

Part 31

The Ten Commandments (20:1-6)

- Moses and his people all under the law

- God wants the people he has redeemed to be obedient

The First Commandment

- No other gods before me

- 'You' is addressed to each individual

- Execution for disobedience

- Negatively, we refuse all forms of idolatry

- Positively, we are led by the Spirit

The Second Commandment

At Exodus 20:1, Moses is among the people. At this point the law is being announced to Moses as well as to the people. Although he has been the mediator through whom God has spoken to the people, the law is for him as well for everyone else.

Now God speaks^{¶1}. '*I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...*' ^{¶2}. Before the 'ten words' of Exodus 20:3–17 are given, God tells of how He has redeemed the people from bondage. Obedience to God's commands will express gratitude for what God has already done. The reason why God saved them was not because they were law-abiding. God saved them from Egypt without any law at all, but now He wishes to give His redeemed people His law. It is a common pattern throughout the Bible. After having been brought to salvation, God wants our obedience.

We come now to the **first commandment**: '*You shall have no other gods before me*'^{¶1}. Maybe other nations will worship their so-called gods, but Israel is not to tolerate any other so-called 'god' in the presence of Yahweh. Maybe there are people in Israel who are not very clear that other gods are nonentities, but the law of God is clear. No other god is to be allowed in Israel. All over the land of Israel, where the Israelites will live and where Yahweh will be specially present, idolatry of any kind is to be severely forbidden.

The 'you' in this command is addressed to the individual. The Hebrew language has a plural 'You' and a singular 'You', and the word here is singular 'You as an individual shall have no other gods before me'. This is rather striking since the law is obviously being given to a nation. Yet although the entire nation are present at the foot of Mount Sinai, each individual Israelite is to hear God as though God were speaking to him or her alone. The same thing was true on the Day of Pentecost which was the anniversary of the giving of the law. The Spirit came down upon them as they were 'all together', but the Spirit also rested on 'each one of them'^{¶1}. The giving of the law was both corporate and personal; so was the giving of the Spirit which would enable the fulfilling of the law.

The first command meant that the Israelite and anyone living among them was literally not allowed to profess faith in or worship or acknowledge any other god. If anyone sacrificed to any god other than Yahweh he was executed^{¶1}.

'You shall have no other gods before me', said the first commandment. No, of course not! The Christian hardly needs to be told. The works of the flesh are plain!

It means that we deny the reality of any other god. We refuse every kind of idol, especially the idolatry of money. We do not turn religion into business. We refuse the idolatry of self. We refuse the idolatry of self-trust and lukewarmness in the things of God.

But the Christian will fulfil the command positively as well as negatively. Led by the Holy Spirit, he or she will openly acknowledge that the God of the Bible is the one and only God, the one he or she worships. The Holy Spirit will lead us in this way.

The Christian also fulfils the **second commandment** by walking in the Spirit. '*You shall not make for yourself an image or any likeness of any creature in the heavens above or on the earth or in the waters which are*

^{¶1} 20:1

^{¶2} 20:2

^{¶1} 20:3

^{¶1} Acts 2:1,3

^{¶1} 22:20

- Other nations worshipped heavenly bodies, animals and images

lower than the earth^{¶1}. In the heavens – the sky – there are the sun and moon and the stars. On earth there are people and animals. In the sea, that is, the waters that are lower than the earth, there are fish and sea creatures of various kinds. In the ancient world gods were made from images taken from all three realms. At one stage the Egyptians worshipped the sun. At Ur where Abraham originated, they worshipped the moon. Others worshipped the stars. Different people worshipped different animals. Others worshipped gods that were modelled on creatures from the sea. The use of ‘images’ like these were forbidden to the Israelites. ‘*You shall not bow down to them, and you shall not worship them*^{¶2}.

^{¶1} 20:4
^{¶2} 20:5a

- These things cannot represent God

Why is it wrong to use an image to worship God? One reason is that God cannot be easily represented by a dead and cold picture or statue. Often when God appeared there would be no form visible at all. ‘You saw no form on the day when Yahweh spoke to you at Horeb...’, said Moses later^{¶1}. The reason Moses gave for God’s not letting the people see a shape was ‘lest you act corruptly by making a graven image ... in the form of any figure...’.

^{¶1} Deut 4:15-18

- Inevitably people will talk to idols – which is completely wrong

When you use an idol to represent God you invariably start talking to the idol. You address the image in prayer. God can only become visibly accessible when He takes the initiative to ‘appear’ and when He does so He also speaks. He appears as the God who talks. This is one of the differences between God and the idols. ‘The idols ... cannot speak’, said Jeremiah^{¶1}. Images are not to be used. God will not tolerate false representation.

^{¶1} Jer 10:5

- God cannot tolerate a rival

God explains why He cannot tolerate an idol. ‘*For I, Yahweh your God, am a jealous God, punishing the iniquity of fathers on children, upon the third and fourth generation of them that hate me*^{¶1}, but showing kindness to thousands of generations, for those who love me and keep my commands^{¶2}. God is a ‘jealous’ God. He cannot tolerate a rival.

^{¶1} 20:5b
^{¶2} 20:6



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