
VIDEO LECTURE MODULE: TEN COMMANDMENTS

LECTURE 8: THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

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The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module

TEN COMMANDMENTS

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Lecture 8

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

And God spake all these words, saying...and then follows the Ten. No God is greater than the Creator of heaven and earth and no law is better than the Ten Commandments. Moses reminded the people of Israel of that when in his parting message he said, And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments, so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day? Yet despite this truth of having the best of the laws, God knew the heart of His people. It was necessary to open His commandments to love Him with the commanding them never to leave Him.

TRANSCRIPT LECTURE 8

Welcome, dear friends. Today we will make a beginning with examining the 10 Commandments, one commandment per lecture. I have titled this first one on the first commandment with *Trust Me Only*. And of course, it's based on Exodus chapter 20, the first commandment as it reads, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." I intend to set up the lectures on the 10 Commandments with introducing, on every one of the commandments, a general principle first. And then, this major part of the lecture will be devoted to looking at the individual commandments.

So, the first principle I want to share with you today is a basic one that states that the 10 Commandments [are] the foundational and the fundamental law of God for all people at all times. You could consider them like the Constitution or the charter of a nation. The ten are God's absolute and moral and eternal revealed will, not just for the Israelites but for all people that He has created. [The] Old Testament already speaks very often about the fact that God is the King of all nations. And though He gave the 10 Commandments specifically to the Israelites, it was intended indeed to be His will for all people.

Now, fundamental and foundational law: in the legal world there is a distinction between base law and case law. There are fancier words for that, but I will omit those. Consider the 10 Commandments as the base law, the official laws given by God as the constitution of the kingdom. [The case law is made] on the basis of the base law. They are laws that are flowing out of the [base] law as, sometimes, more refined applications in the variety of situations we meet. In the Old Testament, we have quite a number of civil laws that are phrased with "If, then." Those are examples of case laws. For example, "thou shalt not steal," is the base law. There's a case law: If my ox is trampling the field of my neighbor and destroying his harvest, then I have to make restitution. That is a case law based on the 10 Commandments.

Now, this distinction will help you to understand that not all the civil laws that are given us in the Old Testament books are necessarily, word for word, applicable to us today. Some of them are framed in the society and the culture of Israel of old, or of the wilderness journey, or of when they have settled in Canaan. And yet, to

underline this importance of the base law, let us remember that God spoke the base law Himself. The 10 Commandments were directly spoken from heaven, were written twice in the tables of the law by God's own finger. They are absolute for all mankind.

Let us now look at the first commandment together. "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." There [are] two things we want to consider: What is God's basic intent for the first commandment, and what are the details of this first commandment? Why did God give and start the 10 Commandments with this particular "thou shall have no other gods before me?" He doesn't mean, 'Among all the gods that there are, have Me only as your God. I'm yours. I'm the most important. I'm the only One to Whom you really ought to devote yourself.' Well, that in a sense is true, but God knows, friends, what He says Himself in Isaiah 43:11, "I, even I, am the LORD; and besides me there is no savior." There is no God, there is no God at all, beside Me.

So therefore, God did not write the first commandment to somehow secure Himself against competition. There is no competition. There is no other competitor who can stand up to the glory and the honor of God. Though, of course, there are many forces that seek to draw us away: Satan and his agents and all the temptations. But, there is no other God besides God Himself.

God is very scathing about every idol. For example, in Jeremiah 10:3-5, He does almost make a mockery of it when He says, 'Now, they take a tree, and they cut it down, and they take a chunk of the tree, and they make it into an image. The rest of it they make firewood (Isaiah 44:14-20). They cover the image with gold and silver. They nail it to a board. They have to carry it.' There's nothing to fear from a scarecrow god like that. And therefore, as God has given this characterization of the idols, notice how He ends that passage. He says, "Be not afraid of them; for they cannot do evil, neither also is it in them to do good." Now, that last statement leads me to share with you what is God's real intent in the first commandment.

God commands, 'Acknowledge Me. Trust Me only. Follow Me only as the only God Who can do you good.' God says, 'Look. I am your devoted Creator. I have all the resources to guide you through this wilderness of this life. Have no other gods. Acknowledge, trust, honor Me only.' On a different level, God could say to His people Israel, 'I am your Redeemer. I took you out of Egypt. Trust no other deity than Me only.' Or on a different level, God can say, 'I am the caring Father standing before His children and this dangerous world. Don't go with others. Have Me only.' Why? 'The others can do you no good. You don't have to be afraid of them, but they don't do you any good either.'

So, with loving devotion, God sets out His will for us in this first commandment. As we say to our children, 'Don't go with strangers,' so God says, 'Don't go with strangers. Don't follow strange gods, no matter how sweet they talk, no matter what they promise you, no matter how they look or what they tell you. Don't trust anyone [and] don't trust anything to take care of you, to lead you, or to counsel you, or to protect you, but Me only.' Don't we say that to our children? That's what God says to His children, 'Don't give your heart to other lovers.' Why? You will experience loss. You will experience disappointment. They will let you down. You will experience pain.

Friends, as we trace the history of Israel, you'll see it again and again. The gods that they followed dropped them like a stone. They couldn't help them at all in the needs they faced. So, God requires that we give Him our complete loyalty and devotion by trusting Him only. Doing that will give you and me the greatest freedom and happiness to enjoy. Why? Well, then we aren't in the grip of these magic forces. Then we aren't following vain and useless people, [and] we [don't] place our trust in flimsy securities. Then we will not be tossed up and down in the world of constant change.

"Have no other gods before me." Do you see what I see? Do you sense what I sense? Not only in the first, but we'll see it in all other nine commandments. I don't see God putting me in a harness to hinder me [or] to restrict me, but to protect me. I don't see a God that is unconcerned about what I feel, but I feel a divine concern in Him for me to be truly happy and satisfied. I don't see a desperate or a fearful God trying to secure Himself as the *number one*, but I see and sense a God Who is seeking to secure us from harm and hurt when we don't follow Him as the only One. "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." So, let's then consider what are the implications and the details of this first commandment. What does God command and, by implication, forbid?

First then, God commands us that we would know Him and trust Him only. Now, to know and to trust are following each other. I can't trust someone I don't know. In all relationships, trust is based on the knowledge of the person, and so it is with God. We tell our children and warn them not to trust strangers that they don't know,

though indeed we also have to warn them not to trust those they do know. In this sick world, so many are indeed taking advantage of [trusted] relationships and [leading] others into abuse that way. But generally, we tell people, “Don’t trust anyone that you don’t know.” That’s what God’s will is in the first commandment. He commands us to know Him. He commands us that we would learn to know Him more and more, and acknowledge Him as the only God in heaven and in earth.

To know Him, friends, is a task. It’s also a never ending study. And the more that we know Him and see His greatness, His wisdom, His goodness, His devotion, His holiness, and His justice, and all the attributes, His loving kindness, more and more we will be drawn to cling to Him, to follow Him, and to trust in Him even when things are rough and tough in life, or even when someone else knocks on our door and says, ‘Give me your heart. Follow me.’ If we know Him, why would we forsake Him Who has so devoted Himself to us, the God of heaven, the Creator, the Redeemer? Now, none honored the first commandment more than Jesus. And notice that Satan starts in the wilderness tempting Jesus to break the first commandment. Faced with hunger and weakness, faced with the incredulous people that He has to go now and preach and introduce Himself to as the Messiah, and pressed with the ultimate prospect of the cross, Satan tempts Him in a variety of ways. Finally, Jesus rejects each attempt of the adversary to place His trust first in Himself, in His own resources, make bread (Matt. 4:3), or in people by His own doings, or ultimately in Satan’s promise, ‘Just bow down, and I will leave and give it all to you.’ No, Jesus knew and trusted and looked and obeyed His Father only, and He sent Satan away with a final appeal to the first commandment: Satan, “Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve” (Matt. 4:10).

So secondly, God commands us to worship and to glorify Him as the only God. When I hear the word *worship*, maybe you’re like me, we think of church, of singing and praying, giving, preaching, or hearing the Word. And yet, the heart of worship is a heart which trusts and lives a life that shows obedience to God as the only God, as the worthiest Being. So, what does worship really look like, friend? It’s not just when we are in church. Worship is to stand in awe of Him. Worship is to choose Him above all others, and comforts and delights, as the God to Whom I devote myself. Worship is to place our hope in Him, to joyfully serve Him alone. Worship is to submit to His will and His ways above my own, even if it’s difficult. Worship is to humble myself under His mighty hand. Worship is to devote my talents to Him. Worship is to be zealous for His cause and for His kingdom, to wait on Him as we seek directions in ways we need to go or His counsel. And ultimately, it is to delight ourselves in Him and Who He is as He reveals Himself in His Word and His providence.

Now, if we honor God with such worship, looking, waiting, seeking, we will experience He will never fail. He will not fail us. He will guide us in His love, uphold us and provide. Psalm 81 is a brilliant example of it. God says, ‘Open your mouth wide, and I will fill your every need.’ He laments in that psalm, ‘Oh, that my people would have hearkened unto me. They went with strange gods, and they were lost. I would have satisfied them with the finest of the wheat and honey out of the rock.’ You see, that’s the first commandment: worship Me.

Now, God, therefore, in the third place commands us to turn away and to keep away from [looking to] anyone or anything above Him for help or guidance. Many people in trouble and fears, look to the stars or to the moon, or [to] sorcery or cultic forces, think of King Saul, or take their horoscope or witchcraft, or call on so-called saints. Others take their refuge in ideas and philosophies and speculations or traditions that reject or contradict the Word of God and the teachings of His Word. The apostle Paul warns already in his days about the days that were coming when “some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of the devils” (I Timothy 4:1). Now, that would be a violation of the first commandment when we give ourselves for security and for guidance, for help, to such forces or such sources. Instead, God says, ‘Have no other gods. Have Me only.’ So, friends, keep reminding yourself why God is commanding us the first commandment. He is not afraid He’ll be losing something of His glory. He is concerned that you and I will lose nothing. Our soul and body we will lose when we exchange the truth for a lie.

So, let’s conclude then with considering what God forbids in the first commandment. There are many possible answers, and I will bypass most of them to focus in on only one. God forbids, of course, atheism, which is the belief that says there is no God, and therefore we don’t have to worry about that. God also rejects and forbids pantheism, which is the belief that everything we see and touch around us is God. He also forbids evolutionism,

in which ultimately you're taught that you are God. But, I bypass those three. Let us focus on one sin [that's] much more closer to our heart: He forbids idolatry.

And what is idolatry? Essentially, idolatry is when we put the creature or any other creature comforts above God in the place of the Creator, and we define our comfort or our strength or our security in things, or creatures, whatever it is. The Heidelberg Catechism defines idolatry in Question 95 as follows, "Idolatry is instead of or besides that one true God Who has manifested Himself in His Word to design or to have any other object in which men place their trust." Now, don't forget or confuse that idolatry is not the same as loving or trusting your people around you that are close to you, like your parents or your spouse or your pastor. That's not idolatry. Idolatry also is not enjoying the beautiful things that God has given us, such as marriage, family, or food and drink, or business, or possessions, or work, so, things we may enjoy. But, idolatry is when these things or these people begin to define our trust or our happiness, or we build our security and we give our devotion to this, in the first place, instead of on God.

Now, therefore, don't think that idolatry is only when we serve stone images or depend on the departed spirits of men. Examine yourself and stay alert to the truth that idolatry is far more refined and, therefore, so much harder to detect in our own hearts. We break the first commandment when we take good and lawful things given for our enjoyment and devote ourselves to them in such an extent that they become more than what God should be. Let me just give you a few examples to think this through further in your own life.

Wealth, possessions, is a gift, but it becomes a snaring idol when I am working harder and harder just to become wealthy, to secure myself or to build a better tomorrow, simply to enjoy myself. Now, wealth has become an idol, rather than a resource given to glorify God and serve my neighbor. Academic success is good and a wonderful aim to work towards to skill yourself better intellectually with the talents that God has given you. It becomes an idol when all I care about is status and titles, and the prestige that [comes] with my titles or my positions. And now, I'm thinking of financial benefits, perhaps, more than honor and the praise of God in the service to my fellow man. That's an idol.

Physical fitness and health [are] a great thing [and] something we all are to do to keep [ourselves] fit to do the work of God, but it becomes an idol when all I want to do is look fit and trim, to show off my body or to somehow lengthen my life indefinitely in the hopes that it will be long. Think about sports and games. Again, they have a great place and a good use, but especially in modern-day, mankind's greatest idol has become in that area of sports and entertainment. It's no more recreational. It is idolatry. It's all about winning and performing and medals and ribbons of our favorite team or ourselves.

But, let's find one more idol: Christian ministry. That can easily become an idol when I aim at reputation and reward, rather than at usefulness that He may increase, and I may decrease or fade away. So together, the first commandment, let's listen to the words of exhortation that Moses writes in Deuteronomy 8 when he speaks about them not forgetting God when they're full and successful and when multiplied and their hearts are lifted up and they forget the Lord their God that has brought them forth out of the land of Egypt (Deut. 8:11-14), and he concludes then with these warnings in Deuteronomy 8:17-19, "And thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand has gotten me this wealth. But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he sware unto thy fathers, as it is this day. And it shall be, if thou do at all forget the LORD thy God, and walk after other gods, and shall serve them, and worship them, I testify against you this day that ye shall surely perish."

There we have it again, 'My people, don't go with these gods. Don't put your trust in them. Don't look to them. They will not help you. Have me only.' Now, do you taste in that God's love, God's concern? Following His will and honoring Him as the only One, friends, will bring us the greatest joy, happiness, security, provision. For they that honor Me, I will honor. It will give us freedom from worry, disappointment, and finally, from perishing at the end of our journey.

I encourage you in every commandment to take a little visit to the Westminster Catechism or the Heidelberg Catechism and to read for yourself the questions and answers, [in] which they have [condensed, and] written very beautifully and richly, the meaning of each one of the commandments. Thank you very much.