

The First Commandment:

"You shall have no other gods before My face."

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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Readings

Exodus 20:1-6 (Kempton Translation, modified)

- ¹ And God spoke all these words, saying,
² "I am Jehovah your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.
³ You shall have no other gods before My face.
⁴ You shall not make for yourself a carved image, nor any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or what is in the earth beneath, or what is in the waters beneath the earth. ⁵ You shall not bow yourself down to them, nor serve them; for I, Jehovah your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the sons, on the third and on the fourth generation of those who hate Me; ⁶ and doing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments."

Mark 12:28-34 (Kempton Translation, modified)

- ²⁸ And one of the scribes came, having heard them disputing and seeing that He had answered them well, asked Him, "Which is the first commandment of all?"
²⁹ And Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ and you shall love the Lord your God out of your whole heart, and out of your whole soul, and out of your whole mind, and out of your whole strength.'" This is the first commandment; ³¹ and the second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these."
³² And the scribe said to Him, "Well spoken, Teacher. You have said the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He; ³³ and to love Him out of the whole heart, and out of the whole understanding, and out of the whole soul, and out of the whole strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifice."

³⁴ And Jesus seeing him, that he answered mindfully, said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

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In the natural or literal sense this commandment... means that no one is to be loved above all except God, nor anything except what comes from God. Anyone or anything which is loved above all is, to the lover, God and divine. For instance, if anyone loves himself or the world above all else, then he or the world is his own god. This is why such people do not in their hearts acknowledge any God.

Apocalypse Explained 949:3

To the extent we remove evils because they are sins, goodness flows in and we are able to do good from then on, although we are not doing it on our own; it is being done by the Lord. [T]o the extent we do not worship other gods, which also means not loving ourselves or the [things of the] world more than everything else, to that extent the acknowledgment of God flows in from the Lord. So then we worship God, not from our selves but from the Lord.

Introduction

- I would guess that you *know* what the first commandment is:
- I would guess that you also know what the “two great commandments” are.
 - You may even have memorized them as recitations.
- However, even though you know those commandments and you know how important they are, I would not be surprised if you do not consciously think about them very often.
 - Some of the other commandments are more obvious in their application.
 - “You shall not steal” and “You shall not bear false witness,” for example, are a little easier for us and for other people to spot when we’ve broken them.
 - But when was the last time that you caught yourself worshiping other gods?
 - Or when was the last time that you consciously thought, “In this situation, am I loving the Lord with my whole heart, whole soul, whole mind, and whole strength?”?
 - I wouldn’t be surprised if you don’t think that way very often.
- If that’s the case, the month of September 2025 is your chance to give the first commandment some conscious attention.
 - This whole school year, we will be studying and trying to live according to the Ten Commandments.
 - Each month we will focus on a different commandment and we’re focusing on the first commandment in September.
- It is always easier to see when *other people* are breaking commandments than when *we* are breaking them.
- And it’s easy to think that we’re *keeping* a commandment when we just *know* the commandment.
- That’s certainly the case for the first commandment.
 - The children of Israel could easily have assumed that the first commandment was for the other nations.
 - After all, the children of Israel knew that Jehovah was the real God.
 - And they had a tabernacle and eventually a temple in which they offered Him sacrifices.
 - So the children of Israel probably thought that they were keeping that commandment just fine.

- In a similar way, it would be very easy for Christians to assume that they have checked the first commandment box.
 - They believe in and worship Jesus Christ so they could easily think that they are keeping the first commandment.
- And people who are familiar with the New Church could easily think that they are keeping the first commandment just because they know about the Lord God Jesus Christ, God in His Divine Human.
 - And they even can read about the inner meaning of the first commandment.
- But all these things are just knowledge unless we are doing the work to actually live according to the commandment.
- There are good reasons why having no other gods is the first of all the Ten Commandments.
 - The impact that keeping the first commandment can have on our relationship with the Lord and our relationships with other people is huge.
 - So let's get into it.

"You shall have no other gods before My face."

- The literal wording of first phrase of this commandment is "You shall have no other gods before My face."
 - This can mean you shall have no other gods in the Lord's presence, but it can be valuable to think of what gods we might put in front of the face of the Lord.
- When we are worshiping other gods, it's not that the Lord has gone away; it's just that we've set up something else in front of Him that we are now bowing down to and serving instead of Him.
 - If we want to get back to worshiping the Lord and keeping the first commandment, then we need to get rid of all the other gods we've put in the way.
- And that really is the first step: to stop worshiping false gods.
 - There's this very useful principle in the teachings of the New Church that the best way to receive something good, is to reject its opposite.
 - This is why so many of the Ten Commandments are expressed as things we shall *not* do.
 - We start by ceasing to do evil, and then we learn to do good (Isaiah 1:16).

- This applies with the first commandment:
 - As we read in our last lesson, “[T]o the extent we do not worship other gods,... to that extent the acknowledgment of God flows in from the Lord” (*Apocalypse Explained* 949:3).
 - Or, in the language of our recitation from John 14: “He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him” (21).
 - As we keep the Lord’s commandments, He will be able to manifest or show Himself to us more and more.
 - Another passage says this:
 - *Apocalypse Explained* 955:4
 - When we shun and turn away from evils because they are sins, we not only see from the light of heaven that God is and that God is one, but also that God is a Person. For we wish to see our God, and we cannot Him other than as a Person.
- Quick side note here: it might be that, even though you’re in church today, you’re not really sure if you believe in God.
 - First, welcome: you are not the only person who has come here, not knowing if they believe in God.
 - Or it might be that you believe in God, but really aren’t sure what God is like.
 - Or maybe you really struggle to trust God because of hard things that have happened to you or to people that you love.
 - I would guess that some part of you would like to feel more confident in your belief in God.
 - Would like to feel more understood by God.
 - Would like to feel more trusting of God.
 - Would like to feel more joined together with God.
 - The implication of these passages is that the way to get to a clearer sight of God and better relationship with God is by shunning evil.
 - As you shun what is *not* God, you may find that you can see more and more clearly who God really *is*.
 - As the Lord said in the Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8).

What Are These Other Gods?

- What are these other gods that we might start bowing down to and serving and how do we get them out of the way?
- The teachings of the New Church can help us see that these other gods are not just physical idols but also anything or anyone that we love more than anything else.
 - *True Christian Religion* 293
 - Anyone or anything which is loved above all is, to the lover, God and divine. For instance, if anyone loves himself or the world above all else, then he or the world is his own god. This is why such people do not in their hearts acknowledge any God.
- It can seem like what we believe about God is a head thing.
 - What religious and philosophical thoughts we have about God.
 - But our relationship with God is really about what we love.
 - What do we love most of all?
 - That is our god.
- What do you want most out of life?
- What do you care about most?
- Tomorrow morning, when you're at school or work or at home, what will be on your mind? What will be on your heart?
 - What's at stake?
 - What will you be working towards?
 - Why are you working towards that?
 - Is the Lord the one who is most important in all of that?

The Explanation of the First Commandment in *Arcana Coelestia*

- We will talk about some examples of other gods we might worship in just a minute, but before we do that let's talk about how the first commandment is explained in the book *Arcana Coelestia* or *Secrets of Heaven*.
 - There are four main places in the teachings for the New Church where the Ten Commandments are explained in detail:
 - In *Arcana Coelestia*
 - In a book called *Doctrine of Life*
 - In *Apocalypse Explained*
 - And in a chapter on the commandments in *True Christian Religion*.
- In the *Arcana Coelestia* explanation of the first commandment the emphasis is on how important it is to know and acknowledge that everything good and true comes from the Lord.
 - *Arcana Coelestia* 8865
 - The Lord starts to reign in a person when he not only believes that everything good and everything true comes from Him but also loves it to be so.
- We break the first commandment when we say that truths from the Lord are actually from some other source (*Arcana Coelestia* 8867).
 - For example, if we say that the Ten Commandments are just some old laws that some people believed back then.
- We also break the first commandment when we claim that we are the source of our own goodness, or when we use truths from the Lord's Word to try to control other people or to try to get the worldly things that we want (*Arcana Coelestia* 8868).
- This is the symbolism of making gods for ourselves.
 - The commandments says, "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, nor any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or what is in the earth beneath, or what is in the waters beneath the earth."
 - We can do things and say things that seem true and good.
 - We can even quote from the Lord's Word.
 - But if the Lord is not in those things that we are doing and saying, then they are false gods – they are likenesses of what is in the heavens above, but they are fakes and spiritually dead.

- *Arcana Coelestia* 8868:3
 - Truths which have life are truths of faith grounded in love to the Lord and charity towards the neighbor. Those which have no life are not truths, because inwardly they have self-love and love of the world in them.
- And so keeping the first commandment is not just about going through the motions of worshiping God or doing and saying good things, it is about what is going on in our hearts.
 - *Arcana Coelestia* 8873
 - [H]umility and submissiveness are the essentials of worship; for without them worship is not worship, only bodily actions which are an imitation of those made by people engaged in true worship. Such actions have no life at all in them. Life from the Lord flows only into a humble and submissive heart, since it is fitted to receive. And it is fitted to receive because when a heart is truly humble no self-love or love of the world stands in the way.
- This commandment comes first because it gets at the heart of the matter with all of the commandments.
 - Why are we trying to keep the commandments?
 - Is it just because we don't want to look bad?
 - Is it because we know that we can get more from people if they trust us to be good people?
 - If those are the only reasons we're keeping the commandments, then we are still in slavery to hell.
 - The Lord wants better for us than that which is why He says, "You shall have no other gods before My face. You shall not make for yourself... any likeness of what is in the heavens above...."
 - If we reject those false gods and humbly try to live according to the Ten Commandments because they are the truth from the one God of the universe and we don't want to sin against Him, then keeping those commandments can be transformative.
 - Then we can be led out of the house of slavery.

Examples of Other Gods

- Let's go through some possibilities of other gods that we might bow down to and serve.
 - My accomplishments or ambition
 - Being the most important or the best
 - Doing what I want, when I want
 - Getting the things I want
 - Being right
 - My own clever ideas
 - People liking me, or respecting me, or being impressed by me.
 - Relaxing
 - Feeling good
 - Knowing everything
 - Me getting to control everyone
- And there are many other possibilities too.
- These things are ok in their proper place, meaning that we are always holding serving the Lord as the higher priority – we are always subordinating that thing that we might want to the Lord and what He might want.
- As we work on removing the false gods that we can see, we may uncover more and more, but we will also be uncovering our God and seeing Him, more and more for who He truly is.

Conclusion

- As you go through today, and tomorrow, and this whole month, try to keep the first commandment in mind.
 - "You shall have no other gods before My face."
- Try to notice when other gods get set up.
- When you're most upset, think about what it is that matters most to you.
 - What would it be like to love the Lord with a bit more of your heart?
 - What would it be like to really believe that the Lord is in charge and is the source of everything good and true?
 - What would it be like to bow down to and serve Him alone?
- The Lord is our God; and the Lord is one.
 - There are no other real gods besides Him.
 - "Amid the weak, One strong; amid the false, One true; amid all change, One changing not, yet making all things new...."
 - He is the only God and the only God worth serving.
 - He is a far better God for us than ourselves or the hells.
 - Let's love Him, and serve Him, and work on keeping the first commandment together.
- Amen.

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.

Join the *Rise Above It* program at brynathynchurch.org/rise-above-it

The four major discussions of the Ten Commandments in the teachings for the New Church are compiled into one book in *10 Commandments: The Secrets of Spiritual Growth Found in God's Principles for Living*. To buy in paperback or download a free PDF of the book go to swedenborg.com/product/ten-commandments