

a sermon from EXODUS 20:2-3

ON MAN'S DUTY TO GOD IN THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

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3/08/2007 AD

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I. A PROPOSITION

There is only one Creator, The Maker of heaven and earth, and He alone is to be worshipped by man.

II. THE TEXT – EXODUS 20:2-3 – THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

2 I am The LORD Thy GOD, Which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

3 Thou shalt have no other gods before Me. ¹

III. INTRODUCTION

The LORD revealed The Moral Law in The Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai as recorded in EXODUS 20. Verse 1 opens with this statement: “And GOD spake all these words, saying,”² These are not “The Ten Suggestions” of GOD to man. Nor are they “The Ten Good Ideas” devised by pious and well meaning men of old. They are rather the decreed will of The Creator which serve as the foundation of man’s relationship to GOD and to his fellow man.

The Ten Commandments are therefore not voluntary, nor may they be cast aside when men find them inconvenient for their own selfish ends. They are required of all men by The LORD. Matthew Henry observes, “This Law GOD had given to man before (it was written in his heart by nature); but sin had so defaced that writing that it was necessary, in this manner, to revive the knowledge of it.”³ They are part of the natural order of Creation. The Ten Commandments “...express the implications of belonging to GOD through the establishment of The Covenant. [For] Moral existence is a response to The Lord’s loving initiative [towards us]. It is the acknowledgement and homage given to GOD and a worship of thanksgiving [to Him]...”⁴

And without the hearts of men governed from within by The Ten Commandments, they must of necessity be governed from without by force and threat of force. Indeed, a free society cannot exist without men knowing and living by the restraint of GOD’s Laws within them. So the American Founding Father James Madison declared, “We have staked the whole future of American civilization, not upon the power of government, ...[but] upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves, to control ourselves, to sustain ourselves according to The Ten Commandments of GOD.”⁵

The Ten Commandments are then GOD’s Laws, though written upon the hearts of our first parents in The Garden, have been subsequently lost by the contamination of sin since The Fall. Therefore The Almighty has spoken These Words to us in Holy Scripture, that all men may know His Standards and be without excuse. The First Commandment sets the foundation for all else that follows: 1) GOD alone is The Creator

¹ 1, KJV, EXODUS 20:2-3.

² 1, KJV, EXODUS 20:1.

³ 2, Matthew Henry, The Ten Commandments, EXODUS 20:1-11, I. Verse 1.

⁴ 3, Catechism of The Catholic Church, The Ten Commandments, # 2062, page 556.

⁵ 4, America’s GOD and Country, “James Madison,” 3rd quote, page 411.

and LORD of all; 2) GOD alone delivers men out of earthly and eternal bondage; 3) GOD alone is to be worshipped by men.

IV. A BRIEF LOOK AT THE TEXT IN HEBREW

In The Hebrew from The Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia, we have this text: ⁶

אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים:
לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל-פְּנֵי:

I offer this transliteration: ‘ANOCHIY [HASHEM] ⁷ ‘ELOHEYCHA ‘ASHER HOTSE’TIYCHA ME’ERETS MITSRAYIM MIBEYT “AVADIYM. LO’ [HASHEM]-LECHA ‘ELOHIYM ‘ACHERIYM “AL-PANAY. ⁸ I offer this wooden translation: “I [am] JEHOVAH GOD of you, Which I have caused to bring out you from [the] land [of] Egypt, from [the] house [of] bondage. Not it will come to pass for you gods others before My face.”

In Verse 2, the verb is “I bring out,” in the first person, completed, active, causative form, meaning “I have caused to bring out, to lead out, to emancipate” you from bondage in the land of Egypt, that place of suffering and slavery. ⁹ The suffix is very personal, in the second person, masculine singular form – You, O Israel, has GOD caused and completed to go forth into freedom! GOD is the personal emancipator of His people collectively and individually.

The sense of what GOD has done here is this is a completed action. And it is active and causative, The LORD being the subject, He is The One acting. GOD is doing the leading out and causing His people to become emancipated; Israel in no way is freeing himself from the state and place of bondage. So GOD here sets the stage for The First Commandment when he declares here, “I am the LORD Thy GOD, Which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” ¹⁰

In Verse 3, the verb is the negative imperative, “Not it will come to be for you” or “Not it will come to pass for you.” This is an absolute and clear command by GOD. And the command is given in the ongoing sense, in that there will never come a time

⁶ 5, BHS, EXODUS 202-3.

⁷ It is the practice of faithful Jewish people to not pronounce The Name of GOD - יהוה - out of reverence for Him, but rather in reading The Sacred Scriptures in The Hebrew to substitute השם “HASHEM,” which means simply “The Name.” Out of deference to our Jewish brethren, I will follow that practice here throughout.

⁸ In my transliteration of The Hebrew Text, I will represent the letter א aleph = ‘ and the letter ע ayin = “

⁹ 6, BDB, EXODUS 20:2, # 4110, Hiphil [causative], perfect [finished], active, 1st person common singular – “I cause to bring out, to lead out, to emancipate” from YATSA’ - יָצַא

¹⁰ 1, KJV, EXODUS 20:2.

when this Command will not be.¹¹ Therefore, “You will not have” other gods coming before the face of The Almighty. You dare not ever bow down and worship idols of any kind in your life and then bring them before The Presence of The Creator, Who is both The Maker of all that is seen and unseen and The Deliverer of His people! Therefore The LORD is fully justified to commands us, “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me!”¹²

V. GOD ALONE IS THE CREATOR AND LORD OF ALL

EXODUS 20:2 begins with GOD’s declaration of Himself, “I am The LORD thy GOD...!”¹³ As Matthew Henry observes, “Because GOD is The Lord--JEHOVAH, self-existent, independent, eternal, and the fountain of all being and power; therefore He has an incontestable right to command us. He that gives being may give Law; and therefore He is able to bear us out in our obedience, to reward it, and to punish our disobedience.”¹⁴ And note The LORD says, “I am your GOD!” The Commandments are a Divine gift “bestowed from within The Covenant concluded by GOD with His people...”¹⁵

The natural order of creation in and around us testifies to the existence and glory of The One Who Is before all things and Who made all things. For we read in GENESIS 1:1 this Great Truth, that The LORD is beyond all time and space, and yet, “In the beginning GOD created the heaven and the earth.”¹⁶ When The LORD reproved Job, He showed him the glory of His greatness in creation as in JOB 38:4-7, “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding. Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it? Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or who laid the corner stone thereof; When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of GOD shouted for joy?”¹⁷ Shall men then not give praise and glory to GOD alone?

Recall that The LORD revealed Himself in the burning bush to Moses by His Eternal Name of Glory in EXODUS 3:14, “And GOD said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and He said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you!”¹⁸ And we read in ISAIAH 44:24, “Thus saith The LORD, thy Redeemer, and He that formed thee from the womb, I am The LORD that maketh all things; that stretcheth forth the heavens alone; that spreadeth abroad the earth by Myself!”¹⁹ So also does David sing out in prayer to The Creator in PSALM 86:10-12, “For Thou art great, and doest wondrous things: Thou art GOD alone. Teach me Thy way, O LORD; I will walk in Thy truth: unite my heart to fear Thy Name. I will praise Thee, O Lord my GOD, with

¹¹ 6, BDB, EXODUS 20:3, #2393, Qal [simple], imperfect [ongoing], imperative [command], active, 3rd person masculine singular, “I come to pass, become, be, take place” from HAYAH -

¹² 1, KJV, EXODUS 20:2-3.

¹³ 1, KJV, EXODUS 20:2a.

¹⁴ 2, Matthew Henry, The Ten Commandments, EXODUS 20:1-11, II, 2, (1). Verse 2.

¹⁵ 3, Catechism of The Catholic Church, The Ten Commandments, # 2077, page 559.

¹⁶ 1, KJV, GENESIS 1:1.

¹⁷ 1, KJV, JOB 38:4-7.

¹⁸ 1, KJV, EXODUS 3:14.

¹⁹ 1, KJV, ISAIAH 44:24.

all my heart: and I will glorify Thy Name for evermore!”²⁰ Shall men then not give what is due to GOD?

And since GOD The Son is one with GOD The Father, and because our Lord is now exalted in His glory in Heaven, The blessed Apostles teach us that CHRIST JESUS is also to be worshipped by men. So Saint James teaches us of Him as in JAMES 2:1, “...our Lord JESUS CHRIST, The Lord of glory...”²¹ Saint Peter exhorts us in II PETER 3:18, “But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour JESUS CHRIST. To Him be glory both now and for ever...” And likewise Saint John beheld the hosts of Heaven calling out in worship as in REVELATION 5:12, “...Worthy is The Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing!”²² Shall men then now worship The Lord?

VI. GOD ALONE DELIVERS MEN OUT OF EARTHLY & ETERNAL BONDAGE

EXODUS 20:2 continues with GOD reminding His people that He alone is Their Deliverer: “...Which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage!”²³ Under The Old Covenant, ancient Israel was especially bound to worship and praise The LORD alone, for He undertook by great works of Mercy to deliver by His mighty hand Those People from their terrible suffering and oppression in pagan Egypt. And He brought them to Mount Sinai, there making with them His Covenant, that He would be their GOD and they would be His people.

Of the duty to GOD that Israel owed, Matthew Henry observes that they were thus “...bound in gratitude to obey Him, because He had done them so great a kindness, had brought them out of a grievous slavery into a glorious liberty... Nay, by redeeming them, He acquired a further right to rule them; they owed their service to Him to Whom they owed their freedom, and Whose they were by purchase!”²⁴ So we read The LORD’s Words in EXODUS 29:45, “And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their GOD.”²⁵ Therefore The Almighty had a double right to command Israel to worship Him and Him alone!

Note what Wycliffe says: “The Law was not given as a means of salvation. It was given to a people already saved... in order to instruct them in the will of The Lord so that they might fulfill GOD’s purpose for them...”²⁶ And as the Old Testament covenant nation, so also for us the New Testament covenant Body of CHRIST - The Church - which GOD spoke to Moses in EXODUS 19:5-6, “Now therefore, if ye will obey My voice indeed, and keep My Covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto

²⁰ 1, KJV, PSALM 86:10-12.

²¹ 1, KJV, JAMES 2:1.

²² 1, KJV, REVELATION 5:12.

²³ 1, KJV, EXODUS 20:2b.

²⁴ 2, Matthew Henry, The Ten Commandments, EXODUS 20:1-11, II, 2, (3). Verse 2.

²⁵ 1, KJV, EXODUS 29:45.

²⁶ 7, Wycliffe, The Ten Commandments, EXODUS 20:1-20, 2, paragraph 1, page 68.

Me above all people: for all the earth is Mine: And ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests...!”²⁷

Now if by such Providence The Almighty has an unshakable claim to the sole worship of Old Testament Israel, how much more does that claim call upon the sole worship of those saved by His hand in The New Testament Church? So Matthew Henry again says well, “And thus CHRIST, having rescued us out of the bondage of sin, is entitled to the best service we can do Him, ...Having loosed our bonds, He has bound us to obey Him...!”²⁸ Martin Luther, that fiery Reformation Father, puts the case for our duty to worship our Lord and Him alone plainly before us: “In His life, CHRIST is an example, showing us how to live; in His death, He is a sacrifice, satisfying our sins; in His resurrection, a conqueror; in His ascension, a King; in His intercession, a High Priest.”²⁹ And into all these great blessings of His Grace The Saviour gives us claim when we are His!

And what does Saint Paul say? That our redemption is bought by the very Body and Blood of GOD Incarnate given up for us! So we read in I CORINTHIANS 6:19-20, “What? know ye not that your body is the temple of The HOLY GHOST Which is in you, Which ye have of GOD, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify GOD in your body, and in your spirit, which are GOD's!”³⁰ Therefore The Almighty has an even more precious double right to command those who are called by The Name of His Son to worship Him and Him alone!

VII. GOD ALONE IS TO BE WORSHIPPED BY MEN

The foundations for GOD’s claim being laid down in Verse 2, now The Almighty gives us The First Commandment in EXODUS 20:3, “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me!”³¹ We are to worship only of The LORD, nor are we to divide our worship between Him and idols of any type in our lives, for He alone has both created us and redeemed us. Matthew Henry puts it this way, that The First Commandment requires us to “...take The Lord for our GOD, acknowledge that He [alone] is GOD, accept Him for ours, adore Him with admiration and humble reverence, and set our affections entirely upon Him...”³²

As Walvoord and Zuck observe, “...Israel was to worship The one true GOD [and Him alone]. Worshipping false gods would be setting up rivals to Him [which is the meaning of ‘gods others before My face’ which we saw in the Hebrew text] ...[meaning] ‘in opposition to Me’ as well as ‘in My Presence.’”³³ And note that The LORD gives us The First Commandment in the negative imperative, as we saw in the Hebrew text, “Not you shall have gods others before My face.” Why did The Almighty not simply say,

²⁷ 1, KJV, EXODUS 19:5-6.

²⁸ 2, Matthew Henry, The Ten Commandments, EXODUS 20:1-11, II, 2, (3). Verse 2.

²⁹ 4, America’s GOD and Country, “Martin Luther,” 3rd quote, page 405.

³⁰ 1, KJV, I CORINTHIANS 6:19-20.

³¹ 1, KJV, EXODUS 20:3.

³² 2, Matthew Henry, The Ten Commandments, EXODUS 20:1-11, III, 1. Verse 3.

³³ 8, Walvoord and Zuck, EXODUS 203, page 139.

“You shall worship only Me?” Because, as Wycliffe notes, The Commandments “...presuppose the existence of sin and evil desires in the human heart.”³⁴ For the human heart is forever in its fallen state yearning to bow down before the idols which tempt us to stray from The LORD.

And note where the root of sin lies in the breaking of The First Commandment: Take away This Truth - “Worship GOD and GOD only” - and all the other Commandments are undone. Remove this basis for True Religion, and all the supports for piety and charity are dissolved. Cast away this most basic of Absolutes from over the souls of men, and what will reign in its place is the violent anarchy of each man desiring to be a god unto himself. It is the sin of which the devil beguiled Adam and Eve in The Garden; the same sin which men held in their hearts when they attempted the Tower of Babel; the same sin which Lucifer aspired to in his futile rebellion against The Almighty: “Come, let us be as GOD, and give the worship due unto Him to ourselves!”

And O what a fearful thing for the idolater to be found out by The LORD! For it matters not if we break The First Commandment with openly brazen idols set up upon the thrones of our hearts, or if we feign piety before Him and quietly lift up our idols when we think neither GOD nor man is watching! Either way, we have sinned. So we read this warning in PSALM 44:20-21, “If we have forgotten The Name of our GOD, or stretched out our hands to a strange god; Shall not GOD search this out? for He knoweth the secrets of the heart!”³⁵

My friends, let us cast down every idol in our lives by the Victory and Grace of our Lord JESUS CHRIST. We must pray for His continuous sanctification of our lives and our souls. We must ask for His Strength to confess and repent of all the violations of His First Commandment in our lives whenever and where ever they may spring up. And we must confess as with the angel in Saint John’s vision in REVELATION 14:7, whom he heard, “Saying with a loud voice, Fear GOD, and give glory to Him; for the hour of His judgment is come: and worship Him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters!”³⁶

VIII. A QUESTION OF IDOLS IN OUR LIVES?

My friends, what idols might we have in our own lives, by which we give offense to GOD and break His First Commandment? We all as sinners – even those who are saved by GOD’s Grace in The precious Body and Blood of our Saviour JESUS CHRIST – are prone to the temptation of setting up idols in our lives. Men may not bow down in worship of idols of Baal or Zeus in this time and place, but there are other idols a plenty all about us in this present world! Perhaps it is another person whom we set up on the throne of our hearts, where first should be our worship of our Redeemer King. Some men bow down in worship to money, power or material things. Others give their soul’s allegiance to earthly accomplishments, places of prestige or the exaltation of the works

³⁴ 7, Wycliffe, The Ten Commandments, EXODUS 20:2, page 69.

³⁵ 1, KJV, PSALM 44:20-21.

³⁶ 1, KJV, REVELATION 14:7.

of their minds. Still others may give their worship to addictions of the world, the flesh or the devil – drugs, alcohol, promiscuity, reveling, gambling and the like.

Here then is the ever present temptation before men to break The First Commandment, that they are forever prone to setting up false idols to rule over their lives, rather than with thankful joy worshipping GOD alone. And it is most commonly a subtle and gradual slide from piety into idolatry, which is therefore all the more dangerous, as even the faithful Christian man may at times fall into its snares! So Matthew Henry observes, “The sin against This Commandment which we are most in danger of is giving the glory and honour to any creature which are due to GOD only. Pride makes a god of self, covetousness makes a god of money, sensuality makes a god of the belly; whatever is esteemed or loved, feared or served, delighted in effect make a god of [that thing in our lives]...”³⁷

But yet in CHRIST JESUS , by obeying His Commands out of earnest humility and love for Him, by His Grace bestowed upon us to resist sin, by the assurances of The Word and The Sacraments kept for us by the faithful Church on earth, by heartfelt confession and repentance to Him when we do fall, we who are His shall overcome! Are you sealed unto salvation in Christian Baptism? Then you have your assurance of your hope for salvation in CHRIST JESUS! Are you a faithful servant of The Body of CHRIST on earth, which is the visible Church? Then take comfort in where your eternal soul shall soon rest!

Do you keep GOD’s Commandments and receive The Sacraments rightly as one that humbly loves The LORD with all your heart, soul and mind, and your neighbour as yourself? Then fear not, for you who call upon The Name of The LORD shall be saved! Though not yet perfected in righteousness in this life, do you seek to worship GOD and Him alone in your Christian walk? Then take courage, for He will give you the Grace to carry on to The Prize of eternal life in Heaven! For as Saint Paul says in II TIMOTHY 2:19, “...the foundation of GOD standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are His. And, Let every one that nameth The Name of CHRIST depart from iniquity!”³⁸

IX. IN CONCLUSION

So we have seen that The Ten Commandments are spoken by The Almighty to all men, that they might know the foundations of their duty and relationship to GOD and to his fellow man. They are given by The LORD particularly within first The Old Covenant to ancient Israel and again in The New Covenant to those within The Church. The First Commandment, “You shall have no other GOD but GOD,” sets the basis for all else that follows. We all are prone to setting up idols in our lives that at times may divert our worship due only to GOD. By our Lord JESUS CHRIST gives to us His saints the Grace to resist such temptations and, when we do fall, the recourse of forgiveness when we confess and repent of such sins.

³⁷ 2, Matthew Henry, The Ten Commandments, EXODUS 20:1-11, III, 1. Verse 3.

³⁸ 1, KJV, II TIMOTHY 2:19/

And within EXODUS 20:2-3 we found these three doctrines: 1) GOD alone is The Creator and LORD of all; 2) GOD alone delivers men out of earthly and eternal bondage; 3) GOD alone is to be worshipped by men. For, as we have seen, there is only one Creator, The Maker of heaven and earth, and He alone is to be worshipped by man! And there is only one Saviour, our Lord JESUS CHRIST, to Whom all men must resort for their salvation. Let us then remember what Saint John exhorts us to in I JOHN 5:21, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols...!”³⁹ In The Name of GOD The Father, and The Son and The Holy Ghost. AMEN! .

³⁹ 1, KJV, I JOHN 5:21.

X. REFERENCES

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