



A Commandment Is Not a Suggestion

The commandments of the Hebrew Bible were given to the people of Israel through Moses. He read them to the people, and the people accepted by them. This is known as the Mosaic covenant, and it begins with a commitment of loyalty to only one God.

The commandments are part of a relationship, a give-and-take communication with God, initiated by God and continued with ongoing human participation. This Law of Moses lets people know how they should live if they want to keep this relationship with God. Living by the law is a choice, and the people of Israel committed to do it.

God spoke all these words: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. "You shall have no other gods before me. (Exodus 20:1-3)

How does this choice of a single God relate to us today?

We may think, these days, that we're so much smarter than those ancient people who believed in many gods. We can look at the weather on the TV news, and we can see the satellite image that shows where the line of thunder storms is coming from and going to. We know that storms at sea are caused by weather conditions and not by an angry sea-god. We know that making presents to so-called "gods" isn't going to make a difference. We know better than to worship things or people that aren't really God. Or do we?

One of the worst times the world has known in living memory was the time of the Nazis in Germany, when the government itself and its leader became a god. We even have in our confessions the Declaration of Barmen which was written in the 1930s, a time when Hitler was bringing his country back to hope and prosperity. It says,

In view of the errors of the "German Christians" of the present Reich Church government which are devastating the church ..., we confess the following evangelical truths:

We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords—areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the church's vocation as well.

In Germany under the Nazis, the government took over the role of God, taking control of not only the civil lives but also the spiritual lives of the people. The government spoke for God, and many people were taken in by it. Many believed because they were told that the Jews and others were to blame for their suffering.

It's hard for us to see now how people could have accepted Hitler as a leader with the authority of Jesus, but he was a convincing speaker who promised to satisfy their deepest needs. We can say now that we wouldn't have been taken in, but I'm not so sure that we wouldn't have been impressed if we had been there at the time. And we all know how much evil was done by that particular false god.

What other gods could we chose instead?

But what other gods are there, really, these days? When my husband and I go home from church, we drive by the North Shore Mall. As we go by, my husband checks to see how many cars are parked at the new Nordstrom's, to see how many are worshipping at that temple on a Sunday morning. Many people spend much more time at the mall than they do at church, and often spend no time at church at all. What does this say about which gods they're worshipping?

We live in a consumer culture, and for some people that means that their lives are defined by their "stuff." They wear the brand names of the gods they worship on their clothing. If it's not the logos of their favorite drinks or sports equipment, it's the designer labels that show how important they are.

Possessions can easily grow into gods, when they become the source of a person's identity and worth. They take over all available time and credit card balance, and they become the focus of attention and activity. The real God of our lives can get squeezed out when these little gods take over.

But what about our passion for celebrities? How many kinds of idols are there in American life besides the winners of the talent contest? We have sports figures, movie stars, television personalities, musicians, singers, dancers, political leaders, leaders of good causes, and even ordinary people who become famous on "reality" shows.

How would you feel if one of those celebrities you admire (I almost said idolize) invited you to one of their parties? I bet you'd have trouble breathing, let alone having a sensible conversation. We each have our own taste in celebrities, but I'm sure you know why you put one or another on a pedestal. And we all face the danger that the glamour and glory we give to those we admire will eclipse our reverence for the God who made them along with all the rest of us.

How would you feel if the celebrity you most admire picked you out of the crowd? Would you bask in their friendship? Would you take their advice? Would you model your life after the way they live? Would you do whatever they asked of you, even if it's against your conscience? Would you give up your friends, your family, or your faith if they asked you to? Would you be snagged into putting that person ahead of God in your life?

If you would do these things, even if you never got the chance, then you already have another god in your life, and not the one God of Israel. Even when the creature is wonderful—beautiful, talented, and blessed in every way—the creature is not the equal of the Creator. We can move from admiration to worship easily and without really noticing it.

There really is only one

For us as followers of Jesus, there is truly only one God, but we need to keep on our guard. We may have wishes and needs that we are longing to have addressed. We may think, "If only I had ..." that special thing or person, or "If only I were ..." rich or pretty or thinner or younger or older or whatever, then I'd be happy, contented, complete. That thing we think we need or that thing we think we need to be can become our god.

The reality is, of course, that when we do get that thing which we think will make us perfect, then we find that there's something else we need as well. The cycle of needing never stops, unless it stops in the one true God. This one God is all that we will ever need and all that we have ever needed. When this one is our God, we need no other. God knows this, and he commands us to stop looking elsewhere.