

The Ten Commandments in the 21st Century - 2

The First Two Commandments

In the second part of our review of the Ten Commandments, we shall examine the first two, which direct how men and women should worship God.

1. I Am the LORD Your God. You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me.

When the Israelites were in Egypt, they would have known many gods and goddesses. The Egyptians had a god for toothache, a god for travellers, a god for war, a god for when you wanted a baby, and a goddess for when the baby was about to be born. The Canaanites too had their gods – Baal and Ash-toreth and Molech, and Dagon the fish god of the Philistines. In the UK, our ancestors worshipped gods, and in English the days of the week are named after those gods.

But Israel's God was (and is) the living God who created the world. He is the only true God. His name 'Yahweh' in Hebrew tells us He is a God of being – He was, He is and He will be. If Israel chose to serve Him, He would not share their worship with other gods. It was all or nothing.

This commandment applies to Christians just as it did to Israel. When we are baptised we make a covenant with God that we will serve Him. This means we agree to put Him first in our life. Jesus was asked:

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with

all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:36–38).

If we love God with all our heart, there is no room for anything else.

This is a sobering thought. Can we say that God is the greatest thing in our life? Is He more important to us than anything else? More important than our boyfriend, our wife, our children, our apartment, or our pension?

Remember, this is a national law. It made Israel unique among the nations.

Today

In some countries today people do still worship multiple gods. But many people today would say they no longer believe in any kind of god. They think man is in control of the world, and that science has made religion out of date. In a recent survey in Australia, only 68% said they believe in God. In the UK the figure is similar, although in America it is 90%.

Yet even those people who say they believe in God often do not put Him first in their lives. They allow other things to take priority. In the western world, we see churches becoming empty, and instead people flock to shopping centres, pop concerts and football matches. They spend their time and money on flat screen TVs, holidays and private schools for their children. These become their gods, the things they worship.



What about us? Do we put God first in everything we do? When we start off the day, do we think about what God would like us to do with the hours that lie ahead? When we collect our pension, do we sit down and ask ourselves what He would like us to do with our money? When we see the crowds on the way to the disco, do we put on our makeup and follow them, or do we spend our time with people who share our faith? When we switch on the TV, do we search out the channel with the war film and hours of killing and swearing, or do we switch on the nature documentary that shows us God's creation?

In these situations, we are deciding who we worship – the God of heaven, or the gods of this world. The first commandment says, 'you shall have no other gods before me!'

2. You Shall Not Make an Image, Or Bow Down To It.

In Old Testament times, most nations worshipped idols made from gold, silver, stone or wood. We can see them in our museums. In Egypt, where the

Israelites came from, there were statues of Apis (the bull), Anubis (the jackal), and even the scarab or dung beetle. Some of these gods had a family of priests who attended them. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon made a huge statue and insisted people should bow down to it.

The prophet Isaiah has some strong words to say about people who bow down before a statue. *"Those who make an image, all of them are useless"* (Isaiah 44:9).

He goes on almost sarcastically in verses 10–20. The idol god is made by a man, whereas Israel's God made man in the beginning. The man who makes the idol grows tired and has to rest, but Israel's God never sleeps. The man-made god is a piece of wood; a man cuts wood to make himself warm with a fire and bake bread, and from another part of the same tree he makes an idol and asks it to save him from his enemies. It is ridiculous!

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul preached to people who worshipped idols in temples.

God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things (Acts 17:24–25).

Modern Images

What about today? As an example, we find Buddhist temples with statues of Buddha, but what about Christian churches? Everywhere in churches you will see the cross, typically made of wood, sometimes of silver or gold. People also hang them round their

necks. You may also see images of the Virgin and Child, Mary and baby Jesus, and pictures or icons of 'saints'. These are man-made images, to which people burn candles and bow down, and ask for help with the problems that they have. If you take a taxi, you may see a cross or picture of a 'saint' hanging from the mirror, to protect you on your journey. All these would be forbidden by the second commandment.

People sometimes say "Ah! But the icon is only a representation of the real god or goddess who lives in heaven." In the same way, they will tell you the icon to Saint Bartholomew, for example, is only a representation of the real saint, who is up there in



heaven. But the Bible teaches us that there is no saint up there in heaven. Nor was Baal up there when Elijah challenged the priests of Baal to shout louder to wake him up (see 1 Kings 18). Bartholomew died in the First Century, and today he is a handful of dust in the earth, waiting for the day of resurrection. However long we pray to him, he can do nothing to help us. Only the living God, the God of Israel, is able to hear prayers and answer them. If we think a cross around our neck is going to protect us from evil, then we are mistaken.

In Numbers 21, we read how in the

wilderness the people of Israel were bitten by serpents, and God told Moses to make a bronze snake and fix it to a pole. God was showing that sin, which the serpent represents, has to be put to death before we can be saved from the grave. The sick people had to crawl out of their tents and look at the serpent on the pole, to show that they believed God's power could heal them from the deadly venom.

What happened to the bronze snake afterwards? It was taken to the Promised Land, and kept as a reminder of that time in the wilderness. But by the time of King Hezekiah, it had become something the people worshipped. Hezekiah had to destroy it (2 Kings 18:4). The brass snake had become an object to be worshipped, as if the bronze itself had some power to save or heal people.

So, to summarise: If we want God to help us, and be our God, we must accept that He wants all of our heart, not part of it. He expects us to put Him at the forefront of our lives. And we should keep our lives free from associations with pagan worship and empty superstition.

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