

No Other gods Before me
Exodus 20:3
Tampa Covenant Church
07 June 2026

Proposition: Because the LORD alone has redeemed us and brought us to himself in a gracious covenant relationship, he alone deserves our ultimate allegiance.

FCF: Wandering hearts that fail to render covenant loyalty to God.

RHF: As the God man, Jesus Christ fulfilled the First Commandment on our behalf through perfect obedience to the Father through his sinless life and in his sacrificial death.

(#1) Introduction:

What's one of the questions we usually ask people after making their acquaintance? *"Whadda you do?"* It's a stock question that usually gets a stock answer: *I'm a teacher. I'm in sales. I'm retired. I'm a business owner. I'm a homemaker.* But what if we instead said, *"tell me what you're passionate about."* That's when faces start to light up right? Because when we discuss our passions, we're no longer talking about how we make a living. We're talking about what gives us meaning. The things we cherish, love and pursue. And these passions sometimes get displaced for others as we discover new joys and interests during the course of our lives. And that's ok.

Now for the Christian there's one passion that should never be displaced or supplanted by another. A love that must always occupy central place in our hearts and it's our love for God. And that's what we behold in the First Commandment. When God says, *"You shall have no other gods before me,"* he's staking his claim on the hearts of his people. He's commanding us to hold him superior to all relationships, loyalties and loves.¹ So, we'll discuss this First Commandment, we'll see the challenge it presents but we'll also discover the comfort it provides.

The Command: *Total allegiance to the true and living God*

(#2) So we look in v.3 of our text and read, *"You shall have no other gods before me."* And right off the bat, we notice it's a negative command.² It's a *"don't do it"* command. And we know how this works in our lives. The minute we're told not to do something; it wakes up that little rebel in all of us and the struggle ensues. *"Hmm, what if I do?" "Why?"* And if we're not careful, that same attitude can seep into our Christian lives; which always unsettles the foundation of our obedience. This commandment implies a doctrine of separation, exclusion, and denial.³ And it's ultimately for our good because it tells us to say no to false gods,⁴ false worship, false religion, rival allegiances, and anything that seeks to occupy the place that belongs to God alone.

The phrase *"before me"*⁵ is idiomatic for saying, *"don't even bring this stuff in my face or in front of me, or even beside me."* It's a constant reminder that the God of Scripture is Lord over every square inch of creation; therefore, he doesn't tolerate rivals of any sort.⁶ Thus, we must always ask ourselves; who or what are we worshiping or giving our attention to; the God of Scripture or the ebb and flow of culture? And this is important because the Commandment calls for the fullness of our devotion to God. And if we want to know why, we return **(#3) to the prologue:** *"I am the LORD your God; who brought you out of the*

land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." In sum, covenant loyalty follows deliverance. In the ancient world, when the secular treaties were made; after the prologue came the stipulations. And the first stipulation, was usually the requirement of exclusive loyalty. The first commandment follows the same pattern; God's people must not to render covenant loyalty to any other god.⁷ So, if God says, "*you shall have no other gods before me,*" what does that look like in our lives? (#4) The Larger Catechism helps us to see how this prohibition can be lived out positively:

- **WLC#104: The first commandment requires us to know and recognize God as the only true God and our God and to worship and glorify him as such:** by valuing, meditating on, remembering, highly regarding, honoring, adoring, preferring, loving, desiring, fearing, believing, trusting, hoping, delighting, and rejoicing in him. (#5) **We must also be zealous for and call on him,** giving him all praise and thanks, completely obeying and submitting to him in our whole person. (#6) **Finally, we must walk humbly with him,** being careful to please him in everything we say and do and being genuinely sorry when we offend him.

The Catechism helps to flesh things out, (#7) **but Deut 6 is the** clearest and most succinct expression of the positive side of the commandment. Moses says to the people, "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.*"⁵ *You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*" This is known as the Shema, meaning to hear. Moses is telling the people to hear that the LORD our God is one or he alone⁸ is our God; meaning there is to be no other. And the call is to love God with the totality of our being as denoted by the word all. All your heart (undivided loyalty), all your soul (core of your being), and all your might (until the last drop of life is wrung out of you).⁹ So, the First Commandment isn't just telling us what to avoid; it's revealing what God desires. A people whose hearts are wholly devoted to him, loving him alone with all their heart, soul, and might. Love comes first because it serves as the motivation for keeping the rest of the law.¹⁰ Now, can any of us honestly say we've consistently lived this way in our (#8) **relationship with God?**

The Challenge: *The waywardness of the heart*

So, the challenge of the First Commandment isn't trying to figure out what God requires. As we've seen together, his requirements are crystal clear. The challenge is that our hearts are not naturally inclined toward the kind of covenant loyalty he deserves. In our modern world, thinking, perceiving, desiring and choosing are said to be functions of the mind but in biblical language, it all connects to the heart.¹¹ "*To set one's heart on something*" means to give attention to it, when we call various things to heart; it entails remembrance. At its core, the heart is the seat of our affections. It determines what we love, fear and treasure most. (#9 Blank) **And this** is precisely where God searches when judging the faithfulness of his people because true covenant loyalty starts in the heart.

Remember the Lord's words to Samuel, "*Man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.*" Which means that while we often get caught up on the externals, God is always looking deeper. He looks beneath the behavior and into the heart from which the behavior flows. And this runs contrary to much of what we're told today. We often hear phrases like, "Follow your heart," "Trust your heart," or "Be true to yourself." But the reality of sin loitering in the heart should tell us that's not good advice because our feelings tend to ride along with our situations and our circumstances.

And this is where Israel's problem began... not in their behavior but in their hearts. While in Egypt, the LORD heard their cry and came to their rescue. They witnessed his mighty acts firsthand: The plagues on the Egyptians, they walked through the Red Sea on dry ground and saw Pharaoh's dead army washed ashore. When they grumbled against Moses about their hunger, the LORD rained down manna from heaven. And when they arrived at Rephidim and found no water, they once again grumbled but once again, the LORD provided. And after they're given water, Moses named the place Massah and Meribah because they put the LORD to the (#10) test by asking, *"Is the LORD among us or not?"* That question revealed more than thirst. It exposed their failure to trust the God who had already proved himself faithful. And I don't know about you but that hits close to home for me. Why does worry and anxiety wreak havoc on us in various seasons of life? Why do we seek security in money, approval in people, or comfort in the things of this world? Because at the heart level, we ask the same basic question; *"LORD you with me or not?"* we're saying *"can the God who redeemed me really be trusted in the midst of various circumstances and situations of life?"*¹²

The Larger Catechism helps us see that violations of the First Commandment are far more extensive than we think. We automatically assume idolatry or false religion. But the commandment reaches into every corner of our lives. (#11) Q.105 asks, *"What particular sins does the First Commandment Forbid?"* As you can see, this is an extensive list; thus, every one of us can find our address somewhere in there. Our brokenness may not be the same, but if we look under the hood of every one of these sins, they reveal the core problem we all share. Hearts that are prone to wander from the God we love. It's almost like saying, *"Every sin is ultimately a First Commandment issue because at some level every sin involves some failure of covenant loyalty to God."*¹³ Once again, the challenge of the Commandment is not that we live in ignorance to what God requires. Israel knew what God required and so do we. The challenge we face is how it exposes our inability to live faithfully in our covenant relationship with God and it also reveals our deep need for a Savior who could render perfect covenant loyalty to God on our behalf... in writing God's (#12) law on our hearts.

The Comfort: *Christ's perfect covenant loyalty*

And so we take comfort in knowing that the good news of the gospel proclaims that God sent his Son into this world to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. What God demanded in the First Commandment, Christ fulfilled on our behalf. We see this clearly in Matt 4. After forty days in the wilderness; he's hungry and facing temptation as Adam in the garden and Israel in the wilderness. But he doesn't put the LORD to the test; *"Is the LORD among us or not?"* nor does he give his allegiance to another. Rather he remained fully devoted to God. In every temptation, he held fast to the Word of God and perfectly demonstrated what it looks like to love God with all of one's heart, soul, and might.

So it shouldn't surprise us later in his ministry, when a (#13) scribe asked, *"teacher which is the great commandment in the Law?"* He answered by quoting the Shema, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."* Then he declared, *"This is the great and first commandment."* Jesus wasn't simply restating the Commandment. Throughout his earthly ministry he demanded the very covenant loyalty to himself that the LORD required of his people. He was clear that loyalty to him took precedence over family, possessions, and even life itself. Who deserves that kind of

loyalty? none other than God himself. And that's the point. Jesus demands the same covenant loyalty because he is God.¹⁴

(#14 Blank) Yet the beauty of the gospel story is that the same covenant loyalty he demands from us, he came to render perfectly for us. As the eternal Son, he remained completely devoted to the Father's will. Every thought, desire, and act of obedience reflected perfect covenant loyalty. And because of his perfect obedience to the Law of God, he was uniquely qualified to become the once and for all perfect sacrifice for sin. Under the Old Covenant, the people would bring their offerings to the temple while their hearts remained far from God. As a result, the LORD repeatedly rebuked them and ultimately rejected their sacrifices.

But that is not what we see in Christ. When he offered himself on the cross, he did so with a heart wholly devoted to the Father; thus, his was a pleasing sacrifice. This is why **(#15) Paul can write**, *"For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."* Through his mediation, forgiveness has been secured, reconciliation has been accomplished, and access to the Father has been granted to us. Therefore, our standing before God doesn't rest on the perfection of our covenant loyalty, but upon the perfection of Christ's covenant loyalty and his finished work on our behalf. We're forgiven not because God relaxed the demands of his justice, but because Christ fulfilled those demands by receiving the due penalty our sins deserved.

(#16 Blank) Someone might be asking, *"If Christ has already rendered perfect covenant loyalty on my behalf, why should I concern myself with covenant loyalty at all?"* Well, we concern ourselves with covenant loyalty because our hearts have been transformed; and we want to live our lives fully devoted to God. Recall, the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel spoke of a day when God would write his law upon the hearts of his people and give them a new heart and put a new Spirit within them. Church, that time has now come. In this New Covenant in which we now stand we're daughters and sons who've been transformed by his amazing grace. We've received a new heart, a new standing and a new hope. And Christ has given us access to the grace in which we stand.¹⁵ And by his Spirit, our affections are being reordered daily toward him in all manner of life. Because the same grace that forgives our divided hearts is the same grace that trains us to live lives of gratitude, pleasing to our heavenly Father. Thus, what God desires of us increasingly becomes what we desire for ourselves.

Conclusion:

And so as reflect on the First Commandment, we discovered both a negative and a positive dimension. Negatively, God calls us to say no to every rival loyalty and every competing claim upon our hearts. Positively, he calls us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and might. When our hearts are full of love for him; it leaves no room for lesser loves or loyalties in our lives. But we also know this commandment exposes us. By the time we lay our heads on our pillows tonight, we would've already fallen short in thought, word, or deed. As I studied this week I kept saying to myself; this commandment serves a mirror in showing me that left to myself I'm a man with a divided heart. And in many ways that's true of all of us.

So the answer isn't walking outta here determined to harder or saying to ourselves; *"this is something I need to work on."* No, the answer is found in looking to Christ...in every struggle, every worry, every hardship and every set back because he's the author and perfecter of our faith. And we rest knowing that right now, he's sitting at the right hand of the Father where his mediatorial work continues in our lives; as he prays for you and me. Because he always meets us where we are and only through him do we receive mercy and grace to help in our time of need. Therefore, brothers and sisters, may our lives be marked by turning towards him in faith. And may we worship him with hearts of devotion. For he is our God, our mediator and our eternal hope. To him alone be glory, honor, praise, and thanksgiving forevermore. Amen.

¹ Dick Lucas, "The Prophet Finds His Successor" (Sermon, resources.gospelcoalition.org, *date unknown*).

² All of the commandments except the fourth and fifth are stated as prohibitions, John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 413.

³ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 414.

⁴ gods: אֱלֹהִים (*ʾēlōhîm*) God, gods, divine beings. *Used for gods or divine beings in general as well as for Yahweh.* The word literally means "gods." The form of the word is plural, but when it is used to refer to Yahweh it is usually treated grammatically as a singular noun and occurs with singular verbs and adjectives.

⁵Before Me: פָּנָה (*pāne*). n. comm. face. *Refers to the front part of a person's head.* While *pāne* literally refers to the front part of the head where mouth, eyes, and nose are located (Gen 43:31), seeing the face could represent being in someone's physical presence, referring indirectly to the body as a whole (Gen 44:14; 47:10). The face can be used to describe various emotional states metaphorically, including shame as something that covers the face and grief as something that makes the face fall (Ezek 7:18; Gen 4:5).

⁶ Frame, 407.

⁷ Ibid, 409.

⁸ Miller asserts the translation of the Shema as "the LORD alone" most clearly represents the force of the First Commandment, which is its foundation and counterpart. From this point onward, loving the Lord is the primary but not the only way of expressing the fullness of devotion conveyed by the First Commandment in its prohibitive form. Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, ed. Patrick D. Miller, First edition, Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 22.

⁹ Ibid, 22.

¹⁰ Frame, 410.

¹¹ Gerald P. Cowen, "Heart," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand et al. (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 731.

¹² Miller, 29.

¹³ Frame, 415.

¹⁴ Ibid, 410.

¹⁵ Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1985), 1084.