

The First Commandment (1997)

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Forerunner, "Personal," January 1997

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. Perhaps for some, if not most of us, idolatry escapes our attention because we look at the subject too broadly. This broad approach keeps us from understanding the sources of idolatry and the extent it can penetrate into our relationship with God.

Though 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. Sometimes we are conscience stricken, feeling very uneasy about what we have permitted ourselves to do. If there were no difference between what one is permitted to do and what one actually does—causing guilt—we would not need to be concerned about self-doubt or self-condemnation.

But these occasions do arise. This leads to a number of overlapping questions that we need to consider:

- » What is the source of what you permit yourself to do?
- » Where did your values originate?
- » Where did you form your values?
- » Are you sure you are right even when you are not conscience stricken?

We should ask these questions of ourselves in areas such as business ethics, education, entertainment, athletics, fashions, diet, child training and marital relations, not just in the obvious areas of morality.

Our Source of Morality

In 1983 I heard Herbert Armstrong give a sermon on the source and origin of law. 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. Where did your system come from?

Within the spirit of the word "religion," any system of morality is an expression of religion because it is a way of life. *Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* defines *religion* as "a system of beliefs and practices relating to the sacred and uniting its adherents in a community." It is also "something which has a powerful hold on a person's way of thinking, interests, etc." Thus, religion does not need to be related to the divine, for *Webster's* proceeds to use the example, "Football is that man's religion." Devotion to anything creates a way of life.

Webster's New World Dictionary adds, "the state or way of life of a person in a monastery, convent, etc." Combined, these dictionaries show that "religion," while most frequently (and rightly) understood in relation to God and church, can also indicate a secular devotion to a body of beliefs, values and laws that effectively motivate one to live his life in a certain way.

When applied to secular life, this has interesting ramifications. Any system of morality is an expression of religion because it concerns itself with values and the way we live. Law, therefore, is enacted, codified morality.

The Bible clearly shows this in relation to God: "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 3:20). Romans 4:15 adds, "[T]he law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression." Paul reinforces this in Romans 7:7:

What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet."

Law shows us our duties. In reference to God, it awakens us to a consciousness of sin. Through law, we become aware of the contrast between what we ought to do and what we actually do. Our civil legislators enact laws, and thus they tell us what is moral, right and good in a particular, secular area of life.

Instead of calling a transgression of the state's laws "sin," we call it "crime." Many crimes are also sin. The difference between secular law and God's law is that God's law relates directly to the divine. It reveals our duties to Him.

Where do people learn what is moral? When viewed from the biblical perspective, religion, law, state and morality—though specifically different elements—are really part of the same family. In reality, every system of law—or system of morality, since law establishes morality—establishes a religion.

Technically, then, there can be no separation of church (religion) and state. This point escapes most Americans probably because of our democratic political views. It is impossible for politicians to separate their value system (religion) from their public life in politics. When the Beast arises in the near future, this concept will become very apparent as ties between church and states grow closer. This form of idolatry will make all the difference in the world in a person's life.

"No Other Gods"

The KJV and the NKJV both translate Exodus 20:3 as, "You shall have no other gods before Me." This translation is misleading, though, because it gives us room to think that other gods are permitted as long as the true God is first in importance. God permits no other gods at all!

Other translations more correctly catch the intent. Moffatt says, "You shall have no gods but me." The Knox translation has, "Thou shalt not defy me by making other gods thy own." The Spurrell translation reads, "You shall have no other gods beside Me." Finally, the *New English Bible* renders it, "You shall have no gods to set against me." These make it very clear God will not share His position, glory and praise with any competitors (see Isaiah 42:8). It would not be good for His purpose to allow us to divide our loyalties.

Ezekiel 20:23-26 reveals a critical factor in the idolatry equation that we need to understand:

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.

Notice the emphasis on the personal pronoun "My." The source of the law or the values we submit to is the sovereign. This aids us greatly in determining whether idolatry is present and how our conscience will respond.

God forcefully contrasts His laws with pagan commands and practices. He clearly implies that those who submit to pagan commands are guilty of putting another god before the true God. The Israelites—in sincerity and a clear conscience, perhaps even fervently—brutally sacrificed their sweet and innocent firstborn in the fires to Molech, and all the while they were guilty of a horrible, vicious idolatry!

Today, we may not throw babies onto Molech's altar, but we abort 4,200 pregnancies a day, ending the lives of these potential members of God's Family in the name of free choice and self-concern. The law of the land permits this atrocity! If that is not idolatry, I do not know what is! What kind of morality, what religion, permits men to enact such heinous laws? People have become blinded by focusing on their own pleasure, failing to see even that murder is involved, let alone the idolatry. God's law nowhere permits such a depraved activity.

Slaves of Whom We Obey

Romans 6:16, 19 supplies additional knowledge about the critical importance of the source of our values:

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 to death, or of obedience to 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.

We are seen here as the servant of the one we obey; we are under its authority. If man is the source of the morality we submit to, then man is our sovereign. As long as this sovereign agrees with God's standards, then idolatry is no problem. If we broaden this to include the state, whether democratic or socialistic, then the state is the sovereign. But in broadening the scope, the chance that idolatry will enter the equation also increases.

At the beginning of our conversion, usually during counseling for baptism, we are asked to consider Luke 14:26-33 seriously. Verse 26 is particularly important because loyalty to Christ is the issue in this context. Loyalty to any other person or thing at the expense of loyalty to Christ constitutes idolatry. 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."

This is extremely important because the character of every life is determined by the loyalty which rules it. If one's loyalty is to the wrong source—the wrong government, body of beliefs, laws, people or religion, regardless of whether the person is ignorant of his idolatry, sincere and has a clear conscience—his character will be shaped accordingly. It will not be in the image of Christ and will not be acceptable in the Family of God.

We generally think of Acts 5:29 only in terms of a state of persecution, but its principle applies all the time: "Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said: 'We ought to obey God rather than men.'" Life is a series of compulsions which lead us to choices. These compulsions come in two varieties: 1) forced, as by a gun to our temple which says, "Do this or else," and 2) unforced, just as each dawn comes regardless, gently persuading us to rise and meet our duties. Each pushes us to choose, and the only real difference in them is their strength.

We are surrounded by various elements that, forced or unforced, exert pressure to compel us to submit to them out of loyalty. Both good and evil are compulsions pressuring us to follow them. Our culture urges us to "go along." Family ties influence us to blend in. Our peers, friends in business, school or neighborhood buddies, entice us to conform. These compulsions sweep us along, and all too frequently we go right into idolatry to satisfy our desires to be accepted and feel secure. But Peter and the other apostles said, "We ought to obey God rather than men."

Idolatry and This World

Law is inseparable from sovereignty. One can identify the god of any system by locating the source of its laws. When the United States began, the Founding Fathers lifted much of our system of law and morality directly or indirectly from the absolutes of the Bible. After the Civil War, the leadership of the nation gradually altered the basis of our law from those absolutes to human relativism in many areas of our culture. It has since crept into virtually every area of life. It now dominates our thinking in education, child training, marital relations, economics, education, agriculture, medicine, social programs and even mainstream religion.

Psalm 10:4 explains why this happens: "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. A proper understanding of—and thus obedience to—the other nine depends largely on this one.

This does not mean "the wicked" never thinks of God. He may even "belong" to a church and attend fairly regularly. He is not an atheist, but he does not fear God. He has no regard for Him and may in fact purposefully avoid Him. This person has conveniently chosen to live without God except to meet society's conventions. He is effectively worshipping himself.

This nation has more and more frequently been led by men and women answering to this description. They have been largely responsible for impressing their concepts upon society, which has been swept along in absorbing their ideas. People may still frequently talk about God, but He is not feared and obeyed. Idolatry is doing its damage, and reaping of the whirlwind is not far off.

None of us has escaped defilement from this world. We were born into it. Since we were virtually defenseless against it, we have grown up absorbing this world's values and system of morality. Most of us were absolutely unaware that this was happening.

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)

II Corinthians 4:3-4 identifies its source:

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.

The Bible uses "world" (*cosmos*) as man's system—of government, economics, religion, education, culture, etc.—established apart from the Creator God. This system is the source of much of what we believe and, along with 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.

Ignorance Is No Defense

We might think to plead "innocent by reason of ignorance," but God's Word nails all of us to the wall in Romans 1:18-20:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.

Our knowledge of God is certainly partial at best, but we cannot plead complete ignorance. Paul says His creation reveals enough of Him to make a major difference in our lives. Failure to keep the first commandment is the major reason why this world is in its current condition. Had mankind kept it, the natural, spiritual progression would have led him to keep the rest because he would then, at the very least, have had the correct Source of law and morality. Without keeping this commandment, the best that man can do in establishing standards is by his own experience, and that leads him directly to Satan!

We are not alone in our helplessness, for all the great ones of past and present stand equal to us before God. In Acts 26, Paul tells King Agrippa the story of his calling on the Damascus road. Verse 14 contains an apropos comment:

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."

Christ seems to be saying, "Saul, why are you beating your head against the wall?" Paul was zealously persecuting God's church, all the while thinking he was part of the true religion, but at that point, he did not even know the true God! God called him dramatically to change the source of his belief system so that he could guide the Gentiles in changing theirs from Satan to God.

Paul, quoting David, writes, "There is none who seeks after God" (Romans 3:11). Man is so deceived and imbued with his own system that no one knows what to look for! The Devil has so deceived the world (Revelation 12:9) that the true God is hidden. Satan is the god of this world because he is the source of its ways of life. All mankind worships and responds to him except for that small, elect group to whom God has revealed Himself.

True Worship

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."

Jesus said, "You worship what you do not know." Since the Samaritans used the Pentateuch, they had a measure of truth. They had the basis of the best system of morality ever devised! But even though one may discover bits and pieces of truth, he will still end up worshipping Satan. Unless God calls him, he approaches God with too many preconceived ideas absorbed from the world's system. This is why God demands repentance.

In Matthew 22:37, Jesus expands the first commandment in what is called the great commandment of 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.'" Among all the things in our lives that we are to devote to God, this leaves very little out! It impacts on every facet of our lives. What can we do that does not involve our very life, emotions and intellect?

This commandment, therefore, 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? When we are in his company and he suggests we do something, are we not moved to comply?

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. Do we devote as much time, concern or effort in admiring God's great abilities as Creator as we do some human performer? God *created* the potential for the abilities and beauty we may admire in humans. His abilities are far greater!

Needed: Sweeping Changes

The result of idolatry in our culture has been immorality on a scale unparalleled in the history of the United States. This will never change until the values, the system of morality that people use to determine right from wrong, change. This change will not occur until a governmental change of such magnitude sweeps aside all existing institutions and standards. We have seen in our lifetimes that the mere replacing of political affiliation, names and faces of those in positions of leadership really changes nothing. It may temporarily moderate immorality, but it does not change the fundamental reasons for it.

Worldly religion has conditioned us to think of worship as something that we do briefly once a week, and then we are free to do what pleases us. This is woefully inadequate for fulfilling God's purpose of creating us in His image. His purpose involves putting His mind in us that we may imitate Him in every area of life.

In this the first commandment has very practical ramifications. If another crowds God out of first place in our thinking, affections and conduct so that we admire, submit to and imitate him, we will be in another's image, not God's. If we are not in God's image, will He allow us into His Kingdom?

It is good to remember Isaiah 57:15 frequently:

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."

We must always remember that we can have no other god but Him because He is our Model as well as supreme Creator, Ruler, Lifegiver, Lawgiver, Liberator, Healer, Redeemer, Righteous Judge, Advocate and much more. The Bible shows Him acting on behalf of His people and His name. It shows Him faithfully fulfilling His promises and carrying out His purpose.

No man can serve two masters. We must worship Yahweh only. To worship one God is to have one supreme loyalty in our lives that all of our instincts, passions and impulses obey.

Far too often, a person's conception of God is very inadequate:

- » Without realizing it, some worship their own conscience, an inner voice that makes God a sort of resident policeman.
- » Others worship a god who is nothing more than the superimposition of their own father. Humanly, our fathers may have been good men, but compared to God, all fathers are very inadequate.
- » Many think of God as nothing more than a grand old man. They consider Him a nice

guy but old fashioned, comfortable in His easy chair, forgetful, a soft touch who is essentially out of it. He is certainly not a vital, dynamic presence who is vigorously completing His purpose!

» How about "gentle Jesus meek and mild"? Jesus fearlessly challenged the hypocrites of His day and courageously went to an undeserved martyr's death in our behalf. The Bible calls Him the Lord of armies!

» Finally, some think of Him as the Managing Director of the Universe. This idea has possibilities, but it implies that He is aloof and detached, too busy to be aware of "little old me."

Any human idea of God will be insufficient. Isaiah writes, "To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him?" (Isaiah 40:18). Only what God reveals of Himself in the Bible is truly adequate. What the Bible reveals of God is His effort and gift to convey to His children a correct impression (image) of Him. Even so, at times He makes statements so grand that our finite minds cannot comprehend them:

Lift up your eyes on high, and see who has created these things, who brings out their host by number; He calls them all by name, by the greatness of His might and the strength of His power; not one is missing. (verse 26)

This is the One upon whom we must fix our eyes, ears and heart. He is worthy of our loyal emulation. He is the Author of a body of laws from which arises the only perfect system of morality. Having other gods besides Him has produced this evil world. It—with all its violence, confusion, anxiety and despair—is passing away. When the God of all power—the One we are to worship in keeping the first commandment—says, "Enough!" and arises to establish His rule, this world will perish.

The issue covered by the first commandment is loyalty—loyalty to the great Creator whose creative acts did not end with the physical creation. When His children keep this commandment, a process works to complete their creation in His image. This is why we have free moral agency—to participate in forming holy, righteous character like our Savior and God has. If we do not keep this commandment, the purpose of God in us crumbles because regardless of who we are, we will take on the image of who or what we believe and obey. We can be certain God will be doing His part to encourage us to keep it. Let's do our part by making every effort to submit joyfully to One so worthy of all loyalty.