

Sermon for September 10, 2017 – Small Catechism: The First Commandment

Exodus 20:1-6 (NIV84)

**Theme: Is the LORD your only God?**

- 1) *If we're honest with ourselves, we must confess: "no"*
- 2) *In Christ, however, the answer is: "yes"*

*And God spoke all these words: <sup>2</sup> "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. <sup>3</sup> "You shall have no other gods before me. <sup>4</sup> "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, <sup>6</sup> but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

If, when I was a child, you would have asked me which of the Ten Commandments was the easiest to keep, I would have answered: "the first". You see, ever since the day the LORD adopted me as his dearly loved child through Holy Baptism, there has never been a single instant when I worshipped any other god, prayed to any saint, or asked any deceased ancestor to watch over me. I am not saying this to brag, because I am sure that almost all of you could say the very same thing!

And yet the more I study the Bible, the more I realize that there is no commandment I have sinned against more than the first.

Your pastor is an idolater!

"How can that be?" you might be wondering, "Do you belong to some secret cult we don't know about?" Absolutely not! My problem, as you will learn, is the same problem you all have too. Ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin, the human heart is inclined to fear, love and trust in other things more than the LORD. We are all idolaters and desperately need to know this about ourselves. Why? So that, realizing the depth of our depravity, we can turn to the LORD in repentance – trusting in his great mercy to forgive us and truly receive Him as our God.

Let us consider this truth, under the theme: **Is the LORD your only God?** 1) *If we're honest with ourselves, we must confess: "no."* 2) *In Christ, however, the answer is: "yes."*

**Part One: Fear Him alone.**

Our sermon text records the LORD giving, what we call, the first commandment. Let's take a moment to recall the scene: The LORD had graciously freed Israel from their slavery to the Egyptians – mercifully guarding, guiding and providing for them on their journey to Mount Sinai. Now he wants to enter into a special covenant with them in which He would promise to be their God, and they would be his people.

To impress upon the Israelites that he – the holy and almighty LORD – is nothing like the idols of the nations, the LORD appeared to them in a blazing fire as mount Sinai shook, thundered and smoked. And yet, as absolutely terrifying as this sight was<sup>i</sup>, the first thing the LORD reminds His people of is his mercy in saving them – thereby giving them the primary reason to keep his commandments.

He said: <sup>2</sup> *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. <sup>3</sup> "You shall have no other gods before me. <sup>4</sup> "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or worship them.*

I know that the text goes on, but I will stop here and save the rest of the it for another service – when we study, what Luther called, “the Conclusion of the Commandments.”

The Lord says: *“You shall have no other gods before me.”* Have you ever stop to consider what “having a god” really means? We often act as if it means nothing more than swearing allegiance to someone or something – much like we would do for a sports team – cheering them on to victory? Is “having the Lord as your God” sort of like supporting your favorite political party – concerned about its causes and trying to get people to buy into its plan for our country? No, it’s certainly not – and yet we often live as if that’s the case!

Asking the question, “What does it mean to have a god?” Luther once wrote: “A god means that from which we are to expect all good and in which we are to take refuge in all distress. So, to have a God is nothing other than trusting and believing Him with the heart.”

Let me ask you, then, who you turn to in every distress and from whom do you expect every good thing? In other words, who do you fear, love and trust above all things? It’s the LORD right?

How I wish it were true, but let’s be honest with ourselves. When Sunday morning comes around, do you wake up - looking forward to spending time with your Savior in Church - or do you think: “Well, let’s get this Church thing over with so I can go on doing the things I want to do”? Is such thinking “loving God above all things”?

Or how about our life goals? Why do you do the things you do? Did you choose your occupation to glorify God with the skills and ability He has given you; or merely as a way to make money and better your own life? If the latter, who, then, is really your god: the LORD or money?

Do you sometimes find yourself thinking that it’s all up to you to support your family – that you need to worry and work or else they won’t have what they need? If so, aren’t you, according to Luther’s definition, making yourself a god, since you are placing your trust in yourself, instead of the LORD, to provide for your needs?

When a friend of yours, who considers himself a Christian, tells you that he is living with his girlfriend outside of marriage, do you point out his sin as lovingly as possible so that he might repent? Or are you afraid of how it will affect your relationship with him and say nothing? Doesn’t

such silence betray the fact that you fear losing his friendship more than keeping God's command to speak?

I could go on and on with all sorts of different scenarios – showing how we often fear, love or trust in other people or things more than God. But it gets even worse than that! Luther once called the first commandment the golden thread that is woven through all the commandments. His point was this: if you were able to keep the first commandment - perfectly fearing, loving and trusting in God above all things - you would automatically keep all the other commandments as well.

However, the fact that you break any of God's commandments shows that you do not fear, love or trust in God above all things. Whether we admit it or not, every single sin we commit is really done because we love someone or something more than the LORD – and more often than not, that someone or something is ourselves!

So let me ask you again: is the LORD your only God? If we are honest with ourselves, we must confess no, he is not. We often allow other people or things to take greater priority in our hearts than him.

None of us fear, love and trust in God as much as he demands or deserves. We, therefore, are all idolaters – deserving his eternal wrath and punishment in hell. Can any of us honestly claim otherwise?

So where does that leave us? Hopefully at the foot of the cross – repenting of our sin and looking to the LORD alone for mercy. And he will forgive us. Why? Because that's the kind of God that he is.

Part Two: *In Christ, however, the answer is: "yes"*

Remember how God started the Ten Commandments? He said: *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.* This statement gives the reason why the Israelites were to worship the LORD as their only God. This statement also reminds us of the reason why we want to fear, love and trust in the LORD above all things.

The LORD is not only a holy and righteous God - rightly demanding our love and obedience, and threatening punishment if we don't give it. He is also a merciful God who, knowing how horribly Adam's fall into sin has corrupted our nature, took it upon himself to forgive and deliver us. And how did he do that? By sending his one and only Son in to the world to live the perfect life of obedience to God's law that we have all failed to live. Having done this, Jesus died on the cross for all our sins – suffering the full punishment they had earned. Jesus rose from the grave, ascended into heaven and sent out the Holy Spirit to call, gather and enlighten all those the LORD has chosen from eternity to be his Holy people.

As the Lord rescued his chosen people, so he has rescued us. And as he asked Israel to respond to his great love by holding on to him as their one and only God, so the Lord invites us to do the same. Everything God does and commands is meant for our good. He wants us to fear, love and

trust in him above all things because only he can rescue us from all the evil we face on this earth and deliver us safely to heaven.

And even though we, due to the corruption of our nature, are unable to give God first place in our lives, the LORD has graciously poured out the Holy Spirit into our hearts through the preaching of his Gospel. He creates faith in the heart of every believer, clothes us with Christ righteousness and makes his home within us. Just think: the almighty God lives in and with you, believer in Christ – moving you to fear, love and trust in him above all things!

Yes, in Christ and in Christ alone, we have the LORD as our one and only God! We look to him alone to forgive all our sins. We trust him to provide everything we need and are confident that he will safely guard us through every evil we face on this earth home to himself in heaven.

The LORD truly is our God – and as such, we wish to please him with our life. How? By keeping his commandments – not as a way to earn God’s love and favor, but because we already have it in Christ. We want to learn more about who he is – not trying to change him according to our preconceived notions of what we want God to be like. Rather – with the Spirit’s aid – we conform our thinking to what he reveals about himself in His Word. We don’t try to fit him into our busy lives, rather we fit our lives into him – making the LORD the number one reason we do anything on this earth.

Sadly, because our sinful nature will cling to us until the day we die, we will never be able to perfectly worship the LORD as we ought this side of heaven. But, because Christ was crucified for us, we stand forgiven, righteous and holy before God through faith in Him.

Yes, the LORD alone is our God – all thanks to Christ. Remembering his love, power and mercy, cling to him in faith – doing everything you do to the glory of His name. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Exodus 20:18-19 & Hebrews 12:21