

NCC, Question 9

Q. What does God require in the first, second, and third commandments?

A. First, that we know and trust God as the only true and living God. Second, that we avoid all idolatry and do not worship God improperly. Third, that we treat God's name with fear and reverence, honoring also His Word and works.

Text: **Exodus 20:3** (LSB): *"You shall have no other gods before Me."*

Context: Exodus 20:1-2 (LSB):

"Then God spoke all these words, saying, 'I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery'."

As scholars note, Exodus 20 is couched in the language and context¹ of covenant inauguration.² In other words, this is not some kind of impersonal 'contract' (like getting hired for a job), but rather an intimate relational covenant (like saying "I do" at a wedding ceremony).

God – Yahweh – has just redeemed Israel out of slavery, and thus His "words" to them explain how they are to appropriately respond to His saving grace and covenantal faithfulness.³

- The Ten Commandments, then, are meant to picture what Israel's love for – and thus faithfulness to – Yahweh, should look like.⁴

At a wedding, the most important "vow" made between the covenant partners (i.e., the husband and the wife) is, "You and no other."

¹ Notably chapters 19-24.

² Specifically, a suzerain-vassal treaty/covenant. The Suzerain ('Lord') is Yahweh, and the vassal is Israel.

³ Moses repeatedly reminds Israel that her deliverance stems from God's faithfulness to keep His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel. Cf. 2:24; 3:6, 15, 16; 4:5; 6:3, 8. Later, Israel's only hope for forgiveness and restoration after the 'golden calf incident' is Yahweh's covenant faithfulness (cf. 32:15; 33:1).

⁴ As Waltke notes, "The stipulations [of the covenant] do not establish the relationship; obedience to them proves the loyalty and love that seals a relationship that exists by faith." From *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 408.

- That is precisely what Yahweh has proven and pledged to Israel; the first commandment shows that He expects her to pledge the same to Him in response.

DeYoung is helpful:

The other nine commandments speak of acts you should or shouldn't do, but the first commandment mandates a certain kind of relationship. Love is at the very heart of the first commandment. If we truly love God, we will love no one else. That is why the Shema (Deut. 6:4) was so foundational for the Israelites.⁵

WHY is the first commandment necessary?

Simply put, God not only loves us passionately; He knows us thoroughly.

Because humans, Israel included, were made to worship, we will inevitably serve someone or something as our ultimate source for security and well-being.

Unfortunately, because of the fall, we are born with broken minds, hearts, emotions, and wills,⁶ which means that 'the natural man' will reject worship of the true and living God⁷ and instead turn to – or invent for himself – false gods that cannot save.

- As Bruce Waltke notes, the [first] commandment assumes the depravity of the human race to create and worship their own gods.⁸
 - This is demonstrated theologically in **Romans 1:18-32**
 - This is illustrated visibly in **Acts 17:16ff.**

Mankind's propensity to serve anyone or anything but the true and living God is summarized in Jeremiah 2, where in response to Yahweh's pleading with Israel to trust and worship Him alone, she responds, saying:

⁵ Kevin DeYoung, *The Ten Commandments* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 33.

⁶ This is known as the doctrine of "total depravity." We have taught through many series on the 5 points of Calvinism in our Sunday school, and thus many resources are available for further study about this on our website.

⁷ See Romans 8:7.

⁸ Waltke, *OTT*, 408.

“It is useless for You to try and stop me because I love those foreign gods⁹ and want to pursue¹⁰ them!” (2:25, NET)

Humanity is addicted to worshipping false gods.

- In the words of Calvin, the human heart is an idol factory.

Not only can these false gods *not* save; they are also harmful and destructive.¹¹

- According to Jeremiah 2:9-13, Israel had exchanged her “glory” – Yahweh – for gods that “cannot profit”, that is, deliver them (v.11; cf. v.28). These false gods are “broken cisterns that hold no water,” and thus offer no ultimate relief or lasting safety (v.13; cf. v.18).
- Worse, Israel, by worshipping these useless gods, has become “a slave” (v.14). By refusing to “serve” her gracious God who “broke her yoke and burst her bonds” of slavery (v.20), Israel must now serve a cruel and merciless “taskmaster” (cf. 5:19; 17:4).

And so, Yahweh’s command to His bride¹² to worship Him *alone* is actually a command to facilitate her ultimate protection and prosperity.

- Yahweh loves Israel too much to let her ‘follow her heart,’ which Jeremiah says is “the most deceitful of all things” and “incurable” (17:9, NLT, CSB).

We Become what we Worship

This is seen most clearly in **Psalm 115**, and summarized in v.8 (LSB), which reads,

“Those who make them become like them,¹³ everyone who trusts in them.”

⁹ Many translations, such as the LSB, ESV, CSB translate the Hebrew word זָרִים (*zarim*) “foreigners.” HALOT gives the following options: “strange, foreign, unlawful”; “one who is unauthorized”; “forbidden.” Jeremiah often treats trusting in foreign nations (for safety and security) as idolatry; and so, regardless of how one translates this Hebrew word, the issue of the human heart trusting in someone else – whether the nation itself, or its false gods – is ultimately an idolatry issue.

¹⁰ Jeremiah vividly makes the picture memorable through alliteration: we go after (*‘akhar*) what we love (*‘ahav*).

¹¹ This is clearly and compellingly shown by G.K. Beale in his excellent book, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry*.

¹² Notice the language of the (broken) marriage covenant in 3:1.

¹³ I.e., the worthless idols of v.4.

Idolaters not only share in the traits of their useless idols, who are mute, blind, deaf, weak;¹⁴ they will also share in their fate,¹⁵ namely divine destruction.

- This is why Yahweh pleads with His people to trust in Him alone (v.9). He alone is their Help and Shield (v.11), and as the only Sovereign One, is the only one who can truly deliver them and bless them (v.12).¹⁶

In the words of Jeremiah,

- **2:5** (NLT) – *“They [Israel] worshiped¹⁷ worthless idols, only to become worthless themselves.”*
- **10:8** – Whenever Israel worshiped the gods of the nations, they became like the nations and like their gods: “stupid and foolish”.

In fact, according to the apostle Paul, the end¹⁸ of unrepentant and unrestrained idolatry is insanity:

- **Romans 1:28** (LSB) – “And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God, gave them over to an unfit mind.”¹⁹

Moreover, the Scriptures teach that worshipping false gods is tedious and tiresome.

- **Isaiah 44:9-20** vividly portrays this through the process of making and caring for these worthless gods depicted in and by their useless idols.²⁰

Thankfully, this is precisely what Jesus came to save us from:

¹⁴ Cf. Isaiah 44:9-11, which basically says the same thing.

¹⁵ The NET picks up on this by translating the verse as “Those who make them will end up like them.”

¹⁶ Cf. Jeremiah 14:22

¹⁷ The Hebrew is identical to 2:25 (“they went after”).

¹⁸ Many commentators see the three-fold “gave them over” as a divine and progressive hardening of the sinner. Verse 28 shows the ‘result’ or ‘end’ of idolatry: a mind that is “reprobate” (KJV), “debased” (ESV); “depraved” (NET, NIV), “undiscerning” (NAB), “worthless” (CSB), “foolish” (NLT).

¹⁹ The LSB picks up on Paul’s wordplay. When pagans – unbelieving Israelites included – do not “approve to have the God in knowledge,” “the God gave them over unto an unapproved mind.” According to BDAG, the noun ἀδόκιμον (*adokimon*) can mean: (1) strictly failing to meet the test: “worthless, unqualified”; (2) “rejected”; (3) of proven inability to do good: “unfit, worthless.”

²⁰ We also see Romans 1:28 in action. Having an “unfit” or “non-functioning” mind, the idolater does not even realize the folly of putting his trust for salvation in the very idol that needed him to make it!!

- **Matthew 11:28-30**

Finally, the principle of becoming by beholding is just as true for us when we gaze upon the true and living God in the person of Jesus Christ:

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18, LSB)

Conclusion:

Syncretism was a perennial problem in Israel. God's people were constantly tempted to make their faith a both/and religion (cf. Josh. 24:14; 1 Ki. 18:21; cf. Matt. 6:24).²¹

- Like Israel of old, God's people today are just as prone to forget who the true and living God is and fall prey to the many false gods who constantly offer us their false promises of rest and safety and comfort.

The first commandment (like the others) is transformed by the coming of Christ. By "transformed" I don't mean that God says, "These commandments don't apply to you anymore." But the way they apply – and the way we obey them – does change.²²

As Waltke notes, "The first commandment, to not rely on other gods is at the same time an invitation to trust I AM and place one's security and life in His hands."²³

Can I ask you this morning, how are you doing with the first commandment?

- Who rules – who is God – on the throne of your heart?
- Who takes first place in your affections, decisions, or time?
- Who calls the shots?

²¹ DeYoung, *TTC*, 32.

²² See DeYoung, *TTC*, 37.

²³ Waltke, *OTT*, 415.

What steps can we take that our lives might say to God and to others, “You and no other?”

- Just as in an earthly marriage covenant, there are practical things a spouse can do to “rekindle” what the apostle John calls “the love we had at first.”²⁴

This might include:

1. Simply spending more time alone with God – in prayer, Bible-reading, and meditation.
 - Psalm 27 (NLT) – “The one thing I ask of the LORD -- the thing I seek most – is to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, delighting in the LORD's perfections and meditating in His Temple.”
 - John 15 – we must “abide in Christ.”
2. Put away anything – even ‘good things’ – that keep you from #1.
 - Hebrews 12:1-2 (LSB) – “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, laying aside every weight and the sin which so easily entangles us, let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.
 - Like Job, you may even need to make a covenant with your eyes (and heart) if necessary.
 - This is not legalism!! (Just ask any spouse)
 - Reciting the Shema – in light of the coming of Christ – daily need not be seen as ‘religious formalism,’ but rather a regular reminder of the pledge we made to serve God and Him alone.²⁵
3. Hang around believers who love and serve our Triune God above all else, who model well what obedience to the First Commandment looks like.

²⁴ Revelation 2:4.

²⁵ This is why believer’s baptism is such an important event in the life of the Christian (see 1 Peter 3:20, NIV).

4. Ask God right now to help you to obey the First Commandment from the heart, by the Spirit, for His glory.

