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The First Commandment

Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

MY FRIEND, are you ready to be weighed against this commandment? Have you fulfilled, or are you willing to fulfill, all the requirements of this law? Put it into one of the scales, and step into the other. Is your heart set upon God alone? Have you no other God? Do you love Him above father or mother, the wife of your bosom, your children, home or land, wealth or pleasure?

If men were true to this commandment, obedience to the remaining nine would follow naturally. It is because they are unsound in this that they break the others.

FEELING AFTER GOD

Philosophers are agreed that even the most primitive races of mankind reach out beyond the world of matter to a superior Being. It is as natural for man to feel after God as it is for the ivy to feel after a support. Hunger and thirst drive man to seek for food, and there is a hunger of the soul that needs satisfying, too. Man does not need to be commanded to worship, as there is not a race so high or so low in the

scale of civilization but has some kind of god. What he needs is to be directed aright.

This is what the first commandment is for. Before we can worship intelligently, we must know what or whom to worship. God does not leave us in ignorance. When Paul went to Athens, he found an altar dedicated to "The Unknown God," and he proceeded to tell of Him whom we worship. When God gave the commandments to Moses, He commenced with a declaration of His own character, and demanded exclusive recognition. "I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Ex 20:2-3).

Dr. Dale says these words have great significance. The Jews "knew Jehovah as the God who had held back the waves like a wall while they fled across the sea to escape the vengeance of their enemies; they knew Him as the God who had sent thunder, and lightning, and hail, plagues on cattle, and plagues on men, to punish the Egyptians and to compel them to let the children of Israel go; they knew Him as the God whose angel had slain the firstborn of their oppressors, and filled the land from end to end with death, and agony, and terror. He was the same God, so Moses and Aaron told them, who by visions and voices, in promises and precepts, had revealed Himself long before to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We learn what men are from what they say and from what they do. A biography of Luther gives us a more vivid and trustworthy knowledge of the man than the most philosophical essay on his character and creed. The story of his imprisonment and of his jour-

ney to Worms, his Letters, his Sermons, and his Table Talk, are worth more than the most elaborate speculations about him. The Jews learned what God is, not from theological dissertations on the Divine attributes, but from the facts of a Divine history. They knew Him for themselves in His own acts and in His own words."

Someone asked an Arab: "How do you know that there is a God?" "How do I know whether a man or a camel passed my tent last night?" he replied. God's footprints in nature and in our own experience are the best evidence of His existence and character.

ISRAELITES EXPOSED TO DANGER

Remember to whom this commandment was given, and we shall see further how necessary it was. The forefathers of the Israelites had worshiped idols, not many generations back. They had recently been delivered out of Egypt, a land of many gods. The Egyptians worshiped the sun, the moon, insects, animals, etc. The ten plagues were undoubtedly meant by God to bring confusion upon many of their sacred objects. The children of Israel were going up to take possession of a land that was inhabited by heathen, who also worshiped idols. There was therefore great need of such a commandment as this. There could be no right relationship between God and man in those days any more than today, until man understood that he must recognize God alone, and not offer Him a divided heart.

If He created us, He certainly ought to have our homage. Is it not right that He should have the first and only place in our affections?

NO COMPROMISE

This is one matter in which no toleration can be shown. Religious liberty is a good thing, within certain limits. But it is one thing to show toleration to those who agree on essentials, and another, to those who differ on fundamental beliefs. They were willing to admit any god to the Roman Pantheon. One reason the early Christians were persecuted was that they would not accept a place for Jesus Christ there. Napoleon is said to have entertained the idea of having separate temples in Paris for every known religion, so that every stranger should have a place of worship when attracted toward that city. Such plans are directly opposed to the divine one. God sounded no uncertain note in this commandment. It is plain, unmistakable, uncompromising.

We may learn a lesson from the way a farmer deals with the little shoots that spring up around the trunk of an apple tree. They look promising, and one who has not learned better might welcome their growth. But the farmer knows that they will draw the life-sap from the main tree, injuring its prospects so that it will produce inferior fruit. He therefore takes his axe and his hoe, and cuts away these suckers. The tree then gives a more plentiful and finer crop.

GOD'S PRUNING-KNIFE

"Thou shalt not" is the pruning-knife that God uses. From beginning to end, the Bible calls for wholehearted allegiance to Him. There is to be no compromise with other gods.

It took long years for God to impress this lesson upon the Israelites. He called them to be a chosen nation. He made them a peculiar people. But you will notice in Bible history that they turned away from Him continually, and were punished with plague, pestilence, war, and famine. Their sin was not that they renounced God altogether, but that they wanted to worship other gods beside Him. Take the case of Solomon as an example of the whole nation. He married heathen wives who turned away his heart after other gods, and built high places for their idols, and lent countenance to their worship. That was the history of frequent turnings of the whole nation away from God, until finally He sent them into captivity in Babylon and kept them there for seventy years. Since then the Jews have never turned to other gods.

Hasn't the church to contend with the same difficulty today? There are very few who in their hearts do not believe in God, but what they will not do is give Him exclusive right of way. Missionaries tell us that they could easily get converts if they did not require them to be baptized, thus publicly renouncing their idols. Many a person in our land would become a Christian if the gate was not so strait. Christianity is too strict for them. They are not ready to promise full allegiance to God alone. Many a professing Christian is a stumbling block because his worship is divided. On Sunday he worships God; on weekdays God has little or no place in his thoughts.

FALSE GODS IN AMERICA TODAY

You don't have to go to heathen lands today to

find false gods. America is full of them. Whatever you make most of is your god. Whatever you love more than God is your idol. Many a man's heart is like some Kafirs' huts, so full of idols that there is hardly room to turn around. Rich and poor, learned and unlearned, all classes of men and women are guilty of this sin. "The mean man boweth down, and the great man humbleth himself" (Is 2:9).

A man may make a god of himself, of a child, of a mother, of some precious gift that God has bestowed upon him. He may forget the Giver and let his heart go out in adoration toward the gift.

Many make a god of pleasure; that is what their hearts are set on. If some old Greek or Roman came to life again and saw man in a drunken debauch, would he believe that the worship of Bacchus had died out? If he saw the streets of our large cities filled with harlots, would he believe that the worship of Venus had ceased?

Others take fashion as their god. They give their time and thought to dress. They fear what others will think of them. Do not let us flatter ourselves that all idolaters are in heathen countries.

With many it is the god of money. We haven't got through worshiping the golden calf yet. If a man will sell his principles for gold, isn't he making it a god? If he trusts in his wealth to keep him from want and to supply his needs, are not riches his god? Many a man says, "Give me money, and I will give you heaven. What care I for all the glories and treasures of heaven? Give me treasures here! I don't care for heaven! I want to be a successful businessman." How true are the words of Job: "If I have made gold

my hope, or have said to the fine gold, Thou art my confidence; if I rejoiced because my wealth was great, and because mine hand had begotten much; if I beheld the sun when it shined, or the moon walking in brightness; and my heart hath been secretly enticed, or my mouth hath kissed my hand: this also were an iniquity to be punished by the judge: for I should have denied the God that is above" (Job 31: 24-28).

But all false gods are not as gross as these. There is *the atheist*. He says that he does not believe in God; he denies His existence, but he can't help setting up some other god in His place. Voltaire said, "If there were no God, it would be necessary to invent one." So the atheist speaks of the Great Unknown, the First Cause, the Infinite Mind, etc. Then there is *the deist*. He is a man who believes in one God who caused all things; but he doesn't believe in revelation. He only accepts such truths as can be discovered by reason. He doesn't believe in Jesus Christ, or in the inspiration of the Bible. Then there is *the pantheist*, who says: "I believe that the whole universe is God. He is in the air, the water, the sun, the stars"; the liar and the thief included.

MOSES' FAREWELL MESSAGE

Let me call your attention to a verse in the thirty-second chapter of Deuteronomy, thirty-first verse: "For their rock is not as our Rock, even our enemies themselves being judges."

These words were uttered by Moses, in his farewell address to Israel. He had been with them forty years. He was their leader and instructor. All the

blessings of heaven came to them through him. And now the old man is about to leave them. If you have never read his speech, do so. It is one of the best sermons in print. I know few sermons in the Old or New Testament that compare with it.

I can see Moses as he delivers this address. His natural activity has not abated. He still has the vigor of youth. His long white hair flows over his shoulders, and his venerable beard covers his breast. He throws down the challenge: "Their rock is not as our Rock, even our enemies themselves being judges."

Has the human heart ever been satisfied with these false gods? Can pleasure or riches fill the soul that is empty of God? How about the atheist, the deist, the pantheist? What do they look forward to? Nothing! Man's life is full of trouble; but when the billows of affliction and disappointment are rising and rolling over them, they have no God to call upon. They shall "cry unto the gods unto whom they offer incense: but they shall not save them at all in the time of their trouble" (Jer 11:12). Therefore I contend "their rock is not as our Rock."

My friends, when the hour of affliction comes, they call in a minister to give consolation. When I was settled in Chicago, I used to be called out to attend many funerals. I would inquire what the man was in his belief. If I found out he was an atheist, or a deist, or a pantheist, when I went to the funeral and in the presence of his friends, said one word about that man's doctrine, they would feel insulted. Why is it that in a trying hour, when they have been talking all the time against God—why is it that in the darkness of affliction they call in believers in that God to

administer consolation? Why doesn't the atheist preach no hereafter, no heaven, no God in the hour of affliction? This very fact is an admission that "their rock is not as our Rock, even our enemies themselves being judges."

The deist says there is no use in praying, because nothing can change the decrees of deity; God never answers prayer. Is his rock as our Rock?

The Bible is true. There is only one God. How many men have said to me: "Mr. Moody, I would give the world if I had your faith, your consolation, the hope you have with your religion."

Isn't that a proof that their rock is not as our Rock?

Some years ago I went into a man's house, and when I commenced to talk about religion he turned to his daughter and said: "You had better leave the room. I want to say a few words to Mr. Moody." When she had gone, he opened a perfect torrent of infidelity upon me. "Why did you send your daughter out of the room before you said this?" I asked. "Well," he replied, "I did not think it would do her any good to hear what I said."

Is his rock as our Rock? Would he have sent his daughter out if he really believed what he said?

NO CONSOLATION EXCEPT IN GOD

No. There is no satisfaction for the soul except in the God of the Bible. We come back to Paul's words and get consolation for time and eternity: "We know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one. For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in

earth (as there be gods many, and lords many), but to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him" (1 Co 8:4-6).

My friend, can you say that sincerely? Is all your hope centered on God in Christ? Are you trusting Him alone? Are you ready to step into the scales and be weighed against this first commandment?

WHOLEHEARTED ALLEGIANCE

God will not accept a divided heart. He must be absolute monarch. There is not room in your heart for two thrones. Christ said: "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt 6: 24). Mark you, He did not say, "No man *shall* serve . . . Ye *shall* not serve" but "No man *can* serve . . .Ye *cannot* serve." That means more than a command; it means that you cannot mix the worship of the true God with the worship of another god any more than you can mix oil and water. It cannot be done. There is not room for any other throne in the heart if Christ is there. If worldliness should come in, godliness would go out.

The road to heaven and the road to hell lead in different directions. Which master will you choose to follow? Be an out-and-out Christian. Him only shall you serve. Only thus can you be well pleasing to God. The Jews were punished with seventy years of captivity because they worshiped false gods. They have suffered nineteen hundred years because they

rejected the Messiah. Will you incur God's displeasure by rejecting Christ too? He died to save you. Trust Him with your whole heart, for with the heart man believeth unto righteousness.

I believe that when Christ has the first place in our hearts—when the kingdom of God is first in everything—we shall have power, and we shall not have power until we give Him His rightful place. If we let some false god come in and steal our love away from the God of heaven, we shall have no peace or power.