
The First Commandment: You Shall Have No other gods Before Me

by: Ronald L. Dart

The Southern end of the Sinai Peninsula has to be one of the most desolate spots on the globe. Beautiful? Hardly, we're not talking about the Swiss Alps.

When you look at a map, you have to wonder what on earth led God to bring these people here, to give them the Ten Commandments. The journey was long, hard, and by the time they got there, it was hot. It would have been nearly June on our calendar.

Why Here?

The children of Israel had already given Moses a lot of misery because of a lack of food and a lack of water and now he brought them to this desolate place and a lot of them wanted to know, "Why here? Why couldn't we have been somewhere else."

The desolation though may have been part of the point. God was going to reveal Himself to a chosen people. It would be a spectacular revelation. He was going to enter into a covenant with them and with no one else. And so, He brought them to the only place that He could have brought them on foot, where He could be alone with a few hundred thousand people. It was not a place with green grass and trees and brooks of water. It was dry, dusty, hot, uncomfortable. But if you have read the Bible very much you would realize that God is not that concerned with our physical comfort. He is after something a little more serious than that.

Now when the children of Israel finally made camp at Mount Sinai, the air must've been electric with anticipation. They had no way of knowing what was going to happen, but they knew they had come here to meet God.

Preparing to Meet God

Moses went up the mountain for a preliminary meeting with God. He came back with this message in Exodus 19 verse 4. God said, "You go down there and you tell the elders this, "You

have seen what I did to the Egyptians. You have seen how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. {5} Now therefore, if you will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then you shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for the earth, after all, is mine. {6} And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.""

Moses trudged back down the mountain and he laid this message out before the elders of all the people, and they replied, {8} "All that the LORD has spoken. We will do."

Now this is crucial. They had to commit, or it was no deal. They had to make an overt commitment themselves. It was not enough for God to appear to them and give them commandments and God say, "Do this, do this, do the other thing, or I'm going to punish you if don't, and they could cow down and say, "We will do that." No, no, no. They had to make a positive, freely given commitment to this deal or it wasn't a deal.

So, Moses came back and told the LORD what they said, "All that you have spoken, we will do."

Hearing the Voice of God

Now this is the preliminary discussion taking place prior to making the deal with Israel. It is going back and forth. It sounds a lot like a matchmaker, discussing the terms of a marriage contract in the old world, but eventually all Israel can no longer just hear Moses' voice, they all have to hear the voice of God himself.

"And the Lord said to Moses in Exodus 19 verse 9, "I am going to be coming to you now in a thick cloud. I want all the people to be able to hear when I speak with you and to believe you forever." So, a thick cloud is going to come down on the mountain because God's brightness would be too much for everyone. But He said, "I do want them to hear.""

So, Moses told the people that they had to do this, and he told the words of the people to the LORD, {10} "And the LORD said, "Moses, "Go to the people. get them ready, set them apart today and tomorrow, and let them wash all their clothes {11} and be ready the third day, for the third day the LORD will come down in the sight of all the people upon Mount Sinai."

Wow! You just wonder what that meant to the people when they heard that. Moses comes back, steps into the camp, and the word goes out from tent to tent, through all the elders of Israel to all the people to the last person at the last tent, and he says, "Get yourself cleaned up, wash all your clothes, the third day from now, see that mountain up there, God is going to appear there and He is going to speak to us."

Meanwhile, {12} "they were putting up barriers and telling the people, "Stay away from the mountain. Don't get too close, don't touch the border of the mountain. We will have to punish anyone who does. {13} There is not a hand to touch it, because when the trumpet sounds long, then we want you to approach the mountain and not before and not to get to close.""

So {16} "the third day in the morning. They were all shattered awake by thunder and lightning in a thick cloud on the mountain and the voice of a trumpet exceedingly loud so that all the people

in the camp trembled." This must've been the mother of all thunderstorms, but it was more than that, it's hard to imagine a huge cloud on top of the mountain with great lightning and rolling thunder and out of it all, a sound of a trumpet, so loud, that you could actually feel the vibrations in your body at the furthest reaches of the camp.

Everybody's knees were turned to jelly. You know when God came to visit Abraham, He appeared as a man. You could talk to Him. You could sit down with Him and touch Him. But this is God in His real state, as He is, power unbridled, coming into contact with the rock and dirt of Mount Sinai. So, all the discipline about not coming to close became very important. The reason human flesh cannot come close to God is the same reason human flesh can't grab a 10,000 Volt power line, only more so.

Apparently when the trumpet was blown high on the mountain, it was so loud that it left everyone trembling in their sandals.

Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God. They stood at the bottom of the mountain to meet with God. This is such a simple phrase, but it was a one-of-a-kind meeting, in all the history of the world, nothing like it has ever taken place again.

The account tells us that Mount Sinai, at this point, was altogether smoking, it wasn't just the clouds, the whole mountain was starting to smoke because the LORD had descended upon it and fire and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a furnace and the whole mountain quaked greatly. The very presence of God on the mountain made the whole thing smoke and the ground underfoot to growl and tremble and shake.

And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long and waxed louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by a voice. God answered by a voice. What an interesting expression because God apparently can answer by thunder, he can answer by lightning and can answer any number of ways, but not this time, He answers with a voice and now something unique in all of history happens. God in the hearing of thousands of people began to speak to them in their language by a voice thundering down the mountainside. What did He say? Of all the things God might say to these people, what does He choose to say? What are His words?

God Reveals the First Commandment

With a thunderstorm raging at the top of the mountain, and with lightning going to and fro and great rolling of thunder and a great peal of a trumpet, the voice of God comes rolling down the mountainside saying, Exodus 20 verse 2, "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. {3} You shall have no other gods before me."

"After all I've done for you, how could you have another god?" But there's a stronger idea than that here. "I am the Lord your God," He said, "I have brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Now, what must we do to keep you free? What do we have to do to keep you from selling yourself back into slavery again? This is not an idle idea or an idle statement, because the fact is, already on this journey and they will yet again, wonder why they ever left Egypt in the first place and will want to go back. It will not be very long after this

before they will be ready to stone Moses, make themselves a leader and go back into Egypt and beg Pharaoh to take them back again.

The question has to be, first of all, I am the Lord your God, I got you out of there. Now we are not going to have any other gods here. Our problem is how to keep you free?

Perfect Law of Liberty

The apostle James, hundreds of years later, will look back at this law and he will characterize it as a 'law of liberty.' In his letter, chapter 1 of James verses 21 through 25, "Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness and receive with meekness the engrafted (implanted) word, which is able to save your souls." Engrafted word. What's that? {22} "But be you doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. {23} If a person is just a hearer and not a doer, why he's like a man who beholds his natural face in a mirror, {24} He looks and goes his way, and forgets what kind of man he was. {25} But, whoso looks into the perfect law of liberty.'

The context makes it clear, James is talking about the Ten Commandments, which he calls, "the perfect law of liberty, and continues in it, not being a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed."

A Yoke of Bondage

Now I realize a lot of people don't look at the Ten Commandments and think in terms of liberty. They have a habit of thinking that, well it's kind of restricting, it keeps us from doing the things that we might want to do, but the problem is, a lot of things we might want to do will just put us back in slavery again.

The Ten Commandments are introduced by this term, "I am the Lord your God that got you out of the house of bondage." What we're about here at Mount Sinai is liberty. Everything that follows is about liberty. It is an odd idea in Christian circles that the law of God is a 'yoke of bondage,' a list of do's and don'ts, of rules and restrictions that take away our liberty.

Paul wrote to the Galatians, warning them about bondage. He said in Galatians 5 verse 1, "Stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free and do not become entangled again with a yoke of bondage."

Some people take that and say, "A ha, see there, the Ten Commandments are 'yoke of bondage,' you're not supposed to get back under that again." That won't do. Sorry.

God didn't bring Israel out of bondage to put them back in bondage again. Just read the introductory statement to the Ten Commandments of God, "I am the Lord your God, I brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." We aren't going there again! So, the Ten Commandments can't possibly be the 'yoke' that Paul was talking about.

The entire objective of the law is to enable man to live free. To live at liberty without having someone tell us what to do, like so many slaves. In the Bible, Egypt is a type of sin and sin is

presented again and again as bringing man into bondage. The law defines right and wrong, so that we will not sin and come into bondage again. Sin brings us to bondage; the law makes liberty possible. That idea is so important, I'm going to say it again. The law makes liberty possible.

The Law Makes Liberty Possible

The democracies of the world, of all people, should recognize, that law makes liberty possible. Without law, we have anarchy. And anarchy is not freedom, you wind up living in fear of what your neighbors are going to do next.

There's a stanza in the 119th. Psalm that acknowledges this. It is found beginning in verse 41, the psalmist says, "Let your mercy come to me, O LORD, even your salvation, according to your word. {42} So shall I answer him that reproaches me: for I trust in your word."

If you read the whole 119th. Psalm, you are going to realize there are probably seven or eight synonyms for 'law' that we find there: commandments, statutes, judgments, and one of the synonyms is God's 'word.'

The whole context of what the psalmist is talking about in Psalms 119 is the 'Law of God.' "I trust in Your word," he says. {43} "Don't take the word of truth utterly out of my mouth because I hope in your judgment." Then he makes this incredibly important statement, {44} "So shall I keep your law continually for ever and ever, {45} And I will walk at liberty, for I seek your precepts."

Now these are his thoughts. The result of keeping God's Law continually for ever and ever, is I will walk at liberty. {46} "I will speak of your testimonies also before kings, and I will not be ashamed. {47} I will delight myself in your commandments which I have loved. {48} My hands also I will lift up unto your commandments which I have loved, and I will meditate in your statutes."

I will lie awake in bed at night and think about your law and how it applies to life because what God has done in giving us His law is to give us an edge in the world. He helps us to know where to go and know what to do. He says that "the law is a light to our feet and a lamp to our path, so we won't fall and stumble and be taken. What the psalmist to saying is, that the law makes liberty possible.

Jesus Taught About Liberty

There came a day when Jesus walked into a synagogue and stood up to read. They delivered to him the book of the prophet Isaiah, you will find this in Luke four verse 17, "And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, {18} "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised,"

There's that word 'liberty' again and the objective of Christ, His ministry, is the same as that of the Ten Commandments, to set man at liberty, {19} "To preach the acceptable year of the Lord." Jesus closed the book and handed it back to the minister and sat down. And all the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, {21} And He began to say to them, "This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears."

The 'acceptable year of the Lord' is probably a reference to the year of release of all the debts and the release of all the slaves. One of the things that Jesus is trying to tell us, is that His ministry, what He is all about is liberty. It is about freeing, it's about liberation.

Jesus is the second Moses and just as Moses under God liberated Israel from bondage, so Jesus Christ liberates us from bondage, but he doesn't do that by eliminating the law, he does it by setting us free from sin, because it is the law which makes liberty possible.

You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me

So, God's first words from the mountain were, Exodus 2 verse 2, "I am the Lord your God that brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." That's who I am and then He adds this, {3} "You shall have no other gods before me." Another translation, the French says, "You shall have no other gods before my face." Still another translation says, "You shall not acknowledge the gods of others in my presence."

No other god brought you out of Egypt. It was not some other god that set you free and guaranteed your freedom.

God Is the Guarantor of Our Liberty

I think it is worth remembering that right here in the United States, the founding fathers of our country also saw God as the guarantor of our liberty. They said, "We do hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men were created equal and were endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." They recognized that it is the Creator that guarantees our rights. We have no other source of natural rights and freedoms, and the foundation blocks of that freedom were laid at Mount Sinai.

Our Relationship with God Is Covenantal

Dr. Laura Schlesinger, in her fine book on the Ten Commandments, makes an important point right here, "In the very first commandment," she said, "God establishes the fact that the relationship with Him will not be casual, it will be covenantal." You know when I read that, I had to admit to myself, that a lot of people only want a causal relationship with God. They want a relationship. They want to be able to pray and have God hear their prayers. They want to be able to go to church and or synagogue, or wherever they go to relate to God, but they really don't want an intimate relationship with God, because that would make demands on them that they're afraid they can't meet. So, they want a causal relationship with God.

But that's not what God is bringing Israel to on this day, that is not what God really wants nor what He will even have with the person. You're going to have to come to grips with Commandment number one, "You shall have no other gods before my face." This relationship is not casual. We are talking about a covenant. You see a covenant involves commitment. You have to step up to the plate and say, "Yes LORD, I will enter into covenant with you."

How Can We Make Life Work?

There's a short passage in Deuteronomy where God develops this a little further. It's found in the six-chapter verse one, "Now these are the Commandments, the statutes, and the judgments, which the LORD your God commanded to teach you, that you might do them in the land where you're going to possess it. {2} That you might fear the LORD your God, to keep all his statutes and all his commandments, which I command you. I want you to do it, your son, and your son's son, your grandchildren, all the days of your life."

Why would you want to do this? Well, so that your days will be prolonged. The objective of the law is to help you lead a clean and upright life where you don't hurt yourself and hurt other people.

"Now hear, therefore, O Israel" {3} "and observe to do it." Why? "That it may be well with you." Now if people could only get this through their heads, the Law of God is not intended to be shackles and chains. It is not a ball and chain around your neck, it is not a yoke over your shoulders. The whole idea of it, is that life will work for you.

Keep this word, {3} "Observe and do it, that it may be well with you that you may increase mightily, as the LORD God of your fathers has promised you in a land that flows with milk and honey." If you'll just live a committed life, an obedient life, life will work for you.

Love God with Your Whole Heart

Deuteronomy 6 verse 4, "Hear, O Israel, The LORD our God is one LORD, {5} And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all you soul, and with all your might."

Love God with everything you have and don't let anything else get in the way. Why is this crucial? I mean, obviously, of course we understand who God is, a person ought to love God, but from a personal point of view, why is this so crucial?

Later in Deuteronomy the thought is developed further in an important way and you will find the section in the 12th. chapter of Deuteronomy and verse 1, where Moses says, "These are the statutes and judgments which you shall observe to do in the land which the LORD God of your fathers gives you to possess, you want to do these all the days that you live upon the earth. {2} You shall utterly destroy all the places wherein the nations that you shall possess served their gods upon the high mountains, upon the hills, and under every green tree. {3} Wherever you go, wherever you find their sanctuaries, wherever you find their altars, wherever you find their idols, their symbols, all of their altars, their pillars, even their groves of trees that are designed for this

purpose, you cut them down, you burn them, and you destroy the names of their gods out of that place," hack them off the monuments. Don't let them stay there.

Verse 4, "You are not to do these things to the LORD your God." That's a funny way He put that, but He says basically, He wants you to destroy all of the worship of these other gods out of the land because you are not to use their idols, their altars, their pillars, their groves, any of the things that they have to worship their gods. It is not permitted.

You're not going to do all the things that you do this day, every man who thinks what is right in his own eyes. You can't just say, "Well this feels good. Now this is my idea of worshiping God. I think this is a novel little innovation, which feels good. Let's put it in our worship services. These worshipers of Molech over here have a cute custom, let's work that in our worship."

Later in verse 28 He says this, "Observe and hear all these words I command you, so that it may go well with you and with your children after you forever." That little 'and with your children' has more meaning than you might realize.

He said, "When you do what's good and right in the sight of the LORD, it is going to go well with you and with your children."

Don't Inquire After Other Gods

Let's continue in Deuteronomy 12 and verse 29, "Now when the Lord your God shall cut off the nations from before you where you're going to possess them, and you succeed them, and you dwell in their land," be really careful, pay attention to yourself, {30} "Take heed that you're not ensnared by following them." When they have been destroyed, remember these people were destroyed from before you, so why should you inquire after their gods, saying, "How did these people worship their gods, I'll do like that."

Verse 31, "You shall not do so to the LORD your God." Don't take pagan customs, don't take the customs of these nations. After all, folks, I destroyed them for what they were doing. Why should you do it?

"You shall not do so unto the LORD your God, for every abomination to the LORD, which He hates, they have done to their gods, for even their sons and their daughters, they have burned in the fire to their gods."

I will tell you what Israel, {32} "Whatever I command you, you do that, you don't add anything to it, and you don't diminish from it." It doesn't make any difference how cute it is. It doesn't make a difference how harmless it seems to you at the moment. You have to realize where all this corruption leads. In the end it led these people to the destruction of their own children.

Do you see what I mean when I said, "To observe and hear all these words that I command you that it may go well with you and with your children."

The First Commandment allows only one god, and only His practices of worship. NO others are allowed. The winners are the people who are committed to God.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you noticed the many times three days show up in the Bible?
2. Have you ever studied it to see if there were some similarities with the three day accounts?
3. Can you imagine what it must have been like to have been a witness to God coming down on Mt. Sinai?
4. Do you find it interesting that James called the Ten Commandments the “perfect law of Liberty?”
5. How would you describe the Ten Commandments as being a law of liberty?
6. How does the law light your path?
7. How can we reveal to others that the God’s law doesn’t put us in bondage, it is sin that does?
8. What kind of relationship with God do you want? Casual or Covenantal?
9. What ‘gods’ are there in our modern society?
10. What can a Christian do to make sure that they are not putting anything above God?