

Do You Have the Only True God?

Deuteronomy 5:6-7

Introduction

Jen Wilkin's book, *Ten Words to Live By: Delighting in and Doing What God Commands*, begins with an introduction, entitled, "Remember to Delight." The passage of Scripture that she uses to start the introduction is 1 John 5:3, which states, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome." Wilkin's goes on to state that her book is "about the law of God in all of its life-giving beauty." The concept of God's law as possessing "life-giving beauty" comes from Deut. 5:32-33, which speaks of how those who "walk in obedience to all that the LORD your God has commanded" will "live and prosper and prolong your days in that land that you will possess."

Wilkin's noted that this vision of "life-giving beauty of the law of God" is often contrasted with phrases like "Christianity isn't about rules, it's about relationship," as if relationships without guidelines, expectations, commitments, and trust is somehow a bad thing. Only in a society that wants freedom to harm or exploit others would we ever suggest that rules are bad for relationship. Rules do not harm when they originate from and are rooted in the kindness of a loving God, which is the circumstance that we find ourselves in this morning as we begin our study of the 10 commandments in the book of Deuteronomy. As we walk through chapter 5 in the coming weeks, I want us to "Remember to Delight" as we meditate on and consider the "life-giving beauty" of God's law.

Deuteronomy 5:6-7

⁶ "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ⁷ You shall have no other gods before me."

Exposition

In verse 7, we encounter the first commandment of the ten commandments. This commandment is foundational to all the other commandments. If we fail to understand the meaning of the first commandment, then we will never understand the other commandment. As we will see, recognizing the priority and supremacy of God over all things is vital to enjoying the "life-giving beauty" of God's law.

So, what does the first commandment mean? Let's read it again: "You shall have no other gods before me." As with any sentence that uses pronouns like "you" and "me," we need to ask about the antecedent. We need to know who the "you" and the "me" refer to. In this case, we simply must look back to verse 6, which tells us that the "me" is "the LORD your God" and the "you" are the Israelites whom the LORD "brought out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." Thus, we could reread verse 7 as "Those of you who were delivered from slavery out of Egypt shall have no other gods before the LORD your God."

The context of the people's redemption is important for understanding why God is commanding them to commit their total allegiance to Him above all other gods. God was not arbitrarily commanding the people to commit to Him. Nor was God commanding them to do something to Him to deliver them from slavery. God's deliverance of the people preceded God's declaration to the people. God in His grace established a relationship with these enslaved people apart from any works on their part. God in His mercy chose to save them from their slavery to be His holy people for His own possession. He acted to save them despite their powerlessness. And because of His deliverance of the people, they are now His people, and He is "the LORD their God."

As "the LORD God" of these people, in verse 7, He will now command them to be fully, totally committed to Him and no one or nothing else. What the first commandment means, then, is that the LORD GOD who redeemed these people "requires," as Martin Luther said, "true faith and trust of heart, which settles upon the only true God and clings to Him alone." Or, to state it slightly differently, "A person's entire heart and all his confidence must be placed in God and in no one else."

In keeping with the language of the command itself, we can first look at the phrase, "have no other," and recognize that such language is about refraining from having another relationship. Such language was common in Hebrew marriages. Thus, even in our own Christian marriage vows, which speaks of "to have and to hold," we get a sense of how God expected His people to consider their relationship with Him as of utmost importance and intimacy.

They were to “have God and God alone,” which also explains why the Scriptures so often describes the rebellion of His people as an act of adultery against God.

The next term worth noting in verse 7 is the word, “gods.” What is interesting here is that while other places in Scripture rightly assert that there are “no other gods like the LORD God,” still there was a need to address the fact that people sometimes pledged their allegiance and devotion to people and things as if they functioned like gods.

Now, you may be thinking, “Well, I can understand why an ancient people would need to be told to not have any other gods, but we are a modern people. We don’t believe in things like that. We would never be so foolish to bow down to figurines in our homes. We have moved past such things, and so, we can move past commands like this. They just don’t apply.” While we may be programmed to think that we have moved past such ancient ignorance, the reality is that we still face the temptation to have other gods before the LORD God. They just don’t typically happen to be little figurines in our homes on our mantels or near our doorsteps unless we have friends and family from the far east.

So, you ask, “What are these gods that we have before the LORD God?” On this question, I found J. I. Packer’s definition of “a god” to be very helpful. He wrote, “Your god is what you love, seek, worship, serve, and allow to control you.” Or, to answer this another way, Martin Luther wrote, “Whatever you set your heart on and put your trust in is truly your god.” Now, these definitions obviously raise the stakes of the debate. Obedience to the first commandment is not just about some sort of outward abstaining from bowing down to wooden figurines or stone statues. The first commandment is about obedience that springs from the heart.

When we think about having other gods before the LORD God from the perspective of our hearts and we recognize that we are prone to make a god out what we love, seek, worship, serve, and allow to control us, then we come to realize that our hearts, as one theologian put it, are a “perpetual factory of idols.” We can turn sex into a god. We can turn success into a god. We can turn money and other material possessions into a god. In a very real sense, as one writer put it, we serve other gods when we demonstrate a willingness to work ourselves to death just “to keep ourselves comfortably surrounded by more and new stuff.”

We can turn pleasure, status, and sports into a god. We can turn education, food, honor, politics, and glory into a god. And finally, possibly worst of all, we can even turn religious activity into a god. We are not as free from other gods as we like to think. Yet, what does this first commandment tell us: Have no other gods before me.

But what does God mean by the idea of having “no other gods before me?” Does He mean that He is ok with us having other gods if He is the main God? You know, like husband that is okay with his wife having another husband if she promises to spend more time with him? Does God mean that He will tolerate other gods in our lives?

According to verse 7, and by the very definition of the concept of a god, there can only be one God that a person fully sets their heart on and puts their total trust in. Jesus taught us this in **Matthew 6:24-25**, when he said, “No one can serve two masters.” It is impossible to give the LORD God the allegiance and devotion that He is due while also serving other gods.

But of course, why would we want any other god than the LORD God? Even in the way that the first commandment states it, the term “before me,” can refer to “in front of me” or “alongside me” or “in my place” or “against me.” Each of these possible renderings are loaded with significance for understand why we should want no other god but the LORD God. For, there are no other gods who can stand before Him or beside Him or replace Him or rival Him.

This reminds me of one of my favorite stories in **1 Samuel 4-6**, when the Philistine captured the Ark of the LORD and brought it into the temple of their god, Dagon. The Ark of the LORD represents the throne of the LORD God, and now it was in the presence of the Philistine’s god. The first morning after the Philistines had placed the Ark of the LORD in the temple of Dagon, the people of Ashdod went into the temple and what did they find? Dagon had fallen on his face before the Ark of the LORD! So, the people of Ashdod picked Dagon back up (the irony, right?) and placed him back in his spot only to find their god the next morning on the ground before the Ark of the LORD, but this time with His head and hands broken off, lying on the threshold. The LORD God would not tolerate any rival in His presence. He is in a class of His own!

As Christopher J. H. Wright puts it, “Nothing whatsoever compares with Yahweh or stands in the same category as he does. Yahweh is not one of a generic category –‘the gods.’ Yahweh alone is the God, in what *Richard Bauckham* calls ‘transcendent uniqueness.’”

There is no other being that is eternal, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving, all-sufficient, holy, and unchanging. All other things that receive the label “god” are not really gods. Not Baal. Not Ashterah. Not Molech. Not Vishnu. Not Brahma. Not Allah. Not money. Not sex. Not success. Not security. There is only one true God.

There is only one God to whom praise, and glory alone are due; the LORD our God who revealed Himself to the Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, then to Moses, then to the prophets, then ultimately, through Jesus Christ, God in the flesh. He alone is worthy of our worship. He alone can save us.

But right now, some of you are thinking, “Yes, but this first command was given to the people of Israel who were delivered from their Egyptian slavery. How does this apply to me? When has the LORD God ever delivered me from slavery, obligating me to devote the entirety of my life to Him? What claim does He have on my life?”

Titus 2:11-14 explains

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. ¹² It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, ¹³ while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

You see, the deliverance of the Israelite’s from Egyptian slavery was part of God’s plan not only to deliver His people, but also to teach us about His power to save and set us free from the sin that enslaves and destroys us. In fact, the LORD God who commands in Deut. 5:7 is the same “great God and Savior” mentioned here in Titus 2:13. Thus, to rightly keep, to rightly obey the first commandment, to have no other gods before the LORD God, means that we must place our trust wholly, completely in Jesus Christ, our great God and savior, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness.

Obedying Deut. 5:7 means embracing Jesus Christ as the only perfect LORD, savior, and mediator who is worthy of our full allegiance and devotion. Jesus alone is able and willing to deliver us from the bondage of our service to other gods. He is able and willing to set us from the slavery that we endure as we seek joy and peace in other things. Jesus alone can deliver us from the suffering and sorrow that we encounter in this life by giving us the hope of eternal life.

Conclusion

Who or what are you expecting good things from this morning in your life? Who or what are you looking to heal your marriage? Who or what are you looking to protect your children? Who or what are you hoping in this morning for deliverance from the suffering and sorrow in your life? Who or what are you looking to this morning for satisfaction and fulfillment in this your life? Who or what are you trusting in this morning for forgiveness from sin and rescue from the fear of death in your life?

If your answer to any of these questions is anyone other than Jesus Christ, then you are guilty of having another god before the One True God.

Yet, here is the wonderful news, the One True God is the God of extravagant mercy and grace, forgiving all who call upon His name in faith. He is the Only True God who welcomes idolaters to turn away from their other gods and become His children.

Do you want to be forgiven for having other gods before the one true God? Then turn away from the other gods and look to Jesus this morning. Look to the Only True God who achieved the righteousness that we couldn’t achieve through His obedient life and pays the penalty of our sin through His death so that we might be set free and made new.