

When we start looking at the Ten Commandments, it's only natural, of course, to begin with the First. And not just because it's the first in the list. The First Commandment is the great commandment, the greatest commandment of the Law. In fact, all of the other commandments flow out of this one. If you break any other commandment, you break this one at the same time, but if you keep this commandment, you will keep all the others as well. The First Commandment is central to our lives as Christians. The First Commandment is the beating heart of the Law. Everything else depends on this one, so it's only natural to begin here.

But the Bible gives us this commandment in two different ways. The way that we know the best is what we might call the negative way, saying what we should not do, and that is, of course, Exodus 20: "You shall have no other gods." But the Bible also presents this commandment positively, talking about what we should do, and we heard that in our reading from Deuteronomy, that "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." So what does that look like, exactly? What does it mean to break this commandment? Or what does it mean to keep this commandment? Those are the questions that we need to consider this evening as we start our look at the Ten Commandments.

So let's think about it in the way that we know it best, the words of Exodus chapter 20, the way that we all learned it in the catechism: "You shall have no other gods." But what does that mean? What does it mean to have other gods? Or maybe to put it a little simpler, what is a god? How would you define it? We might have lots of different answers to that question. A god is something powerful, we say. It's a deity. It's the creator. That's what a god is. And yeah, that works, but it's not quite the full picture just yet. So maybe the better way to ask it is, what makes something your god? Your god is whatever you look to for help in the midst of trouble. If things aren't going all that well, or if you need to get through something difficult, whatever you turn to for help in the midst of that trouble is your god. Your god is whatever you put your trust in. Your god is whatever you expect to help you out when you are in trouble.

And so if the Lord is our God--and he should be our God--then we look to him for help. We turn to him in the midst of all of our troubles, and we ask him to help us. Psalm 121, for example, talks about God keeping us safe from every danger, from every evil. And the way it describes it, at least in the first part, is this: "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." And Psalm 27, which we all said together this evening, talks about the Lord delivering us from enemies and from every evil. And it says, "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?" So if the Lord is our God, then, we can look to him in everything. We can turn to him in every trouble. If we have him, we have everything, even if everything else is going terribly. It's like Paul says in Philippians chapter 4: "I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." If God is our God, He's the one who strengthens us. He is the one who helps us, no matter what may be happening in our lives.

But Christians, my god is whatever I put my trust in, and people often turn to other things other than the Lord for help. For example, if I call on the god of another religion, then I'm expecting that other god to help me, because why would I call on that god in the first place if I didn't think that that god could help me in some way? Israel gives a very good example of this in the Old

Testament, because Israel was always running after other gods, always looking to these other gods to help them in some way. In the book of Jeremiah, for example, the prophet comes before them and accuses them of doing just that. But listen to how Israel responded. Jeremiah 44: "Since we left off making offerings to the queen of heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have lacked everything and have been consumed by the sword and by famine." The people had become convinced that as long as they were serving this false goddess they called the queen of heaven that everything would be fine, and as soon as they stopped giving her offerings, that's when all their troubles started. That's when the enemies came. That's when this famine started. Everything went downhill ever since they left off giving those offerings. They had become convinced that this false goddess could help him, and that's why they called on her. They wanted help from her rather than from the Lord.

But a god can be anything, Christians. God is whatever I think can help me in the midst of my trouble. And so if I think having more money, for example, will fix my problems, then money is my god. If I think that the government will fix my problems, then the government is my god. If I think that just working more or working harder, putting in more hours at work, will fix my problems, then work has become my god. Whatever I trust in, whatever I look to for help is my god, especially in those times when things are hard and not going the way that I need.

But our greatest temptation, Christians, is to want things both ways. To say that we believe in God, that we trust in him, but also to turn to something else for help as well. And Israel in the Old Testament often did this, because they wanted to worship God, but they also wanted to worship these other gods at the same time. The Bible calls this limping between two different opinions or serving two masters. Elijah, for example, in 1 Kings 18, speaks to the people and says: "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him. But if Baal, then follow him." So the people needed to stop thinking that they could serve both at the same time, that they could follow the Lord and also follow Baal, to get something from both of them in their time of need. That's what they were doing.

And Jesus in Matthew chapter 6 says this: "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." What Jesus says here certainly applies to any god. It could apply to anything, but money is often our greatest temptation. And how does that happen, exactly? What does that look like? Let's say, for example, you're facing some difficult situation. You have a bad year, for example, a bad harvest, or you're wondering how you're going to be able to pay the bills this month, whatever it may be. What do you do? Where do you turn for help first? Do you turn to the Lord, coming to him in prayer, asking him to help you through your situation? And if you do pray, do you keep praying? Coming back to him again and again until that help comes, even if that means you have to pray a hundred times or more before it does? Or do you turn to something else, thinking that that will help you and get you through this difficult time? That's what I mean by wanting it both ways. That temptation to serve two masters is always there. Because we are tempted to become impatient with God, thinking that maybe he doesn't want to help us or maybe that he's not going to help us, and to turn to something else for help instead. But in reality Christians, as Jesus says, in the end we only have one master, one that we truly serve, one that we truly trust and turn to in times of trouble. And is that Master the Lord?

Well, then, what should we do? What does God want us to do in the First Commandment? What is he trying to say? God commands us to have him as our only God, to turn to him for help. Deuteronomy chapter 6, which we read for this evening, shows that loving God is not just a feeling that we have. Loving God is an action. Loving God is what we do. We love him with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our might, and show that love to him in everything that we do. That means listening to him, following after him, doing what is right in his sight, turning away from what is evil in his sight. Keeping God first in everything in all of our lives, turning to him in the midst of every trouble, and putting our trust in him and him alone: that is what God wants us to do in the First Commandment.

But of course, that's hard, incredibly hard for us to do, even as Christians, because we are constantly tempted to turn towards those other things. Our sin wants to have any other god than the Lord, to look for help from any other place than the one who can actually help us. And in that way, Christians, every sin that we commit is a sin against this commandment. Because every time that we sin, we are turning to something else other than the Lord. If we steal, for example, then money has become our god. If we covet, for example, possessions have become our god. So out of all of the commandments, there is no commandment more difficult for us to keep than the First.

And so that's why we need, Christians, to keep the Lord and his Word constantly in front of us. To always be turning towards him, to always be looking towards him. This is why Deuteronomy says, starting in verse 6: "And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise." And that "teach them diligently" that we hear in verse 7 could also be translated as "sharpen." Like sharpening a knife, running a knife back and forth on a sharpening stone. If I have a knife that is never sharpened, then it becomes dull, and a dull knife isn't any good. And I can't sharpen that knife again just by running it over the sharpening stone once. Sharpening that knife means being on it constantly and carefully, so that then it stays and remains sharp. And in that way, Christians, same for us, we are called to listen to what God has to say, to be sharpened on him and his Word. Listening to him, thinking about what he says, being shaped by his Word. And in that way, God will lead us throughout our lives until the day when we are in heaven and will sin no more. And on that day, we will be perfect, and we will love the Lord perfectly, as he has called us to do.

But of course, we are only able to do all of this because of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Jesus has made us to be his people. He has given us the Spirit so that God is now our God. We wouldn't be able to keep the First Commandment at all without Christ. Apart from him, we can do nothing. But in him we can follow after God and love him with our heart, soul, and might. And we will do so perfectly in heaven, because then we will be perfectly like him. That is how we keep the First Commandment, by being in Christ and by listening to him.

So let us not have other gods, Christians. Let us fear, love, and trust in the only God. And then we will be able to say with Joshua in Joshua 24: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have called us to be your people and have become our God. Teach us always to follow after you so that we may look to you in the midst of every

trouble, knowing that you will help us through your Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.
Amen.