Section: Commands (Law)

**TEACHING NOTES**

Disciples Church

Lesson 36: September 20, 2023

**TEACHING NOTES**

**Q45. Why does God give the first commandment: You shall have no other gods before me?**

So we will worship only God. He is the one true God.

Here we are church back in the swing of things! School is back in session, Josh is back from his sabbatical, midweek is back in full swing and our families are diving in! I’m really honored to be able to dig into the first commandment tonight with you. I’m going to read the catechism question and answer and then we will pray!

**Q45. Why does God give the first commandment: You shall have no other gods before me?**

So we will worship only God. He is the one true God.

**Pray:**

Open up your bibles to Exodus 20:2-3

**Exodus 20:2-3 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.”**

**Intro:**

With every commandment we have both prohibitions and requirements. When God declares, “You shall have no other gods before me,” He in effect declares you shall have Him as your God (positive requirement) and you shall not have any other gods (negative prohibition). This means we often have more to the command than we realize. Now I doubt that anyone in here was thinking that this command meant to have no gods. In fact when the term “before me” is found we often use it to apply the point that we must have Him as our God. While this is true I think it often misunderstood and not fully or rightly applied. So before we dig in, I want you to consider the reality that we will have prohibitions and requirements and many times these will go hand in hand. When I speak about a requirement you can also consider the prohibitions. When I speak about the prohibitions you can also consider the requirements.

With that let’s dig into this passage and unpack it!

**POINT 1: This is a gracious command!**

**Exodus 20:2-3 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.”**

It’s wise to acknowledge the context of this passage. God had just rescued the nation of Israel from **200 years** of slavery to Egypt. Egypt was a very pagan nation with many gods and traditions that were abominations to God. God’s people, the Israelites, were supposed to be a nation of people who were set apart for God, you could say they were supposed to be uniquely different than the world around them. This would declare to the watching world that they were different because of God. Well this nation had spent many years mixed into this very pagan Egyptian culture.

In fact Israel just watched God rescue them from arguably the most powerful nation that existed in that time. They watched God do this in supremely amazing way by the plagues God poured out upon Pharaoh and by leading Israel through the red sea then destroying Pharaoh’s army in that very same sea. In the three months of wandering through the wilderness after this amazing salvation of God, Israel had complained about food, about water, even declaring that it would have been better if they had stayed enslaved to Egypt. Yet God graciously provided all of these things to them and even gave them victory in battle against another army of Amelek.

Church can you imagine this? You just watched God take out an entire army with a sea. The very same sea you walked through before He let the walls down and crushed the Egyptians. Then very shortly after that you complain about food, so God causes bread to lay on the grass from the morning dew and quail to fill the camp in the evening. You move on to another new place but there’s not enough water so you complain again and instead of wiping you out as God wiped out Pharaoh and his army, God commands Moses to strike a rock and water comes out of it. This God is pouring out His grace and mercy and provision for a complaining group of whiners. It’s hard to fathom! However this context is so helpful for us to see God’s mercy poured out upon His people. All of this complaining came after God displayed in such tangible ways His power, love, and salvation. And yet God comes to His people and continues to pour out His mercy by giving them these commandments to help them restore the culture they should have so that they can again be set apart. As we have learned, these commandments are not new to mankind (no, they are eternal moral law), but God expresses them clearly and even adds some supplementary data for their further benefit. Surely, after all the time spent in Egypt and the adoption of their false cultural and false god worshipping practices, now was a great time for the one true God to summarize eternal moral law and give them other commands.

So God appears in a cloud over Mount Siani and Moses goes to speak with Him. God doesn’t just come as a cloud, but from the cloud came an extremely loud trumpet such that the people of Israel were nervous and scared, the mountain that He covered shook, from the cloud came thunder and lightning. I mean this people could not deny that God had shown Himself to them in a unique and again very tangible way.

And God begins His commands to restore a culture and way of life for His people with this:

**Exodus 20:2-3 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.”**

Now church do you feel the weight of what God is declaring here? He says I am your God, I am the one who rescued you. I am the one who performed all of these miracles in these short three months of you being in the wilderness. I am the one who makes the mountains shake and lightning and thunder answers to me just as the waters of the red sea did. I am the ONE TRUE GOD.

God declares that He is that LORD, the LORD who did all of these things.

After giving Israel reason to trust and believe that God alone is God, that He is who He says He is and He is able to do all that He pleases He then tells them “you shall have no other gods before me!”

Now this should be a command that is adored, it should be uniquely appreciated by the Israelites. They saw all the so-called gods that Egypt worshiped and NONE of those so-called gods were able to deliver Egypt. They saw physical impossibilities done as easy as God declaring it to happen. That is the very God who is commanding the Israelites in this passage to have no other gods.

Consider this reality church, Israel literally watched arguably the world’s most powerful nation filled with false gods a plenty, fall to the one true God. The very same God who is now calling on them for utter and total obedience and worship. This should not be a hard task for them. But as you can tell by the narrative that I shared they are already grumbling toward this very God. They had in these three months as Genesis records already complained at least two times that they’d rather be back in Egypt. Now lest we, from this greater vantage point, become indignant toward them, we must remember all that God has done for us and consider how quickly we turn to false gods and grumbling about our lives.

The primary reason I am sharing the context and historical back drop is to draw out the primary point we must see in this great command from God.

**God is so gracious to us!**

God who rules the nations, God who upholds the universe by the word of His power, God who gives us life and breathe and all that we need, this God has commanded us to have Him as LORD, as God, and no other. THAT CHURCH is ***VERY*** gracious!

What kind of god would be okay with you worshipping other gods? What kind of god would allow you to place your hope and trust and life in the hands of gods who don’t exists and cannot deliver you? What kind of god would allow you to make your life and utter devotion about something that does not exists? Not the God of scripture, not the one true God. Only a wicked god would be okay with such a thing.

Church do you see God’s mercy in this first command to have “no other gods” before Him? Because God is supremely valuable, it is only for our best that we make Him the supreme object of our hearts desire! That we worship, love, and live for Him is our only hope and the only right option because He alone is God!

If God were to allow or be okay with you worshiping other gods who don’t exist or perhaps simply worshiping yourselves as your own little gods, then God would be wicked and not gracious. However church we must see this command and the context it is coming from and fall to our knees in adoration and praise that our God will not allow us to be falsely satisfied in things that cannot provide what He alone can. This command is not just for our good, it is for our best good!

God has declared in scripture so clearly that He alone is God. There are no other gods, there are no other saviors, and there are none like Him! Isaiah declares this over and over again.

**Isaiah 43:10-13 10“You are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. *Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me.* 11I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior.**

**12I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “and I am God. 13Also henceforth I am he; there is none who can deliver from my hand; I work, and who can turn it back?”**

**Isaiah 44:** **6Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. 7Who is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and set it before me, since I appointed an ancient people. Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen. 8Fear not, nor be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses!**

**Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any.”**

God declares so clearly in these passages that He alone is God. There is no other god. He is the first and the last, there will never be another god. Before Him no other god was formed and after Him there shall be no other god. Is there a god besides Him? God Himself declares there is no rock I know not ANY!

Church there are no other gods. God’s command for us to worship Him alone, to have no other gods before Him, is a gracious command saving us from a lifetime of letdown and failure. It is in fact a gracious command saving us from an eternity of suffering for there is no other savior than Him!

So first and foremost I want us to see that this command is gracious! It is given to us by a good God who cares for us even more than we care for ourselves. When God declares that He is the God who has done all these things and that He alone should be our God, He is continuing on in His merciful love for those who have ears to hear!

In this gracious command there are a few details that will be helpful to understand and see.

**POINT 2: The details of the command.**

**Exodus 20:2-3 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.”**

First off we must note here that God knows His creation and He knows the specific way that He has designed His creation.

HE has put eternity into the heart of man,

**Ecclesiastes 3:11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.**

He has placed His law into the heart of man,

**Romans 2:14-16 14For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. 15They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them 16on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.**

He has made us worshipers such that, when rightly applied, we can glorify Him and enjoy Him forever!

**1 Corinthians 10:31: So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.**

However when wrongly applied, we make gods out of anything! One of the details we should understand from our exodus passage is that mankind will, sinfully, seek false gods.

We will either have the One True God, or we will make and worship gods of our own.

So our first detail is that we must have a god. We will worship a god because it is in our very nature to do so. Unfortunately, through Adam, our very nature is corrupted with sin and we make gods of anything to satisfy this desire to worship.

So our second detail is that the God we must worship is the one true God.

We must have a God and it must be the One True God that we have and worship.

This is the God who saved Israel from Egypt, the only God that exists according to our Isaiah passages. The only savior and LORD who is! So we must have a god and it must be the only true God!

Our third detail is that we must have God *and God alone*! So we must have a god, and it must be the One True God, and it must be the One True God ALONE!

Our God is a jealous God, He will give His praise to no other!

**Isaiah 42:8I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.**

In the second verse of our primary passage in Exodus, there is a phrase that may not be fully understood. It reads, “You shall have no other gods **before** me.” The word “before” here is an important one to understand. Is not declaring that it’s okay to have other gods just not above the God who is. Rather what this word in verse three means is that in the presence of the omnipresent God, you must have no other gods. When verse three declares no other gods ***before*** me, it means you must not even bring another god into the presence of the one true God. You must lay no other god in view of or bring before the one true God.

Now the weight of this command suddenly becomes much more real. I believe many people are happy to declare that God is supreme in their lives as long as they can hold on to secondary gods. What I mean is that people happily declare God to be supreme for them but they most certainly have other gods of their life. The way this is justified is that they claim these other gods are not their supreme god so it’s okay.

It goes like this most often, God is my treasure, He is the only Supreme Being for my worship. But my kids are like second on the throne. Maybe third next to my spouse but more likely than not second. You see the problem with this is that when it actually comes down to it, if your children are on the throne at all, or if you have other gods in your life in the throne room, they are competing for God’s throne.

This has proven to be true time and time again in the lives of many who profess to be Christians. Unfortunately this has happened very publically in the lives of some who held the position of pastor. These men had taught and held to a biblical view on sexuality until their child declared that they had a different view or actually wanted to live a life contrary to the one they had believed scripture condemned. Suddenly the pastor doesn’t see scripture the same way anymore.

Now to be clear, I am not mocking those men or the difficulty of those circumstances. I am using it as an example to help us see the reality that our good God who commands us not to have any other gods at all, does so because of this very reason.

God does not permit us to have various little “g” gods so long as we don’t make them supreme. The word “before” used in our Exodus passage, has nothing to do with position of said gods or better said ranking of said gods. Rather it means we must not have them in the presence of God, they must not be set before Him in His view! Since God is omnipresent it is very clear that we must not have them period!

So to recap the details of this passage;

1. We must have a god.
2. It must be the One True God.
3. It must be the One true God ALONE!

Now this makes way more sense in the already declared reality that there are no other gods. If you make anything a god or idol in your life that is not the one true God then it will fail you, it will draw your affections from God who properly requires them, it is sinful and unacceptable in Gods sight.

**POINT THREE: The application of this command.**

This command is applicable to us in numerous ways but as our answer to our catechism states, this command is given, “So we will worship only God. He is the one true God.”

When we worship other things or make idols out of other things we are breaking this command and are in sin. Remember God is gracious to give us this command because the alternative would leave us unsatisfied in worshiping lesser things and ultimately leave us in eternal destruction.

We’ve already spoke of the hopelessness of worshipping and living for things that can’t truly save you. Just consider all the false religions of the world. It is ever so clear that man is made for worship, the problem is man settles in their worship for things that fit their carnal minds rather than the true things revealed to us by God in His word. What I mean is this, when false religions like Mormonism come along. All the needed truth to have squashed this false religion from the start was available in scripture. We have already read the verses from Isaiah that declare there to be only one God and that the One God doesn’t even know of another. However according to the LDS church, there are multiple gods and you in your most proper obedience, you can become a god one day.

If God’s word had been applied to this false teaching from the start then those who were partaking in it would have ended it as a false belief. This can be applied to Jehovah’s witnesses as well. This command is to have no other gods than Jehovah but because of scripture clear declaration that Jesus is God, the Jehovah’s witnesses have changed their bible to say Jesus is a god. Well even if Jesus is a god, this clear command from Exodus is to have no other gods in the presence of the one true God who they would call Jehovah. Therefore Jesus could not be their god or one of their gods and He certainly couldn’t command utter devotion to himself.

We see this commanded by Jesus Himself:

**Luke 14:25-27 25Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, 26“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. 27Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.**

Isn’t it interesting that Jesus declares if He is not the ONE you worship, live for, obey (—so much so-- that blood family, the most intimate and important human relationships in your life, are not seen as your treasure), then you cannot be His disciple. Sounds a bit familiar right? Kind of like this first command, I am the LORD your God you shall have no other gods before me. What you see here is a consistent command throughout scripture that God will not share the throne. If God is not supreme—if He is not your one true God--then you cannot be God’s disciple. If Christ is not supreme in your life then you are not obeying the first command given to us in Exodus.

False religions have been born out of a desire and pursuit of false gods and idols. These are things that God graciously keeps us from by giving us His first commandment to have Him as God alone. Not just above all things but to have no other thing competing for His throne at all!

Now this would be a great connector to our lesson on the trinity. Since we have already taught on this I won’t spend time unpacking it tonight. Honestly I wouldn’t have enough time left to unpack it even if I wanted to. But for clarities sake, when God says in the first commandment that you shall have no other gods before Him. He is talking about Himself as He exists, triune in nature. God is one being, three persons. So when we see Jesus command our utter and complete love to Himself, it is truly only a reiteration of this first commandment. Utter love and devotion to Jesus is utter love and devotion to the one true God!

In fact what’s really incredible about Jesus’s command in Luke is it reveals to us in what way we must have God and God alone! Jesus commands us to honor Him rightly as God, to which no other relationship in our life is competing for the throne. This is what it means to have God as your LORD and to have no other gods before Him. Now the incarnate Christ was not the first to expound on this reality. In fact we see in Deuteronomy that after Moses teaches about the Ten Commandments, He unpacks the first one in greater detail.

**Deuteronomy 6:5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.**

In fact he goes on to say that you should teach these commands and this understanding of how to worship and love the LORD to your children so diligently that it is simply a part of your every day walk.

Church when you look at your life and consider the things you treasure, the things you value, Do they point back to your ultimate love for God? Practically speaking this passage is a great and gracious command for our devotion to God and it serves as a great warning to our fickle hearts that there are many good even great gifts that God blesses us with in our lives. Gifts so good that we will be inclined to make them gods, however we must not do this.

Perhaps you’re thinking you’d rather God not bless us with such good things so that we are never tempted to make gods out of them. But I think if you allow that thought some time to swirl around a bit you’d agree that would not be a favorable reality. God has all wisdom and has created us for His glory and our everlasting enjoyment of Him. Surely He knows what He’s doing in the various aspects of the lives He’s given us.

So before we wrap up let’s do some real business with idols and gods that we set before the one true God. Idolatry is worshiping or finding hope, identity, significance, purpose, or security in anything other than in God, our Creator. What is it in your life that you idolize? Is it your husband or wife? That kind of pressure is exhausting upon a spouse.

It really does great damage to a marriage and often times I think it destroys marriages without either the husband or wife really understanding the root of the issue. Is it children? Oh I certainly understand how easy it is to make our children idols in our lives. Even just a few years ago as Erin and I sat in a counseling session I heard Erin say, “Steven is a great dad the best dad but he’s not a good husband.” That’s a hard pill to swallow. If she was correct about good dad but bad husband then she was actually wrong about good dad too.

I cannot be a good dad to my girls if they do not see me rightly prioritizing their mom above them. This too could have been very destructive for us, but by God’s mercy and the blessed counsel of our elders we were able to work through these things and I was able to repent and grow.

How about your work? Is work your idol? Have you made a god of making money or of being the best employee in your field?

What about strength? I have often said lifting heavy things is my spiritual gift, but a few weeks ago, when I moved wrong in a simple workout my back popped out of alignment. I missed a week of working out and a day of work because of it.

You see all of these things are fleeting. Kids leave or die young, marriages rightly end in the death of the spouse. Strength fades, job status’s change. All the good gifts of God can be gone in a moment. If God allowed you to make those things ultimate He would be cruel! God gives us the first commandment so that we will worship Him and Him alone. Nothing else is worthy or capable of bearing the weight of our worship. All other things are temporary but He is eternal! We must have our utmost desires focused on the only eternal God who we will worship eternally! This is a gracious command, when obeyed it saves us from a million self-inflicted heart aches. When rightly obeyed it keeps us from placing expectations upon people who were never meant or capable of bearing those expectations. Spouses who have bore the weight of being made into a functional savior often know this weight to be unbearable. Children who have bore the weight of being an idol in the eyes of their parents often know this weight to be unbearable. There is hardly a thing in this life more destructive than idolatry which is essentially having other gods.

To be honest it has been one of the most difficult things in ministry. When we exhort or correct or rebuke a loved one in regards to something they have made an idol of it is typically a very rough and hard road. People get very defensive when their idols are questioned. This is one reason why so many will answer to Christ one day saying Lord Lord didn’t we do these things in your name but He will declare depart from Me you workers of lawlessness for I never knew you (Matthew 7). I bring this up because I think those who find themselves in this place of judgment one day will be ever more aware that the gods they worshipped were not truly Christ but false gods that they are warned about in the first commandment. I think idolatry has a unique way of letting you proclaim and even think your worshipping God when in reality it is your kids or spouse or status that you worship. This is why it is such a great joy to walk with other brother and sisters in Christ who will speak the truth in love to me. So that I can be made aware when this danger is lurking at my door.

The last point I want to draw out for us in this lesson is that if we do not obey this command, we will not be able to obey any of the other commands that God gives us. God starts with the correct posturing of our hearts towards Him so that we can even be capable of the correct posturing of our hearts to the rest of His commands. If we do not or will not honor this first and foremost command we will not and indeed we cannot honor the others.

Martin Luther said in His treatise concerning God, “All those who do not at all times trust God and do not in all their works or sufferings, life and death, trust in His favor, grace and good-will, but seek His favor in other things or in themselves, do not keep this [First] Commandment, and **practice real idolatry**, **even if they were to do the works of all the other Commandments**, and in addition had all the prayers, obedience, patience, and chastity of all the saints combined. For the chief work is not present, without which all the others are nothing but mere sham, show and pretense, with nothing back of them… If we doubt or do not believe that God is gracious to us and is pleased with us, or if we presumptuously expect to please Him only through and after our works, then it is all pure deception, outwardly honoring God, but inwardly setting up self as a false [savior]…. (Part X. XI) Excerpts from Martin Luther, Treatise Concerning Good Works (1520).”

God is the only one worthy of our undivided devotion. The first letter to Timothy says this;

1 Timothy 1:17 To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

God is worthy of glory forever and ever and we must make Him the treasure of our hearts above all else. We must not have any other gods. He alone is worthy!

**Closing-**

This commandment really does provide a safety net for us in our decision making and worship, it is a grace filled command for our hearts to be centered on the only truly ultimately valuable God. This command keeps us from all false religions and idolatry, it helps us to see areas of discernment with a new eye.

**We had recently started a class for Azaria through a company that offered a unique program. The place was very nice but there were a few things that I became immediately concerned about. Ultimately out of my desire to protect my daughters from spiritual concerns I decided that they wouldn’t be going back to the place. The place was run by a person who claimed to Christian and I have no doubt they were genuine in their beliefs and did not see the danger of mixing things that come from false religions into Christianity. This type of borrowing from religions that are actually centered on false gods or demons is something that causes me great concern. It is a blending of new age mysticism and eastern thought religions and unfortunately it has bled into the Christian culture of our day. When I was discussing my concerns with Azaria and trying to help her see the dangers this class presented I read to her the first commandment. I asked her if she thought practicing something that was originally meant to be done to worship false gods would fit into this command to have no other gods before our one true God. I asked her if she would be honored if someone said they loved her but practiced something that dishonored her. The amazing reality of this command is that it truly does lead us into all the others and provide us with a new way of being discerning.**

All of that to say we love the law of Lord. It is a light unto our path and a lamp unto our feet. It is sweeter than honey and drippings from the honeycomb. It is to be thought upon day and night. This is the first and greatest commandment. We would do well to see the goodness rooted in this command and enjoy faithful obedience unto it!