

CHAPTER ONE

Who's First?

"You shall have no other gods before me." Exodus 20:3

God's Credentials ... His Person

God begins His dialog with the Children of Israel by introducing Himself. *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."* We do much the same when we introduce a speaker to an audience. We list their accomplishments and their unique qualifications for speaking to us in the context of a particular environment. In introducing Himself, God draws Israel's attention to His initial revelation of Himself to Moses at the burning bush; there, God revealed Himself as *"I AM THAT I AM"* (Exodus 3:14). "One of the most debated uses of [hayah] occurs in Exodus 3:14, where God tells Moses His name. He says: "I am [hayah] that I am [hayah]." Since the divine name Jehovah or Yahweh was well-known long before (cf. Genesis 4:1), this revelation seems to emphasize that the God who made the covenant was the God who kept the covenant. So, Exodus 3:14 is more than a simple statement of identity: "I am that I am"; it is a declaration of divine control of all things.¹ In effect, God is revealing Himself as sufficient for whatever needs may come! Now, in Exodus 20 He is revealing to Israel that He kept His word with Moses and brought them out of Egypt to worship at Mount Sinai (see Exodus 3:12).

God's Credentials ... His Purpose

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." Just as He proved to Moses that He was sufficient to bring Israel out of bondage to Egypt, so now He is proving to Israel that He is sufficient for their future as well. One of the great tragedies recorded in scripture is that Israel did not fully appreciate their freedom from bondage. On numerous occasions they complained about how much they liked their former life to their present one. The parallel to modern Christianity is sobering, to say the least. There are too many who have not truly left their *Egypt* and entered fully into the freedom of the Gospel. Indeed, they are satisfied to contend with "their old way of life" as though it is part of their "new life in Christ." Too many are giving the world a false picture of the Christian life, forgetting that they have been set free from the *old* in order to fully live the *new*. Luke records an interesting event in the earthly ministry of Jesus.

Luke 4:16-21 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. ¹⁷ The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ¹⁸ The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. ²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back

¹ Vine's Expository Dictionary; PC Study Bible, Copyright 1993-1999 BibleSoft

to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him,²¹ and he began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.' (NIV)

The Apostle Paul reminds us in Galatians 5:1 that "It is for *freedom* that Christ has set us free" ~Emphasis added. Instead of putting on a display of the freedom that we have because of the blood of Christ, many of God's people are either *in* bondage, or like Israel, longing for the *flesh pots* of their former lives. John quoted Jesus in John 8:32 & 36 "And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free. If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." (NAU) Paul also told the Christians at Galatia in Galatians 5:13 "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love." He told the Christians at Corinth, in 1 Corinthians 8:9 "Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak." The Apostle James wrote in James 2:12 "Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom...." Rather than speaking boldly, through our lives, of the tenants of freedom, we have either remained silent or have lived in contradiction of those principles of freedom that we say we believe! **"For freedom Christ has set us free!"** What do we think that means? God's purpose in setting us free was for us to become demonstrators of *freedom*! *We* have been set free from the power and tyranny of sin; but we cannot demonstrate *that* freedom from sin while we are in bondage to sin! *We* have been freed from the fear of death; but we cannot demonstrate freedom from fear while we are in bondage to fear, whatever form that fear takes ... today, tomorrow, eternity! *We* are now free to live righteous, obedient lives; but we cannot demonstrate *that* freedom while we are focused on and living primarily for ourselves! How free are you? How have you demonstrated your freedom? Do you know what the irony is amongst Christians? We want, we crave, we even pray for, the return to *One Nation, under God*, but we won't pay the price for *One Church, under Christ*! Not only do we not do that cross-denominationally, but we don't even do it locally!

When God revealed Himself with the words "*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of slavery,*" He was stating that He was not only sufficient to deliver them out of the slavery to Egypt, but He was sufficient to bring them into the promised blessing of Canaan! God didn't bring them out to leave them as they claimed (Exodus 16:3, 17:3) but to bring them into the fulness of His promise. In order to fully experience His blessing and His promises, we must understand who He is and who we are – His sufficiency and our insufficiency.

God's Credentials ... His Position

First! That word denotes an order. In other words, there is a *second* and perhaps a *third* order. One of the most famous, if not the best, comedy sketches of the mid-1900's was Bud Abbott and Lou Costello's baseball sketch, "Who's on First?". Too often, our attempt to understand God's position in our lives is like the misunderstanding that intensified between Abbott and Costello. The harder Abbott tried; the more confused Costello became as to the name of the player on first; never realizing that his name was *Who*! (I have included the full text of "Who's on First" in Appendix "B".) The major difference here is that we are not engaged in a comedy routine but in establishing who has the right to *be first*! By virtue of simple logic, there is only one position called *First Place*. Vince Lombardi, the late great coach of Wisconsin's Green Bay Packers is reported as having stated, "Second place ain't nothin'".

This First Commandment states, “You shall have no other gods before me.” *That* should settle any controversy concerning first place. Unfortunately, man has managed to muddle the simple clarity of God’s will. In this Lesson we will seek to come to an understanding of the parameters that make up this Commandment. While the initial words that make up this Law are few in number, the full meaning is vast in its scope.

I. CONSIDERING OUR PERSPECTIVE

We, by nature, view things primarily from one perspective – the physical. In viewing this Law from the physical, we may take great pains to make sure that God is first in our sense of order. We make sure that no one takes His place, and we recognize His supremacy and His right to that “number one” position. We wouldn’t dream of actually bowing down or prostrating ourselves in front of an idol or worshiping it. Yet, too often, that is exactly what we do. Let me explain. Paul stated in Romans 7:14, “We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual [fleshly], sold under sin.” In this verse, Paul’s emphasis was on what he *was* – fleshly, not on what he *wasn’t*. For example, a number of years ago a soft drink advertised itself as the *Un-Cola*, trying to distinguish itself from the popular Cola soft drinks. There was, however, more to that soft drink than its *un* designation. In the same way, there is more to *fleshly* or *carnal* living than being *unspiritual*. Living according to the dictates and for the desires of the flesh is the antithesis of living by the power of the Holy Spirit. If we focus our attention on the physical dictates of the Law alone, we will seek to fulfill the Law through our flesh. While we may not actually state, or even believe that a particular person, place, or thing occupies the place of God in our lives, in all probability it is true only because we have not fully considered the *spiritual* ramifications of this Commandment. We need, therefore, to fully understand the *spiritual* aspects of the Law; because that is what Paul stated the Law is – *spiritual*.

Like the Israelites of Jesus’ day, we have done violence to this Law of God by limiting it to the physical and ignoring the spiritual. What do we mean by the spiritual? In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word translated “spirit” is the same as that translated “breath”. Speaking of the final act in the creation of man we read, “And God ... breathed into his nostrils the breath [spirit] of life and the man became a living being.” (Genesis 2:7). This concept is also seen in our understanding of the origin of Scripture. We say that Scripture is “God-breathed; “holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost (i.e. the breath of God)” (2 Peter 1:21 -KJV). When this same truth is applied to the Law, we find that when the Law is strictly adhered to in the physical or natural realm, it brings death, “the letter of the law kills” (2 Corinthians 3:6). When the Spiritual aspect of the Law is factored in, it brings life, “...but the spirit gives life.” (2 Corinthians 3:6). The *Spirit* or *Breath of God* is what gives the Law its greatest meaning. That is what Paul was referring to when he said, “And the commandment, which was **ordained to life**, I found to be unto death” (Romans 7:10 -KJV) ~Emphasis added. The word “ordained” means to define its purpose. Therefore, the *purpose* of the Law was to lead us to Life. You cannot have life without “breath”. That, once again, underscores the words of Paul to the Christians at Galatia, “The Law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 4:4 -KJV). Consider, too, these words, “When Christ, *who is our life*, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory” (Colossians 3:4 -KJV) ~Emphasis added. It should, therefore, be readily seen that Romans 7:10 and Galatians 4:4 are in perfect harmony with each other. When we view the Law from the physical perspective alone, death results; because death is what the Law demands for violating its principles. While this

concept is true of the Law as a whole, it is also applicable to the individual Commandments; and it is especially true in this First Commandment.

What comes first the physical or the spiritual? The Bible is very specific on the order of life, "The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual" (1 Corinthians 15:46 -KJV). God never meant for us to ignore the *spiritual* even though it is not *natural* for us to consider it. It is what Jesus was conveying to His disciples when He clarified the Law concerning adultery, moving it from a purely physical act to the intent of the thoughts or driving force (spirit). Perhaps what is needed here is a *change* in our perspective.

II. CHANGING OUR PERSPECTIVE

When we think of God's place in our lives, we tend to think in terms of *order*. i.e. God *first*, family *second*, etc. When we seek to put God into the *order* of our lives, problems arise. We may then have a tendency to forget Him when we deal with those issues that are in second or third place. In this Commandment, God is not stating that He desires to be *First*, but that there are to be *no other gods before Him*. At first glance, the word *before* would seem to speak of order. We will examine that in more detail later; however, for the present, suffice it to say that He is the *only* God. When He is viewed from that perspective, then He is *first* in our worship, *first* in our dealings with our family life, *first* in our considerations about our jobs, friends, and throughout *every* aspect of our lives. In other words, He becomes the motivator of our lives.

When we talk about motivation, we often speak of *spirit*. For example, we may say of another individual that they have a strong spirit, or a willing spirit, or a sweet spirit, or even a mean spirit. We may refer to someone as "spirited," meaning, possessing the energy of an unbridled or unbroken stallion. The human spirit is the driving force of our lives. Now, when we take that concept and transpose it into our understanding of this First Commandment, a dramatic change should occur in our *thinking*. We recognize that *God is Spirit*; and, as such, *He* should be the driving force of our lives. Because He is *Spirit*, we need to come to understand that we will never be able to fully capture His essence through our physical senses alone. Stephen Charnock, a godly man of the mid-1600's wrote,

If God be a Spirit, we see how we can only converse with Him by our spirits. ... We can only see, know, embrace a spirit with our spirits, ...A spirit, when broken, is his delightful sacrifice; we must therefore, have our spirits fitted for Him, >be renewed in the spirit of our minds, ...We can never be united to God but in our spirits: bodies unite with bodies, spirits with spirits. The more spiritual anything is, the more closely doth it unite.²

What Charnock is saying is that since God is a spirit (John 4:24) the only way to truly communicate with Him is through *our* spirits. That is why Paul stated in Romans 8:16, "God's spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God." Without Christ, our spirits are dead. When we are saved, we are "made alive" or "quickenened" in our spirit, thus through the work of Jesus we are fitted to fellowship with God.

We no doubt believe that we are created in His image (we, too, have a spirit), and that the *spirit* is the source of life. We must, therefore, consider from this Law that God is the *source* of our life.

² Charnock, Stephen; The Existence and Attributes of God; V.I, pg.202.

We stated that man is God-breathed; he became a living soul. Therefore, the source of our life (both spiritual and physical) is the *Breath of God*.

God then, as the source of our lives, has every right to project Himself as the *only* source of life. His statement, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3), is a statement to that effect. The word translated “gods” means anything considered as supreme in strength, power, or importance. One writer states,

This word *gods* indicates ‘might’ or ‘strength’ utilized in accomplishing or conquering in order to achieve the fullness of life. Its attention is directed at pointing out that which is the most excellent *of a kind*, or that which excels over other things with similar qualities and characteristics.³ ~Emphasis added.

An alternate paraphrase of Exodus 20:3 states, “Do not consider other **objects** as giving you the satisfaction for which you hunger and thirst.”⁴ ~Emphasis added.

This was precisely the point of Adam's transgression. Why? Because Adam looked to his wife as the *supreme* source of his comfort, joy, and pleasure. How do we know that? Because of the conscious *choice* that he made. He chose Eve over God because he ate *knowingly*. Adam knew the particulars of his choice. He knew that there would be consequences for his choice. He *still* chose. There is a lot of speculation among Bible scholars regarding Eve and her role in Adam's transgression. But that is all it is or ever will be, speculation. We do not have a clue what God would have done at that point had Adam chosen the *Spiritual* over the *Physical* – God's Word over Eve's words.

Jesus said in Luke 14:26 that He is to have first place in our lives over any other relationship. He went so far as to state that if this condition is not met, we cannot be His disciple. In this passage, Jesus is using hyperbole, i.e. comparison of heightened contrast. In other words, He is stating that our love for God should so transcend our other relationships that those relationships appear to be hatred in comparison. It should also be noted here that the meaning of the word *cannot* is the absolute negative of possible. Another way to state this would be: If, when we come to Jesus, we do not love Him foremost, if He is not first in our lives, it is an *absolute impossibility* for us to be His disciple. Could this be one of the major roots of our lack of following through? Many come to Jesus, but don't make it past this first step. Remember, this is Jesus speaking and stating the criteria for *His disciples* not the criteria for church membership.

If *anything* supersedes our love for God, it is misplaced in our priorities! Here, then, is the point in the enormity of our error: We have, at worst, substituted *inanimate* things for God, and, at best, have substituted another *individual* for God.

If God be a Spirit, He can only be the true satisfaction of our spirits: spirit can only be filled with spirit: *content flows from likeness to suitableness*. As we have a resemblance to God in regard to the spiritual nature of our soul, so we can have no satisfaction but in Him. ... Corporeal things can no more fill a hungry spirit, than pure spirit can feed a hungry body. ... Man is lord of the creation: nothing below him can be fit *for* his converse; nothing above him offers itself *to* his converse but

³ Focus on the top 10 Ibid.

⁴ Focus on the top 10 Pg.11.

God. ...God had no rest *from* the creation till He had made man; and man can have no rest *in* the creation till he rests in God⁵ ~Emphasis added.

Here, the emphasis is on the fact that there is *nothing else* in the natural realm that can satisfy the innate spiritual hunger of man. Just as physical food nourishes, sustains, and satisfies physical hunger, so, too, the spiritual can only be satisfied with spiritual.

III. THE CHALLENGE TO OUR PERSPECTIVE

Let's consider the absurdity of trying to find a replacement for God. Ask yourself, "Who or What is like unto God?" When God revealed Himself to the prophet Isaiah, He told him that there was no other god (Isaiah 46:9). "Who or What is in the same league as He?" Five times in Isaiah 45 this truth is stated. Nothing else is *fit* to be on the same plane as God! Who or What else is the embodiment of love, purity, and truth?

Well, we may *say* we believe all that; but how often have we ascribed this place of honor, this place of supremacy, not only to other people but to other *things* C inanimate objects – things that are not God-Breathed? What is being said here? This Law is saying that God is to be the Supreme Source of our lives. In every area, He is to be first. We have only to go down the list of the areas of our lives and consider if He plays a part in them. Are the following areas of your life God-Breathed: your social connections, your family, your finances, your vocation, your physical appetites, your leisure time, your church affiliation, your speech, etc. etc.. The list could go on and on.

Since material things often get in the way of our relationship with God, let's briefly consider what Scripture says. "...whose god is their belly" [meaning physical gratification and/or sensual pleasure] (Philippians 3:19). Jesus said to His followers, "What good will it be for a [person] if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his own soul." (Matthew 16:26). Jesus also said that we could not serve both God and money (Luke 16:13).

Everything He has given us is for our use and our pleasure, and it was never meant nor intended to become the *source* of our fulfillment. We find then, upon examination, that too often our own personal desires, rather than the Word of God, dictate our devotion.

Robert C. Shannon, in his book 1000 Windows, recounts the following: "A European explorer in Africa, anxious to press ahead on his journey, paid his porters extra for a series of forced marches. Almost within reach of their destination, they stopped and refused to go forward. No amount of extra money would persuade them. They said they had to wait for their souls to catch up."⁶ Whenever we have anyone or anything before Almighty God, our souls never catch up. Consequently, we are never satisfied or at peace. *Flesh* cannot satisfy *Spirit*.

In the Hebrew word translated "before me", used in this first commandment, we find an interesting parallel to our modern saying: "In your face". The meaning behind this word focuses on the *face* of the individual. In a loose translation of the meaning here, God is saying that we should not have other gods "*In His Face*". What God wants is for the object of His desire, the one whom He cherishes, to be "*In His Face*". It is astonishing that *we* are the object of His desire, and that *He* wants to be the object of ours! When we raise other individuals or things to His plane, we

⁵ Charnock; Ibid. Pg.202, 203.

⁶ Bible Illustrator for Windows, Version 3.01, 8 1990-1998, by Parsons Technology, Inc.

become guilty of placing those things “*In His Face*”. We have probably used the expression: “Get out of my face,” when our individual space or territory has been violated. Yet, we continually dishonor the Almighty God by deliberately putting in His face those individuals or things that rob Him of His uniqueness. As a result of these other gods being continually *In His Face*, He gave warning to the people of Israel through the prophet, Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 14:3-8 A Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of me at all? ⁴ Therefore speak to them and tell them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: When any Israelite sets up idols in his heart and puts a wicked stumbling block before his face and then goes to a prophet, I the LORD will answer him myself in keeping with his great idolatry. ⁵ *I will do this to recapture the hearts of the people of Israel, who have all deserted me for their idols.* ⁶ "Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Repent! Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices! ⁷ "'When any Israelite or any alien living in Israel separates himself from me and sets up idols in his heart and puts a wicked stumbling block before his face and then goes to a prophet to inquire of me, I the LORD will answer him myself. ⁸ I will set my face against that man and make him an example and a byword. I will cut him off from my people. Then you will know that I am the LORD. ~Emphasis added.

What God did to those in Israel, who continued to provoke Him in this manner, was He established their idol. In other words, He removed Himself from the picture and moved their idol into the place He had reserved for Himself. God did this so that they would see how foolish it was to put something or someone else in His place. The person or thing that they considered of such value as to replace God became *all* they could see and *all* they longed for. Their lives were consumed with it.

With that as a warning, we need to take a closer look at this commandment and use it as a mirror to reflect our own behavior. This First Law was never intended to be obeyed in its physical ramifications alone; but, rather, it was intended to be a revelation of our deeper spiritual need.

Now, in viewing *God's place* in all these areas, where does that leave us? Without a doubt, guilty! Without excuse. ... In need of a Savior. ... In need of Forgiveness. ... In need of God's Grace. Therefore, *this* Commandment has exposed our sin and led us to Christ. If we are guilty, He has provided mercy and grace; if we are attempting to justify ourselves, we need to allow His Spirit to reveal our sin and then come to Jesus for His cleansing and renewal.

Prayer for Forgiveness:

“Father, I am now more aware of how guilty I am of breaking Your Holy Law and grieving your Holy Spirit. I admit my foolish tendency to put other people and even other things in the place that You alone have the right to occupy. I am so grateful to You for Your promise that when I agree with You concerning my sin that You are faithful and just to forgive me my sin and to cleanse me from *all* unrighteousness. Thank You for forgiving me and for cleansing me. I want Your Holy Spirit to remind me when I begin to drift into the error of robbing You of Your priority in my life. I love You and thank You, too, for loving me. In Jesus, matchless name, Amen.”

In Chapter Two, we will consider how we, as Christians, can be guilty of Idolatry without

actually bowing down before a shrine or an icon.