

The Christian Life (6): The First Commandment

The first four commandments concern the object (1st), nature (2nd), manner (3rd), and timing (4th) of worship. Taken together, they provide the who, what, how, and when of public worship. "As the first command requires that the true God should be truly worshipped, so the three next following commands prescribe the means and branches of His worship, and the way and manner how He would have it performed" (Hopkins).¹

The four precepts of the first table of the law relate immediately to God. The first points out the object of worship; while it forbids us to have any other God before Him, it calls upon us to acknowledge and worship Him alone. The second prescribes the means of worship, not by images or any other plan of human invention, but by the rites and ordinances which are divinely appointed. The third declares the manner in which the service of God should be performed, namely, with reverence, as opposed to profaneness and every abuse of religious institutions. The fourth specifies the time of worship, to wit, one day in seven, which is to be wholly devoted to God; not however to the exclusion of other seasons which the events of providence may point out, and the regular devotional exercises of every day.²

I. The First Commandment

Q. *What does the Lord require in the first commandment?* A. That I, not wanting to endanger my very salvation, avoid and shun all idolatry, magic, superstitious rites, and prayer to saints or to other creatures. That I sincerely acknowledge the only true God, trust Him alone, look to Him for every good thing humbly and patiently, love Him, fear Him, and honor Him with all my heart. In short, that I give up anything rather than go against His will in any way.³

1. *Duties required.* The first commandment is foundational to the moral law. "As the first commandment is the foundation or cornerstone of the whole law, especially the first table, it is obeyed or disobeyed, in all our obedience or disobedience to any commandment" (Brown).⁴ "The sum of this commandment is, that we should sanctify God in our hearts, and give Him a precedence above all created beings" (Watson).⁵ "The purpose of this commandment is that the Lord wills alone to be pre-eminent among His people, and to exercise complete authority over them" (Calvin).⁶ "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Ex.20:3). "'You shall *have* no other gods' has the force of, you shall own, possess, seek, desire, love or worship none other. 'Before Me,' or 'My face,' the force of which is best explained by His word to Abraham, 'Walk before Me and be perfect' (Gen.17:1)—conduct yourself in the realization that you are ever in My presence, that Mine eye is continually upon you" (Pink).⁷ "The words *before Me*, or before My face, teach us that God, who sees all things, takes special notice of, and is much displeased with, the sin of having any other God: that so it may be an argument to dissuade from it, and to aggravate it as a most brazen provocation: as also to persuade us to do as in His

¹ Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 1:277-278

² John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 4:433-434

³ Heidelberg Catechism, Q.94

⁴ John Brown, *Systematic Theology*, 455

⁵ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 49

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.16

⁷ A.W. Pink, *The Ten Commandments*, 10-11

sight, whatever we do in His service."⁸ "God is present among His people; He looks upon them and they upon Him. Therefore, the fact that this sin is committed in the presence of God, greatly aggravates it. The more extraordinary, clear, and glorious this presence is, the more abominable this sin is. In the place where God is served and by a people in whose midst He resides, no sin is more heinous than to put something in the place of God or to have something besides God which one honors and serves as God" (Brakel).⁹

The duties required in the first commandment are, the knowing and acknowledging of God to be the only true God, and our God; and to worship and glorify Him accordingly, by thinking, meditating, remembering, highly esteeming, honoring, adoring, choosing, loving, desiring, fearing of Him; believing Him; trusting, hoping, delighting, rejoicing in Him; being zealous for Him; calling upon Him, giving all praise and thanks, and yielding all obedience and submission to Him with the whole man; being careful in all things to please Him, and sorrowful when in anything He is offended; and walking humbly with Him.¹⁰

(1) Knowledge of God. This includes a proper understanding of His being, word, and works. By nature all men have a knowledge about God (Rom.1:21), but this knowledge, though enough to condemn them (Rom.1:20), is not enough to enable them to know and/or worship God rightly. "As for you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and serve Him with a loyal heart and with a willing mind" (1Chron.28:9). "Knowledge is the foundation of all religion, for religion is a reasonable service. The mind of man should be clear and distinct in the uptaking of divine things. So it was when God made it, so it should be without darkness" (Boston).¹¹ Boston then suggested, "this commandment requires us to know 1) the existence of God, and 2) the nature of God. We must know Him as He has revealed Himself in His word and works. We must know Him in the unity of His essence, and Trinity of persons; in His attributes held out to us in the word, as that He is infinite, eternal, unchangeable, &., and in His works of creation, providence, and redemption."¹²

Because the being and existence of a deity, is a notion so common and natural to mankind, and that we are strongly inclined to the worship of a God; it will be necessary rightly to know that God, to whom this homage of our souls, and all our affection and veneration is due: for, while we remain ignorant of this, it is impossible but that we should be idolaters; giving that, which is proper to God alone, to some vain created fiction of our own deluded understandings. Idolatry, therefore, is a sin more common among us than we imagine: for as many ignorant persons as there are, so many idolaters there are; who, though they fall not down before stocks and stones, yet form such uncouth ideas and strange images of God in their minds, that no more represent His infinite perfections and excellencies, than those dumb idols that the heathens worship.¹³

This knowledge is both notional (head) and experiential (heart). "True knowledge of God is the internal and immediate beholding of God in His perfections by the enlightened eyes of the understanding

⁸ Larger Catechism, Q.106

⁹ Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 3:90

¹⁰ Larger Catechism, Q.104

¹¹ Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:92

¹² Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:92-93

¹³ Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, 1:295-296

from which all holy motions proceed. It is that light by which the soul, being illuminated by God Himself, loses itself in adoration, in deep reverence bows before Him, leaps up for joy, and is set aflame with love" (Brakel).¹⁴ "Most certainly that knowledge of God which is necessary to lay a foundation of genuine love to Him implies not only right apprehensions of what He is, but also a sense of His glory and beauty in being such" (Bellamy).¹⁵

Wicked men and devils may know what God is, but none but holy beings have any sense of His infinite glory and beauty in being such; which sense in Scripture language, is called *seeing* and *knowing*. 'Whosoever sinneth, hath not seen Him, neither known Him.' 'He that doeth evil hath not seen God.' 'He that saith, I know Him, and keepeth not His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.' Because wicked men have no sense of His glory and beauty, therefore they are said not to know God; for all knowledge without this is vain; it is but the form of knowledge. It will never enkindle divine love. And, in Scripture, sinners are said to be blind, because, after all their light and knowledge, they have no sense of God's glory in being what He is, and so have no heart to love Him. And hence also they are said to be dead. They know nothing of the ineffable glory of the divine nature, and the love of God is not in them.¹⁶

(2) Allegiance to God. This means, we must not only know God but acknowledge Him as our God. "We are required hereby to acknowledge Him to be the only true God, and our God" (Boston).¹⁷ "To-day you have proclaimed the LORD to be your God, and that you will walk in His ways and keep His statutes, His commandments, and His judgments, and that you will obey His voice" (Deut.26:17). This includes trust, fear, and obedience. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me" (Ex.20:2-3). Obedience to the law is dependent upon our relationship with God as our covenant Redeemer. "The First Commandment requires us to know and acknowledge God to be the only true God, and our God; and to worship and glorify Him accordingly."¹⁸ That we are to "have no other gods" implies we are to have Him as our God. "*To have God* is to know and acknowledge that He is God, that He is one, that He is such a one as He has revealed Himself in the church, and that He is also such a God to us. Then it is to trust in Him alone, with the greatest humility and patience; to submit ourselves to Him with fear and reverence" (Ursinus).¹⁹

"To have God to be a God to us, is to fear Him. 'If you do not carefully observe all the words of this law that are written in the book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, THE LORD YOUR GOD' (Deut.28:58). This fearing God is to have Him always in our eye, 'I have set the Lord always before me' (Ps.16:8). To fear God is to have such a holy awe of God upon our hearts, that we dare not sin. 'Stand in awe and sin not' (Ps.4:4)" (Watson).²⁰ "To have God to be a God to us, is to trust in Him. 'My eyes are unto You, O God the Lord: in You is my trust' (Ps.141:8). There is none in whom we can trust but God. All creatures are a refuge of lies. God only is a sufficient foundation to

¹⁴ Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 3:100-101

¹⁵ Joseph Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated*, 16

¹⁶ Joseph Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated*, 18

¹⁷ Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:93

¹⁸ Shorter Catechism, Q.46

¹⁹ Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 508

²⁰ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 51

build our trust upon. When we trust Him, we make Him a God to us; when we do not trust Him, we make Him an idol. Trusting in God is to rely on His power as a Creator, and on His love as a Father. Trusting in God is to commit our chief treasure, our soul, to Him. 'Into Your hands I commit my spirit' (Ps.31:5). As the orphan trusts his estate with his guardian, so we trust our souls with God. Then He becomes a God to us" (Watson).²¹

(3) Adoration of God. This includes esteem and love. The first commandment requires that we have no greater good than God. That we esteem, love, honor, and delight in Him more than all created things. "Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You" (Ps.73:25). Joseph Bellamy said love for God flows out of a true knowledge of God. "A spiritual sight of God, and a sense of His glory and beauty, begets love. When He that commanded the light to shine out of darkness, shines in our hearts, and give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, the temper and frame of our hearts become like God's, to speak after the manner of men: we begin to feel towards God, in a measure, as He does towards Himself; that is, to love Him with all our hearts."²² He then suggested love for God entails three things: esteem, benevolence, and delight. (a) Esteem. "Esteem, strictly speaking, is that high and exalted thought of, and value for, anything which arises from a sight and sense of its own intrinsic worth, excellency, and beauty. So, a sense of the infinite dignity, greatness, glory, excellency, and beauty of the most high God, begets in us high and exalted thoughts of Him, and makes us admire, wonder, and adore" (Bellamy).²³

(b) Benevolence. By this is meant a desire for God's glory; thus, it includes rejoicing in all that tends to that glory. It entails being generous in our actions (to God and others) that results in God being praised. "When we are acquainted with any person, and he appears very excellent in our eyes, and we highly esteem him, it is natural now heartily to wish him well; we are concerned for his interest; we are glad to see it go well with him, , and sorry to see it go will with him; and ready at all times cheerfully to do what we can to promote his welfare."²⁴ "When God is seen in his infinite dignity, greatness, glory and excellency, as the most high God, supreme Lord, and sovereign Governor of the whole world, and a sense of His infinite worthiness is hereby raised in our hearts, this enkindles a holy benevolence, that natural language of which is, 'Let God be glorified.' 'And be thou exalted, O God, above the heavens; let thy glory be above all the earth.'"²⁵

This holy disposition sometimes expresses itself in earnest longings that God would glorify Himself and honor His great name; and bring all the world into an entire subjection to Him. Again, this divine benevolence, or wishing that God may be glorified, sometimes expresses itself in earnest longings that all worlds might join together to bless and praise the name of the Lord. Lastly, from this divine benevolence arises a free and genuine disposition to consecrate and give up ourselves entirely to the Lord forever – to walk in all His ways, and keep all His commands, seeking His glory; for if we desire that God may be glorified, we shall naturally be disposed to seek His glory.²⁶

²¹ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 52

²² Joseph Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated*, 14

²³ Joseph Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated*, 18

²⁴ Joseph Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated*, 20

²⁵ Joseph Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated*, 20

²⁶ Joseph Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated*, 20-22

(c) Delight. "By delight we commonly mean that pleasure, sweetness, and satisfaction, which we take in any thing that is very dear to us. When a man appears very excellent to us, and we esteem him, and wish him all good, we also, at the same time, feel a delight in him, and a sweetness in his company and conversation; we long to see him when absent; we rejoice in his presence; the enjoyment of him tends to make us happy, so, when a holy soul beholds God in the infinite moral excellency and beauty of His nature, and loves Him supremely, and is devoted to Him entirely, now also He delights in Him matchlessly."²⁷

As delight in the world naturally makes us seek after the enjoyment of the world, so this delight in God will naturally influence us to seek after the enjoyment of God; and while we love God primarily for being what He is, we cannot but, for the same reason, love His law, which is a transcript of His nature, and love to conform to it. If we loved him only from self-love, from the fear of hell, or from the hopes of heaven, we might, at the same time, hate His law; but if we love Him for being what He is, we cannot but love to be like Him, which is what His law requires. So saints in heaven love God perfectly, and so the good man on earth begins, in a weak and feeble man, to love God; for there is but one kind of love required in the law, and so but one kind of love which is of the right sort; for no kind of love can be of the right sort, but that very kind of love which the law requires. There is, therefore, no difference between their live in heaven and ours here upon earth, but only in degree.²⁸

2. *Sins forbidden.* ""The first commandment forbids the denying, or not worshiping and glorifying, the true God as God, and our God; and the giving of that worship and glory to any other, which is due to Him alone."²⁹ "The first commandment condemns the failure to recognize Jehovah as the true God; failing to believe in His existence and attributes, in His government and authority; and failing to render Him the inward reverence and the outward homage which are His due, that is, the first commandment forbids Atheism whether theoretical or practical" (Hodge).³⁰ "It moreover forbids the recognition of any other than Jehovah as God. This includes the prohibition of ascribing to any other being divine attributes; rendering to any creature the homage or obedience due to God alone; or exercising towards any other person or object those feelings of love, confidence, and submission which belong of right of to God" (Hodge).³¹

(1) Atheism. "The first commandment forbids atheism. "This is either *actual*, in which men flatly and directly deny or doubt God's existence, perfections, and providence, or *practical*, in which men live as if there were not a God; having no knowledge of Him, no faith in Him, no choice of Him, no love to Him, no spiritual thoughts of Him, no holy desires after Him" (Brown).³²

(2) Idolatry. "*What does the first commandment forbid?* The first commandment forbids idolatry. *What is idolatry?* Idolatry is 1) to worship anything that is not God, as the sun, stars, images, and the like. 2) To fear, love or trust in any person or thing more than in God" (Luther).³³ "*What is idolatry?* It

²⁷ Joseph Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated*, 23

²⁸ Joseph Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated*, 24-25

²⁹ Shorter Catechism, Q.47

³⁰ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:278

³¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:278-279

³² John Brown, *Systematic Theology*, 458

³³ Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, Questions 38, 39

is to imagine or possess something in which to put one's trust in place of or beside the one true God who has revealed Himself in His Word."³⁴ "There are two forms of idolatry. One is, when another beside the true God is professedly worshiped, or, when that is worshiped for God which is no God. The first is the more apparent and gross form of idolatry and belongs properly to this first commandment. The other form of idolatry is when we do not professedly worship another God but err in the kind of worship we render unto Him, or when the true God is worshiped in a manner different from that which He has prescribed in the second commandment" (Ursinus).³⁵ Thus, according to Ursinus the first commandment forbids giving worship to anything other than God, who is rightly worshiped only in Christ. Or as Thomas Boston put it: "Idolatry is the giving that worship and glory to any other which is due to God alone."³⁶ He then suggests two forms of idolatry: "it is twofold, gross external idolatry and subtle heart-idolatry."

(a) Gross external idolatry. "As gross idolatry this command condemns the heathens whose religion brought in a multiplicity of gods." "It also condemns the Papists whose religion is nothing but the great apostasy from Christianity, headed by Antichrist. They are guilty of gross idolatry. First, they worship the saints departed, especially the virgin Mary, in whose worship they are so profuse, that they may be called Marians rather than Christians. To the saints they pray, make vows, swear by them, consecrate altars and temples to them, and offer incense." "Second, they worship angels, pray to them, to bestow good things on them, and to protect them from evil." Third, they worship the bread in the sacrament; for as soon as the priest has consecrated it, he falls down on his knees and worships it; then he lifts it up above his head, that the people may see it; and then they worship it too." "Fourth, they worship the cross, the tree itself on which they pretend Christ died, and the image of it. They bow their knees to it and kiss it, pray to it, and consecrate temples and altars to it." "Fifth, they worship the relics of saints, not only their bodies, but what belonged to them while they lived, their bones, blood, flesh, teeth, hair, clothes, shows, belts."³⁷

(b) Subtle heart-idolatry. "Men commit this idolatry with the creatures when their mind, will, and affections are set on the creature, as much or more than on God. So covetousness is called idolatry (Col.3:5). "Now we are guilty of this idolatry when we love anything as much or more than God; when we desire anything as much or more than God; when we delight and rejoice in anything as much or more than God; when we sorrow more, or as much, for anything as the offending of God; when we have as much or more zeal for anything than for God and His honor; when we fear any person or thing more than God; when we have more or as much hope in anything as in God; and when we have more or as much confidence and trust in anything as in God."³⁸ "In practical idolatry we are to distinguish between the letting out of our affections upon simply sinful objects, and the letting them out excessively upon lawful objects. Thus men covet unlawful and forbidden things when another man's house, wife, or goods, have the heart. Again, men are guilty of idolatry in making lawful objects idols; as when, by excess of love to their own means, wife, house, they put them in God's room. An idol is something excessively esteemed of, and idolatry is the transferring of God's due, outwardly or inwardly, to what is not God; whether we esteem it God or not" (Durham).³⁹

³⁴ Heidelberg Catechism, Q.95

³⁵ Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 508

³⁶ Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:122

³⁷ Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:122-123

³⁸ Thomas Boston, *Works*, 2:123-125

³⁹ James Durham, *Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments*, 76