

# THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

*Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them... unless your right-eousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven* (Mat. 5:17,20) These words of Jesus remind us of the interpretive key to the Law which we discussed in the last flyer. The scribes and the pharisees of Jesus' time interpreted the Law in strictly legal fashion. This led them to understand each commandment in a minimalist fashion. The command not to kill was understood as only a law against the unjust taking of life. It meant purely and simply that we were not to murder. But Jesus says we must move beyond such a narrow view and He interprets the Law more fully from the standpoint of love: *You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill...But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire.* (Mat 5:21-22). Thus, for Jesus the Commandment, "You shall not kill" is about more than just taking life. It is about all the attitudes and evil deeds that lead to murder: wrathful anger, attitudes of contempt, revenge, bitterness, and hatred. Jesus asks us to consider all the implications of God's Law. He does this because we are called into a relationship of love and trust of God. God commands us and sets limits for us not because He is out to make life difficult or to take away our fun. God commands because he loves us and does not want us to be trapped in the painful realities of sin and evil. Through the grace He gives us Jesus enables us to trust the Father and to love Him. Love does not treat the law as an imposition but as a gift. Love does not seek to avoid the Law by asking, "What is the least I can do to just get by?" Love's response is extravagant. It embraces the Law and asks, "What more can I do?" This is the disposition of heart that Jesus gives us by his grace. As we examine each commandment we will apply Jesus' interpretive principal. We will look at the fuller and inner meaning of each command and see the freedom and truth to which each command points. We do this in trust of God who does not

command without first giving us the grace, the power, to keep what He mandates (*cf.* 1 Cor 10:13).

As a final preliminary comment, note how Jesus points to love as the foundation of the commandments. *And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets* (Mt 22:37ff). Love contains the whole law. A man who loves his wife does not need a command that says, "Do not break her arm." This is already understood by one who loves. The twofold summary of the Law by Jesus on the basis of love also helps us to sort out the Ten Commandments. The first three commandments specify the command to love God absolutely. The remaining seven spell out what it means to love our neighbor. We are now ready to look at the first commandment.

## The First Commandment

I am the Lord your God: you shall not have strange gods before me (Ex 20:2-17; Dt 5:6-2). Is God merely jealous here? Why is he so exclusive in his demand to be worshiped? Perhaps the best way to understand this commandment is to understand that God seeks to protect us from false claimants to our worship and obedience. The history of the ancient world shows a long sad history of the confusion that arises from the false gods which had influence. Some of these false religions and cults demanded human sacrifice, many enshrined bizarre sexual practices and called for numerous and costly sacrifices. Most of them also fostered fears and superstitions to hold their power over people. The Greeks even had an altar to the "unknown god" (*cf.* Acts 17:23) and offered worship just in case such a god existed and he (or she), angry at not being worshiped, would seek to bring about destruction of some kind. There were many confusing and contradictory claims and demands that

bewildered much of the ancient world. Even if these ancient religions contained some elements of the truth, they were incomplete expressions of the truth and contained numerous errors. Though too lengthy to reproduce here, a rather vivid and terrifying description of the evils and sorrows resulting from false worship is given in Romans 1:18ff.

In the first commandment God seeks to preserve His people from such bewilderment and sorrow. He alone is the Creator Lord who made all things. We can and must trust Him in all things for he is able. He gives us the one and only truth by which we may be saved. Since He alone is all powerful we need not worry of the anger or power of other gods for if they exist at all, *the Lord our God is God of gods and Lord of lords* (Dt. 10:17). God therefore speaks to us in love and commands us to worship Him alone, to trust him in all things and serve him by our obedience. *Only in God will my soul be at rest; from him comes my salvation. He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly moved.* (Ps. 62:1-2).

## Implications of the 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment

The first commandment is much more than a law against worshiping idols. It is a summons to a whole way of life. God calls us to the absolute obedience of faith in Him who is *constant and unchangeable... always the same, faithful and just, without any evil. It follows that we must necessarily accept his words and have complete faith in him and acknowledge his authority. He is almighty, merciful, and infinitely good. Who could not place all hope in him? Who could not love him when contemplating the treasures of goodness and love he has poured out on us? Hence the formula God employs in the Scripture at the beginning and end of his commandments: 'I am the Lord.'* (Catechism 2086)

Since faith is such an important response to the first commandment it also follows that we must nourish and protect our faith with prudence and vigilance, and to reject everything that is opposed to it. Many today take lightly the duty to know the

sacred truths of our faith revealed by God. Yet many of these same individuals have detailed and through knowledge of worldly matters. Though it is not wrong to learn of the things of this world, when it is paired with a wilful neglecting of the truths revealed by God may well show where our true priorities lie and exhibit a form of idolatry.

*Idolatry not only refers to false pagan worship. It remains a constant temptation to faith. Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God. Man commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a creature in place of God, whether this be gods or demons (for example, satanism), power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the state, money, etc. (Catechism 2112).*

### **The duty to adore and worship**

Another important duty flowing from the first commandment is the call to love and worship God. *To adore God is to acknowledge him as God, as the Creator and Savior, the Lord and Master of everything that exists, as infinite and merciful Love. "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve," (Catechism 2095; Dt. 6:13; Lk 4:8).* Thus every human being has a solemn obligation to worship God through prayer and praise, both public and private. Our prayer and praise must come from true dispositions of the heart. *To attribute the efficacy of prayers or of sacramental signs to their mere external performance, apart from the interior dispositions that they demand, is to fall into superstition which is also forbidden by the first commandment. (Catechism 2111)*

### **Attempted Control**

A common sin against the first commandment is the attempt to tell the future or to control it. It is true that *God can reveal the future to his prophets or to other saints. Still, a sound Christian attitude consists in putting oneself confidently into the hands of Providence for whatever concerns the future, and giving up all unhealthy curiosity about it. (Catechism 2115).* Consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens and lots, the phenomena of clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums all conceal a desire for power over time and history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate hidden powers. *They contradict the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone. (Catechism 2116).*

### **Atheism**

Many individuals today either do not perceive or explicitly reject the existence of God or consider His bond to us to be unimportant. The catechism calls this one of the most serious problems of our time. *The name "atheism" covers many very different phenomena. One common form is the practical materialism which restricts its needs and aspirations to space and time. Atheistic humanism falsely considers man to be an end to himself, and the sole maker, with supreme control, of his own history. Another form of contemporary atheism looks for the liberation of man through economic and social liberation. (Catechism 2124) Atheism is often based on a false conception of human autonomy,*

*exaggerated to the point of refusing any dependence on God. (Catechism # 2126).*

Agnosticism is a related matter except that the agnostic, instead of denying God's existence outright, declares that it is impossible to know if God exists or not. This of course is a denial of revelation in the Bible and in creation.

*Believers can have more than a little to do with the rise of atheism. To the extent that they are careless about their instruction in the faith, or present its teaching falsely, or even fail in their religious, moral, or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than to reveal the true nature of God and of religion (Catechism 2125).*

In the end the first commandment brings before us the truth about God. He alone is God and Lord. To him alone belong all worship, honor, praise and thanksgiving. Since he is all powerful and all loving we can trust in his love for us and begin to live as children who are both blessed and loved. In this way the entire Christian life is contained in this commandment for it is by this commandment that we cling to our God and entrust our whole self to Him. In the depths of our hearts a song sounds forth that is a fruit of this first and greatest commandment: *God is a good God. He is a great God. He can do anything but fail. He can move so many mountains our of our way. God is a wonderful God. O come let us adore him.*