

The First Commandment

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Forerunner, "Personal," May-June 2008

Christians should have a great interest in the subject of idolatry because of its major importance to morality and our relationship with God. We ought to be constantly refining our understanding of it so we can avoid allowing anything to come between us and God. Five of the Ten Commandments directly deal with it. The first four clearly define our relationship with God, as does the tenth, because Paul defines covetousness as idolatry in Colossians 3:5. The Bible deals with no other sin so directly and so often.

Although Romans 14:22-23 is usually not applied to idolatry, it has an interesting bearing on this subject:

Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.

Paul is dealing with a clash of values within an individual. Confronting a situation in which two distinctly different moral or ethical alternatives exist can produce puzzlement and fear. Such a situation has the potential to leave a person conscience-stricken after doing what he permits himself to do.

If there were no differences between what a person is permitted to do and what he actually does, there would be no self-doubt or self-condemnation to be concerned about. However, the reality is that differences arise. This often occurs when the individual has learned a value in his past, but he is challenged by a different value in the present. This leads to a number of overlapping questions that we need to consider:

- » What is the source of what we permit ourselves to do?
- » Where did our values originate?
- » Where did we form our values?
- » Are we sure we are right even when we are not conscience-stricken? This last question is necessary because people can be absolutely wrong while sincerely thinking that they are right.

We should ask these questions of ourselves in areas such as business ethics, education, entertainment, athletics, fashion, diet, child-training, and marital relations—in other words, the entire framework of life, not just in the obvious areas of morality. Acts 18:25-26 reminds us that Christianity is a way of life, a course of conduct encompassing every aspect of life.

Our Source of Morality

In 1983, Herbert Armstrong gave a sermon on the source and origin of law. Within a community, laws establish acceptable standards and provide for penalties. He said, "That base, or body of beliefs from which you operate, is your system of morality and ethics." That system of morality is also a body of laws and values. They are standards we have accumulated, at the very least, up to the time we were called. Where did our system of morality come from?

Notice the word "our" because that particular code of standards is our own. Bits and pieces of it have been absorbed from others—parents, church, friends, and business associates—who have had influence on us. Yet, whether accidentally, passively, or purposely, we have made those pieces ours by choosing to use them. Each one of us has a code that is probably not, in every detail, like anybody else's.

Proverbs 16:25 is a familiar scripture: "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." "Way" can be understood both as a narrow, single issue within one event or an entire package of values within a course of conduct. The proverb's point is that humanity is frequently driven by blind self-deception or ignorance. It often has no absolute certainty regarding right and wrong because its standards have been merely absorbed and never seriously compared against God's. How do ours compare?

This is a fair question because, since our calling and the fact that we are no longer blinded, we have the opportunity to make a fair assessment of this. In one sense, God is challenging us in this proverb either to defend our body of beliefs and practices, or to drop them and change to His. He is also warning us in advance that our way of life—if it is wrong—is going to kill us.

Any system of ethics and morality is by definition an expression of religion because religion, again by definition, is a way of life containing some measure of worship. Worship is merely a respectful response to one's god. A system of morality concerns itself with values and the way one lives, even as God's moral code does. The major overall difference is that His way works because it leads to life, even though in a given instance it may appear more wrong than ours.

Because these principles are true, they lead to the fact that each one of us is technically the god of our system of values and its way of life in opposition to the Creator God, if our code of conduct is not in alignment with His. We are serving, and thus in a limited way, worshipping ourselves.

Law, therefore, is codified, enacted morality. Whether it is God's or man's does not matter. The difference is in what they produce. What does man's law produce on earth? History makes this obvious: confusion, warfare, constant competition, pain from all the collisions of values, and ultimately death.

Law, Sin, and Crime

Paul writes in Romans 3:20, "Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin." Romans 4:15 adds, "[T]he law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression." Together, these produce a general principle that covers, not just biblical morality, but also secular. Laws reveal to us our religious and/or civic duties. In reference to God, law awakens us to a consciousness of sin. Through God's laws we become aware of the contrast between *what we do* and *what we ought to do*.

By enacting laws, our legislators tell us what is moral, right, and good in secular areas of life, but instead of calling a transgression of the state's laws "sin," we call it "crime." In many cases, crimes are also sins. The difference between secular law and God's law is that the latter contains clear moral values and reveals our duties toward the Creator God. Where do people get their ideas regarding what is moral?

We must conclude that religion, law, the state, and morality are each parts of the same family. Thus, every system of law is a system of ethics and morality. Since law establishes standards of conduct, those standards are the establishment of religion, a way of life we are to be devoted to following. Therefore, in truth, there can be no absolute separation of church and state.

This point escapes most Americans, but not every American. For instance, some journalists have clearly identified communism as a religion. In such a system, the government is the god. At the height of the Roman Empire, the Romans made no bones about this principle, declaring and demanding under the penalty of death that Caesar be worshipped as a god. This is part of the "divine right of kings" principle. Beware, because this idea is about to be reborn:

Then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth, and he had two horns like a lamb and spoke like a dragon. And he exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence, and causes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast, whose deadly wound was healed. (Revelation 13:11-12)

When the Beast arises, he will be accorded this honor that belongs only to God.

In the Western world, a new religion is rising. It is not really new, but it has a fairly new name: secularism. It is a type of idolatry, one that has been increasingly challenging this world's Christianity over the past century, and it is gaining ever more strength in numbers and devotion here in America. The war between it and this world's Christianity is virtually over—with Christianity rapidly becoming irrelevant. Persecution in the courts is already an established fact, and outright persecution on the streets cannot be very many years away.

Loyalty to Whom?

Ezekiel 20:23-26 portrays a critical point regarding why Israel was taken into captivity:

Also I lifted My hand in an oath to those in the wilderness, that I would scatter them among the Gentiles and disperse them throughout the countries, because they had not executed **My** judgments, but had despised **My** statutes, profaned **My** Sabbaths, and their eyes were fixed on their fathers' idols. Therefore I also gave them up to statutes that were not good, and judgments by which they could not live; and I pronounced them unclean because of their ritual gifts, in that they caused all their firstborn to pass through the fire, that I might make them desolate and that they might know that I am the Lord.

There is no doubt Israel was a religious people. Yet, notice the emphasis on the personal pronoun "My." Their source of values was not God. Realizing the source of any given value or moral standard will go a long way toward determining its rightness and therefore its efficacy.

Romans 6:15-19 helps to clarify this:

What then? Shall we sin [transgress God's law] because we are not under the law but under grace? Certainly not! Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness.

The source of a person's values will determine his righteousness or his sinfulness. In addition, then, the source of the values to which he submits will also establish who is the sovereign in his life and of whom he is a servant. Finally, the source also determines whether idolatry is present and how the individual's conscience will be affected and respond.

If the source of values is man, then man is the sovereign. This can be perfectly acceptable as long as the value one obeys agrees with God's values. Any person's values may come from society in general, his family practices, his peers, or even his spouse. One often hears the justification, "Everybody's doing it," as a defense. The source of that value is "everybody"!

Understanding the source helps to reveal the sin of idolatry in a clear but disgusting light. The Israelites of Ezekiel 20 apparently could, in all sincerity and with a clear conscience—and perhaps even with fervency—sacrifice their firstborn to Moloch! This is a vivid example of how twisted a person's thinking and conscience can become by believing a corrupt source.

At the beginning of our conversion, usually during counseling for baptism, we are asked to consider Luke 14:26-33 seriously. Verses 26-27 are particularly important because loyalty to Christ is the issue in this context. Jesus says, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple." Jesus makes it plain that, after entering into the New Covenant, our highest loyalty is to Him.

This is extremely important because the character of every life is determined by the loyalty that rules it. Peter confirms Jesus' words in Acts 5:29, saying, "We ought to obey God rather than men." He made this affirmation following Jesus' crucifixion. Persecution was imminent against the fledgling church. However, we must understand that the world is always a threat against our loyalty to Christ. Life is a mixture of choices and compulsions, and many of our values have their source in the world. These values exert an ever-present pressure to conform to them, thus we must be aware.

The pressure to make moral choices is the furnace in which character is forged. Our compulsions to make choices come in two varieties: 1) forced, as by a gun to our temple that demands, "Do this or else," and 2) unforced, the pressure of old habits, perspectives, and attitudes engraved in our character, hangovers from our past. Thus, the past and the present both push at us to choose. What we chose determines where our loyalties lie and thus whether we commit idolatry. If we are not thinking carefully, idolatry is an easy sin to fall into.

Law and Sovereignty

Psalm 81:4-5 states, "For this is a statute for Israel, a law of the God of Jacob. This He established in Joseph as a testimony when he went throughout the land of Egypt, where I heard a language I did not understand." Asaph points out that God ordained the law of which he speaks. Law is inseparable from sovereignty. The god of any system can be identified by locating the source of its laws. From this principle, Mr. Armstrong concluded that the church is the only place on earth where the government of God operates.

In the beginning of the United States, our system of law and our standards of morality were lifted in principle—but sometimes almost verbatim—from the absolutes of the Bible. After the Civil War, the basis of our laws gradually switched from the absolutes of the Bible to human relativism, which claims there are no absolutes. It asserts that every system's values, indeed everyone's values, are as good as the next. This philosophy began as mere advice to be tolerant, but as it became more popular, its adherents urged people to be pragmatic, that is, to adapt, to make compromises in values, to do whatever needs to be done regardless of its conflict with others' values.

Concurrently, situation-ethics systems arose so that even churches eventually looked upon the Ten Commandments as mere suggestions. God was gradually erased from our public schools. Relativism has crept into every area of life so that it now dominates our moral and ethical thinking in education, religion, childrearing, marital relations, economics, agriculture, health care, social programs, etc.

Psalm 10:4 is central to this series on the Ten Commandments: "The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of His thoughts." This is of major concern because the first commandment is the most important. It lays the foundation for all that follow. If the source of a person's values is not of the very highest order, he sets himself up for certain moral and spiritual failure. No other source can even begin to compare to Almighty God.

The last phrase of this verse does not mean the "wicked" man is an atheist. In fact, He may be a nominally religious person. However, while undoubtedly considering himself realistic, he has such a low regard for God that he does not consider Him as he makes his choices in life. God plays no major role in his life, and he may even purposefully avoid Him. To him, God is not dead, but He is nonetheless an inconvenience brought into play only in times of extreme stress. He has essentially chosen to live without Him, and thus he is effectively worshipping himself. This description likely fits a high percentage of Americans.

Loyalty to Satan and the World?

John writes of this system:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever. (I John 2:15-17)

John's warning against the world is focused on the very reason for the "source" theme of this article. The word translated "world" is *cosmos* in Greek. John uses it six times in three short verses, emphasizing its importance to us. It literally means "an orderly arrangement." In other words, it means "a system." The apostle refers to the environment and lifestyle system into which we were

born. Our values originated from this source, and those values are a confused mix of good and evil, specifically designed to entrap us in a web of death.

Cosmos identifies the system established on earth apart from the Creator God. Since the system's source is Satan, it cannot produce life. The problem for us is that this system is quite appealing to human nature, and it is continuously exerting pressure on us to return to it. Yet, if we love the world, it precludes love for the Father. The Father is then pushed to the background of our lives.

John points out that love for the world is essentially meaningless because the world is passing away. If it and its values pass away, what will a person following that system have to show for his life?

The basics of that system's values are contained in the words "flesh," "eyes," and "pride." *Flesh* indicates a self-oriented outlook that pursues its own ends independent of God, a focus that clearly produces idolatry. *Eyes* suggests being captivated by everything that entices the sight, drawing attention to the human attraction to covetousness, which is idolatry. *Pride* indicates a pretentious hypocrisy that glories in self, possessions, and accomplishments. This too is idolatry because pride focuses devotion on the self.

So, to whom or what are we loyal? II Corinthians 4:3-4 identifies the source of the spiritual beliefs and values of everybody in the world prior to his calling:

But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.

This system is the source of much of what we believed, and its author, Satan, has been our god, though we did not realize it. Because Satan has been clever enough to include some of the true God's system, beliefs, stories, and practices within his, the Devil's system has an air of righteous authority. We can feel good, even joyous and inspired, while doing evil—like committing idolatry—in submitting ourselves as servants to his way.

Romans 1:18-32 provides us with a compelling history of mankind's efforts to avoid God as the source of their values, and it shows what this has produced. Satan has made strong and persuasive efforts—seemingly doing everything in his power—to diminish the importance of obedience to the Ten Commandments. Mankind's failure to keep these godly standards is responsible for the condition of the world.

The undermining of their importance began with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Satan's persuasions were so enticing that they submitted to his values despite having seen God literally eye to eye! None of us has been blessed with that gift. However, in God's judgment that does not let us off the hook. Yet, mankind cannot plead complete ignorance of God because He is revealed by His handiwork. Since men will not seek out and obey the true God on their own, the best they can do in regard to a standard of values is their own experience, and that has produced this perverted and violent world. That is the story of idolatry in Romans 1.

Our Values Must Change

Acts 26:12-19 provides us with an example of how misled a sincerely wrong person can be:

While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads." So I said, "Who are you Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and the things which I will yet reveal to you. I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me." Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.

Here is a virtually perfect example for us. Paul, despite his zeal, did not know the true God even though he was sincerely religious. He was sincerely deceived. Jesus basically asked him, "Paul, why do you continue to beat your head against the wall by following the path you are on?"

Can we hear in that question His expectation even of the unconverted? There is in the unconverted some minimal level of understanding and repentance that enables them to see that their values are wrong and to change to those coming from a different, far better Source—Him. If He expects that of them, what does He expect of us whose minds have been opened?

Paul's conversion led to many being given the opportunity to change their values more fully. However, the fact remains to this day what king David wrote and that Paul later quoted in Romans 3: 11, "There is none who seeks after God." Carnal people are so imbued with their own systems that they will not change unless essentially forced to.

Satan has the world so deceived that God is veiled from the eyes of their understanding, so Satan is the god of this world and the source of its ways of living. He is worshipped and responded to by all of mankind. Unless God moves to change our values, we rarely change for the better. When God does move, He demands repentance of us and then loyalty to Him in our lives from then on.

Notice the discussion between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4:19-24:

The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

In this episode, the woman represents the unconverted person who is confronted by Jesus' truth. She is informed of changes she must make if she is to follow Christ. If a person truly wants to change once he realizes that all his life he has been sincerely ignorant regarding God and his values, the newly converted individual must seek to make whatever changes are necessary. Jesus shows her God expects this.

Does Anyone Measure Up to God?

In Matthew 22:37-38, Jesus provides us with the commandment that lays the foundation for all others: "Jesus said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment.'" This command leaves very little out in terms of our devotion to God. It involves the fear, service, obedience, and worship of the great God who is the Creator. The dictionary definition of *worship* says it involves intense admiration, adoration, honor, and devotion to someone or something. Practically, worship is our response to our god.

If we respect someone greatly, does not our respect cause us to behave differently because of him? If we know he will be in our area, do we not try to spend some time with him or at least see him? Maybe we plan to give him a gift. If we know his habits, do we not try to emulate him, such as copying his manner of dress or his speech? Whole industries are built on this reality, which is why promoters attempt to get celebrities to use and endorse their products. Finally, when we are in his company and he suggests we do something, are we not moved to submit?

In Western civilization, people and institutions reach heights of admiration that drive some to do all sorts of unusual things. Teens, mothers, and even grandmothers will swoon over a crooning singer. Fans will practically tear the clothing from a rock star. Boys and men idolize athletic heroes. At political conventions, grown adults will act like mindless fools in behalf of their candidate.

It is this principle that is involved in keeping the first commandment. The respect and response we give to men, things, or the self should be given to God.

The KJV and the NKJV both translate Exodus 20:3 as, "You shall have no other gods before Me." It is better understood as, "You shall have no other gods *in place of* Me." The term "before Me" allows enough wiggle room that it can be argued that other gods are permitted as long as God comes first. In reality, God permits no other gods at all!

Genesis 1:1 informs us, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." God is Creator. This is how God introduces Himself in His Book. Paul directs our attention to this very point in Romans 1 as where men stumble by not truly acknowledging Him as Creator God, sovereign over every aspect of what He had made.

But "Creator" can be just as vague as "ballplayer," "rock star," or "actor," if we never show enough interest to study and observe the awesomely beautiful distinctiveness of His character, power, and way He reveals regarding His Person. Do we devote as much time, concern, or effort in admiring God's great ability as Creator as we do the men we admire? Using Himself as the Model, God created the potential for the qualities and abilities we admire in others to be in us, and He has far more and better in Himself than we can comprehend.

What a Great God!

The world has conditioned us to think of worship as something we do once a week. This is woefully inadequate in terms of what God expects. Is God merely on an ego trip to receive "Hallelujahs!" from His worshippers?

No! Everything He asks of us is for our good because of what it motivates us to do and become. American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "It behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming." This is true. Because a person becomes or does what his god is, he must be careful regarding his reaction to this commandment because it affects every area of life, thoughts, and action. It is not just a tiny sidebar of life. If kept as it should, it becomes part of the very foundation of what we are becoming.

Exodus 34:5-8 reveals this of God:

Now the Lord descended in the cloud and stood with [Moses] there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation." So Moses made haste and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped.

What man or institution has these qualities? In addition, He is the eternal Creator, Healer, Savior, Judge, and the very pinnacle of wisdom, understanding, and grace.

Yet, mankind is so deluded that, without realizing it, many worship their consciences formed by their own earthly experiences. Their consciences are nothing more than an inner voice, a sort of a moral policeman that has taken up residence within. Can it be trusted? Do we trust ours? This is better than nothing, but conscience is easily perverted and often abnormally developed because it is almost entirely dependent upon upbringing and propaganda from this world's media. Since this is Satan's world, there is little chance that a person's conscience will be entirely aligned with God's standards.

Others superimpose on God their conceptions of a human father, but this, too, is woefully inadequate. What if one has no father as part of his life? What if the father was stupid, foolish, tyrannical, or over-indulgent? What kind of positive impression will that leave? Is God merely a grand old man, a head-patting, gray-headed, somewhat doddering person whose mind wanders back to better times, forgetful of what is occurring on the earth and in our lives?

God's name is "I was, I am, I will be." He has lived for eternity, but He is not old; He is every bit as modern as tomorrow. When God came as a man, He showed He did not have a completely placid temperament, a God who would not say, "Boo!" He did not just let sleeping dogs lie. He was not uninspired and uninspiring; Jesus stirred people up so that they said, "No man ever spoke like this Man!" (John 7:46). He challenged and exposed the hypocrisies of the religion of His day and was moved to deep anger by the shameless exploitation taking place at the Temple. He was of such personality that He walked unscathed through hostile crowds. Jesus was meek, but the term indicates that He had the power to use as He willed, restraining it as an act of mercy, wisdom, and love.

Christianity is not for the soft and sentimental. We have a war on our hands, and our God is a powerful warrior—the Lord of Hosts is His name. He is on our side, but He demands our loyalty.

Idolatry Underpins Sin

Isaiah 57:15 makes an incredible statement about Him, one that is really incomprehensible to us:

For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones."

He put this in His Word to impress us and thus encourage us with the greatness of His power, wisdom, and humility. If we are so impressed and encouraged, we respond by honoring Him through our humble obedience, thus glorifying Him and enabling Him to form us into His image.

I Corinthians 10:12-14 urges us to take stock of our relationship with Him:

Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

This passage appears in the midst of an epistle detailing the problems of a tumultuous congregation. Paul draws on the experiences of Israel in the wilderness as examples to us. He concludes by telling them, despite what manner of sin each individual was involved in, to turn their attention to overcoming idolatry. In others words, idolatry sat at the foundation and was ultimately the cause of whatever their sin happened to be.

God must be the Source of everything we think, say, and do for us to have a fighting chance to overcome this persistent sin. More to come.