

## The First Commandment — The Primacy of God.

Text: Exodus 20:3

Suggested Hymns:

507, 344, 170 R&S, 458, 508

- 1) The Primacy Of God
- 2) God Is Transcendent
- 3) God Is Imminent
- 4) God Is Fair

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 20:3, <sup>3</sup> ***You shall have no other gods before Me.*** (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Over the next several weeks we are going to meditate upon the Ten Commandments combined with the Liturgy. Today we are looking at the First Commandment — The Primacy of God.

Our Lord, replying to the third temptation, summed up the whole Old Testament teaching on this point, by answering, ***“It is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.’”***

This is the positive command, compared to the negative form as indicated in our text. Between the two, lies a good measure of the difference between the two great divisions of the Bible.

Eight of the Ten Commandments tell us what not to do. Our Lord often tells us what we ought to do. He speaks of going the second mile, loving enemies, and following Him in all things. This has a distinct advantage over the “Do not” nature of Old Testament Law. This is why Luther begins his explanation of the Ten Commandments with *“We are to fear and love God ...”*

Wherever you find Puritanism, you find a great emphasis on the forbiddings of the Old Testament, and the result is a repellent religion of gloom. This is not the spirit of Christ, who thought of life as an opportunity and a privilege, an invitation to do whatever good might be done within the span between birth and death. Certainly our Saviour’s cross is a sufficient demonstration of His eagerness to do something of positive value on earth.

And the philosophy of life which was Christ's is to be ours, who bear His name. He did not redeem us only to induce us to refrain from evil. He proposes to make us instruments for the continuation of His work, to accomplish certain assigned tasks, and to exercise certain privileges.

At the top of the list stands this blessed privilege of loving, worshiping, and serving God. That comes first because He Himself does. And that is why the topic of this first sermon on the Ten Commandments has been titled: *The Primacy of God*. Primacy means being first, being number one, being the most important. May the Lord bless our meditation.

### **1. The Primacy Of God**

I do not know how much you think about God, whether He is in your heart and mind pretty much constantly or only occasionally. Whichever may be true of you, or at whatever point in between these extremes your spiritual ammeter may stand, the position of God remains unchanged. He retains His primacy whether you acknowledge it or not. It makes no difference in Him, but it makes all the difference in the world to you.

Immense benefit comes to the individual who keeps the First Commandment, but that is not the chief reason for obeying it. There is perhaps a legitimate appeal that may be made to our self-interest, but that is always a dubious motive and by no means the one which is constantly presented in Holy Scripture.

We are not asked to keep the commandments because it is to our best interests to do so. It is indeed, but this benefit must come as a somewhat unexpected result; it is not the cause for such obedience that we render. The cause is God Himself; His greater glory is the object, not our own.

Those people who urge upon us a holy life because we shall thereby be blessed are putting the cart before the horse. The holy life ought to be lived because of God. If this does not make much sense to the modern mind, it is because we have drifted so far from the Source and End of our being that we have no clear idea of who God is and what He is like and still less any intimate association with Him.

If, then, we are to talk of the primacy of God, His claims on our lives, we must at the outset understand, as completely as we can, both His person and His work. For it is obvious that if we are to fear, love, and trust in God above all things, we

first must know God. Scripture says *“for he who comes to God must believe that He is.”*<sup>2</sup>

## 2. God Is Transcendent

He is certainly a transcendent God. Transcendent means supreme, unequalled, superior, going above and beyond ordinary limits. Look up the attributes of God in *Luther’s Small Catechism* and you will find words like, eternal, unchangeable, almighty, omniscient, omnipresent, holy, just, and faithful.

The transcendent nature of God is a difficult thing to be talked about. Yet the Psalmists of the Bible do speak of it, and in our liturgy we make use of their poetry particularly in the Introits.

God’s existence is, of course, taken for granted, and He is constantly addressed as the high and holy One to whom all prayer and praise should be addressed.

*“God is in His holy habitation,”* begins the Introit for the 11th Sunday after Trinity. For the 10th Sunday after Trinity it begins, *“As for me, I will call upon God, And the LORD shall save me.”* For the 7th Sunday after Trinity the tone is more joyful, *“Oh, clap your hands, all you peoples! Shout to God with the voice of triumph!”*

Sometimes it is more sombre, such as for the 3rd Sunday after Trinity, *Turn Yourself to me, and have mercy on me, For I am desolate and afflicted.*<sup>17</sup> *The troubles of my heart have enlarged; Bring me out of my distresses!*<sup>18</sup> *Look on my affliction and my pain, And forgive all my sins.*

But always, God is approached, sometimes in penitence and sometimes in glad thanksgiving. The unvarying supposition is that God is there and that His ears are open to our prayers.

Such an approach dare not be made lightly or irreverently. We are certainly bold to lift up our eyes to God who dwells in the heavens. Isaiah was quite overcome when he saw the Lord *“sitting on a throne, high and lifted up.”*<sup>3</sup> He cried, *“Woe is me, for I am undone!”*<sup>4</sup>

The reaction of other saints who have seen the heavenly vision has been unvaryingly the same. Our God is not one to be trifled with. He is not from beneath. He is from above, and the majesty of His person is such that all the earth must keep silent before Him.

Moses was told to take off his shoes, for the place on which he stood was holy ground. St. John, at the other end of the Bible, seeing the King of heaven, said, as we read in Revelation 1:17, ***“And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead.”***

The first thing, then, to be said about God is that the Lord is a great God. He is ***“far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this [world] but also in that which is to come.”***

To God alone *“Angel hosts and powers on high; Raise to Thee their joyful cry.”*<sup>5</sup> He is the *“King of majesty tremendous.”*<sup>6</sup> To the Lord is ascribed ***“blessing and honor and glory and power ... forever and ever.”***<sup>7</sup>

That is why, in the liturgy for the Holy Communion Service, we never dare to approach God without a confession of our unworthiness and a formal absolution in His name. We must come to God with clean hands and a pure heart. The minister does not enter the sanctuary of God until all uncleanness and impurity has been purged away by an act of penitence and an announcement of the forgiving grace of Christ.

It is only after this that the Worship Service may now properly begin. The Introit is spoken to indicate that the great God is now being approached with the cares, the burdens, and the expressed and unuttered sighings of His faithful people. It is a most solemn act upon which we enter. It is the King of Glory upon whose name we venture to call.

### **3. God Is Imminent**

But the other, more comforting but if anything even more awe-inspiring side of the picture is this, that God is not only transcendent but also imminent which means that He is near us.

God bowed the heavens and came down. The skies poured out righteousness in the person of God’s Son. This is what makes our worship possible and our service acceptable. This increases our adoration; indeed it has become its heart and soul.

If God is as high and holy as He is described to be, the marvel of His descent to this sin-cursed earth is great indeed. The mysteries of nature have moved all sensitive souls to profound wonder; but what shall we say of the mystery of the Incarnation?

At Christmas time the whole wide world becomes as a little child over it, looking at Mary's Son with an adoring amazement for which no words are adequate. This is our God, this little Child of lowly birth; and because of Him man's relation to God is transformed, and man's worship takes on an entirely different tone.

Without Christ there may be adoration, but there will never be the response of thankful love which man now makes for the gift of redemption.

Some of the Introits give expression to this, "*Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Surely your salvation is coming.'*"<sup>8</sup> *The Lord said to me: "You are My Son, Today I have begotten You."* "*For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given.*"<sup>10</sup>

But even when not expressed, the idea of the Incarnation is basic to all our communion with God. What we do, we do "*through Jesus Christ, our Lord, our only Mediator and Advocate.*"

Now I say to you that God, who would do for us, the sort of thing that He did in Christ, is surely entitled to the position of primacy in our thoughts and affections. He has won the right. He has bought us with a price.

But there is always a danger, when the matter is put like this, that someone will get the idea that a dedicated life is something which God demands of us, like an old money-lender demanding his due, and that whatever response is made to this requirement is made grudgingly, of necessity.

Nothing could, of course, be further from the truth. Let it be said again that the Christian does not live under a law sternly imposed and cringingly obeyed. His is the perfect law of liberty, to which he conforms as a matter of privilege rather than duty. The Puritans knew little of privilege but spoke a great deal of duty. The true Christian reverses this.

He rejoices in the liberty with which Christ has made him free. He makes no attempt to evade his responsibilities; on the contrary, he goes out of his way to meet them. Nothing is too much for him, if only he may do some God-pleasing thing. He is a cheerful giver. The ideal of his life is sacrifice and service.

That is so because the model of his being is Christ. He regards it as an honour to be called a child of God. He is therefore most eager to be the kind of person that

a son of God and a brother of Christ ought to be. He has an upward calling; the compulsion of the Gospel invites him to live up to it.

It is much better to think of our obligation of keeping the First Commandment in this way. Much, of course, might be said about the negative aspect of it and about the other gods we so easily set up for our affectionate regard, money, prestige, recreation, luxury, family, and self-interest of every description.

A preacher may with the greatest of ease thunder about the great desertion of our time; certainly there is provocation enough. The Holy Trinity does not enjoy a position of primacy in the souls of the great majority of people today.

But what about God's position in the minds of many church members? It is the function of the Law to point out these sins of defection and to warn of the wrath of God which comes on the children of disobedience.

There is, however, a more excellent way to produce more general obedience to the great commandment, the setting forth of God in all His infinite desirableness. The Lord is adorable, and the first step in the supremely good life is to fall in love with Him. Once that relationship is established, there is no more need for any urging either to worship or to work. Obedience comes of itself, and it is of a sort that will never be obtained by a succession of thou-shalts and thou-shalt-nots.

What proceeds from love is a thing of joy, the kind that was in the virgin Mary's heart when she said, "*My soul magnifies the Lord,*"<sup>47</sup> *And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.*"<sup>48</sup>

It is because this attitude of glad, obedient thanksgiving is so noticeably missing in our lives that we need a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments and the Liturgy. There are many things seriously wrong with us, and to set them right only one thing need be done. An old saint on his deathbed got to the root of the matter when men asked him how they could restore the Services of the church. To each questioner he replied like a machine gun, "*Love God! Love God!*" There is the whole answer to all our problems.

#### **4. God Is Fair**

Let us take another look at God, then, this God who is "*fairer than the sons of men.*"<sup>49</sup> We have said that God is both transcendent and near. These two qualities come to a focal point for us in a way that we can see and fasten on in the Sacrament of the Altar.

One hymn expresses it in one line, “*Lo, upon the altar lies Bread of heaven from the skies.*”<sup>13</sup> The whole glory of Christianity lies behind that idea.

The problem of religion is how God and man can be brought together. Christianity solves that problem by preaching the Gospel of how they have been brought together in the person of Jesus Christ, true God and true man. And lest anyone should say that this union is too remote a thing, having occurred centuries ago, God in His grace has extended the miracle to us, being both transcendent and imminent.

The hymnist writes<sup>14</sup>

*Ah how hungers all my spirit  
For the love I do not merit!  
Ah how oft with sighs fast thronging  
For this food have I been longing!  
Oft have I sought this refreshing  
In the cup of life and blessing  
Giv'n by Him who here invites us,  
And to God Himself unites us.*

This union is the ultimate in religious experience. It is the Last Supper of the Lord. There is nothing greater that the Lord can do for us until He comes again. That is why the celebration of Holy Communion has from the beginning been the high point of Christian worship.

That is why the structure of its liturgy has been so carefully built up. That is why it is so solemn and yet such a glad a thing — solemn because we become united to God in the course of it, and glad because this God is Christ, who has redeemed us by His body and blood. We worship God, the sacrifice of whose Son we remember; there is no higher privilege known to man.

There will be no special sermon in this series about the Creed, but certainly here, if anywhere, is the place to say something about it. “*I believe in God the Father ... and in His Son, Jesus Christ ... and in the Holy Spirit,*” we confess Sunday after Sunday in our churches.

Surely there ought to be more quiet meditation about the infinite wonder of God among us, about His immensity, His never-ceasing and superabundant gift of

life, and above all, about the redemption of the world by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and about the means of grace and the hope of glory.

Then there ought to be a deeper worship of God among us. This is why we do not engage in hand-waving, and a noisy approach to God's person which seems to be gaining so much ground today. The Lord is not a fellow "Rotarian," and worship of God ought to be characterised more by silence than by noise.

That is not to say that church services ought to be stiff and severe; but certainly they ought to have some depth. At the same time there should be a great joy in them.

The Holy Communion is rightly called a Eucharist, a thanksgiving, a great burst of praise for the redemption sealed to us by the sacred body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Our function and purpose is to magnify the Lord. Dr. Jowett wrote to preachers, "*What you are after is not that people shall say at the end of it all, 'what an excellent sermon,' but rather, 'What a great God!'*"

We are to be glad in this God of ours. The psalmist knew it when he wrote, "***O Lord, open my lips, And my mouth shall show forth Your praise.***"<sup>5</sup> And he closed his book by saying what we attempt to do in all our services, "***Praise the Lord! Praise God in His sanctuary; Praise Him in His mighty firmament! Praise Him for His mighty acts; Praise Him according to His excellent greatness! ... Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD!***"<sup>6</sup>

If we can enter into worship with that spirit, we shall have gone a long way toward the keeping of the First Commandment. Of course, there remains the time that we spend outside this holy place, at home, at work, or wherever your path may lead.

The Introit for the 8th Sunday after Trinity begins, "***We have thought, O God, on Your lovingkindness, In the midst of Your temple.***" But what do we think of when we are not in the temple? That question must wait until another time. But today the liturgy points the way, guiding us in the doing of what ought to be done every day of our lives, "***You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.***"<sup>7</sup> Amen.

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

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 4:10, Deut 6:13

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 11:6

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 6:1

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 6:5

<sup>5</sup> LH, The Te Deum, p37, Hymn 428

<sup>6</sup> ALHB 270 v 4

<sup>7</sup> Revelation 5:13

<sup>8</sup> The Second Sunday in Advent

<sup>9</sup> Christmas Eve

<sup>10</sup> Christmas Day

<sup>11</sup> Luke 1:46

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 45:2

<sup>13</sup> Hymn 184, ELS

<sup>14</sup> Hymn 287 v3

<sup>15</sup> Psalm 51:15

<sup>16</sup> Psalm 150:1-2, 6

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 4:10