of heaven, the earth, and the water under the earth. This means that we are not to make up excuses or justifications which make the worship of idols appear to have value. Our reasoning ability can help us see the Lord’s ways, or it can mold self-love and love of the world to seem like they are living and good.

But such idols have no lasting power. They can fascinate and obsess, but they cannot bring inner or lasting happiness. That only comes from recognizing the one God of heaven and earth as our Lord and Savior. For there is tremendous power in focusing upon the Lord. Only when we accept Him as the source of all good and truth, can we become less concerned about ourselves. Oh yes, without Him we can live an outwardly good life. We can be productive, have fun, and be respected. But unless we are doing so because the Lord is our God, every effort at improvement circles back to self. Recognizing the Lord as the reason for existence is the only way to remove the unhealthy self which would take over and dominate our existence.

How can we worship one God and not various idols as we strive to bring Him more into the center of our lives? Not in an overly pious or sanctimonious way. Not in an all-consuming way either. Rather, we do this by making our priorities the same as the Lord's. Do we value the same things He does? Are we concerned about those around us? Do we want to treat them fairly? Do we wish them well? Is our marriage or family worth energy? Do we feel close to the Lord? What we care about says much about what our priorities are.

Although the amount of time spent each day on various activities is not necessarily an accurate indicator of what we consider important, we can learn much by reflecting upon what things we make time for. Do we have regular worship? Do we pray daily? Do we read something from the Word? Do we think of the Lord? Do we try to help fellow employees? Do we talk to our spouse and children?

Of course, we can all accuse ourselves of not doing enough—not caring enough, not spending enough time with the Lord and our neighbors. But it is relatively simple to change. We do not even have to give up much to say a prayer of thanks each morning or to ask our friends how they are feeling. Small changes can, like water dripping on rocks, wear away some of our selfishness, and bring us into greater harmony with the Lord—into worshiping Him alone.

Regularly asking ourselves the question, “do we really want the Lord's will to be done?” can remind us that He plays a critical role in our everyday existence. Stepping back to think— removing ourselves from the apparent necessity of frantic activity—enables us to remember what He wants for us and how He is leading us, often in spite of ourselves!

By these, and numerous other methods, the Lord's first commandment can be followed. It comes first, and just so it can become the first principle, the center of our lives. Focusing upon the one God who created us, rather than upon the false idols of self and the world, we can be lifted up to Him. We can see Him more clearly with the sight of our minds. We can feel His presence more fully in the course of our lives.

Worshiping the one God of heaven and earth is the way in which we can forget about ourselves and gain true perspective. Our wants and our ideas pale in comparison to what the Lord offers us. As we see all the brilliance of truth and the warmth of love coming from Him, we can relax. We can have no other gods before Him. We can avoid making carved images. And we can receive mercy by loving the Lord and keeping His commandments.

Amen.

Lessons: I Kings 18:21-40; Mark 12:28-34; *True Christian Religion* 282, 283 (portions)