

# LECTURE 4: THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

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## First Commandment: No other gods

—WLC 103-06, WSC 45-48

[Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (1692), divides consideration of this commandment into two parts: (1) That we must have God for our God, (2) That we must have no other.]

## We must have no other god

### Everyone has a god or gods

While all people have God as their God in the sense that he created them and rules over them and that they must give account to him, this commandment requires that we acknowledge God as our God.

In a sense everyone has a god of some sort. One of the definitions for “god” in *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* is “a person or thing of supreme value.” Everyone has such a person or thing, considered as of supreme value in his or her life, including even atheists and agnostics.

In biblical times atheism or agnosticism was rare. The Bible frequently mentions the gods of the nations that were not the true God.

- “On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn—both men and animals—and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD.” (Exod 12:12)
- “Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?” (Exod 15:11)
- “Now I know that the LORD is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those who had treated Israel arrogantly.” (Exod 18:11)

### Idolatry is forbidden

[Note the extensive discussion of idolatry and its manifestations in worship in Calvin’s day, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.10-12; 4.17.36; 4.18.18.]

The having or recognizing or worshiping of any god other than the true God is considered idolatry, and is condemned in the strongest terms, not only in this commandment, but throughout Scripture. These are typical examples:

- “Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold.” (Exod 20:23)
- “Be careful to do everything I have said to you. Do not invoke the names of other gods; do not let them be heard on your lips. . . . Do not bow down before their gods or worship them or follow their practices. You must demolish them and break their sacred stones to pieces. . . . Do not make a covenant with them or with their gods. Do not let them live in your land, or they will cause you to sin against me, because the worship of their gods will certainly be a snare to you.” (Exod 23:13, 24, 32-33)
- “So Moses went back to the LORD and said, ‘Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold.’” (Exod 32:31)

- “Do not turn to idols or make gods of cast metal for yourselves. I am the LORD your God.” (Lev 19:4)
- “Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you.” (Deut 6:14)
- “For they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD’s anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you.” (Deut 7:4)
- “For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, won’t he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.” (1 Cor 8:10)

Especially interesting are the passages that ridicule the stupidity of making and worshiping idols.

- “Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it? Or an image that teaches lies? For he who makes it trusts in his own creation; he makes idols that cannot speak. Woe to him who says to wood, ‘Come to life!’ Or to lifeless stone, ‘Wake up!’ Can it give guidance? It is covered with gold and silver; there is no breath in it.” (Hab 2:18-19)
- (See especially the extended satire of Isa 44:9-20)

## God sees and is offended by idolatry

Note that, as our standards point out, the phrase “before me” (עַל־פָּנָי *‘al panay*, literally, “before my face”) means “in front of my face” or “in my sight.” It does not mean that God forbids us to have other gods in greater honor than him; rather it means that we are to have no other gods at all, for he sees all that we do (WLC 106, WSC 48). Idolatry cannot be hidden from God.

“‘Cursed is the man who carves an image or casts an idol—a thing detestable to the LORD, the work of the craftsman’s hands—and sets it up in secret.’ Then all the people shall say, ‘Amen!’” (Deut 27:15)

## Manifestations of idolatry

Thomas Watson notes these ways we can express idolatry:

- To trust in anything more than God
  - Riches
  - Arm of flesh (“We have broken our parliament-crutches, by leaning too hard upon them.”)
  - Wisdom
  - Civility
  - Duties
  - Graces shown in us
- To love anything more than God

Cf. Ezek 14:3-7, idols in the heart

- Our estate
- Our pleasure
- Our belly
- Our children

## We must have God for our God

Every commandment has, along with sins forbidden, the opposite duties required. The first commandment requires the recognition of the true God as our God, and our rendering to him the worship and obedience he requires of us.

Note that the true God is the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Any other God is not the true God.

- “It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me [Jesus].” (John 6:45)
- “Then they asked him, ‘Where is your father?’ ‘You do not know me or my Father,’ Jesus replied. ‘If you knew me, you would know my Father also.’” (John 8:19)
- “Jesus said to them, ‘If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me.’” (John 8:42)

Watson provides a helpful outline here also:

- We must acknowledge God to be God
- We must choose God to be our God
  - Requires knowledge of God
  - Requires mature deliberation
- We must enter into solemn covenant that he will be our God
- We must give him adoration
  - More than civil respect or veneration; religious adoration
- We must have a holy filial fear for God
- We must trust God
  - This trust at all times
- We must love God
  - “In the godly, fear and love kiss each other.”
- We must obey God
  
- Two applications:
  - Atheism is condemned.
  - Professing Christians who live as though there were no God are condemned.
    - Christians must believe in God, love God, worship him as God.

## Modern applications of the First Commandment

### Sins forbidden:

- Atheism, agnosticism, “practical atheism”
- Other world religions (Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Baha’i, traditional religions)
- Cults that deny or deform the Trinity (Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witness)
- Unitarianism, Liberal “Christianity”
- Worship or prayer to angels or saints
- Satanism, occult practices
- Supreme attention to anyone or anything other than God

**WLC #105, What are the sins forbidden in the first commandment?**

A. The sins forbidden in the first commandment, are, Atheism, in denying or not having a God; Idolatry, in having or worshipping more gods than one, or any with or instead of the true God; the not having and avouching him for God, and our God; the omission or neglect of any thing due to him, required in this commandment; ignorance, forgetfulness, misapprehensions, false opinions, unworthy and wicked thoughts of him; bold and curious searchings into his secrets; all profaneness, hatred of God; self-love, self-seeking, and all other inordinate and immoderate setting of our mind, will, or affections upon other things, and taking them off from him in whole or in part; vain credulity, unbelief, heresy, misbelief, distrust, despair, incorrigibleness, and insensibleness under judgments, hardness of heart, pride, presumption, carnal security, tempting of God; using unlawful means, and trusting in lawful means; carnal delights and joys; corrupt, blind and indiscreet zeal; lukewarmness, and deadness in the things of God; estranging ourselves, and apostatizing from God; praying, or giving any religious worship, to saints, angels, or any other creatures; all compacts and consulting with the devil, and hearkening to his suggestions; making men the lords of our faith and conscience; slighting and despising God and his commands; resisting and grieving of his Spirit, discontent and impatience at his dispensations, charging him foolishly for the evils he inflicts on us; and ascribing the praise of any good we either are, have, or can do, to fortune, idols, ourselves, or any other creature.

**Duties required:**

- Belief in the Triune God, theological orthodoxy
- Public profession of faith in God
- Submission to God's Word
- Participation in the visible church and its ordinances
- Loving, obeying, worshiping, serving God

**WLC # 104, What are the duties required in the first commandment?**

A. The duties required in the first commandment are, the knowing and acknowledging of God to be the only true God, and our God; and to worship and glorify him accordingly, by thinking, meditating, remembering, highly esteeming, honouring, adoring, choosing, loving, desiring, fearing of him; believing him; trusting, hoping, delighting, rejoicing in him; being zealous for him; calling upon him, giving all praise and thanks, and yielding all obedience and submission to him with the whole man; being careful in all things to please him, and sorrowful when in any thing he is offended; and walking humbly with him.