

# No Other Gods

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Sermon Series:  
Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy 5:1-7

*Whatever we love and care about the most becomes our god.*

May 7, 2006 has been designated America's first annual Ten Commandments Day. Ten Commandments Weekend is being celebrated at the D.C. Armory today. Maybe you were one of 150,000 people who received a free book about the Ten Commandments at Metro stops this week. When our worship team planned, early this year, this series on the Ten Commandments, we had no idea we would be inaugurating this sermon series on Ten Commandments Day. Aren't we cutting edge?!

A consortium of Evangelical Christians, Seventh Day Adventists and Orthodox Jews want the Ten Commandments to get more recognition. They are upset with recent court rulings banning the Ten Commandments from government buildings and courtrooms. They argue these Ten Commandments are not merely quaint articles of history; they serve as the basis for civil society. These ancient prohibitions against killing, stealing and lying form the bedrock of moral law.

At one level, I understand why some people want to keep the Ten Commandments out of courtrooms. They support laws on stealing or killing but nearly choke on the first command, "You shall have no other gods before me." The first commandment calls for

exclusive loyalty to the Biblical God.

My primary purpose isn't to debate whether the Ten Commandments belong in government buildings. The challenge is much larger than whether Ten Commandment displays are constitutional. Incidentally, nearly every government building is marked with religious inscription. Take the Washington Monument. The aluminum cap on top of the monument bears the Latin inscription *Laudus Deo*, which is "Praise to the Lord." Are we going to sanitize from the public sphere every single reference to God?

My desire in this sermon is for Christians to inscribe these commandments on their hearts.

This first command assumes belief in God. Interestingly, the first command isn't "Thou shall believe in God." Rather, we are commanded, "You shall have no other gods before me."

John Calvin said the human heart is a relentless factory for producing idols. We can express devotion to just about anything—wealth, status or popularity. Whatever we love and care about the most becomes our god. Martin Luther said, "Your god is whatever you run to for refuge in your time of need."

Blasé Pascal is remembered today for his work in mathematics and chemistry. By age 12, he had

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discovered advanced principles of geometry. By age 18, he had invented mechanical calculating machines and the theory of probability. In his mid 30s, he became interested in religion. He wrote that within every person is a God-shaped vacuum that only God can fill.

We can fill this vacuum with gods of our making. Pascal suggested everyone is religious, everyone has a god. What do we think about when our minds are at rest? Where do we lavish our affections? Whatever we love and think about most becomes our god. This command directs us to love God first.

“You shall have no other gods before me.” The belief that God is one was altogether novel in Moses’ day. Israel’s neighbors were polytheists; they believed in sea gods, fertility gods, storm gods and sun gods. Every forest and house, field and stream was under the jurisdiction of a local deity. The gods were in charge of everything from crop production to human fertility

These gods possessed human-like qualities. They loved and fought among themselves. They accepted bribes and expected kickbacks. They were fickle and capricious. It’s no small feat to keep all these gods happy.

In Moses’ day there was no such thing as a monotheistic God. Israel’s neighbors couldn’t understand the attraction to a single God. It would be like saying, “You can have only one friend.”

You might conclude that no one believes in polytheism anymore. We still venerate other gods. We just dropped the Greek names.

Jesus railed against the polytheism of his day. Narcissus was the god who fell in love with his own image. I know lots of narcissistic people still in love with themselves. Aphrodite was the Greek goddess of love and sexuality. I doubt any further elaboration is needed on how we pay homage to this goddess today. Bacchus was the god of wine. Don’t get me started on the god of alcohol. What about Athena, the goddess of knowledge? In this information age, we think our Internet knowledge is something special.

“You shall have no other gods before me.” God is not only one; God is only. Israel’s neighbors were willing to grant Yahweh a place in their hierarchy of gods. They believed in a whole pantheon of gods. There is a temple in Rome today called the Pantheon, which is a monument to all these gods.

Syncretism is still alive and well today. We fuse dramatically different religions together into a coherent whole by air brushing differences away and coming up with a lowest common denominator religion.

Take the person of Jesus Christ. Christianity emphatically claims Jesus is the Messiah. Judaism and Islam insist Jesus cannot possibly be the Messiah. We can’t have it both ways. Either Jesus is the Messiah or Jesus isn’t the Messiah? The only way syncretism is able to

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reconcile this discrepancy is by reducing Jesus to the level of a great moral teacher.

Steven van Zandt, guitarist in Bruce Springsteen’s E Street Band, was interviewed by Rolling Stone magazine and asked about his religious beliefs. He said, “I am a reformed Taoist, part-time Buddhist, Hindu, animist, pagan, Jewish and Christian. I always get along great with priests and rabbis, mullahs and gurus, even though I spend most of my life constructively criticizing them.”

This first command draws a line in the sand. God is one and God is only. God is without equal. God isn’t saying, “You can worship all the other gods you want, just so long as you make me your favorite.” That would be like saying to my wife, Chris, “Honey, I love lots of women, but I love you the most.” Would she be flattered by my remark? When I stood before her 32 years ago and took her as my wife, I pledged to forsake all others and love her exclusively.

Our love for God must be exclusive. The reason for this exclusivity is there are no other gods worthy of our devotion.

This first commandment has to do with priorities. God must be our first priority. We do not trust in anything or anyone above God.

Dr. Wilbur Williams was professor of Biblical Literature and Archaeology at Indiana Wesleyan University for 30 years. Over the years, he asked students to arrange the Ten Commandments by placing the most important command-

ments first. He kept a running tally of their responses. They ranked the commandments in order of importance: do not kill, do not steal, do not lie, do not commit adultery, Honor your father and mother and do not covet. No other gods ranked eighth. The most important commandments were the ones which involve other people.

His data squares with conversations I’ve had. When the Commandments surface in polite company, people are most likely to recall commandments about killing, stealing, lying or committing adultery. For some reason people skip over the first four commands, dealing with our relationship with God.

When Jesus was asked which commandment is the greatest, he answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39). What Jesus did was summarize the Ten Commandments. Love God (the first four commands) and love your neighbor (the last six commands).

As Hitler was amassing power before WWII, he ordered every institution in Germany to bow to the Third Reich. Virtually every institution did so—the press, universities, labor unions and the military. Many churches succumbed, as well. But some Christians, called Confessing Christians, refused to support Nazi ideology. In 1934, they pledged themselves to the Barmen Declaration. They resisted Nazi Germany

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on the basis of the first commandment.

After the war, Elton Trueblood wrote about the success of the Confessing Church movement to resist Nazi Germany. “The brave opposition to Hitler which was provided by Christian groups...has amazed the world.... Many have been curious to know the secret of this courageous opposition. What did the church have that the labor unions and newspapers and universities did not have? We now know the answer: they had the first commandment!”

Germany was subsequently divided into East and West Germany. While East Germany was under control of communism, West Germany was constituted as a democratic state. Walter Ulbricht, leader of the German Communist party, once boasted to German theologian and pastor Karl Barth that the communists would be teaching the Ten Commandments in East German schools. Ulbricht claimed the precepts of the Ten Commandments would provide the moral foundation for this new society.

Barth found it incredulous that this atheistic communism would aspire to teach the Ten Commandments. Barth listened politely to Ulbricht’s claims and then said, “I have only one question, Herr Minister. Will you be teaching the first commandment?”

Some of us have been chasing after the gods of success, pleasure and self. There are those among us who are tired of a secular way of life and living strictly for our-

selves. If you desire to enter into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, during the closing prayer I invite you to stand.

Some of us have already entered into relationship with God through Jesus Christ but have relegated God to subordinate status. We have tried to add God to an already full life of competing priorities. Somehow, God always ends up short-changed. If we have allowed work, hobbies, money and people to occupy first place, I invite you to stand during our closing prayer and express your intention to give God your exclusive devotion.

