

To God Alone Be The Glory

The First Commandment: “You are to have no other gods.” That is, you are to regard me alone as your God. What does this mean, and how is it to be understood? What does “to have a god” mean, or what is God?

Answer: “god” is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart. As I have often said, it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true one. Conversely, where your trust is false and wrong, there you do not have the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.

The intention of this commandment, therefore, is to require true faith and confidence of the heart, which fly straight to the one true God and cling to him alone. It is as if God were saying: “See to it that you let me alone be your God, and never search for another.” In other words: “Whatever good thing you lack, look to me for it and seek it from me, and whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, crawl to me and cling to me. I, I myself, will give you

what you need and help you out of every danger. Only do not let your heart cling to or rest in anyone else.”

So that it may be understood and remembered, I must explain this a little more plainly by citing some everyday examples of the opposite. There are some who think that they have God and everything they need when they have money and property; they trust in them and boast in them so stubbornly and securely that they care for no one else. They, too, have a god—mammon by name, that is, money and property—on which they set their whole heart.

Mammon is the most common idol on earth. Those who have money and property feel secure, happy, and fearless, as if they were sitting in the midst of paradise. On the other hand, those who have nothing doubt and despair as if they knew of no god at all. We will find very few who are cheerful, who do not fret and complain, if they do not have mammon. This desire for wealth clings and sticks to our nature all the way to the grave.

So, too, those who boast of great learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family, and honor and who trust in them have a god also, but not the one, true God. Notice again, how presumptuous, secure, and proud people are when they have such possessions, and how despondent they are when they lack them or when they are taken away.

Therefore, I repeat, the correct interpretation of this commandment is that to have a god is to have something in which the heart trusts completely.

Again, look at what we used to do in our blindness before we came to a better understanding of God's Word. Anyone who had a toothache fasted and called upon St. Apollonia; those who worried about their house burning down appealed to St. Laurence as their patron; if they were afraid of bubonic plague, they made a vow to St. Sebastian or St. Roch. There were countless other such abominations, and everyone selected his own saint and worshiped him and invoked his help in time of need. In this category also belong those who go so far as to make a pact with the devil so that he may give them plenty of money, help them in love affairs, protect their cattle, recover lost property, etc., as magicians and sorcerers do. All of them place their heart and trust elsewhere than in the true God, from whom they neither expect nor seek any good thing.

Thus you can easily understand what and how much this commandment requires, namely, that one's whole heart and confidence be placed in God alone, and in no one else. To have a God, as you can well imagine, does not mean to grasp him with your fingers, or to put him into a purse, or

to shut him up in a box, as people can do with little statuettes. Rather, you lay hold of God when your heart grasps him and clings to him. To cling to him with your heart is nothing else than to entrust yourself to him completely. He wishes to turn us away from everything else apart from him, and to draw us to himself, because he is the one, eternal good. It is as if he said: "What you formerly sought from the saints, or what you hoped to receive from mammon or from anything else, turn to me for all of this; look on me as the one who will help you and lavish all good things upon you richly."

Look, here you have the true honor and worship that please God, which God also commands under penalty of eternal wrath, namely, that the heart should know no other consolation or confidence than in him, nor let itself be torn from him, but for his sake should risk everything and disregard everything else on earth. On the other hand, you will easily see and judge how the world practices nothing but false worship and idolatry. There has never been a nation so wicked that it did not establish and maintain some sort of worship. All people have set up their own god, to whom they looked for blessings, help, and comfort.

For example, the pagans, who put their

trust in power and dominion, exalted Jupiter as their supreme god. Others, who strove for riches, happiness, pleasure, and the good life, venerated Hercules, Mercury, Venus, or others, while pregnant women worshiped Diana or Lucina, and so forth. They all made a god out of what their heart most desired. Even in the mind of all the pagans, therefore, to have a god means to trust and believe. The trouble is that their trust is false and wrong, for it is not placed in the one God, apart from whom there truly is no god in heaven or on earth.

Accordingly the pagans actually fashion their own fancies and dreams about God into an idol and rely on an empty nothing. So it is with all idolatry. Idolatry does not consist merely of erecting an image and praying to it, but it is primarily a matter of the heart, which fixes its gaze upon other things and seeks help and consolation from creatures, saints, or devils. It neither cares for God nor expects good things from him sufficiently to trust that he wants to help, nor does it believe that whatever good it encounters comes from God.

There is, moreover, another false worship. This is the greatest idolatry that we have practiced up till now, and it is still rampant in the world. All world religions are founded upon it, and all Christians are tempted to

return to it. It involves only that conscience that seeks help, comfort, and salvation in its own works and presumes to wrest heaven from God. It keeps track of how often it has made special offerings, fasted, gone to church, etc. It relies on such things and boasts of them, unwilling to receive anything as a gift of God, but desiring to earn everything by itself or to merit everything by works of supererogation (that is, good works that go above and beyond what God requires), just as if God were in our service or debt and we were his liege lords. What is this but to have made God into an idol—indeed, an “apple-god” (a culturally derisive term among Germans at that point in history)—and to have set ourselves up as God?

God’s people are to mark well and remember this sense of the commandment: We are to trust in God alone, to look to him alone, and to expect him to give us only good things; for it is he who gives us body, life, food, drink, nourishment, health, protection, peace, and all necessary temporal and eternal blessings. In addition, God protects us from misfortune and rescues and delivers us when any evil befalls us. It is God alone (as I have repeated often enough) from whom we receive everything good and by whom we are delivered from all evil. What a happy

coincidence that the term God is so similar to the word “good.” God is an eternal fountain who overflows with pure goodness and from whom pours forth all that is truly good.

Although much that is good comes to us from human beings, nevertheless, anything received according to his command and ordinance in fact comes from God. Our parents and all authorities—as well as everyone who is a neighbor—have received the command to do us all kinds of good. So we receive our blessings not from them, but from God through them. Creatures are only the hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings. For example, he gives to the mother breasts and milk for her infant or gives grain and all sorts of fruits from the earth for sustenance—things that no creature could produce by itself. No one, therefore, should presume to take or give anything unless God has commanded it (which he has). This forces us to recognize God’s gifts and give him thanks, as this commandment requires. Therefore, we should not spurn even this way of receiving such things through God’s creatures, nor are we through arrogance to seek other methods and ways than those God has commanded. For that would not be receiving them from God, but seeking them from ourselves.

Let each of you, then, see to it that you esteem this commandment above all things and not make light of it. Search and examine your own heart thoroughly, and you will discover whether or not it clings to God alone. If you have the sort of heart that expects from him nothing but good, especially in times of distress and need, if you have the sort of heart that renounces and forsakes all that is not God, then you have the one, true God. On the contrary, if your heart clings to something else—even something mundane like beer or wine—and expects to receive from it more good and help than from God and does not run to God but flees from him when things go wrong, then you have another god, an idol.

[Quoted from *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, © 2000 Augsburg Fortress, pp. 386-390. Adapted a little so today’s hearers can get the sense of Luther’s thoughts.]

We have heard God’s law explained well by Luther. Now hear God’s gospel as recorded in Isaiah 1. “Come now, let us reason together,” says the LORD. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.” It’s much easier to love the Lord and keep his commandments when you know that he loves you and forgives you for Jesus’ sake.