

—Westminster Shorter Catechism—

Lesson 67—What does the First Commandment Forbid? Q.47-48

The sins forbidden

- I. The first commandment is written in the negative (as are most of them) in order to be as absolute as possible. It strengthens and presses the affirmative by stating the negative. And in this case, the negative is that *we're to have no other gods before God*. So that what's forbidden first and foremost to us as moral creatures of God is the having of anything on which we set our delight more than God or which we esteem more than God. In other words, we're to allow nothing to withdraw our soul or anything in our body or soul away from the worship of God.
Five things are especially forbidden in this commandment.
 - A. The sin of neglecting the duties commanded (cf. Lesson 66).
 - B. The sin of atheism/agnosticism, either intellectual or practical.
 1. Intellectual atheism is the outright denial of God, a sin that overturns religion by the root, Ps 14.1.
 - a) Technically, both atheism and agnosticism are impossibilities because man cannot erase or annul either the fact of his being made by God in the image of God or the testimony to that reality in his own conscience and heart.
 - b) However, a man can be so hardened in his heart by sin that he can intellectually choose to deny God's existence and to look upon himself and all nature as coming into existence and being sustained without God. And it's his choice to do so that's not only at the heart of this deadly sin but also at the core of his own foolishness and the consequences that'll surely follow such a choice, Ps 14.1-3; Rom 1.19-25.
 2. Practical atheism is "vulgar irreligion, living without God in the world. Many who would shudder at the name of atheist are yet, for all intents and purposes, living an atheist's life. How many atheistic hours we all spend, and how many atheistic acts we all perform, let each man say for himself," Whyte.
 - a) Practical atheism is a danger for every Christian and we must be on our guard against it by cultivating both the awareness that we ever live coram Deo and the practice of the presence of God.
 - b) Likewise, we should beware of the influence of prosperity in our hearts, which will easily be drawn away from God by wealth, and the doubting and denying of God's hand in providence, which will tempt us to doubt and deny God's existence at all.
 3. The three best cures for atheism are:
 - a) Humble, sincere prayer in which you call out to God and ask Him to graciously reveal Himself to your soul, Ps 50.15.
 - b) Remind yourself that atheism is so dreadful a sin that not even demons are guilty of it, Js 2.19; Mt 8.29.
 - c) Remind yourself that there are no atheists or atheistic thoughts in all of hell, Lk 16.24.
 - C. The sin of idolatry, either in action or in affection, 1Cor 10.14-22.
 1. This sin is treated more fully under the Second Commandment, but here is the ground for its sinfulness in any case, namely, because only God is God, Hos 4.12. Flavel, "the idolatry forbidden in the first commandment is a sin respecting the Object of worship when we set up anything in the place of God, which by nature is not God. But that against the second commandment is when we pretend to worship the true God, but do it by such means and in such a manner as He has not required or has forbidden."
 2. Whatever a man sets his heart upon, that thing is his God. Whatever a man minds above all else, that thing is his God. Whatever a man works for, lives for, and is willing to sacrifice and die for,

that thing is his God. Leighton, “Consider that which you bestow most thoughts and services upon, that which you are most affectionate and earnest in; is not that your God?”

3. And God curses the man who trusts in anything but Him, i.e., who has any other God but Him, Jer 17.5-8; Lev 20.6.
- D. The sin of coveting, which is idolatry, Col 3.5.
 1. When we covet what another man has we’re idolizing that thing and bowing our affections and thoughts down before it, longing after it, wishing we had it, desiring it, idolizing it as our hope, stay, and confidence, dreaming and fantasizing how fulfilled and satisfied and happy we’d be if we had it, and possibly even scheming a way to get it.
 2. And all this is done in the face of God, who alone can satisfy our souls, who alone can provide our needs, who alone can make us happy, comfortable, and blessed, and whom we already have as our God.
 3. Moreover, none should be the Object of the heart’s deepest desires and longings and worship but God Himself, which is the positive duty of this commandment.
- E. The sin of autonomy, Gen 3.5.
 1. Every man is by nature his own god. The first sin that corrupted our nature was the sin of trying to be a god unto ourselves, Gen 3.5, and that sin of *autonomy* is now at the heart and core of our nature and at the heart and core of all our wickedness, Jdg 21.25; Pr 21.2; 2Tim 3.1-5.
 2. By nature, we love and serve ourselves and would have everyone join us. We use and abuse everything in life according to how well it serves our selfish ends. We are the end of all our actions and we sacrifice all to our own glory.
 3. The three great enemies to all the heart-work a Christian strives to do is *self-love*, *self-conceit*, and *self-will*, all which arise from the central sin of autonomy, the desire to be our own god.

The reason annexed

- I. God presses our duty upon us by reminding us that our disobedience will be done before His face.
 - A. In other words, the Lord’s telling us that, in all that we do, we live before His very face. We live in His presence. He sees us, and not just every action, but every thought in our mind and every affection and motive in our heart.
 - B. It’s a warning that if we disobey, He will see it, and seeing it, He will punish it because disobedience to this commandment is a personal insult to Him and occurs in His very presence.
 1. So that if we obey this commandment and have God as our God, our entire life will bear the blessed fruit of that choice.
 2. But if we disobey it and choose any other as our God, the one true and living God will see it and punish it.
 - C. This first commandment is the most spiritual because it calls us to esteem, delight in, know, love, fear, and trust in none as God but God Himself. And as we learned in *Lesson 66*, it’s, therefore, the most helpful and fundamental because all these worship-actions of the heart determine all the actions of the will which follow in the life, Pr 4.23; Mt 22.37-38.

Applications

- I. Let us be humbled for and confess to God our atheism, idolatry, covetousness, and self-centeredness. For there’s not a man among us who doesn’t sometimes fear men more than God, depend upon outward means more than God, love earthly things more than God, and seek our own glory more than God’s.
- II. Let us learn to use all outward things as though we didn’t use them, so that our minds, affections, and choices may not be fixed upon or determined by anything but God.
- III. Let us learn to rest on, depend upon, and trust in none but God for all our joy and peace and happiness.
- IV. And let us learn the great lesson of dying to self because it’s at the heart of all our other sins and the better we learn it the more holily we’ll live, Jn 3.30; Gal 2.20; Acts 20.24.