



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 18.4.3.1 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

The Moral Law: The First Commandment

How do we know that God gave the Israelites ten commandments, and how do we know which commandment is the First Commandment, and which is the Second, and so forth? We know that there were ten commandments, because Moses said to the Israelites before they crossed the Jordan River to enter the land of Canaan: **“He (God) declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone”** (Deuteronomy 4:13). We know that the first two tablets were broken by Moses when he came down from Mt. Sinai and found the people worshipping the golden calf. But Moses went up on the mountain again with two other tablets, and he said to the people: **“He (God) wrote on the tablets according to the first writing, the Ten Commandments, which the LORD had spoken to you in the mountain from the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly; and the LORD gave them to me. Then I turned and came down from the mountain, and put the tablets in the ark which I had made; and there they are, just as the LORD commanded me”** (Deuteronomy 10:4-5).

But even though we know there were ten commandments (literally “words”), we do not know for sure which one is the First Commandment, and which is the Second Commandment, and so forth. The fact is that different groups have divided them in different ways. When Martin Luther wrote his *Small Catechism*, he used the numbering that was common in the Roman Catholic Church. Other reformers changed the numbering, so that what we teach as the First Commandment was divided by them into the First and Second Commandments. Thus, the numbering of the commandments differs among the various church groups today. The Tenth Commandment of others was divided by Martin Luther into two commandments, as we shall see. It is possible that Luther’s numbering is not the best way of dividing the commandments, but it is the traditional way that has been used among the Lutherans, and it would be confusing at this point to make any changes. The content remains the same, no matter what numbering is followed.

In Luther’s catechism, the First Commandment includes the following underlined words from Exodus and Deuteronomy:

- **“God spoke all these words, saying: ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image – any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them’”** (Exodus 20:1-5).
- **“He said: ‘I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image – any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them’”** (Deuteronomy 5:5-9).

Most Protestant churches call the commandment about images the Second Commandment, whereas Lutherans consider the commandment about images as an explanation of the First Commandment.

The Lutheran *Book of Concord* (Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 351) gives us this English translation of the First Commandment and Luther’s explanation in his *Small Catechism*:

The First Commandment

You are to have no other gods.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things.

The God who gave us this commandment identified Himself to the Israelites as the LORD (JAHVEH or JEHOVAH) who brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thus this God is not a generic god, but a specific God with a specific name. He is the God who created the heavens and the earth, the God who called Abraham to be the father of a new nation, the God who promised to Adam and Eve the coming of a Savior, later called the Messiah or the Christ, and repeated that same promise to Abraham and his descendants through the prophets. In other words, this God is the God who sent His Son Jesus into our world to be our Savior from sin, death, and hell, and who accomplished our salvation through this Son. This God is the God who sent the Holy Spirit into the world to make known the good news of Jesus' birth, life, suffering, death, and resurrection. Thus, the God who spoke this First Commandment is the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the God who has revealed Himself in the Bible, and particularly in the Person of God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We are to have no other gods except this one God who spoke this commandment to His people.

The worship of other gods is called idolatry, and other gods are called idols. We know that this First Commandment is part of God's moral law for us Christians today, because this commandment is clearly repeated in the New Testament. The apostle John wrote: **"Little children, keep yourselves from idols"** (1 John 5:21). The apostle Paul wrote: **"My beloved, flee from idolatry"** (1 Corinthians 10:14). God's threats indicate that He wants us to take this commandment seriously. **"Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers ... will inherit the kingdom of God"** (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). The apostle Paul includes **"idolatry"** as one of **"the works of the flesh"** and then warns: **"Those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God"** (Galatians 5:19-21). **"This you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them"** (Ephesians 5:5-7).

Idolatry includes the open worship of anyone or anything other than the Triune God. There are people all over the world who openly worship the sun, the moon, or the stars, and other creations of God instead of worshiping God, the Creator of all things. Some people worship their ancestors. Some worship Satan (the devil) or evil spirits (demons). Others worship persons they consider especially holy, such as believers who have been named as saints, such as Saint Mary, Saint Paul, Saint Peter, Saint Thomas, and so forth. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, promotes prayer to Mary. One of the prayers common among them has this wording: "Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of mercy; hail, our life, our sweetness, our hope. To thee do we cry ... Turn then, most gracious advocate, Thine eyes of mercy toward us." Mao-Tse-Tung, former leader of China, once said: "Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people."

Christianity is the only religion in the world where worship is directed only to the one true Triune God. All other religions worship other gods, whether it is Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, or Islam. Even many who call themselves Christians do not really worship the one true God who has revealed Himself in the Bible, but they worship a god of their own making, a god that they have themselves invented in their own minds.

Idolatry also includes the worship of those who say they are worshiping god or God, but yet are not willing to acknowledge Jesus as God or the Holy Spirit as God. Some Muslims and some Christians think that they are all worshiping the same God. But Muslims do not regard Jesus as the Son of God or as a Person of the Triune God. So their Allah is an idol. The adherents of Judaism claim the Old Testament as their Bible, as do we Christians. Nevertheless, the God of the Jews is an idol, because

Jews do not accept or worship Jesus as the true Son of God, nor do they realize that the true God who chose the Israelites as His people is the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Such religious groups as Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormons, the practitioners of Christian Science, and the Unitarians no doubt consider themselves to be Christians because they use the Bible, but they are not Christians but idolaters, because they do not believe that Jesus is the true Son of God, true God together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. There are also many religious organizations or semi-religious organizations that refer to God in their services or literature but consider worship in Christ as optional. Some of these organizations are called lodges, such as the Masonic Lodge (the Free Masons) and other similar groups. These groups talk freely about God and consider themselves to be worshipping the same God as true Christians, but their god is really an idol because they do not confess Jesus to be true God. The same thing is true of much patriotic religion in the United States that talks about God but will not define that God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so as not to offend non-Christians.

Listen to what Jesus had to say about such worship. After putting Himself on the same level as the Father, **"the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God"** (John 5:18). Did Jesus respond by telling the Jews that they had misunderstood Him? No, He did not. Rather, Jesus confirmed that they understood Him rightly, saying: **"As the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will. For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him"** (John 5:21-23). He was definitely making Himself equal with God.

Some of the Jews claimed to be worshipping the true God. But Jesus said to them: **"If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me. ... You are of your father the devil. ... He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God"** (John 8:42-47).

We must therefore be on guard against joining or supporting any religious group that claims to worship God, but will not confess Jesus as true God with the Father and the Holy Spirit. For example, in the United States there are youth groups known as the Girl Scouts and the Boy Scouts. Members of both of these groups promise to serve God or do their duty to God, but this God is not defined as the Triune God, and belief in Jesus as God is considered optional. If the so-called God of the organization is vague and undefined, members of the organization are guilty of sponsoring idolatry, whether they realize it or not. We should not **"share in other people's sins"** by membership in such groups (1 Timothy 5:22).

Idolatry also includes the inward or secret fear, love, or trust in any person or thing more than the true God. We should have no other gods. That is, we should love God above all things. As Jesus said: **"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind"** (Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:30, see also Luke 10:27). God must come first in all things. Jesus said: **"He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me"** (Matthew 10:37). It is not wrong, but very right, to love our parents and our children. But if there is a conflict between our parents and God, then God should come first. If there is a conflict between our children and God, then God must come first.

One of the most common idols on earth is money. Those who don't have money want it and think that money will make them happy. Those who have money want more of it, and no matter how much they have, it does not make them happy. It is not sinful to have much money. But Jesus said: **"You cannot serve God and mammon (money)"** (Matthew 6:24). David said: **"If riches increase, do not set your heart on them"** (Psalm 62:10). Not only are we in danger of loving money more than God; we are also tempted to trust in money and the things money can buy more than in God.

Another common idol is self. That is, we may think we are wiser than God. We may put our trust in our own thinking power more than in God. We may want to set aside what God has to say about something because we prefer our own ideas to His. But God's Word is clear: **"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding"** (Proverbs 3:5).

This idol of self gets in the way of our Christian living. Instead of living our lives according to the will of God, we fashion our lives according to what gives us pleasure, even if it is a behavior that God forbids. One very prevalent philosophy of our time is hedonism, which can be summed up in the slogan: "If it feels good, do it." But many times what feels good is not what God has in mind for us. What God wants us to do may not always feel good, but it is good.

Any thing or any person can become an idol, even our own husband or wife. It is easy for us to make family more important than God and to make our work more important than God. Potential idols include such items as pleasure, power, prestige, or personal pride. Sometimes we are more concerned to gain the approval of others rather than the approval of God, thus fearing men more than God.

The Old Testament gives us several examples of believers in Christ who kept the First Commandment as a fruit of their faith in the coming Messiah of Israel. For a long time Abraham and Sarah had waited for a child. Finally God gave them a son whose name was Isaac. After son Isaac had grown into a young man, God ordered Abraham to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice to the Lord. There must have been an inner conflict in Abraham. Should he obey God by killing his own son? But he did not waste any time in obeying God's order. He did as God had commanded, and while the knife was already in his hand to kill his son, God stopped Abraham and spared Isaac.

When he was still a very young man, David, in his zeal for the Lord, put God's promise first and dared to fight against the Philistine giant Goliath. David trusted in God's promise to be with His people when they went out to battle against God's enemies. With his sling he slung a stone right into Goliath's forehead, and then he used Goliath's own sword to cut off the giant's head.

Many years later there were three young Israelites who were ordered to worship a golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. These three men did not want to worship this idol, even though they knew that their disobedience might cost them their lives. But they were more afraid of displeasing God than displeasing the king. They refused to worship the golden image, and as a result they were thrown into a fiery furnace. They trusted that God could deliver them if He chose to do so. They put God's command above the king's command, and God did indeed miraculously preserve their lives even though they were thrown into a furnace so hot that those who threw them into the furnace perished.

This First Commandment condemns all of us, however, for we have all failed at one time or another to put God above everything else in our lives. Even though we may not have openly worshiped an idol or some image made of wood or stone, we have all had thoughts and feelings where other things and other persons claimed more of our attention and devotion than God. We have all been guilty of idolatry. Only Jesus Himself put God above everything else in His thoughts, words, and actions. The Father Himself could find no fault in His Son, saying of Him both at His baptism and at His transfiguration: **"This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased"** (Matthew 3:17; Matthew 17:5).

Since we have transgressed the First Commandment, we deserve temporal and eternal punishment. Our only hope to escape from this punishment is Jesus Christ, who obeyed the First Commandment in our place and was punished in our place for our disobedience. We need to cling to Jesus in faith and also ask Him to give us the Holy Spirit to work through the Gospel in our hearts so that we may fear, love, and trust in God above all things. All our lives we will have to struggle against idolatry, but Christ has won forgiveness for us which the Holy Spirit extends to us in the means of grace: the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.

Questions

1. How do we know that God gave His people ten commandments?
2. Why is there confusion as to which commandment is the First Commandment?
3. Why did Martin Luther and the Lutherans divide the commandments as they did?
4. What is the wording of the First Commandment in the Small Catechism?
5. Why can we be sure the First Commandment is part of God's moral law?
6. What is the difference between open idolatry and secret idolatry?
7. What makes both Muslims and Jews idolaters in their worship?
8. Prove that your answer to question 7 is correct by quoting a statement from Jesus.
9. What are the most common idols on earth?
10. What are the most common idols in your locale?
11. Why can we not be saved by keeping the First Commandment?
12. What is the only way by which we can be saved?