

The Foremost Commandment
Men's Bible Study at Park View
October 4, 2005

Scriptures: Exodus 20:2-3, Matthew 22:34-40, Deuteronomy 6:4-9

This week we are beginning to study the Ten Commandments themselves, devoting at least one weekly lesson to each of the ten. In our numbering of the commandments, we shall follow the order of the modern Greek and Reformed Churches. Contemporary Jews differ in their listing, as do Lutherans and Roman Catholics. We will use the commandments listed in Exodus 20:1-17, with occasional references to the list in Deuteronomy 5:6-21. Thus, we began with the first commandment:

“You shall have no other gods before me” (Today's New International Version)

“Do not worship any gods besides me.” (The New Living Translation)

“No other gods, only me.” (The Message)

The covenant law delivered by God through Moses began with the demand for total trust and loyalty, based on the display of God's power to deliver the people from Egypt. This command, then, is a voluntary commitment of loyalty to God alone. From this place of trust in God's sovereignty flowed the rest of the covenant law. The first commandment is sometimes interpreted as a statement of *priority*, ie. no other gods in a higher place of worship than Yahweh. But as you can see from the contemporary translations above, it is really a commitment of *exclusivity*. You shall have no other gods *besides* me.

According to Waldemar Janzen, “this demand was as radical for Israel as it is familiar to us. None of the religions of the ancient world, and few if any outside of the biblical religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), believed or believe in one God to the exclusion of all others.¹” Therefore, this covenant command set the Israelites apart from other ancient peoples. The Canaanites and others were proud to serve many gods. The everyday lives of the people who stood with Moses at Mount Sinai were filled with gods. The gods ruled the rivers, the trees, the caves, and the sun. The ancient peoples trusted in these gods to help them carry out the duties of daily life. The first and foremost commandment does not deny the presence of such gods. Rather, it calls for absolute loyalty to the God who triumphed over the gods of Egypt and delivered the people from slavery.

The commandment to worship one God alone became central to Jewish faith and self-understanding. In his exhortations to the second generation of people who had left Egypt, Moses challenged the people: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Or, “The LORD is our God, the LORD alone” (Deuteronomy 6:4). This statement, called the Shema, came to be the most familiar scripture in Jewish life. It is really a restatement of the first of the Ten Commandments.

¹ Exodus, Herald Press, Waterloo, 2000, p. 254.

After giving the Shema, Moses urged the people to teach God's commandments to their children, to tie them as symbols on their hands and foreheads, and to write them on the doorframes of their houses. Consequently, the Shema is repeated each week in synagogue worship. It is taught to Jewish children and encapsulated in a little box called a mezuzah, which is fastened to the doorposts of Jewish houses. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees carried it in phylacteries, tiny boxes bound to their wrists and foreheads. Deep in their spiritual consciousness, the Jewish people knew that there was only one true God; they were not to worship any other.

Elton Trueblood has suggested that "the number one differs from all other numbers, not in degree but in kind. The step from two to three is relatively slight, but the step from one to two is enormous."² He explains that we make the distinction between singular and plural, dividing one from all other numbers. A man who has four wives is no more a polygamist than one with two wives. Both are very different from the man who is faithful to one wife. The difference between singular and plural is nowhere more evident in our spiritual or social lives than in the matter of loyalty. "Since there can be only one ultimate priority the decision concerning what this may be is crucial for an individual or a society."³

Jesus was once asked which commandment in the law was the greatest. He replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all you mind" (Matthew 22:37). He was quoting from the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 6:5, the words immediately following the Shema. Jesus' words are the classic and positive restatement of the first commandment for the covenant community, both in his day and ours. To worship God alone and to love him with all our heart, soul, and mind is indeed the first and foremost commandment.

In a sermon at Park View Mennonite, Pastor Phil Kniss challenged the congregation to think about the exhortation of Moses following the words of the Shema:

Even Jewish groups differ on whether Moses is being literal or figurative. But the principle stands, and it still works today. The clear command is to put constant reminders in front of you that you belong to God, that you belong to a community of God's people, and that you are resident aliens. And to tell that your children, in many different ways, at many different times throughout every day.

How are we doing on that, I wonder? I think many of our kids are getting immersed every day in all the symbols of dominant culture, with very little thoughtful critique from us grown-ups. And God's kingdom and its symbols, gets a crack at them maybe for a couple hours once a week, if they're lucky.

What is your response to Pastor Kniss' challenge? In what ways do we demonstrate that God is our exclusive and ultimate object of love, worship, and devotion? What symbols remind us of this commitment? How do we teach this commandment to our children?

² *Foundations for Reconstruction*, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1946, p. 12.

³ Trueblood, p. 13