

Priorities: No Other Gods Besides Me

The First Commandment

A sermon by the Rev. Mark D. Pendleton
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Last week we began the third spiritual program of our church year, and that program is titled, *Rise Above It: Spiritual Development Through the Ten Commandments*, and in our opening message we talked about the Ten Commandments as a whole. Among other things we noted the central position of these Commandments in the Old Testament Scriptures, the New Testament Gospels, and also in the writings of Paul. We discussed how the Lord in His good providence has seen to it that these laws, or laws like them, exist in all major faiths and cultures throughout the world, such that they lie at the heart of all true religion. We suggested that without civil laws that in some way match these Commandments, any nation will tend to fracture and fail, and that the opposite is also true. And finally, we quickly explored one of the Commandments—the Commandment against murder—in some depth, in order to show how significantly just one of the Ten Commandments can impact our lives and our culture for good.

Well, today and in the coming weeks we'll be talking about each one of these Commandments in turn, and between each Sunday message we'll get to put a different Commandment to work in our lives, to see how much good can come of it.

So this week we'll talk about the First Commandment. But before we do, let me say a word about the *numbering* of these Commandments: Just to say that different religious denominations that know and practice the Ten Commandments number them differently. People simply differ in their understanding of where one Commandment leaves off and another starts. But how the Commandments are numbered is not as important as whether or not, or how we live them. So for purposes of this series, we'll be following the numbering that is spoken of in the New Church; and if the numbering you grew up on is different, hopefully this won't be an obstacle to learning about these Commandments and living them.

So here we go. The first Commandment: "You shall have no other gods before Me." There are several things to observe about this Commandment. First is the reference to "other gods." Remember that the Israelites who were hearing this Commandment announced from Mt. Sinai had recently departed from Egypt where they had been used to a plurality of gods. So the first thing Jehovah needed to do in order to lead the children of Israel was to focus their attention on the one true, eternal God of the universe—Jehovah, God of Love.

The second thing to notice about this Commandment is the word “before”—“You shall have no other gods *before* Me.” This can be understood in different but related ways: it can mean, “You shall have no other gods *in My presence*.” And it can also mean, “You shall have no other gods *besides or more important than Me*”

The third thing to share with you about this Commandment is that as I recite it to you—“You shall have no other gods besides Me”—I can hear the voice of one of my eighth grade students chiming in from the back of the classroom, “Well, it sounds like He’s a pretty *selfish* God, demanding all the attention for Himself.” But we know that everything Jehovah God does and says is for *our* sake, so that if He tells us to focus our primary attention on Him, it’s only so that we can experience all the blessings in our lives that true love longs to give us.

The truth of this is evident in the preamble to the Ten Commandments where Jehovah says, “I am Jehovah your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” Among other things, this preamble gives us a snapshot of the one single purpose and goal that lies behind all of the Ten Commandments, and that is, that Jehovah God might free us from different forms of personal bondage and enslavement.

Moving on then, what is this Commandment saying to us today? What is it trying to get us to do, or not do? And in what way is it trying to support us and help us grow spiritually?

On the most literal level this Commandment is trying to get people to avoid bowing down to idols, to forces of nature, to the sun, moon, and stars, and also to avoid worshiping people (either dead or living) as though they themselves were God. This commandment is trying to get us to focus beyond people and idols on the one true God of the universe instead—the God of truth and love—so that we can draw closer to Him and be helped by Him.

This is not to say that statues, pictures, or images in nature can’t be used to remind us of certain aspects of God; we do this in our culture all the time; but it does mean that the Lord doesn’t want us to mistakenly bow down to images or people as though they themselves are God. One of the main reasons for this is that people and idols aren’t able to reform and regenerate us spiritually—only God can do that.

But this isn’t the real issue for most of us today. Most of us don’t bow down to relics, or call on the rain god or the god of fertility, and most of us don’t pray to relatives, friends, or personal heroes, whether alive or dead. So what are these “other gods” that we are not to have in place of God, or hold as more important than God? These “other gods” are the things of the material world and the things of self.

We’re told in the New Church that there are four universal kinds (or levels) of love that are reflected in the Ten Commandments. The first is love for God; then comes love for people;

then comes love for material possessions and worldly pleasures; and finally love for ourselves (which is a healthy love for our reputation, status, position, and power in the world around us).

Each of these kinds of love is good and useful, and when they are held in such a way that God is our first priority, people are our second priority, material possessions and pleasures are third in line, and our own position and power are fourth, then our lives tend to function smoothly, and the four kinds (or levels) of love work together and in harmony toward good and useful ends in the world around us.

Another way to say this is that God wants us to love Him and the things of religion; He also wants us to love and support the goodness and truth in people around us; He also wants us to enjoy the wealth that we've been given and our cottage by the lake; and He wants us to enjoy positions of importance and personal advancement. And He wants us to enjoy all of these things *for the sake of the good we can do by means of them* in society around us.

A problem arises, though, when these priorities get out of order, such that our own reputation, status, or personal power, or our own worldly possessions and worldly pleasures become the most important things in our lives, that is, *more* important than God and people. When this happens, it can be a momentary experience for us; for example, when we lose our temper at someone for not giving us the TV remote when we want it. (This example includes both worldly stuff and personal desire or want.) But it can also become a prolonged experience that impacts our lives in globally destructive ways. Examples could include any form of chemical dependency or physical addiction; becoming obsessed with our work or becoming power-hungry in the workplace; being controlling, dominating, or manipulative of people who won't honor us in the ways that we want them to, or who won't do things we (selfishly) expect them to.

When the things of self and the world become *more* important to us than loving God and people, then these four kinds of love have difficulty working together and harmonizing. Our priority *tends* to become more ourselves than God; and instead of focusing outward on the useful services we can provide for others in the world around us, we tend to focus more and more on our own survival and what we can next get out of life or accomplish for our own selves. Under these circumstances, our lives can get to feeling more and more empty and closed off to influences from heaven, our sense of faith in God, a charitable spirit toward others, and our sense of appreciation for God in our lives can atrophy and waste away.

So to repeat, what are these "other gods" that the Lord is warning us against in the first Commandment? They are the things of self and the world *when* these things start to become *more* important than God and people. The first Commandment, then, "You shall have no other Gods before Me," can be encapsulated in the following simple rule of thumb found in the New Church:

No one but God, and no thing but what proceeds from God, is to be loved above everything else, because that which a person loves above everything else *is* God and *is* divine to the person who so loves.

In connection with this rule of thumb, it's interesting to note that this Commandment can also be rendered, "You shall have no other gods before My faces" (literally, "You shall no other gods *to the faces.*") Our doctrines teach that when God's face is spoken of in the Word it's referring to His love: The face of God is the face of love; and that when the "faces" of God are spoken of, the qualities of *love, mercy, peace, and goodness* are what are being talked about. (These four primary qualities are also reflected in the Ten Commandments in order.)

The practical point of this is that when the Lord says, "You shall have no other gods before My faces," one of the things it means is that we shouldn't allow anyone or anything to be more important to us than the qualities of *love, mercy, peace, and goodness*. When we live this Commandment as part of our living code, and when we don't allow anyone or anything to be more important to us than God — or more specifically than God's love, mercy, peace, and goodness—then we begin to experience some of the many blessings that the Lord has in store for us:

- We begin to feel the atmosphere and influence of heaven in our lives.
- We begin to think more and more from the Lord in our deliberations.
- The Lord flows into us and starts to reign in our lives. He fills us up and makes our lives feel more and more complete.
- Faith, charity, and love for the Lord are awakened and live in us.
- The four kinds or levels of love conspire in us toward the common good.

Well, so far we have been talking about *what* God is: God is love, mercy, peace, and goodness. We've also been talking about what we *need to be doing* so that we can experience these qualities in our lives—not allowing anyone or anything to be more important to us than God and His qualities. But this Commandment teaches us about the *who* of God a well. In other words, this Commandment teaches us specifically *who* God is who we can worship.

Now I know that I'll be mainly "preaching to the choir" in this last part of today's message, but let me go through it anyway, just because it's important and useful to our practice of this Commandment.

We know that the God of the Ten Commandments is Jehovah God of the Old Testament. But we also know from a number of teachings and prophecies given in Old Testament Scripture that Jehovah Himself was to come on earth in human form to help and save a world that was in need of Him at that time. In other words, we're taught that Jehovah God of the Old Testament

would Himself become the visible Lord Jesus Christ of the New Testament. Here are just three of the teachings given in the Old Testament about the coming Jesus:

It shall be said in that day, “Lo, *this is our God*; we have waited for Him that He may deliver us. *This is Jehovah*; we have waited for Him; we will rejoice and be glad in His salvation.”

Next we read,

I am Jehovah, and *besides Me there is no Savior*.

And finally,

Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and His name shall be called: Wonderful, Counselor, *God, Father of eternity*.

The point, here, is that on deeper, spiritual levels, the Commandment “You shall have no other gods before My faces” is talking about the Lord God, the Savior Jesus Christ who prophesied to come on earth to restore people’s freedom to choose between right and wrong which was at that time being lost.

This teaching about the first Commandment is not meant to say that our faith—the faith of the New Church—is better than any other faith; and it’s not to say, in a school playground sort of way, “Our God is better than your God.” There is and can be only God of the universe, the God of love, mercy, peace, and goodness, which different people, different faiths, and cultures have access to in degree or another through their own faith and culture.

But what the deeper levels of this Commandment say is that Jehovah God—the invisible God of the Old Testament—became visible, tangible, and more fully accessible to us in the life, stories, and teachings of the New Testament than He had ever been before. From a New Church perspective, Jesus Christ was (and *is*) His own Divine love (mean by “the Father” in Scripture), encapsulated in His own body and wisdom of life (meant by “the Son”), reaching out to help and spiritually transform all who wish for these things in their lives (meant by the work of “the Holy Spirit”). Therefore (from a New Church perspective) Jesus Christ is at once the Creator, Redeemer, and Savior of all people the world over. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—all in the one visible, approachable, and divine person.

But wrapped up in these concepts about God is something even more important and valuable; because in them we *also* see an image of the way our lives are supposed to be. Like Him, the Lord wants to come from a place of love (“the Father”) and wisdom (“the Son”) in each of the useful services we perform (the Holy Spirit or Going Forth of the Lord).

The practical value in this (for those who believe that Jesus is Jehovah God on earth) is that we will naturally put our faith and stock in the deeper teachings and life code of New Testament Scripture; and in doing so, we will be able to experience the love, mercy, peace, and goodness of the Lord God more fully than was possible in Old Testament times. We also can be more deeply freed from different forms of spiritual bondage than was possible before the New Testament Word was given. That is the real, practical, value of the spiritual levels of this Commandment.

But regardless of how deeply any one of us may understand or internalize these different concepts surrounding the first Commandment, what matters most is how each one of us lives this Commandment in day-to-day life:

And God spoke all these words saying, “I am the Lord your God who brings you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before My faces”.

No *one* but God, and no *thing* but what proceeds from God is to be loved above all else. For that which a person loves above all else *is* God and *is* divine to the person who so believes. Amen.

Readings: Ex. 20:1-4; Matt. 22:35-37; Luke 10:25-28

There are three universal kinds of love—love of heaven, love of the world, and love of self. *Love of heaven* means both love to the Lord and love towards the neighbor; and as each of these looks to useful service as its goal, the love of heaven may be called the love of useful service. The love of the world is not merely a love of wealth and possessions, but is also a love of all that the world affords and of everything delightful to the bodily senses; also becoming dress, convenient houses, etc.; thus all the enjoyments arising from these and many other objects. The love of self is not merely the love of honor, glory, fame, and eminence, but also the love of meriting and seeking office, and so of ruling over others.

These three kinds of love are related to each other like the three regions of the body, the highest of which is the head; the intermediate, the chest and abdomen; while the knees, feet, and soles of the feet form the third. When the love of heaven constitutes the head, love of the world the chest and abdomen, and love of self the feet and their soles, a person is in a perfect state in accordance with his or her creation, because the two lower kinds of love then minister to the highest, as the body and all its parts minister to the head. Then the love of heaven flows into the love of the world, and through this latter love it flows into the love of self, and by means of things belonging to the world and self it performs useful services.

But when love of the world or love of self forms the head, a person puts on a completely different state; for then the love of heaven is exiled from the head and passes down through the body to the feet and is trodden upon. It follows that if love of self were to form the head, and love of the world the body, the person would be upside down. People in such a state would love themselves above all else, and consequently they would immerse their wills and the thoughts of their minds in all kinds of evils, such as contempt for others, resentment against those who do not favor them, etc., and where such evils prevail, there is also contempt for God and for Divine things. (*True Christianity* 394, 403-405)

The first of the Ten Commandments means (among other things) that no one except God, and no thing but what proceeds from God, is to be loved above all else, for any person or thing that is loved above all else *is* God and *is* Divine to the one who so loves. Therefore, to a person who loves him- or herself or the world above all things, he himself or the world is his God. (*True Christianity* 291-293)