



THE FIRST PART: THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

“You are to have no other gods.”

That is, you are to regard me alone as your God. What does this mean, and how is it to be understood? What does “to have a god” mean, or what is God?

Answer: A “god” is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart. As I have often said, it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true one. Conversely, where your trust is false and wrong, there you do not have the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.

The intention of this commandment, therefore, is to require true faith and confidence of the heart, which fly straight to the one true God and cling to him alone. What this means is: “See to it that you let me alone be your God, and never search for another.” In other words: “Whatever good thing you lack, look to me for it and seek it from me, and whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, crawl to me and cling to me. I, I myself, will give you what you need and help you out of every danger. Only do not let your heart cling to or rest in anyone else.”

So that it may be understood and remembered, I must explain this a little more plainly by citing some everyday examples of the opposite. There are some who think that they have God and everything they need when they have money and property; they trust in them and boast in them so stubbornly and securely that they care for no one else. They, too, have a god—mammon by name, that is, money and property—on which they set their whole heart. This is the most common idol on earth. Those who have money and property feel secure, happy, and fearless, as if they were sitting in the midst of paradise. On the other hand,

What do you think of Luther’s explanation of the First Commandment?

What would you add to it?

What would you subtract from it?

What is Mammon?

The word “Mammon” comes from the Greek word *μαμωνάς*. At its core, the word means “riches” or “wealth.” It’s all about materialism and the evil influence it can have on you. It is most famously used in the King James Version of the Bible in Matthew 6:24 “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”

those who have nothing doubt and despair as if they knew of no god at all. We will find very few who are cheerful, who do not fret and complain, if they do not have mammon. This desire for wealth clings and sticks to our nature all the way to the grave.

So, too, those who boast of great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family, and honor and who trust in them have a god also, but not the one, true God. Notice again, how presumptuous, secure, and proud people are when they have such possessions, and how despondent they are when they lack them or when they are taken away. Therefore, I repeat, the correct interpretation of this commandment is that to have a god is to have something in which the heart trusts completely.

Again, look at what we used to do in our blindness under the papacy. Anyone who had a toothache fasted and called on St. Apollonia; those who worried about their house burning down appealed to St. Laurence as their patron; if they were afraid of the plague, they made a vow to St. Sebastian or Roch.³⁶ There were countless other such abominations, and everyone selected his own saint and worshiped him and invoked his help in time of need. In this category also belong those who go so far as to make a pact with the devil so that he may give them plenty of money, help them in love affairs, protect their cattle, recover lost property, etc., as magicians and sorcerers do. All of them place their heart and trust elsewhere than in the true God, from whom they neither expect nor seek any good thing.

Thus you can easily understand what and how much this commandment requires, namely, that one's whole heart and confidence be placed in God alone, and in no one else. To have a God, as you can well imagine, does not mean to grasp him with your fingers, or to put him into a purse, or to shut him up in a box. Rather, you lay hold of God when your heart grasps him and clings to him. To cling to him with your heart is nothing else than to entrust yourself to him completely. He wishes to turn us away from everything else apart from him, and to draw us to himself, because he is the one, eternal good. It is as if he said: "What you formerly sought from the saints, or what you hoped to receive from mammon or from anything else, turn to me for all of this; look on me as the one who will help you and lavish all good things upon you richly."

Look, here you have the true honor and worship that please God, which God also commands under penalty of eternal wrath, namely, that the heart should know no other consolation or confidence than in him, nor let itself be torn from him, but for his sake should risk everything and disregard everything else on earth. On the other hand, you will easily see and judge how the world practices nothing but false

How true is the statement about very few who are cheerful, who do not fret, or who do not complain without having mammon?

Can you give an example of why you think this?

When do we have by "grasping him with your fingers," "putting him into a purse," or "shutting him up in a box"?

³⁶ Apollonia was martyred on 9 February 248 or 249. Because the executioners pulled her teeth out, she was regarded as a help against toothache. Laurence, a Roman deacon, was reputed to have been martyred by being roasted on a gridiron on 10 August 258. Sebastian, a Roman martyr, was executed on 20 January, early in the fourth century (?), reputedly by being shot with arrows. Roch, reportedly a Franciscan monk from Montpellier, devoted himself to caring for victims of the plague in Italy. His feast day is 16 August.

worship and idolatry. There has never been a nation so wicked that it did not establish and maintain some sort of worship. All people have set up their own god, to whom they looked for blessings, help, and comfort.

For example, the pagans, who put their trust in power and dominion, exalted Jupiter as their supreme god. Others, who strove for riches, happiness, pleasure, and the good life, venerated Hercules, Mercury, Venus, or others, while pregnant women worshiped Diana or Lucina, and so forth.³⁷ They all made a god out of what their heart most desired. Even in the mind of all the pagan, therefore, to have a god means to trust and believe. The trouble is that their trust is false and wrong, for it is not placed in the one God, apart from whom there truly is no god in heaven or on earth. Accordingly the pagans actually fashion their own fancies and dreams about God into an idol and rely on an empty nothing. So it is with all idolatry. Idolatry does not consist merely of erecting an image and praying to it, but it is primarily a matter of the heart, which fixes its gaze upon other things and seeks help and consolation from creatures, saints, or devils. It neither cares for God nor expects good things from him sufficiently to trust that he wants to help, nor does it believe that whatever good it encounters comes from God.

There is, moreover, another false worship. This is the greatest idolatry that we have practiced up until now, and it is still rampant in the world. All the religious orders are founded upon it. It involves only that conscience that seeks help, comfort, and salvation in its own works and presumes to wrest heaven from God. It keeps track of how often it has made endowments, fasted, celebrated Mass, etc. It relies on such things and boasts of them, unwilling to receive anything as a gift of God, but desiring to earn everything by itself or to merit everything by works of supererogation,³⁸ just as if God were in our service or debt and we were his liege lords.³⁹ What is this but to have made God into an idol—indeed, an “apple-god”⁴⁰—and to have set ourselves up as God? But this reasoning is a little too subtle and is not suitable for young pupils.

What does Luther say is the greatest idolatry that we practice? Do you agree or disagree with Luther? Why or why not?

This much, however, should be said to the common people, so that they may mark well and remember the sense of this commandment: We are to trust in God alone, to look to him alone, and to expect him to give us only good things; for it is he who gives us body, life, food, drink, nourishment, health, protection, peace, and all necessary temporal and eternal blessings. In addition, God protects us from misfortune and rescues and delivers us when any evil befalls us. It is God alone (as I have repeated often enough) from whom we receive everything good and by whom we are delivered from all evil. This, I think, is why we

³⁷ Both Hercules and Mercury were venerated by the Romans as gods of wealth and prosperity. Venus, often identified with Aphrodite, was regarded as giving success in love. Diana was the Roman goddess of the moon, often identified with Artemis. Lucina was the goddess of childbirth, often identified with Juno.

³⁸ Supererogatory works, in medieval theology, were good works done in excess of what God required of a person. They could then be applied for the benefit of someone else.

³⁹ In the medieval feudal system, a vassal was obligated to render allegiance and service to his lord.

⁴⁰ German: *Apfelgott*. The word may possibly be a corruption of *Aftergott*, a “sham god.” On 15 June 1539, Luther spoke of King Ferdinand as an *Apfelkönig*, an “apple-king.” In 1530 he wrote of *Apfelkönige oder gemalete Herrn*, “apple-kings or painted lords,” the latter expression being a term of derision somewhat like “plaster saints.” Sebastian Franck, a contemporary German humanist, uses the expression *Apfelkaiser*, “apple-emperor.” The *Apfelbischof*, “apple-bishop,” was a Shrove Tuesday character, for example, in Berlin.

Germans from ancient times have called God by a name more elegant and worthy than found in any other language, a name derived from the word “good,”⁴¹ because he is an eternal fountain who overflows with pure goodness and from whom pours forth all that is truly good.

Although much that is good comes to us from human beings, nevertheless, anything received according to his command and ordinance in fact comes from God. Our parents and all authorities—as well as everyone who is a neighbor—have received the command to do us all kinds of good. So we receive our blessings not from them, but from God through them. Creatures are only the hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings. For example, he gives to the mother breasts and milk for her infant or gives grain and all sorts of fruits from the earth for sustenance—things that no creature could produce by itself. No one, therefore, should presume to take or give anything unless God has commanded it. This forces us to recognize God’s gifts and give him thanks, as this commandment requires. Therefore, we should not spurn even this way of receiving such things through God’s creatures, nor are we through arrogance to seek other methods and ways than those God has commanded. For that would not be receiving them from God, but seeking them from ourselves.

Let each and everyone, then, see to it that you esteem this commandment above all things and not make light of it. Search and examine your own heart thoroughly, and you will discover whether or not it clings to God alone. If you have the sort of heart that expects from him nothing but good, especially in distress and need, and renounces and forsakes all that is not God, then you have the one, true God. On the contrary, if your heart clings to something else and expects to receive from it more good and help than from God and does not run to God but flees from him when things go wrong, then you have another god, an idol.

Consequently, in order to show that God will not have this commandment taken lightly but will strictly watch over it, he has attached to it, first, a terrible threat, and, then, a beautiful, comforting promise. Both of these should be thoroughly emphasized and impressed upon the young people so that they may take them to heart and remember them.

[EXPLANATION OF THE APPENDIX TO THE FIRST COMMANDMENT]

“For I am the Lord your God, the strong, jealous one, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, and showing mercy to many thousands who love me and keep my commandments.”

Although these words apply to all the commandments (as we shall hear later), yet they are attached precisely to this commandment at the head of the list, because it is most important that a person have the right head. For where one’s head is right, one’s whole life must also be right, and vice versa. Learn from these words, then, how angry God is with those who rely on anything but him, and again, how kind and gracious he is to those who trust and believe him alone with their whole heart. His wrath does not subside until the fourth generation, but, in contrast, his kindness and goodness extend to many thousands. Therefore, people should not live in false security and trust in luck, like brutes who think that it makes no great difference how they live. He is the sort of God who does not let the wickedness of those who turn away from him go unpunished, and his anger does not cease until the fourth generation, until they are utterly exterminated. Therefore he wants to be feared and not despised.

⁴¹ German: *gut*. This derivation is etymologically incorrect. The words for “God” (*Gott*) and “good” (*gut*) are not related in either Gothic or in Middle High German.

He has also proved this in all the records of history, as Scripture abundantly shows and as daily experience can certainly still teach us. From the beginning he has completely rooted out all idolatry, and on that account he overthrew both heathens and Jews; just so in our day he overthrows all false worship, so that all who persist in it must ultimately perish. Even now there are proud, powerful, and rich potbellies who, not caring whether God frowns or smiles, boast defiantly of their mammon and believe that they can withstand his wrath. But they will not succeed. Before they know it they will be ruined, along with all they have trusted in, just as all others have perished who doubtless thought themselves so secure and mighty.

Just because such blockheads imagine, when God looks on and refrains from disturbing their security, that he is ignorant of or unconcerned about such matters, he must strike and punish them so severely that he just cannot forget his anger down to their children's children. God does this so that everyone will be impressed and see that this is no joke with him. These are also the ones he has in mind when he says, "who hate me," that is, those who persist in their stubbornness and pride. They refuse to hear what is preached or said to them. When someone rebukes them, in order to bring them to their senses and cause them to mend their ways before the real punishment comes, they become so wild and crazy that they justly deserve the wrath they receive. We experience this every day in the case of bishops and princes.

But as terrible as these threats are, much more powerful is the comfort in the promise that assures all those clinging to God alone of his mercy, that is, his sheer goodness and blessing, not only for themselves but also for their children to a thousand and even many thousands of generations. Certainly, if we desire all good things in time and eternity, this promise ought to move and urge us to fix our hearts upon God with perfect confidence, since the divine Majesty approaches us so graciously, invites so warmly, and promises so richly.

Therefore let everyone take this to heart and thus be careful not to regard this as if a mere human being were speaking. For it brings you either eternal blessing, happiness, and salvation, or eternal wrath, distress, and heartache. What more could you want or desire than God's gracious promise that he wants to be yours with every blessing, to protect you, and to help you in every need? Unfortunately, the world neither believes this nor regards it as God's Word. For the world sees that those who trust in God and not in mammon suffer grief and want and are opposed and attacked by the devil. They have neither money, prestige, nor honor, and can hardly stay alive. Conversely, those who serve mammon have power, prestige, honor, possessions, and all sorts of security in the world's eyes. Therefore, we must hold fast to these words, even in the face of this apparent contradiction, and be certain that they do not lie or deceive but will yet prove true.

Think back yourself, or ask around, and tell me: When people have devoted all their care and effort to scraping together possessions and great wealth, what have they accomplished in the end? You will find that they have wasted their effort and toil. Even if they have piled up great riches, these have turned to dust and blown away. They themselves never found happiness in their wealth, nor did it ever last to the third generation. You will find examples enough in all the histories and from old and experienced people. Just examine and pay close attention to them. Saul was a great king, chosen by God, and an upright man; but once he was in office

What examples do you see in life of the curse that God will "visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me" and the blessing of God "showing mercy to many thousands who love me and keep my commandments"?

and let his heart turn from God,⁴⁶ placing his confidence in his crown and power, he inevitably perished along with everything he had; not one of his children survived.⁴⁷ David, on the other hand, was a poor, despised man, hunted down and always on the run, never certain of his life, yet inevitably he remained safe from Saul and became king. These words must stand and prove true, because God cannot lie or deceive. Just leave it to the devil and the world to deceive you with their appearance; it may last for a while, but in the end it is nothing at all.

Therefore, let us learn the First Commandment well, so that we see that God will tolerate no presumption or trust in anything else; he makes no greater demand on us than a heartfelt trust in him for every good thing, so that we walk straight ahead on the right path, using all of God's gifts exactly as a shoemaker uses a needle, awl, and thread for his work and afterward puts them aside, or as a traveler makes use of an inn, food, and lodging, but only for his physical needs. Let each person do the same in his or her walk of life according to God's order, allowing none of these things to be a lord or an idol.

Let this be enough for the First Commandment. We have had to explain it at great length, for it is the most important. As I said before, if the heart is right with God and we keep this commandment, all the rest will follow on their own.¹

What is Luther saying here when he tells us to use all of God's gifts "exactly as a shoemaker" or "as a traveler"?

How does keeping the 1st Commandment really make us keep all the commandments?

REFLECTIONS

- 1) Pick a Luther quote from our reading today and explain what you learned from it or why it stuck out to you. Here are some that stuck out to me, but feel free to pick something else.
 - a. "Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God." (Page 1)
 - b. "The intention of this commandment, therefore, is to require true faith and confidence of the heart, which fly straight to the one true God and cling to him alone. What this means is: "See to it that you let me alone be your God, and never search for another." In other words: "Whatever good thing you lack, look to me for it and seek it from me, and whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, crawl to me and cling to me. I, I myself, will give you what you

⁴⁶ See 1 Samuel 15:11*.

⁴⁷ Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua were killed in battle with the Philistines (1 Sam. 31:2*). Ishbaal, Saul's youngest son, was beheaded (2 Sam. 4:7*).

¹ Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. (2000). *The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (pp. 386–392). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

need and help you out of every danger. Only do not let your heart cling to or rest in anyone else.” (Page 1)

- c. “We will find very few who are cheerful, who do not fret and complain, if they do not have mammon. This desire for wealth clings and sticks to our nature all the way to the grave.” (Page 2)
- d. “To have a God, as you can well imagine, does not mean to grasp him with your fingers, or to put him into a purse, or to shut him up in a box. Rather, you lay hold of God when your heart grasps him and clings to him. To cling to him with your heart is nothing else than to entrust yourself to him completely. He wishes to turn us away from everything else apart from him, and to draw us to himself, because he is the one, eternal good.” (Page 2)
- e. “This is the greatest idolatry that we have practiced up until now, and it is still rampant in the world. All the religious orders are founded upon it. It involves only that conscience that seeks help, comfort, and salvation in its own works and presumes to wrest heaven from God. It keeps track of how often it has made endowments, fasted, celebrated Mass, etc. It relies on such things and boasts of them, unwilling to receive anything as a gift of God, but desiring to earn everything by itself or to merit everything by works of supererogation, just as if God were in our service or debt and we were his liege lords..” (Page 3)
- f. “Just because such blockheads imagine, when God looks on and refrains from disturbing their security, that he is ignorant of or unconcerned about such matters, he must strike and punish them so severely that he just cannot forget his anger down to their children’s children.” (Page 5)
- g. “Think back yourself, or ask around, and tell me: When people have devoted all their care and effort to scraping together possessions and great wealth, what have they accomplished in the end? You will find that they have wasted their effort and toil. Even if they have piled up great riches, these have turned to dust and blown away. They themselves never found happiness in their wealth, nor did it ever last to the third generation” (Page 5)
- h. “As I said before, if the heart is right with God and we keep this commandment, all the rest will follow on their own” (Page 6)

2) Using this section of Luther’s Large Catechism, how would you define an “idol”? What are the most tempting idols? How do you fight them?