
THE FIRST COMMANDMENT
Sermon for the 3rd Sunday in Lent, 2021
Exodus 20:2-3

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Exodus 20:2-3: ² **“I am the LORD, your God, and have brought you out of slave-quarters in the land of Egypt. ³ You shall have no other gods before Me!**

Dear friends in Christ,

Our First Reading for today contains the giving of the Ten Commandments by the LORD God. In the Ten Commandments, God had given His people Israel a summary of the moral Law. The Commandments offered a basic distinction between right and wrong. Their prohibitions did not merely apply to outward conduct but began by pointing to the *importance of reverence* for the one true God, the only source of all good, and ended by calling attention to people’s *inner desires*, their act of coveting, as the source of all evil. Moses later emphasised in his farewell address how true observance of the Commandments begins with the fear and love of God.¹ Christ pointed to love as the fulfilment of the Law. In the Sermon on the Mount, He emphasised again and again how true obedience to the Commandments begins in the heart.

At the pinnacle of all Commandments stands the mighty word: **“I am the LORD, your God.”** This First Commandment of God is amazing because before He comes to us with His *“You shall,”* He comes to us with His **“I am.”** Before the LORD God wants something from us, *He introduces Himself to us*, revealing His reality, and in His holy name, He gives Himself. First He gives, then He demands. Out of pure grace, He puts us into His domain and announces what the Laws of His kingdom are. What the LORD God wants from us is only a result of what He has given us in His Son, Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, the LORD God has caught us poor, sinful, lost men and made us His people, a people for His possession.² In Him, He has delivered us out of the darkness into His light.³ In Him, He has set us free to be His children. That is where we are coming from when we hear the LORD God’s Commandments. When the LORD

¹ Deuteronomy 5, 6

² Exodus 19:6; Deuteronomy 7:6; 1 Peter 2:9

³ Luke 1:79

God gives us His commandment, we are coming from the Gospel we have received. The Ten Commandments are therefore not the sum of some kind of moral teaching but a consequence of the miracle that the LORD God has performed on us through His Son. We would not be able to take even a step on the path of the Commandments of our LORD God if He had not first taken us along the path of salvation, on the path that He has gone with us in the birth, passion, death, and resurrection of our Saviour. But since He has led us out of the slavery of sin, death, and the devil, since He has bought us to be His own possession, since He has purely out of grace and mercy taken us completely in His hand, He now tells us what is fitting for such people, for those who have become citizens and members of His household. Therefore, He rightly expects from us that we, out of the power of His saving work, must praise and thank Him. He further expects too that we shall now behave sensibly, as is fitting for such people, for those who belong to His family, since they have indeed become His children.

So who does the LORD God address in His Ten Commandments? Who is meant by “*you*,” when He says, “**You shall have no other gods before Me!**”

In the Ten Commandments, the LORD God addresses His people, His Church, as a whole. In Christendom, it must not happen that before the one true God, there are still other gods who are being served. In its conduct, the Christian Church, *Christendom as a whole*, should make it plain every day that it fears the LORD God alone above all things and that it loves and trusts Him above all things. Luther, in his explanation of the Commandments, was correct when he said that the “*you*” of the Commandments is explained by the “*we*.” “**You shall have no other gods.**” *What does this mean? We* - the holy, universal, Christian Church – Luther said, should “fear, love, and trust in God above all things” (Luther’s Small Catechism). In the Ten Commandments, the individual is addressed as a member of the whole, as a component of the “*we*.” It is essential that we make that clear from the start. The Ten Commandments primarily have in view the sum of God’s people and the Christian Church. *The sanctification of the LORD God’s people is, therefore, the goal of the Ten Commandments.*

The Bible speaks of the Christian Church in several different ways. In the strict sense of the term, the Church is the communion of saints, or the total number of true believers of all times and places, the people who belong to Jesus Christ. In this sense, there is only one Church. We often call this the Church Invisible. However, the New Testament repeatedly speaks of churches also in the sense of local congregations. It uses this term to refer to believers in certain places who regularly meet together with Christ in His real presence through the

Gospel and the Sacraments. A local church in this sense is not different from the communion of saints, the Church Invisible, but it is the communion of saints *in that place*. In this local church, individual members come together for worship but are still part of the whole. The attitude of the individual worshipper is truly dependent on the whole and, as a rule, is more dependent than he knows. The individual, in his spiritual insights, in his spiritual desires, also in the progress of his spiritual life, is carried and defined by the whole congregation in which he stands. What's more is that in every part of his life until it ends, he is carried and defined by the spiritual condition of all Christendom. That's why it's crucial to know what attitude is reigning among Christians throughout the Church at a certain time. That's why the LORD God primarily takes aim with His Commandments at the *sanctification of His people*. That's why we, as individuals and as an individual congregation, must also be responsible together for knowing the entire inward and spiritual situation of the Church. The entire spiritual life of Christendom is precisely where the LORD God's will should plainly be seen, that it serves Him alone and that He is feared and loved above all things. Each person is responsible for this entire spiritual life of the congregation, of the Church, of Christendom, each in his own place, but together.

Since the LORD God addresses all His people in His Commandments, the whole must also be responsible to know the Commandments for each individual member. Paul writes that “*A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough*” (1 Cor. 5:6; Gal. 5:9). That is why the whole Church, the whole congregation, also has the right and the duty to watch over the individual members so that individuals don't spoil the attitude of the whole. In a church and in a congregation, the congregation and its leaders have the holy duty of making sure that there are not individuals who are persistently breaking the LORD God's Commandments. That is why Paul warns the congregation in Corinth to “*Clean away the old yeast!*” (1 Cor. 5:7). That is why the Epistle to the Hebrews warns: “*Be careful that no one loses the grace of God, that a bitter root does not grow up and cause trouble, so that many people are defiled through it!*” (Heb. 12:15). Just as the dependence of the individual member is on the entire attitude of the whole, so also among us, the responsibility of the whole must clearly be for the individual member, if we want to understand the consequences of the godly “**You shall.**”

What, then, is the first thing that the LORD God expects from His people, from His Christendom made holy by faith? “**You shall have no other gods before Me!**” The first and greatest danger that the LORD God sees threatening

us is perhaps not what we expect, which is to deny God, or what we usually call godlessness or atheism. Honestly, there is no man alive who doesn't have something that he bows down to as a final authority. This final authority may be anything from money or his stomach or even the state or his own ego.

No, the dangers that threaten the LORD God's people and its members are much worse than paganism. It's the mixture of Christian with pagan, the mixture of the worship of the LORD God with the worship of idols, the mixture of the one, true, living God with the dead idols of blind, human hearts. Or even worse, the camouflage of idol worship seen through what seems to be a Divine Service. That is what the First Commandment opposes. It demands the uniqueness, worthiness, and indivisibility of the worship of the LORD God. The hesitancy of our worship, the indecision of our heart in our worship: that is the first and greatest danger from which the LORD God, through His First Commandment, wants to spare us.

If we want to understand it rightly, we must ask ourselves: *What then does it mean to have God, this one God?* Luther, in his Large Catechism, answered this question with rare clarity when he said: *"To have a god means to have something we are supposed to look to for all good and in which we are supposed 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... Anything that your heart now relies and depends on, that is really your God"* (Large Catechism I, 2). Therefore, in the First Commandment, the point is that the faith and trust of our heart *is always to be right*. The faith and trust of our heart is right, when in every situation, in joy and sorrow, in fortune and poverty, in life and in death, it is always and exclusively directed to the one, true God, who has spoken to us in His Word, in His commanding "I am the LORD, your God." Our undivided trust and adoration, our undivided heart, that is what the LORD God wants from us in His First Commandment. He wants us totally for Himself as His chosen possession.

The danger that the LORD God sees in us is not that we don't call on Him anymore, or that we no longer speak His name, or that we no longer want to know anything of Him, or that we have completely forgotten Him. Instead, the danger that He sees in us is that when we call on Him, our hearts are ultimately still bound by other things, powers, and authorities. The danger is when we carry His holy name in our mouth, but we're actually expecting help for our despair from somewhere else. In a word: *the danger that God sees in the First Commandment for us is that His people don't take Him seriously, that we divide our heart between Him and other things, powers, and gods*. The divided

heart, the heart that half trusts in the LORD God and half trusts in money is, in fact, *completely* trusting in money; the heart that depends a third on the LORD God and two thirds on its own work, is, in fact, ultimately and exclusively *depending on our own work*; the heart that believes that it has to serve the LORD God on Sundays, but on workdays forgets Him and becomes wholly consumed with business or other earthly influences, and then also on Sundays doesn't genuinely serve the LORD God - this divided heart is Christian in appearance, *but godless in faith*. That is the original sin against which the LORD God speaks in the First Commandment. Out of this original sin flows all other sins.

The First Commandment is about Christendom coming out of its half-heartedness. It's about Christendom coming out of the real falsehood in which it lives. It's about Christendom coming out from under its mock piety that shields man's heart from ever being touched. It's given so that we'd want to be afraid of the real secularisation of the heart, of the real godlessness of the heart. It's to tear us out from under the flimsy cover of a detached Christian spirit, to make us recognise how the LORD God is still being overthrown, betrayed, and denied. It's so that we'd want to recognise when something else is competing with Him for our faith and trust, and that by recognising, we'd see for ourselves the only saving work, the only constructive work. It's so that we would want an undivided devotion of the heart to lead us to the only real and true Saviour and God, Jesus Christ. That is what the LORD God wants from us and Christendom today when He calls to us and says: "You, My people, who I have chosen to be My possession; you, My people, in whom I have confided; you, My people, who I have purchased with the price of My Son, **You shall have no other gods before Me!**" Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

Lord God, heavenly Father, limitless in love, and perfect in power, receive our worship and praise. Our eyes always turn to You, for without You there is no help, and with You there is no danger. Be the guardian and defender of all who lift up their hearts to You, of all who seek Your help in times of need.

We confess that we fully deserve Your wrath for breaking Your holy commandments. Therefore we thank You for Your great love in Jesus, who in His compassion and grace sacrificed Himself for our sins. With grateful hearts we praise You for His finished work: His holy life, His blessed example, His

gracious teaching, His loving companionship, and His atoning death, and the place in Your kingdom that He has won for us.

Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may follow the example of Jesus, and walk in love. Grant that, as Your children, we may continue to repent of our sins, give up the ways of darkness and error, and walk in paths that are good, righteous, and true. Fill our lives with holiness, with love of Your Word, and with every grace and virtue.

Prosper and protect the work of Your Church. Give success to all who proclaim the glorious Gospel of salvation. Give conviction and faithfulness to all Your people, that they may work with zeal to gather in the harvest of Christ's redeemed people.

Rule and direct our government. Give wisdom and integrity to all in our police and armed forces, that our nation may be kept in peace, and that righteousness and justice may hold sway everywhere.

We pray for all in any need of body or soul, for all loved ones in distant places, for all who have strayed from Your truth, for all who are in temptation, for all who are suffering sickness and pain, and for all who mourn. Bless and help them according to their need. Hear their prayers. Comfort them with Your presence.

Unite in one spirit through the truth all in Your Church on earth, and finally bring us to Your joys in heaven. We pray for these things in the name of Your Son Jesus Christ, who, together with You and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

Exodus 20:1-17

¹ Then God spoke all these Words:

² "I am the LORD, your God, and have brought you out of slave-quarters in the land of Egypt. ³ You shall have no other gods before Me! ⁴ You shall not make a carved image for yourself or any likeness of anything that is in the heavens above or that is on the earth below or that is in the water under the earth! ⁵ You shall not worship them or serve them! For I, the LORD, your God, am a jealous God. I

punish the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me. ⁶ However, I show mercy for a thousand generations to those who love Me and keep My Commandments. ⁷ You shall not use the name of the LORD, your God, in a wrong way! For the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who uses His name wrongly. ⁸ Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy! ⁹ For six days you shall labour and do all your work! ¹⁰ However, the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD, your

God. On it you shall not do any work, you, your son, your daughter, your male servant, your female servant, your cattle or your foreign resident, who is inside your gates!

¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and everything that is in them but rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the LORD has blessed the Sabbath day and has declared it holy. ¹² Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land that the LORD, your God, is giving you! ¹³ You shall not murder! ¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery! ¹⁵ You shall not steal! ¹⁶ You shall not give false evidence against your neighbour! ¹⁷ You shall not desire your neighbour's house! You shall not desire your neighbour's wife or his male servant, his female servant, his ox, his donkey or anything else that belongs to your neighbour!"

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For Scripture says: "I shall destroy the wisdom of wise people and frustrate the intelligence of intelligent people." ²⁰ Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?

Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For, since the world by its wisdom has not come to know God, God has graciously resolved, in His wisdom, to use the foolishness of the preached message to save those who believe. ²² For Jews ask for miraculous signs, and Greeks look for wisdom. ²³ However, we preach a crucified Christ, to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness; ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, we preach Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

²⁶ For see what you were, fellow-Christians, when God called you! Not many of you were wise from a human point of view, not many were influential and not many were born of noble parents. ²⁷ However, God has chosen the foolish things in the world to put those who are wise to shame. God has chosen the weak things in the world to put those who are strong to shame. ²⁸ God has chosen the lowly things in the world, the things that are despised and the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, ²⁹ that no one may boast before God. ³⁰ However, you are from Him in Christ Jesus, who has

become for us wisdom from God and righteousness, holiness and redemption,³¹ that it may be as Scripture has said, “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord!”

John 2:13-25

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the Temple He found those who were selling cattle, sheep and doves, as well as the moneychangers sitting there. ¹⁵ He made a whip of small ropes and drove them all out of the Temple, together with their sheep and cattle. He scattered the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ He told those who sold the doves, “Take these away from here! Stop making My Father’s house a house of merchandise!”

¹⁷ His disciples remembered that Scripture has said: “The zeal for Your house will consume Me.”

¹⁸ The Jews spoke up and asked Him, “What miraculous sign do You show to us, seeing that You are doing these things?”

¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this Temple! I shall raise it in three days.”

²⁰ Then the Jews said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this Temple, and will You raise it in three days?”

²¹ However, He was speaking about the Temple of His

body.²² Therefore, after He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this and believed the Scripture and the statement that Jesus had made.²³ While He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw His miraculous signs, which He was doing. ²⁴ However, Jesus Himself did not entrust Himself to them, because He knew all people,²⁵ and because He did not need anyone to testify about man. For He knew what was in man.