

The Words of a Covenant

Part 2 - The First Commandment

March 29, 1998

Exodus 20:3

3 "You shall have no other gods before Me. NKJV

- **Review & Introduction**

In the introduction last week, we established three primary points to keep in mind when we study the Decalogue more closely. First we should remember that these words are the words of a covenant. They are not separate rules or standards but are included in the terms of the covenant between the only true God and His people. Secondly, these words summarize the more detailed law also given to the people through Moses. Third, the law is perfect, holy, righteous and good and we are not. When the two meet sin is made evident and we are taught our need for grace. Therefore, any proper discussion about the law of God is really or ultimately a discussion about His grace or His wrath.

Another key point for us to remember is that these commandments are all at least double sided. Note that when God declares that we should not steal He is at the same time declaring His acknowledgement and protection of private property. When He prohibits adultery it is because He honors His covenant of marriage that He gave to us and expects us to honor it as well. In addition, these commandments are not isolated but rather very much intertwined. Coveting has much to do with stealing and committing adultery.

- **Having God**

- Although we all probably brush by the meaning of this portion of the command, the law assumes an understanding of what it means to *have a god*. Having a god includes declarations of allegiance, submission to law, ascribing glory and greatness, rendering sacrificial worship and servitude.

- **Having A god Before God**

- In this first commandment the only real textual difficulty is understanding properly the meaning of "...before Me." The wording may render at least three possible understandings. First the word before could mean in pre-eminence that God is to be worshipped before all other things. However, the difficulty here is that nothing else is to share His worship so there should be nothing we worship as God *after* Him. Secondly, for the same reason, we know that He is not addressing a chronology of how we worship in that we are not told to worship God *earlier* than we worship other gods. The only workable understanding is that God is prohibiting our worship of any anything in His *presence* —keeping in mind *His omnipresence*.

- **Some Modern Day Violations of the Commandment**

- **Atheism - Denying God's Existence.** Given that we live in a period of time in a country where rarely are traditional idols of wood or stone made for worship, it is common for some to think that this commandment (and the next) have little applicability today. However, the command doesn't simply address idols made with *hands* it also includes idols made with our *minds*. The Bible has much to say about those who deny God's existence. In short, it teaches that those who make such claims of belief are really liars. *Psalm 14:1* "¹ To the Chief Musician. A Psalm of David. The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, They have done abominable works, There is none who does good." In Romans 1:18-25 Paul teaches that all men know of God's existence but they suppress that truth and the truth of His character by propagating lies contrary to what they really believe. This means that there are no honest atheists. Deep down, they know God exists but they cannot declare it because of unrighteousness.
- **Idolatry - Worshipping Something Other Than God.** The point to be made here is that God, who later describes Himself as a jealous God (He also says His name is Jealous), will not share His glory with anyone or anything. When we ascribe glory due the Father upon other humans or the stars or even angels we are practicing idolatry. Now it is true that we are to respect our teachers, leaders, the King and our parents. However when the respect becomes worship or the ascription of glory then we are robbing God of that which rightfully belongs to Him alone. *Isaiah 42:8* "⁸ I am the Lord, that is My name; And My glory I will not give to another, Nor My praise to carved images."
- **Theism - Having a Generic God Without Name or Character.** The is the classic God-The-Rotarian or The God of Prayer Breakfasts. When we refuse to identify our God by name, we are simply worshipping an unknown deity. But, despite what Alcoholics Anonymous says, there is no "higher power" other than the Lord Jehovah. Any other god who is worshipped is either demonic or manmade. Unfortunately though, the Church is somehow encouraged when the polls show that nearly everybody

believes in God. Believing in a generic deity without name and character is as foolish as denying His existence. Yet day after day, meetings are held around our land where generic prayers are offered to an unnamed Spirit in the Sky. We serve the God of pluralism and refuse to offend by declaring our Lord's name, deeds and character.

- **Grumbling - Denying The Sovereignty of God.** Complaining about our situation is the same as complaining about the Lord. Most frequently, it is inadvertently an attack on the sovereignty of God by the way we forget that His sovereignty is exhaustive and nothing is outside of His jurisdiction. Other times complaining is high-handed rebellion in God's face by those who are brave enough to say with their mouths that they hate their circumstances and they hate God. When we complain it is as if we were declaring that we wish that we had a different God. Therefore, repentance from complaining is really repentance from poor theology.
- **Theological Revisionism - Having False Opinions of God.** This is where we worship this year's model of God. In times past our brothers may have emphasized other attributes of God, but today some of those attributes are no longer as attractive to us and we de-emphasize those to make room for the more politically correct features of our God. Therefore, we mold and shape our god into a candy coated shell that makes Him easy to swallow. However, the truth is, our God is merciful and He is severe. He is a loving Father and He is a consuming fire. He is all knowing yet He is a God who commands us to pray. He is not tame such that we can lead Him around in front of unbelievers for their approval. No, our God is as He has revealed Himself and it is not our place to apologize for His character nor revise His word so that sinners will no longer fear Him.