

Catechetical
Ezekiel 8
Psalm 44
1 Cor 10

“No Other Gods: The First Commandment”

July 18, 2021

*Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark,
each in his room of pictures?*

This gets at the heart of idolatry.

What do you do in the dark?

What do you do when no one is watching?

We go to church and worship the Triune God on Sunday –
and we try to maintain an image of being a good, upstanding Christian,
at least when others are around.

But what rules your heart?

Who rules your “room of pictures” –

that private realm of your heart/mind.

We have seen in the preface to the 10 commandments
that the law of God comes to us in the context of grace.

And as we go through the 10 Commandments,
we always need to remember that *grace* comes before law.

Our obedience to God is rooted in our gratitude for the great redemption
that he has wrought in Jesus Christ.

I hope that you can see that this is reflected in the flow of worship.

We begin our service with a confession of sin and declaration of pardon.

Every week we are reminded that the foundation of the Christian life
is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The movement of our worship service begins with God’s gracious call,
moving from confession of sin to God’s declaration of pardon
from hearing the gospel of Christ to the response of thankfulness,
concluding with the Lord’s Supper
(sometimes called the Eucharist—from the Greek word for “giving thanks”)

The Ten Commandments, then, give God’s directions for a life of gratitude.

Psalm 44 offers some useful comments on the first commandment.

Psalm 44 starts by saying, “our fathers taught us your mighty deeds.”

We looked at Deuteronomy 6-11 over the last couple weeks –

a passage that emphasizes the importance of teaching your children God’s mighty deeds!

Psalm 44 says, “hey, our parents did it right! They taught us! Now what?”

Sing Psalm 44 (PHSS)
Read 1 Corinthians 10

I once had a conversation with a man
who claimed that he had broken nine of the ten commandments.

I told him that I was really impressed –
since I had broken all ten commandments since breakfast –

But I was curious – so I asked, which one had he kept!
He said that he had never worshiped any other God besides the true God.

Paul says to “flee from idolatry.”
But in order to flee from something, it would help to know what it is!

What is an idol?
We’ve popularized the term today to refer to a popular person.
So we have a TV show called “American Idol”
where you are supposed to vote for your favorite singer.
Sports heroes – singers – actors – characters – all can be “idolized”

Children sometimes grow up dreaming that might someday be like
Mickey Mantle or Magic Johnson or LeBron James.

And there is a sense in which these are indeed “idols.”
An idol is an image that is worshiped.
Or more precisely, you worship your god by means of the image.
I doubt that too many youngsters ‘worshiped’ Mickey Mantle.
But they worshiped *through* Mickey Mantle.
When we say “I want to be like so-and-so”
we are idolizing them.
They are the image that we want to conform to.

So who do you want to be like?
There is a good side to imitation –
Paul says ‘imitate me as I imitate Christ!’
But when we lose sight of Christ – imitation starts heading the wrong direction.

Whenever you value the creature more than the Creator,
whenever you are more concerned with what man thinks of you,
than with what God thinks of you,
then you are breaking the first commandment.

Q45: Which is the First Commandment?

A45: The First Commandment is, You shall have no other gods before Me.

This should perhaps be obvious to all of us.

Not only is God our Creator, but he also sent his only Son to die for us,
so that we might live with him forever.

If God has been so kind and gracious as to deliver us from our sin and misery,
it is only fair that we should acknowledge him as our God!

Our Shorter Catechism asks:

Q46: What is required in the First Commandment?

A46: 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.

Q47: What is forbidden in the First Commandment?

A47: The First Commandment forbids the denying, or not worshipping and glorifying the true God, as God, and the giving of that worship and glory to any other which is due to Him alone.

For each commandment the catechism will ask “what is required?” and “what is forbidden?”

Because when God says “you shall have no other gods before me,”
He is not only forbidding the worship of other gods,
but he is also commanding us positively to worship him.

To put it another way,
God is saying that he must be first in our life.
Nothing else can take his place.

In order to highlight this, question 48 asks:

Q48: What are we specially taught by these words, *before me* in the First Commandment?

A48: These words *before me* in the First Commandment, teach us, That God who sees all things, takes notice of, and is much displeased with, the sin of having any other God.

I want us to see why God puts this commandment up front.

All other sins are ultimately rooted in this one.

If we *always* loved God with all our heart –
if we *never* put anything ahead of him,
then we would never sin!

So:

1. What Is Required in Having “No Other Gods”? (Psalm 44)

Our Catechism states that

A46: 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.

This is at the heart of Psalm 44,

the Psalm that we sang earlier.

a. Knowing God to Be *Our God*

Psalm 44 opens with a statement that our fathers taught us the deeds you performed of old.

We remember what you have done –

and we hand down those stories to our children.

In so doing we teach them to know and acknowledge the true God.

But not only do we acknowledge God to be the only true God,

we also know and acknowledge him to be *our God*.

Psalm 44:4 –

“You are my King, O God.”

You can find a lot of people who will acknowledge God.

O yes! I believe in God!

I believe in Jesus!

But do you acknowledge God to be *your God*?

Because if he *is* your God,

then you need to do what he says.

If you say that you believe in God,

but you ignore what he says,

then he is not *your God*.

You may believe in him,

but he’s not your *God* –

you simply acknowledge his existence.

And – of course – God knows when we do this!

As we sang in Psalm 44:20-21 –

“If we had forgotten the name of our God or spread out our hands to a foreign god,
would not God discover this?

For he knows the secrets of the heart.”

God knows our hearts.

He knows us!

And the remarkable thing is that even though he knows us –

he still loves us – and he sent his Son to die for us!

b. Worshiping God and Glorifying Him

And therefore we worship and glorify him accordingly!

Psalm 44:8 says – “In God we have boasted continually,
and we will give thanks to your name forever.”

If we know and acknowledge God to be the true God and our God,
then we *should* worship and glorify him!

As we saw a couple weeks ago.
we should love the LORD our God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength.

When you put the first commandment positively,
it sounds easy!

Sure, I know and acknowledge God to be the only true God, and my God,
and so I worship and glorify him accordingly.

Okay, we're good!
Right?

But that's why the catechism puts it both ways!
After all, the 1st commandment itself states,
"you shall have no other gods before me."

2. What Is Forbidden in Having "No Other Gods"? (Ezekiel 8)

Q47: What is forbidden in the First Commandment?

A47: The First Commandment forbids the denying, or not worshipping and glorifying the true God, as God, and the giving of that worship and glory to any other which is due to Him alone.

Here's where we really get to the lure of idolatry.

And it goes two ways.

First, there is the idolatry of omission –
where we simply "neglect" the worship of God.

But second, there is the idolatry of commission –
where we actually worship other gods.

Sins of commission are those sins where we actually commit some sin.

So, if you sleep with your neighbor's wife, you have *committed* adultery.

But sins of omission are equally sinful.

Maybe you've always been outwardly faithful to your wife,
but you've just used her for your own sexual fulfillment.

You have *omitted* the love and the honor that you owe her!

If God is God – and *your* God –
then what do you owe him?

a. The Idolatry of Omission: Neglecting to Worship the True God

The idolatry of omission is stated bluntly in Hebrews 10:25,

"do not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some,

but encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”
The context of Hebrews 10 is *worship* –
entering the holy places by the blood of Jesus –
coming into the presence of God through the sacrifice of his Son.

If we neglect to worship God –
whether the meeting together of God’s people every week,
or our daily gathering in our families, or individually –
then we are loving something else more than we love God.

You cannot love God, but neglect his worship.
And this is true not only for our public worship on Sunday –
but also for our daily worship in our homes and by ourselves.

If you say you love your wife, but you only talk to her when *you* want something,
that’s not love.

Likewise, if we love God, then we need to *seek* him out.
So the idolatry of omission is a serious problem!

b. The Idolatry of Commission: Giving Glory to Any Other

But at the heart of the first commandment is what I’ve termed
“the idolatry of commission.”

After all, the first commandment says,
“You shall have no other gods before me.”
The focus of the commandment is on this point.
Don’t put anything else ahead of God.

Ezekiel 8 provides a very striking discussion of idolatry.
Ezekiel was a prophet who lived at the time of the exile (ca. 586 B.C.).
He himself went into exile in Babylon twenty years before.
Earlier in his prophecy,
he had spoken of the coming destruction of Jerusalem.
Jerusalem will go into exile because of the idolatry of the people.

Ezekiel 8-11 is all part of a single vision.
And at the end of this vision, the glory of the LORD will depart from the temple.

And in this vision, especially in chapter 8, the key theme is the theme of “seeing.”
The verb “to see” is used 13 times in the 18 verses of chapter 8.

And notice where the vision starts:
the first thing that Ezekiel sees is the “the form that had the appearance of a man” –
the vision of the glory of the LORD that had appeared to him before.

When Ezekiel sees the glory of the LORD –
only then does he properly see what is going on all around him.

Remember this –
because you will only make sense of your world –
you will only see the idolatry around you (and in you) –
when you see clearly our Lord Jesus Christ!

Verses 5-18 describe the four abominations for which God abandons the temple:
Ezekiel starts the vision from the northern gate outside the temple,
and moves step by step towards the Holy of Holies –
and as he goes, the idolatry gets worse and worse.

First, The Image of Jealousy (8:5-6)

The ‘Image of Jealousy’ – 8:3-5 – can also be translated “image of Lust” –
most identify it as the goddess Asherah

2 Kings 21:7 says that Manasseh set up an Asherah in the temple,
but king Josiah had torn it down when he cleansed the temple.

Ezekiel’s vision could be a vision of Manasseh’s Asherah –
after all, the book of Kings says that Manasseh’s idolatry
was the reason why God brought judgment on Jerusalem.

But this is what is driving Yahweh “far from his sanctuary.”
Archeologists have found inscriptions and pictures from ancient Israel,
with depictions of “Yahweh and his Asherah” –
showing pictures of Yahweh and Asherah together.

Why would Yahweh-worshippers start worshiping Asherah?
Asherah was the Canaanite fertility goddess.
Her worship included a variety of sexual practices forbidden by Yahweh.
(Hence the term “image of jealousy” which can also mean “image of lust”)

But you will see still greater abominations.

Second, The Room of Pictures (8:7-13)

7 And he brought me to the entrance of the court, and when I looked, behold, there was a hole in the wall. 8 Then he said to me, “Son of man, dig in the wall.” So I dug in the wall, and behold, there was an entrance. 9 And he said to me, “Go in, and see the vile abominations that they are committing here.” 10 So I went in and saw. And there, engraved on the wall all around, was every form of creeping things and loathsome beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel. 11 And before them stood seventy men of the elders of the house of Israel, with Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan standing among them. Each had his censer in his hand, and the smoke of the cloud of incense went up.

You need to realize how shocking this is.

These are unclean animals – “creeping things and loathsome beasts” (v10).
It would be bad enough to hear that elders are *eating* them –
but far worse, they are *worshiping* them.

Now, the usage of gods in animal shape strongly suggests Egyptian worship,
where the gods took the shape of crocodiles, snakes, and dung beetles,
among other animals.

But it gets worse.

Because there are 70 elders here.

In Moses’s day, there were 70 elders who led the people in following the LORD,
as Israel departed from Egypt.

Now, there are 70 elders who are leading the people back to Egypt.

But the LORD says:

12 Then he said to me, “Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark, each in his room of pictures? For they say, ‘The Lord does not see us, the Lord has forsaken the land.’”

Remember who these men are.

These are the elders of the house of Israel.

These are the leaders of the Old Testament people of God – the church.

Ezekiel is not in Jerusalem.

Ezekiel is in Babylon, speaking to the *exiled* elders
regarding what is happening “back home.”

The elders of Judah (in exile) are sitting around Ezekiel –
and he tells them about his vision.

But just a few years before, *they* had been the ones leading Jerusalem.

And they had been no different from Jaazaniah and the 70 elders.

And so Ezekiel’s warning comes to them as well.

Are they secretly hoping that Egypt would come and rescue Jerusalem?

Are they putting their hope and trust in the gods of the nations,
rather than in the LORD their God?

What is your secret hope?

Outwardly you act as though the Triune God is your hope and your shield –
but in the dark – in your room of pictures –
what false hope do you cling to?

For one woman it was her “white knight,” whom she hoped would come rescue her.

She would dream of him –

and she would wish that her hum-drum husband

would be more like the man of her dreams.
And she thought of it as her way of coping with a dull, ordinary life.
It was just a harmless fantasy – right?
It destroyed her marriage and sent her down a thousand dead-end roads,
before she realized that she was, in fact, worshipping another god.
It is so easy to ‘baptize’ our selfish desires and say that they are godly.
Here’s the test:
do you *live* as though you believe that “to live is Christ; to die is gain”?
Does your heart overflow with love and gratitude to God?

Or do you linger in the dark – in your room of pictures –
in your secret hopes and dreams and fantasies?

What we see in Ezekiel 8 is that the glory of the LORD still resides in the temple,
but it is surrounded by the abominations, the detestable things of the nations.

And the result is found in verse 17:
they have filled the land “with violence.”

17 Then he said to me, “Have you seen this, O son of man? Is it too light a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abominations that they commit here, that they should fill the land with violence and provoke me still further to anger? Behold, they put the branch to their nose.

Idolatry is the root of all other sins.
After all, if you are loving and worshipping the Lord your God,
then when you sin, you will repent!
There may be occasional outbreaks of sin and rebellion,
but the general pattern will be righteousness and justice,
because love of neighbor proceeds from the love of God.

Our Larger Catechism has a really helpful summary of what is required
and what is forbidden in the first commandment.

If you want to read along, you’ll find this on page 952 in your hymnals.

The Larger Catechism was produced by the Westminster Assembly in the 1640s.
When they wrote the Larger Catechism,
they wanted to provide a summary of biblical teaching –
and particularly on the Ten Commandments,
they wanted to help folks think through both what is required,
and what is forbidden, in each commandment.

Question 104 (on page 952) asks:

Q. 104. *What are the duties required in the first commandment?*

A. 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,...

So far, that's the same as the Shorter Catechism that many of you have memorized.
But the Larger Catechism wants to help us think this through more.

What does it mean to worship and glorify God?

First,

...by thinking, meditating, remembering, highly esteeming, honoring, adoring, choosing, loving, desiring, fearing of him; believing him;

Faith – both believing in God – but especially *believing God* –
is at the heart of worshiping and glorifying him *as God*.
If he is God – then you should believe him!
And the next line flows from that:

...trusting, hoping, delighting, rejoicing in him;...

There is a delight that is found only *in him*.
After all, he made us for himself –
and our hearts are restless until they find our rest in him –
so not surprisingly, when we trust and hope in him,
we also delight and rejoice in him!

And that then leads to:
...being zealous for him;...

When we are faithful to God – we are zealous for him.
And so that results in:

...calling upon him, giving all praise and thanks, and yielding all obedience and submission to him with the whole man;...

After all – if we love him with all our heart – and all our strength –
then we will always want to be near him!

And so...
...being careful in all things to please him, and sorrowful when in anything he is offended;...

You always want to please the one you love!
If you love someone, then you are sorry when you have hurt the one you love!

...and walking humbly with him.

That's what it means to have no other God but the LORD.

In contrast, question 105 asks:

Q. 105. *What are the sins forbidden in the first commandment?*

A. *The sins forbidden in the first commandment, are, atheism, in denying or not having a God;*

First of all, the first commandment forbids atheism.

But it's not enough to have just any god... also...

idolatry, in having or worshiping more gods than one, or any with or instead of the true God;
(like we heard about in Ezekiel 8)

the not having and avouching him for God, and our God; the omission or neglect of anything due to him, required in this commandment;

such as:

ignorance, forgetfulness, misapprehensions, false opinions, unworthy and wicked thoughts of him; bold and curious searching into his secrets (in other words, if we don't really trust him!); all profaneness, hatred of God; self-love, self-seeking, and all other inordinate and immoderate setting of our mind, will, or affections upon other things, and taking them off from him in whole or in part; vain credulity, unbelief, heresy, misbelief, distrust, despair, incorrigibleness, and insensibleness under judgments, hardness of heart, pride, presumption, carnal security, tempting of God; using unlawful means, and trusting in lawful means; carnal delights and joys; corrupt, blind, and indiscreet zeal; lukewarmness, and deadness in the things of God; estranging ourselves, and apostatizing from God; praying, or giving any religious worship, to saints, angels, or any other creatures; all compacts and consulting with the devil, and hearkening to his suggestions; making men the lords of our faith and conscience; slighting and despising God and his commands; resisting and grieving of his Spirit, discontent and impatience at his dispensations, charging him foolishly for the evils he inflicts on us; and ascribing the praise of any good we either are, have, or can do, to fortune, idols, ourselves, or any other creature.

Sometimes we sin by omission – failing to do what we should do;

other times we sin by commission – doing what we shouldn't do...

But as we've seen – idolatry is at the root of every other sin.

Whenever you see a pattern of sin in your life,

you may be sure that there is a root of idolatry behind it.

You are loving and pursuing something else rather than the living and true God.

3. “Before Me”: Idolatry Is a Really Bad Idea (1 Corinthians 10)

Q48: What are we specially taught by these words, *before me* in the First Commandment?

A48: These words *before me* in the First Commandment, teach us, That God who sees all things, takes notice of, and is much displeased with, the sin of having any other God.

Paul talks about this in 1 Corinthians 10.

God had placed his mark on Israel –

they were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

But they turned away from the LORD and pursued idolatry – and sexual immorality.

And in the same way that God placed his mark on Israel,
our Lord Jesus Christ has marked you with his mark.

He has placed his name upon you.
You have been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, you belong to him.
And so you must flee from idolatry.

When you are at work this week,
I want you to look around –
and I want you to *see* the idolatry (each in his room of pictures).
When you talk with your colleagues – your neighbors – your friends –
I want you to dig through the wall and see what is going on,
(each in his room of pictures).
Because you dwell in the midst of the rebellious house of Israel.

What are the pictures that motivate them?
What are the gods that they worship.
It can be easier – at times –
to see this in others than in yourself.

But as you see the idolatry around you,
remember also Ezekiel's plea:
“Ah, Lord GOD! Will you destroy all the remnant of Israel
in the outpouring of your wrath on Jerusalem?” (9:8)
If you have seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,
then you cannot be haughty in your attitude
toward those who are committing these abominations!
If you have seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,
then you must “sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed,”
and your heart must break as you look at those who are casting themselves
before gods that do not hear, or see, or speak.

And as you come to understand their idolatry –
as you come to see their abominations –
you may also begin to see how you may speak to them.

But before you can speak to them effectively,
you must first “sigh and groan” –
because your heart is broken by the same things that break the heart of God.

But if you would learn to speak,
then you must first learn to see:

and see first the vision of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ!

So what is the cure? What is the solution to idolatry?

The solution to idolatry is to flee to Christ.

Paul uses the example of the wilderness wanderings,
and says,

Now these things happened to them as an example,

but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.

Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man.

*God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability,
but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape,
that you may be able to endure it.*

And Paul insists that he is talking about the First Commandment:

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry!

And how do you flee from idolatry?

Paul tells us to flee to Jesus – flee to the Lord’s table – where we participate in Christ.