



Southwestern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

By Bishop Jon Anderson

The Commandments are found two places in the Old Testament. It is interesting to watch how they are the same and how they differ. Part of respecting biblical authority is respecting the Bible enough to be honest about what it is.

Exodus 20

Then God spoke all these words: ²I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me. ⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. ⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. ⁸Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. ¹³You shall not murder. ¹⁴You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵You shall not steal. ¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Deuteronomy 5

⁶I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ⁷you shall have no other gods before me. ⁸You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁹You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, ¹⁰but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. ¹¹You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. ¹²Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. ¹³Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁴But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. ¹⁵Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. ¹⁶Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. ¹⁷You shall not murder. ¹⁸Neither shall you commit adultery. ¹⁹Neither shall you steal. ²⁰Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbor. ²¹Neither shall you covet your neighbor's wife. Neither shall you desire your neighbor's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

When Luther began his catechism, (lit. “to repeat” if I remember right) he began with the 10 Commandments. Notice how differently the commandments sing depending on whether or not you use the refrain, “I am the Lord your God...” then follow with the particular commandment. Jay Beech wrote a song about the commandments where he used this preface as the chorus/intro to each commandment. It sticks in my mind whenever I read the commandments.

Luther’s text follows.

“[I] THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

*IN THE PLAIN FORM IN WHICH THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY
SHALL TEACH THEM TO HIS HOUSEHOLD¹*

THE FIRST

“You shall have no other gods.”²

² What does this mean?

Answer: We should fear,³ love, and trust in God above all things.”

What are the other “gods” that seek to take over your life?

Luther says in the Large Catechism “A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else that to trust and believe him with our whole heart. As I have often said, the trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and idol. ... That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God.” (Large Catechism = LC – Tappert 365 – my Wengert/Kolb version is at home.)

It is helpful to become aware of and think about your false “gods,” your idols. One teacher argues that our hearts are factories for idols, our false gods. I think he is right. There are all kinds of things that want to take over the center of our life that we place in the center of our lives and give our trust. Luther would agree, “Search and examine your own heart thoroughly and you will find whether or not it clings to God alone.” (LC, p. 368)

A friend of mine argues that “idols are what we make/cling to in times of trouble. We make idols of things of this world to manage our anxiety, uncertainty. So it isn’t simply about trusting in something, but seeking security in the face of insecurity, and seeking security in something other than the one Lord God. We seek security in “idols” because they give the illusion of being more effective in dealing with the troubles or the sources of our insecurities, than if we were to trust in God.”

If only keeping this commandment was as simple as not making “graven images” as we are prohibited from doing in the biblical texts above. What are your false gods? In different seasons and different situations I have been tempted by different idols.

¹ Latin title: Small Catechism for the Use of Children in School. How, in a very Plain Form, Schoolmasters Should Teach the Ten Commandments to their Pupils.

² The Nuremberg editions of 1531 and 1558 read: “I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me.” In some editions since the sixteenth century “I am the Lord your God” was printed separately as an introduction to the entire Decalogue. The Ten Commandments are from Exod. 20:2–17 and Deut. 5:6–21.

³ On filial and servile fear see Apology, XII, 38.

- † When I was a young man my idol was to become an “all-American” athlete. Going to state and nationals was the idol. Winning was the idol. Now I watch a football game and wonder at how I gave myself to athletics. It was fun, but I let it become way too important. It became the center.
- † When I was a young pastor living through an oil bust, security became an idol. As we would walk through our neighborhood full of the empty carcasses of what had once been homes, the foreclosed houses reminded me of how insecure we were as a young family financially. The financial troubles of the past few years have provoked plenty of flashbacks. This potential idol has not gone away. It just comes back in different forms at different times in my life.
- † I love to read and think. Through the years as I have encountered the first commandment’s prohibition against images, I have come to understand this part of the commandment to speak also about my own theology. Our attempts to capture God in a theological system of our own making or someone else’s can be a form of image making. Our attempts to understand and think about God are always less than able to capture who God is and what God is up to. At times I am tempted to think I know more or less than I do. Even my best teacher’s work and thought also has this capacity, to shape my thought about God and Jesus so neatly that I miss the whole of who Jesus Christ is in scripture, or fail to see how God is creating in our time, or fail to see how God’s Spirit is blowing me to understand something I have understood incorrectly or had too neatly packaged. I trust the description instead of the deeper reality.
- † God’s church today, for all of its beauty or pain, can easily be an idol for me these days. That was true for me as a parish pastor and it is true in this call as well. God’s church is just that, God’s. It is not ours. It is not God. It exists to proclaim the Good News we know most clearly and deeply in Christ Jesus crucified and raised for you and me.

I invite you to pray and think about this question. What are your idols... your false “gods” back in time....and currently? The commandment to not have any other “gods” challenges us to notice our sin, our idol making and note our temptations. It is easy to smell rotten eggs in someone else’s pocket, but this commandment is for each of us.

The Good News is that the God who called Moses and whom he encountered in the burning bush wants us to know who the true God is and to be in relationship with us. That is why I like to preface each command with the phrase, “I am the LORD your God, The LORD our God (YHWH lit. I am who I am – I will be who I will be) pursues us and loves you and me. Our LORD wants us to protect us and free us.

We don’t have God, God has us

My friend is right “God will show himself to be worthy of our trust. God will be faithful to God’s promises and provision, even if we must suffer for a while. Idols will only satisfy for a while, but ultimately their promise is a false promise they won’t deliver in the long run or ultimately, especially after death.”

Luther closes this section of the Large Catechism (LC p. 371) with these words.

Let us learn the first commandment well and realize that God will tolerate no presumption and not trust in any other object; he makes no greater demand on us than a hearty trust in him for all blessings. Then we shall be on the right path and walk straight ahead, using all of God’s gifts exactly as a cobbler uses his needles, awl, and thread(for work, eventually to lay them aside) or as a traveler avails himself of an inn, food , and bed (only for temporal need). Let each person be in his station in life according to God’s order, allowing none of these good things to be his lord or idol.”

There is much more to say about this first commandment, but that is enough for today.