

Loving His Commandments

Part Two

The First Commandment

Exodus 20:1-3

With Study Questions

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And God spoke all these words, saying: 2 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. 3 “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exodus 20:1-3).

No Other Standard

The late Apologist and theologian, Dr. Greg Bahnsen, in one of his many appearances on the radio show, *Religion on the Line*, was confronted with a very bitter and accusational caller. The man was blatantly anti-christian and accused Dr. Bahnsen of being an intellectual Jimmy Swaggart--something he clearly meant to be an insult. His attack on the Christian faith was based upon a hideous picture he had seen at his job, in a court-house evidence exhibit room, involving an abused baby. He asked Dr. Bahnsen how he could worship a God that would allow such a vile thing to take place.

Dr. Bahnsen took an interesting approach in his answer. He asked the caller how he came to the conclusion that the picture he just described was vile. This question seemed easy enough, but the caller had a difficult time coming up with an answer. After all, it should be obvious to anyone. Dr. Bahnsen also asked how he came to the conclusion that a God who would allow such things shouldn't be worshipped. Again, the answers weren't readily forthcoming. The caller finally gave the answer that he simply thought it was wrong. Dr. Bahnsen then asked, "So you set the standard?" The caller then took a deep breath and answered "Yes, I guess I do."

Dr. Bahnsen's response paralyzed the caller! "Let me tell you what happens in a world when people think they can set the standard for what is right and wrong" explained Dr. Bahnsen, "You have just described a pretty disgusting picture to me. That disgusting act was done by a person who thought he could set the standard for what is right and wrong. And the thing you must realize is that your criteria and his criteria for setting standards are the same...yourselves."¹

¹ This is a rough interpretation from Dr. Bahnsen's appearance on the Religion on the Line—Does God Punish &

The unbelieving world has never had any objective basis for morality. This is repeatedly unearthed in our current culture by the absurd arguments seeking to rationalize fornication, adultery, abortion, gay marriage, pornography, prostitution, etc.

The man in the story above would not likely view himself as a god. If asked if he thought he were god, he would probably say 'no'. Yet self-deification (operating as if you're god) is one of the inevitable conclusions of violating the First Commandment. And it is a killer. One needs merely consider the prevalence of Communism in the 20th century and the tens of millions left dead. My atheist acquaintances will often object that atheism doesn't do anything because it doesn't believe anything. Assigning moral properties to atheism, they suggest, is like assigning a hair color to a bald man.

But Communism, at its heart is dependent upon Marxist driven atheism. It was the surgical and intentional extraction of the acknowledgement of the Triune God from the affairs of men that left politically amoral monsters in charge of the 20th century. It is not what these atheists believed that made them the horrifying nightmares that they were; it was what they refused to believe.

The Sin of Unbelief

One reason people ought to recoil at atheism is because it is a sin. People react to professions of atheism the same way they might respond to professions of lying or stealing. Being a committed atheist is not morally different than being a committed thief. The first commandment forbids atheism either theoretical or practical. What I mean by that is that it is a sin to be or live as an atheist. Unbelief is not a morally neutral position.

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God (Hebrews 3:12).

How can something like unbelief be sinful? In the first chapter of Romans, Paul writes that **"what may be known of God is manifest in them (all men), for God has shown it to them" (Romans 1:19)**. Paul goes on to explain that man's knowledge of God is **"clearly seen...so that they (all men) are without excuse" (Romans 1:20)**.

The knowledge that God exists is something that God has shown to

all men and manifest in all men. The rejection of God, (i.e. the violation of the first commandment), is sinful because, as stated above, men suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

The Apostle tells us that they are, therefore, without excuse. Men are as guilty in their rejection of God as they are in the violation of any other commandment (e.g. murder) because they inherently know that God exists and that He should be worshipped, but suppress that truth in unrighteousness.

We must keep this in mind in our witnessing. People who have intellectual objections regarding the existence of God (and here we must argue that Paul is writing about the Christian God) are actually putting forth a red herring or a smoke screen. I don't think it would be right to initially accuse them of being insincere; they may be convinced that their objections are legitimate. At the same time, whether it is apparent to them or not, we know that somewhere in the recesses of their soul, they are denying what they know to be true. Somewhere in the conversation this should come forth.

For example, I recall telling one of my, when they were small, that it was time for bed. She didn't want to go to bed so she starts asking me if it's okay to try on her new dress. I said "No". She said, "But it's my dress." Now we start arguing about whether or not she should have the right to wear a dress that belongs to her. I begin arguing that I'm the one who bought her the dress so I have primary jurisdiction over the dress. She may be utterly convinced that she is in the right. I need to remind her (and myself) that the wearing of the dress is not the issue. The issue is that it's time for bed and she knows it.

I am not saying we should not seek to answer objections to the Christian faith. What I am saying is that the conversation, at some point, needs to turn to the gentle confrontation that the person in question is denying something they know to be true.

These commandments are the essential criteria of what is moral and immoral. Unbelief is not merely an error or a mistake. It is a sin. And it is a sin that, if left unchecked, with dire consequences. Belief in and pursuit of obedience to the Law of God might be compared to an instruction manual perfectly tailored to the human condition. I will often purchase a product that needs to be assembled. And all too often I will think I can assemble without need of the manual.

Depending on the item this can range from foolish to dangerous. My son recently bought a go-kart and I made sure that we followed every jot

and tittle due to the potential danger of getting it wrong.

Freedom

Last time we spoke of how James calls the law the law of liberty or freedom. The law liberates us from folly and danger. Our nation was built on the promotion of freedom. Patrick Henry said, "Give me liberty or give me death." President Woodrow Wilson had, to be sure, some views worthy of critique. But in his speech entitled 'The New Freedom' he gave a beautiful picture of the freedom which comes when we begin to adjust ourselves to that which is actually true; truth which, I would submit proceeds from heaven, found in the Word of God.

I have long had an image in my mind of what constitutes liberty. Suppose that I were building a great piece of powerful machinery, and suppose that I should so awkwardly and unskillfully assemble the parts of it that every time one part tried to move it would be interfered with by the others, and the whole thing would buckle up and be checked. Liberty for the several parts would consist in the best possible assembling and adjustment of them all, would it not? If you want the great piston of the engine to run with absolute freedom, give it absolutely perfect alignment and adjustment with the other parts of the machine, so that it is free, not because it is let alone or isolated, but because it has been associated most skillfully and carefully with the other parts of the great structure.

What is liberty? You say of the locomotive that it runs free. What do you mean? You mean that its parts are so assembled and adjusted that friction is reduced to a minimum, and that it has perfect adjustment. We say of a boat skimming the water with light foot, "How free she runs," when we meant, how perfectly she is adjusted to the force of the wind, how perfectly she obeys the great breath out of the heavens that fills her sails. Throw her head up into the wind and see how she will halt and stagger, how every sheet will shiver and her whole frame be shaken, how instantly she is "in irons," in the expressive phrase of the sea. She is free only when you have

let her fall off again and have recovered once more her nice adjustment to the forces she must obey and cannot defy.”²

Human liberty consists in nothing less than the skillful adjustment of humanity to the perfect law of God. The more we are perfectly aligned with the law of God the more our freedom. When we obey the breath out of heaven our sails are full. When we throw our heads back and stiffen our necks to the law of God, we too shall halt and stagger until we repent to the force that we must obey and cannot defy.

Out of Egypt

And yet, on this side of heaven, we continually find ourselves at odds with the breath out of heaven. We simply fail to yield to the laws of perfect alignment. It’s as if hell is attached to our feet. But our knowledge of this difficulty means the law has achieved one of its goals. It has reminded our flesh that the judgment which comes from our violation of truth needs to be nailed to the cross (Colossians 2:14). And that perfect adjustment to truth is only found in Christ, having forgiven all our trespasses and having defeated the enemy of our souls.

In our next meeting, we will view the many ways this Commandment can be kept and violated. But let us not move too quickly beyond this preamble to the Ten Commandments.

And God spoke all these words, saying: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage (Exodus 20:1, 2).

Even in the thickness of the Law, we see the cool breeze of the gospel. Before God informs us what we should do, He informs us of what He has done. We were in bondage to sin and death and were delivered.

But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. 18 And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness (Romans 6:17, 18).

Let us not seek to take one step in our efforts of obedience to the Law

² Essie Chamberlain, *Essays, Old and New* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, Chicago, 1926), pp. 112,113.

of God without first rejoicing in the One Law-Keeper. The One who became **“obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross”** (Philippians 2:8).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Discuss Dr. Bahnsen’s response to the caller. Is it possible for there to be absolute standards apart from God? Why or why not?
2. Can you imagine any method of obtaining law or counsel on how to live other than from God?
3. Discuss President Wilson’s speech on freedom. How could this relate to the law of God?
4. When we fail at keeping the law, how has the law achieved one of its goals?
5. In what respect must the law be nailed to the cross?
6. Should we ignore the law? Why?
7. Should we think we have kept the law? Why?