

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Ten Commandments, we have come to call them, are a bit of a phenomenon in the Bible. For starters if you read through Exodus 20, or Deuteronomy 5, and you try to count the “Commandments” you’d be hard pressed to come up with ten. It is far easier to count them as 9, 12, or 14. So why do we say there are ten? It turns out in Deuteronomy 4 it says:

God declared to you His covenant, which He commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments, and He wrote them on two tablets of stone.¹

There is a little problem with the Ten Commandments. That little problem is the title we’ve given them in English. The King James translation of the Bible still affects a great deal of how we speak. There are many clichés in the English language that come directly from the King James Bible. It is a very good translation, but it has some quirks. This is one of them. Deuteronomy 4:13 was translated “Ten Commandments,” but the literal translation is the “Ten Words.”

I like to call them the “Ten How-Could-You’s.” I call them that because that is a little closer to their real meaning. When God gave these to us, through Moses, this is how He started:

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 slavery.²”

It is better to read them as words of love rather than edicts and commands. “I am the Lord your God who brought you out... of slavery. “How-Could-You have any other gods?” “How-Could-You misuse My name?” They are an expression of love for us from our heavenly Father, not commands which would compel us, by edict, to obey. They should be read as words of love. It is with this understanding that we will look at these Words from God.

The First Commandment, as you might have memorized it from Luther's Small Catechism, is:

You shall have no other gods.

What does this mean?

We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.

That's the short version. The full text is found in Exodus 20:3-6:

1 Deuteronomy 4:13

2 Exodus 20:1-2

Never have any other god. Never make your own carved idols or statues that represent any creature in the sky, on the earth, or in the water. Never worship them or serve them, because I, the Lord your God, am a God who does not tolerate rivals. I punish children for their parents' sins to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, but I show mercy to thousands of generations of those who love Me and obey My Words.³

Have you ever watched a lightening storm? Watched as it moved from the horizon toward you. Have you ever watched as the bright searing flashes of light that come before the deep guttural rolls of thunder that shake the ground? Have you ever watched as the rain falls from the sky in such volume that it appears as though sheets of water are falling from the cloud? Have you ever watched a storm of such violence and power?

Have you ever walked outside after the storm? Have you ever been out in the woods after a lightening storm has gone by. It is truly a wonder to behold. The sun starts to streak through the sky on beams of light that stretch down to the Earth. It sparkles on the water droplets, and the leaves glisten as though covered with diamonds.

Have you ever walked across a meadow as the storm fades and the sun breaks free? Have you ever see a rainbow of such vibrant and vivid color that you can't look away? Have you ever seen a full-circle rainbow? A multi-colored belt of light in the sky?

Events like these can bring you to a place where you can try to imagine Eden. You can, in these moments, feel like you have just touched the face of God. He is the Creator, and all of creation reflects His grace, love and tender care for us, as we marvel at all He has given to us. It can be a wonderful thing to behold.

I am amazed at the transforming power of God. We are, at times, ambushed by the greatness, the wonder, the wisdom of God when He stoops down to walk with us, His children. At times like that we feel His presence, and we realize that God is dynamic, authoritative, powerful, even a little dangerous. We also realize that He is personal, compassionate, loving and frighteningly very real.

After coming away from such an encounter with God you cannot help but realize that He is the Creator and you are merely the created. At such times you have this compelling feeling that you should be bowing, kneeling down, or perhaps

3 Exodus 20:3-6

even laying prostrate on the floor in reverence for His might and His power, as you pay homage to Him as Lord and God.

The First Commandment states”

“You shall have no other gods.”

What does this mean?

“We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.”

In other words we are to acknowledge His existence, affirm His Lordship, obey His decrees, and direct our hearts and minds towards Him and no one else, and nothing else. We do not worship the storm, the lightening, the thunder, or even the sun, the rainbow, or the shimmering diamonds of light that glisten on the leaves. Some people do worshiped such things. There are still people today who do worship these things.

The First Commandment also means that we do not worship Baal, Dagon, Moloch, or Lucifer as people do today. It means that we do not worship Allah, we do not worship Buddha, and it also means that we do not worship our friends, or ourselves and our own abilities, as we are often tempted to do.

In the First Commandment, God is saying do not worship: things, pleasure, or money none of which will last. God says do not worship: fame, fashion, position, or people's applause, none of which will last. Just worship Me the One True God.

That is the ‘what’ of this commandment. That is ‘what’ it says. The real question is ‘why?’ Why does God give this commandment to us? Maybe you've been tempted to ask, “why is He so concerned about all of my worship going to Him alone?” That sounds a little jealous. It sounds narrow minded. It sounds intolerant. Why should God be so exclusive? Why should God have a monopoly on our worship? He teaches us to share, so why doesn't He lead by example? Can't He share our worship with other things like: money, idols, and ourselves? It sounds like God is just being greedy.

Is that what is meant by the First Commandment? Is this command given because God is insecure and afraid? Is it there just so God can maintain His precariously held position? Is God just protecting or flaunting His ego? Of course not!

God knows (He knows because He made us and designed us) that wherever we focus our attention that will affect our thoughts. He also knows that all of those other things are temporary. They cannot last because nothing in this creation will last, except you, me, and God who created it. Everything else is temporary. Everything else will fad. Everything else will disappear and disappoint. God knows

that any other god to which you bow will not come through for you when you need it most.

That is exactly what God teaches us in Psalm 115 where we read about beautiful gods made of gold, and silver. I have been in one of the largest Hindu Temples in America, and seen such idols. Hand carved rare woods, and ivory, covered in pounds of gold and silver. They are magnificent works, made from the very skilled hands of a master artist. Yet, that is all they are, artwork made by an artist. The scraps of wood, after the idol was carved were swept off the floor and burned with the weekly garbage. There is nothing special about the wood. It's just wood.

That is why Psalm 115 says:

They have mouths, but they cannot speak.

They have eyes, but they cannot see.

They have ears, but they cannot hear.

They have noses, but they cannot smell.

They have hands, but they cannot feel.

They have feet, but they cannot walk.

They cannot even make a sound with their throats.⁴

Psalm 115 is just a poetic way of saying, to those who worship such things, “you’re making a fool out of yourself. You have wasted you life, time, and worship on that block of wood, no matter how decoratively carved and adorned. Your idol will never come through for you when you need it.”

Worship should be directed at the God of the Bible, the only true triune God, the only true and living God, who is the creator of all things. Worship should be directed at the God of the Bible because He comes through for you. The one true God promises to act for those who worship Him, and He does in many and various means. He promises to watch over His worshipers, and He does. He promises to listen to the prayers of His worshipers, and He does. He alone has the power to touch a life and make a change. God acts in the lives of His people. Ultimately, when we need Him most, at our death, He defeats even that enemy and carries us safely home.

We see that most clearly, we see that best, in the life of Jesus. In Jesus we see God who has come near to us, walked with us, cried and laughed with us. He suffered the trials of life just like we do. He even died the death we were supposed to die. Why? Because His love for His children is greater then pain He had to

4 Psalm 115:5-7

endure to save us. Then, as He breaks out of the grave, He sets us free from the grave.

Don't waste your worship on those other gods, be they: things, idols, money, or spirits. Because if you do the day will come when you will be very disappointed. Parents can disappoint you. Brothers and sisters can disappoint you. Husbands and wives can disappoint each other. Friends can disappoint you. Even churches can fail to be everything they should. Even pastors can be something less than everything we want them to be. All of these things can disappoint us.

So who can you trust? Where can we anchor our hopes? The First Commandment teaches us to, “fear, love, and trust in God above all things” because He will come through for you, forever. Worshiping God is never a waste. Worshiping God is always a blessing, God will hear you. God comes to us through His Word that we use in worship. God will hear you, bless you, and care for you forever.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.