

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

“You shall have no other gods.”

¹ That is, you shall regard me alone as your God. What does this mean, and how is it to be understood? What is to have a god? What is God?

² Answer: A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart. As I have often said, the trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol.

³ If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true God. On the other hand, if your trust is false and wrong, then you have not the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God.

⁴ The purpose of this commandment, therefore, is to require true faith and confidence of the heart, and these fly straight to the one true God and cling to him alone. The meaning is: “See to it that you let me alone be your God, and never seek 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, come and cling to me. I am the one who will satisfy you and help you out of every need. Only let your heart cling to no one else.”

⁵ This I must explain a little more plainly, so that it may be understood and remembered, by citing some common examples of failure to observe this commandment. Many a person thinks he has God and everything he needs when he has money and property; in them he trusts and of them he boasts so stubbornly and securely that he cares for no one.

⁶ Surely such a man also has a god—mammon by name, that is, money and possessions—on which he fixes his whole heart. It is the most common idol on earth.

⁷ He who has money and property feels secure, happy, fearless, as if he were sitting in the midst of paradise.

⁸ On the other hand, he who has nothing doubts and despairs as if he never heard of God.

⁹ Very few there are who are cheerful, who do not fret and complain, if they do not have mammon. This desire for wealth clings and cleaves to our nature all the way to the grave.

¹⁰ So, too, if anyone boasts of great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family, and honor, and trusts in them, he also has a god, but not the one, true God. Notice, again, how presumptuous, secure, and proud people become because of such possessions, and how despondent when they lack them or are deprived of them. Therefore, I repeat, to have a God properly means to have something in which the heart trusts completely.

¹¹ Again, consider what we used to do in our blindness under the papacy. If anyone had a toothache, he fasted to the honor of St. Apollonia; if he feared fire, he sought St. Lawrence as his patron; if he feared the plague, he made a vow to St. Sebastian or Roch. There were countless other such abominations, and every person selected his own saint and worshiped and invoked him in time of need.

¹² In this class belong those who go so far as to make a pact with the devil in order that he may give them plenty of money, help them in love affairs, protect their cattle, recover lost possessions, etc., as magicians and sorcerers do. All these fix their heart and trust elsewhere than in the true God. They neither expect nor seek anything from him.

¹³ Thus you can easily understand the nature and scope of this commandment. It requires that man’s whole heart and confidence be placed in God alone, and in no one else. To have God, you see, does not mean to lay hands upon him, or put him into a purse, or shut him up in a chest.

¹⁴ We lay hold of him when our heart embraces him and clings to him.

¹⁵ To cling to him with all our heart is nothing else than to entrust ourselves to him completely. He wishes to turn us away from everything else, and 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 anything else, turn to me for all this; look upon me as the one who wishes to help you and to lavish all good upon you richly.”

¹⁶ Behold, here you have the true honor and the true worship which please God and which he commands under penalty of eternal wrath, namely, that the heart should know no other consolation or confidence than that in him, nor let itself be torn from him, but for him should risk and disregard everything else on earth.

¹⁷ On the other hand, you can easily judge how the world practices nothing but false worship and idolatry. There has never been a people so wicked that it did not establish and maintain some sort of worship. Everyone has set up a god of his own, to which he looked for blessings, help, and comfort.

¹⁸ For example, the heathen who put their trust in power and dominion exalted Jupiter as their supreme god. Others who strove for riches, happiness, pleasure, and a life of ease venerated Hercules, Mercury, Venus, or others, while pregnant women worshiped Diana or Lucina, and so forth. Everyone made into a god that to which his heart was inclined. Even in the mind of all the heathen, therefore, to have a god means to trust and believe.

¹⁹ The trouble is that their trust is false and wrong, for it is not founded upon the one God, apart from whom there is truly no god in heaven or on earth.

²⁰ Accordingly the heathen actually fashion their fancies and dreams about God into an idol and entrust themselves to an empty nothing.

²¹ So it is with all idolatry. Idolatry does not consist merely of erecting an image and praying to it. It is primarily in the heart, which pursues 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 receives comes from God.

²² There is, moreover, another false worship. This is the greatest idolatry that has been practiced up to now, and it is still prevalent in the world. Upon it all the religious orders are founded. It concerns only that conscience which seeks help, comfort, and salvation in its own works and presumes to wrest heaven from God. It keeps account how often it has made endowments, fasted, celebrated Mass, etc. On such things it relies and of them it boasts, unwilling to receive anything as a gift from God, but desiring by itself to earn or merit everything by works of supererogation, just as if God were in our service or debt and we were his liege lords.

²³ What is this but making God into an idol—indeed, an “apple-god”—and setting up ourselves as God? This reasoning, however, is a little too subtle to be understood by young pupils.

²⁴ This much, however, should be said to ordinary people so that they may mark well and remember the meaning of this commandment: We are to trust in God alone and turn to him, expecting from him only good things; for it is he who gives us body, life, food, drink, nourishment, health, protection, peace, and all temporal and eternal blessings. It is he who protects us from evil, he who saves and delivers us when any evil befalls. It is God alone, I have often enough repeated, from whom we receive all that is good and by whom we are delivered from all evil.

²⁵ This, I think, is why we Germans from ancient times have called God by a name more elegant and worthy than any found in other languages, a name derived from the word “good” because he is an eternal fountain which overflows with sheer goodness and pours forth all that is good in name and in fact.

²⁶ Although much that is good comes to us from men, we receive it all from God through his command and ordinance. Our parents and all authorities—in short, all people placed in the position of neighbors—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, and he gives grain and all kinds of fruits from the earth for man’s nourishment—things which no creature could produce by himself.

²⁷ No one, therefore, should presume to take or give anything except as God has commanded it. We must acknowledge everything as God’s gifts and thank him for them, as this commandment requires. Therefore, this way of receiving good through God’s creatures is not to be disdained, nor are we arrogantly to seek other ways and means than God has commanded, for that would be not receiving our blessings from God but seeking them from ourselves.

²⁸ Let everyone, then, take care to magnify and exalt this commandment above all things and not make light of it. Search and examine your own heart thoroughly and you will find whether or not it clings to God alone. Do you have the kind of heart that expects from him nothing but good, especially in distress and want, and renounces and forsakes all that is not God? Then you have the one true God. On the contrary, does your heart

cling to something else, from which it hopes to receive more good and help than from God, and does it flee not to him but from him when things go wrong? Then you have an idol, another god.

²⁹ 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. These should be thoroughly stressed and impressed upon young people so that they may take them to heart and remember them.

[EXPLANATION OF THE APPENDIX TO THE FIRST COMMANDMENT]

³⁰ *“For I am the Lord your God, mighty and jealous, 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 of those who love me and keep my commandments.”*

³¹ Although these words apply to all the commandments (as we shall hear later), yet they are attached precisely to this one which stands at the head of the list because it is of the utmost importance for a man to have the right head. For where the head is right, the whole life must be right, and vice versa.

³² Learn from these words, then, how angry God is with those who rely on anything but himself, and again, how kind and gracious he is to those who trust and believe him alone with their whole heart. His wrath does not abate until the fourth generation.

³³ On the other hand, his kindness and goodness extend to many thousands, lest men live in security and commit themselves to luck, like brutes who think that it makes no great difference how they live.

³⁴ He is a God who takes vengeance upon men who turn away from him, and his anger continues to the fourth generation, until they are utterly exterminated. Therefore he wills to be feared and not to be despised.

³⁵ This he has witnessed in all the records of history, as Scripture amply shows and as daily experience can still teach us. From the beginning he has completely rooted out all idolatry, and on that account he has destroyed both heathen and Jews; just so in our day he overthrows all false worship so that all who persist in it must ultimately perish.

³⁶ Even now there are proud, powerful, and rich pot-bellies 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 wrecked, along with all they have trusted in, just as all others have perished who thought themselves to be so high and mighty.

³⁷ Just because such blockheads imagine, when God refrains from disturbing their security, that he is unconcerned or uninterested in such matters, he must strike and punish them so severely that he will not forget his anger down to their children’s children. He intends that everyone shall be impressed and see that this is no laughing matter with him.

³⁸ These are also the people he means when he says, “who hate me,” that is, those who persist in their stubbornness and pride. They refuse to hear what is preached or spoken to them. When they are rebuked, to bring them to their senses and cause them to mend their ways before punishment descends, they become so mad and foolish that they justly merit the wrath they receive. We observe this every day in the case of bishops and princes.

³⁹ Terrible as these threats are, much mightier is the comfort in the promise that assures mercy to those who cling to God alone—sheer goodness and blessing, not only for themselves but also for their children to a thousand and even many thousands of generations.

⁴⁰ Certainly, if we desire all good things in time and eternity, this ought to move and impel us to fix our hearts upon God with perfect confidence since the divine Majesty comes to us with so gracious an offer, so cordial an invitation, and so rich a promise.

⁴¹ Therefore let everyone be careful not to regard this as if it were spoken by man. For it brings you either eternal blessing, happiness, and salvation, or eternal wrath, misery, and woe. What more could you ask or desire than God’s gracious promise that he will be yours with every blessing and will protect and help you in every need?

⁴² The trouble is that the world does not believe this at all, and does not recognize it as God’s Word. For the world sees that those who trust God and not mammon suffer grief and want and are opposed and attacked by the devil. They have neither money, prestige, nor honor, and can scarcely even keep alive; meanwhile, those who

serve mammon have power, prestige, honor, wealth, and every comfort in the eyes of the world. Accordingly, we must grasp these words, even in the face of this apparent contradiction, and learn that they neither lie nor deceive but will yet prove to be true.

⁴³ Reflect on the past, search it out, and tell me, When men have devoted all their care and diligence to scraping together great wealth and money, what have they gained in the end? You will find that they have wasted their effort and toil or, if they have amassed great treasures, that these have turned to dust and vanished. They themselves have never found happiness in their wealth, nor has it ever lasted to the third generation.

⁴⁴ Examples of this you will find aplenty in all histories and in the recollections of elderly and experienced people. Just ponder and heed them.

⁴⁵ Saul was a great king, chosen by God, and an upright man; but once he was secure on his throne and he let his heart depart from God, placing his confidence in his crown and power, he inevitably perished with all that he had; not one of his children remained.

⁴⁶ David, on the other hand, was a poor, despised man, hunted down and persecuted, his life nowhere secure, yet inevitably he remained safe from Saul and became king. These words must stand and prove to be true since God cannot lie or deceive; just leave it to the devil and the world to deceive you with their appearance, which indeed endures for a time but in the end is nothing!

⁴⁷ Let us therefore learn the first commandment well and realize that God will tolerate no presumption and no trust in any other object; he makes no greater demand of us than a hearty trust in him for all blessings. Then we shall be on the right path and walk straight ahead, using all of God's gifts exactly as a cobbler uses his needle, awl, and thread (for work, eventually to lay them aside) or as a traveler avails himself of an inn, food, and bed (only for his temporal need). Let each person be in his station in life according to God's order, allowing none of these good things to be his lord or idol.

⁴⁸ Let this suffice for the First Commandment. We had to explain it at length since it is the most important. For, as I said before, where the heart is right with God and this commandment is kept, fulfillment of all the others will follow of its own accord.¹

¹ Tappert, T. G. (Ed.). (1959). [*The Book of Concord the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*](#). (pp. 365–371). Philadelphia: Mühlenberg Press.