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“You shall have no
other gods before me.”

EXODUS 20:3



*Do I love God
unconditionally?*

1

YOUR STRUGGLE WITH GOD

One of the hottest issues in America today is the debate over values. Our values tell us what is right and wrong and drive us to certain actions. Your personal values can motivate you to donate to a food pantry or make you hide your income from the Internal Revenue Service at tax time. They can cause you to volunteer as a tutor or protect your own self-interests. It's not surprising that teachers, religious leaders, businesspeople, and politicians all agree that our values need to be clear.

Where do you get your values? And how do you know which values are the right ones? Is it all a matter of personal choice? And if so, what are we to say about the values of Hitler, Stalin, or followers of Al Qaeda? They have values too.

Values come from somewhere, and the first thing to grasp about the Ten Commandments is that they reflect the character of God. That's why there is so much controversy about displaying these commandments in public. Secularists object that these commandments are

specifically tied to the God of the Bible. And of course they are absolutely right. A different god would have given different commandments.

The God you worship will shape the values you hold, and the values you hold will shape the lifestyle that you choose. The common values that shaped the founding of America arose from a consensus about God. Take away that consensus about God and you lose any hope of consensus about values.

It's not surprising that some people get upset about the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance. If we really are one nation under God, that would mean some kind of commitment to live under the values that this God has given us, and that would mean a lifestyle that many people don't want!

Those who choose a lifestyle that differs from the principles of the Ten Commandments need to find a different god, and that is precisely what's happening in our country. When the God of the Bible doesn't fit with where people want to go, they find themselves desperately looking for other gods who will reflect different values, and therefore accommodate a different kind of lifestyle.

A country that chooses to abort forty million babies needs to find a different god.¹ Our society is on a collision course with the God of the Bible, who both gives life and says, "You shall not murder." It's no surprise that the search is on in America for new gods who will reflect our choices.

This attempted reshaping of God is not new. It goes all the way back to the garden of Eden. When Satan tempted the first man and woman, he lured them away from the Lord by suggesting that God's commands were too restrictive.

God had told the first man and woman not to touch the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But Satan wanted them to make a different choice. His goal was to change how they behaved. His strategy was to undermine what they believed. "Did God really say that you

could not eat from the tree?” he asked. (See Genesis 3:1.) “And this talk about death following sin is surely exaggerated. You shall not surely die. No; on the contrary, you shall be like God. You can be the Lord of your own life. You can decide your own values. You can discover what’s right for you!” (See Genesis 3:1–5.)

So Adam and Eve became confused about God. They put themselves in the place of God by grasping what God had not given.

Adam and Eve’s first struggle was their struggle with God. They wanted to take God’s place, and although the first commandment had not been written at that time, it describes the greatest struggle not only of our first parents, but for all their descendants.

GETTING TO KNOW GOD BY NAME

“I am the LORD your God.”

EXODUS 20:2

Throughout history, human beings have made repeated attempts to replace the God of the Bible by inventing other gods that reflected their values. The ancient gods of the Egyptians represented what was important to them: the Nile (the god Osiris), frogs (Hekt), and the sun (Ra). The Babylonians also valued the sun (Bel), but they also placed great importance on wisdom and literature (Nebo), and their city (Marduk). Each of these gods reflected the values of the cultures in which they were created.

In modern times, Communism puts the state in the place of God, capitalism puts money in the place of God, and hedonism puts pleasure in the place of God.

The world has become a marketplace for gods. So the question we have to answer is, “What’s unique about the God who gave the Ten Commandments? Why should we follow Him?”

God introduced Himself to Moses at Mount Sinai (also known

as Horeb) when He spoke from the burning bush and commissioned Moses to speak to Pharaoh.

Moses wanted to know God's name. That wasn't surprising. Egypt had its own gods, and if Moses said that God had sent him, Pharaoh would want to know which "god" he was talking about.

So God said to Moses, "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14).

In the original Hebrew, this was just one word, with the letters YHWH. It's hard to be certain about how this was pronounced, because the Hebrew text of the Old Testament was preserved without vowels.

If you add vowels to YHWH, you could get "YeHoWaH" or in its Anglicized form, *Jehovah*, though most scholars today think that the name should be pronounced "YaHWeH."

This is the name by which God made Himself known to His own people. Whenever it is used in the Old Testament, it is translated as LORD with capital letters, and it is surely significant that when Moses brought the newly liberated slaves to Sinai, God used this special name to introduce Himself: "I am Yahweh, (the LORD) your God."

Literally translated, God was saying "I am 'the I AM,' your God." He was saying, "I've got a name. I am not like a lump of clay that you can mold to your own liking. I am who I am. I am your God, and I am inviting you into a personal relationship with Me."

The God of the Bible is who He is. That means He is not whoever you want Him to be. He is neither a product of some ancient culture, nor a reflection of the ideas of Moses. He is who He is.

He is the Creator and the sustainer of all things. He is the unchanging, self-existent God, and that means that He depends on nobody. He is neither helped by our faith nor hindered by our unbelief.

God used the image of a bush that did not burn to make this clear to Moses. Fire can only be sustained as long as it has fuel. But this fire did not depend on the bush for its life. It went on burning, and the

bush was not consumed. This was how God made Himself known to Moses. He was saying, “I don’t depend on anything or anybody. I exist in the power of My own life. I am who I am.”

This sets Yahweh apart from everything else in the universe. Every created thing is dependent. Schools depend on students and teachers. Businesses depend on customers and manufacturers. Churches depend on believers and pastors. Human beings depend on food, air, and water.

But God depends on no one. He exists in the power of His own eternal life. He is God whether we believe in Him or not. Some folks love Him, others hate Him, but none of us can avoid Him. He is who He is. So to make Him your God is to come in line with reality. To resist Him is utter folly.

God’s name sets Him apart from all other gods. They were inventions of human history, the products of cultures that sustained them. Like pop stars who rise and fall with the fashion of the times, they rose and fell with the civilizations that shaped them. Nobody worships Bel, Marduk, Baal, or Dagon today. They were designer gods made to fit the demands of a market that has now passed away.

But Yahweh is who He is. He always has been and He always will be. He was not created by our words. He created us by His Word, and that is why it is entirely right for Him to say, “You shall have no other gods before Me.”

THE APPEAL OF UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

“I am the LORD your God, who brought
you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”

VERSE 2

God could have laid out the Ten Commandments on the authoritative basis of His own divine power. Given who He is, He might have said, “I

am your Creator. I made the universe. I have more power than a million nuclear bombs, and so you had better knuckle under and do what I say.”

But God does not make His appeal to His people on the basis of raw power, like a dictator. Instead, He says, “I am the LORD your God, *who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery*” (emphasis added). God has already proved that He is committed to the good of His people, and it is on this basis of His gracious intervention to deliver them from slavery that He appeals to His people to follow His commands.

Life in Egypt had been miserable for these people. Their plight had been hidden, and they had been powerless to do anything about it. They were trapped in a life of poverty, abuse, and oppression with no way out.

Then Yahweh stepped in and brought these desperate people out of Egypt. He rescued them, and now He introduces Himself to them: “I am Yahweh. I am the One who brought you out of Egypt. I sent the plagues on your oppressors. I parted the Red Sea, and I destroyed your enemies. When you cried out, nobody else was listening. But I did. Nobody else cared about you, but I came down to help you. No one else saw a future for you, but I did. I am Yahweh, *your God*, and that is why you must have no other gods before Me.”

You will never be ready to embrace God fully until you are convinced that He is good. You may submit to raw power, but you will never love raw power. That’s why it is so significant that God invites you into a relationship of love.

Consider the difference between a kidnapper and a lover. A kidnapper may say, “You are mine” on the basis of power. A lover says, “You are mine” on the basis of affection.

Many people have the idea that the Ten Commandments are the talk of an authoritarian deity who, like a kidnapper, is intent on imposing his unattractive will on others. Those who believe this will do everything in their power to get as far away from God as possible.

But Moses and the Israelites knew better. They had experienced

the grace of God in their extraordinary escape from slavery, and so they did not hear God's commands as the imposition of an authoritarian deity. They heard the commandments as the intimate talk of a lover who has given everything to win the affection of the loved one, and now embraces her, saying, "You are mine."

The reason you should make Yahweh your God and follow His commands is that He is God and He is good. We see this even more clearly in the New Testament where we discover that the "I AM" took flesh and came to us in the person of Jesus. Jesus Christ is Yahweh (the I AM) with us. That is why He said, "I am the bread of life," "I am the way and the truth and the life," and "Before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 6:35; 14:6; 8:58).

The same God who spoke the Ten Commandments to Moses speaks to us in Jesus Christ, who has come down to bring us a greater deliverance than God's rescue of His people from their Egyptian holocaust. Christ came into the world to set you free from your slavery of sin, death, and hell. Imagine the risen Lord Jesus Christ holding out His nail-pierced hands and saying, "I am the Lord your God. I gave Myself to deliver you. Don't put any other gods before Me." How could you resist such an appeal?

**WORSHIP:
CULTIVATING YOUR AFFECTION FOR GOD**

"You shall have no other gods before me."

VERSE 3

God invites you into a relationship of mutual love and loyalty. That's what the first commandment is all about. You can't begin to follow this command until you are persuaded of the love and mercy of God. But for those who believe, the first commandment seems like a natural response of gratitude to the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Pursuing a life of loving loyalty to God means cultivating your affection for Him. As with any relationship of genuine love, this involves thinking about Him, appreciating Him, honoring Him, desiring Him, fearing Him, trusting Him, hoping in Him, delighting in Him, calling upon Him, and giving thanks to Him.

It means giving God more weight in your life than anything else, so that if you face a decision where every inclination of your heart says no and yet to honor God you would have to say yes, you would say yes—because God carries more weight for you than every other inclination of your heart.

That has been the choice of thousands of believers who have gone to prison and sometimes died rather than renounce the name of Jesus. They are living the first commandment.

As Christians, we gather for worship because we want to cultivate our affection for God. In any relationship, love needs to be renewed and replenished. My love for my wife is renewed as I spend time with her and savor fresh insights into the wonderful person that she is. Fresh love sustains a marriage and keeps a husband or wife from turning to someone else. In a far greater way, it is your enjoyment of God's love and the renewing of your love for Him that will sustain you in following the first commandment.

REPENTANCE:

TURNING FROM ALL THAT OFFENDS GOD

Pursuing a life of loving loyalty to Yahweh means turning from all that offends Him. Sins that break the first commandment have one thing in common: They all displace God. When something or someone other than God gains a controlling position in your life, the first commandment is broken, because that position belongs to God alone.

I've found it helpful to identify some of the sins that break the first commandment:

- Pride
- Hero worship
- Infatuations
- Allowing other people to bind your conscience
- Superstition
- Consulting the devil, mediums, or fortune-tellers
- Teaching or believing that all religions lead to God (because it puts all gods on the same level)

Despair is another sin that breaks the first commandment. How can you despair if the Lord is your God? Despair comes when there is something that you want, and your disappointment in not getting it becomes more important than your loyalty to God.

This is a sobering list of sins. I see traces of too many of them in my own life, and they show me how much I still need to grow in learning to love the Lord with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. Perhaps you feel the same.

The first commandment looks easy from a distance, but once you get up close, you will see how difficult it is. You may well find yourself saying to God, “I can’t even keep the first commandment. I am surrounded by other powers that control my life. I need help!”

That’s a great way to come to Jesus. Following the first commandment is a lifelong struggle, but with the help and presence of Christ you can begin to pursue it.

THE FOUNDATION OF FREEDOM

The first commandment brings many wonderful blessings for those who follow its path. Making the Lord your God will deliver you from the grip of forces that might otherwise dominate your life.

I have often spoken with people whose lives were dominated by an overbearing parent, an authoritarian pastor, or a manipulative friend.

In these dysfunctional relationships, somebody else has been assuming the place that belongs to God.

God wants to deliver you from all these forms of oppression. He makes this clear in the first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me.” That’s liberating! Keeping the first commandment will deliver you from infatuations with other people and from the domination that others may seek to exercise over you.

The first commandment is the basis of our rejection of tyranny: “No other gods before Me!” That leaves no room for dictatorships. No man has the right to assert himself in the place of God.

The first commandment lays the foundation for freedom. It is no accident that free countries around the world have, at least in their heritage, honored the Ten Commandments. So it is a great tragedy that many in America today want to move away from these commands.

A house cannot stand if its foundations are undermined. Those who reject the Ten Commandments in the name of freedom will find at length that the freedom they seek is lost because the foundation on which it rests has been destroyed.

THE FIRST LOVE OF YOUR LIFE

It’s worth considering what other gods we might be tempted to put before Yahweh today. Noting that God is a trinity of persons, Bible scholar James Packer suggests some other trinities that vie to take His place: sex, shekels, and stomach; pleasure, possessions, and position; football, the firm, and the family.

All of these are good gifts from God. But any of these can become an area of sin against the first commandment if the specific gift becomes more important to us than the Giver. That is idolatry.

What dominates your thoughts, your goals, your conversation? What is the first love of your life? That is your god.

**COMMITMENT:
EMBRACING THE LORD UNCONDITIONALLY**

In the first commandment, Yahweh is inviting you to take a step of faith in which you embrace Him unconditionally as your God. He invites you to do this on the basis of trust, knowing that He is God and He is good.

His appeal is made on the basis of love. He is the God who has come down in Christ to deliver you from sin, death, and hell and has done this by laying down His own life on the cross, and then rising again to make a way through death and into everlasting life for you. He offers Himself unconditionally to you and invites you to offer yourself unconditionally to Him.

It's rather like the marriage service: God invites you to take Him as your God for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, and keeping only to Him until death brings you into His presence. Making this kind of commitment to God is a wonderful foundation for marriage. Indeed, if you can't make this kind of unconditional commitment to God, how can you hope to make such a commitment to someone else?

Folks who want to negotiate with God usually want to negotiate with everyone else as well. But when you have grasped the unswerving strength of God's self-giving love for you, and you have offered yourself fully to Him, you will begin to discover what a lifelong unconditional covenant of love looks like, and that will help you to offer such love to someone else.

KILLING THE CONDITIONS

Your challenge is to embrace God unconditionally. The first commandment leaves no room for an "if," "but," or "when," because as soon as you say "if," "but," or "when," you have put something else in the place of God and thereby broken the first commandment.

If you say yes to God but then add, “*if* you give me my health,” or “*if* you bless my family,” or “*if* you solve this problem,” then you are putting your health, God’s blessing on your family, or the resolution of a problem in the place of God.

The first commandment is our greatest struggle because we always want to set conditions. We want to use God instead of letting Him be God. But as soon as you try to use God, you have taken Him off the throne of your life and put whatever use you have for Him there instead.

When Jesus said, “Follow Me,” His disciples did not know where He would lead them, and you can’t know that either. Making Christ Lord of your life could get you into some tough situations. The nine commandments that follow describe the life God is calling you to lead. Every one of them will be a struggle. But God is calling you to take a step of commitment based on trust, because you know that He is God and that He is good.

Are you ready to embrace the Lord as your God unconditionally?

NOTE

1. Since the 1973 Supreme Court decision (*Roe v. Wade*) to legalize abortions in America, more than 1.2 million babies have been aborted every year.