

Sermon on the First Commandment

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Old Testament contains many laws and regulations which God gave for the spiritual and moral formation of the children of Israel. Most of these regulations eventually fell by the wayside under the inspiration and direction of the Holy Spirit during the Church's first Council in Jerusalem.

For example, we are no longer required to practice circumcision or avoid pork. These rules or laws are followed now only by observant Jews. But the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, were kept and affirmed as absolutely essential for all Christians.

The Ten Commandments reveal a particular plan; there is nothing coincidental about them or the order in which God gave them to Moses. Thus, the first few commandments are the most important, outlining our specific duties towards God, and the next five commandments define our responsibilities towards our neighbor, our life in community, in society, as it were. And only the last commandment talks about the inner life we must cultivate—learning how to discipline our desires and thoughts.

There are some interesting similarities between the Ten commandments and the laws of ancient such nations as Mesopotamia, and the Assyrian and Hittite laws composed around 1500 B.C. These similarities are not coincidental, but due to the fact that a very distinct moral law has been planted deeply into all human beings by God—even if they are pagans. This is why the early Christian writer, said that the Ten Commandments were engraved on the hearts of men even before being written on the tables of stone.

Today we will speak only about the first commandment, which is the Great Commandment:

"I am the Lord your God ... thou shalt have no other gods before Me."

By means of this commandment, God draws our complete attention to Himself, making it clear that He alone is worthy of love, praise and worship, as well as being the supreme goal of our life. Therefore, He deserves all of our thoughts, words and actions, as Christ Himself taught us in the Lord's Prayer: "Hallowed be Thy Name; Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven."



Entrance of the Theotokos to the Temple

We can easily deduce from this that the First Commandment is the foundation of everything—and is even more important today than it was in Old Testament times. Although we live in an internet cyberspace world, permeated by knowledge and information of all kinds, right at our fingertips, true awareness, experience, and knowledge of God—as opposed to vague warm feelings--has never been at a lower ebb than it is today.



The correction of this crisis must begin with learning about God from His revelation in the Holy Scriptures, studying, thinking, and praying the scriptures, and adding to this a study of the Holy Fathers and the saints. One needn't be particularly pious or holy to do this, nor must one enroll in special classes. It is an intensely personal act of self-education which requires only a sincere desire to learn and grow. It is an act of "knowing", not so much with the head

as with the heart, keeping in mind Christ's words: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." As another has written, "This acquired religious knowledge will enlighten not only the mind but will also permeate the heart and become the light of Christ shining in good deeds."

Although sins against the First Commandment are the most serious and also the most common, I have almost never heard anyone confess that they have violated this commandment. Why is this?--because most people think that this Law has to do with paganism and idol worship. Well, it does have to do with that, but also much more, since we can also make idols of other people, material things, our own opinions, etc. Therefore, how can we tell if we are breaking this commandment? When we experience indifference to God or even turn away from Him to material things, people, etc. Of course, also included in the First Commandment are atheism, polytheism (belief in many gods), disbelief or agnosticism (which is a stubborn unwillingness to learn about Him), superstition, disavowal of faith, heresy and despair (disbelief in His providence and mercy). These are all sins of the *mind*—and therefore they are the most serious sins of all, because they deprive us of grace and, if not repented, can send us straight to hell.

A recent troubling development in Orthodoxy in the West, which directly contradicts the First Commandment, is the plethora of so-called Orthodox websites and blogs. Now, don't get me wrong; some of these sites are o.k., but the majority reflects a quite creepy sectarian mentality, wherein the canons of the Church have been made into idols, calendars are constantly argued about, and the otherwise pious traditions of men have been elevated to the status of infallibility. This is very dangerous; very. These sites feed a profound sense of self-importance (also elevating personal opinions to the status of law), egotism (masked as righteousness), passion (especially hatred), and even outright ignorance—of the invincible kind. For this reason I always advise people to stay away from such sites, visiting only a few reliably moderate sites which are in some way connected to canonical Orthodoxy in this country.

So, with all this in mind, how can we keep the First Commandment in our daily lives?

First, by constantly reminding ourselves, especially in times of temptation, difficulty or crisis, that all might and power are only in God, nowhere else. Thus we should not seek power, money, or even highly developed technology, or craving for pleasure, drugs and other things that distract and separate us from God, remember that anything that doesn't reflect the Law of God comes under the category of "other gods," "strange gods," in other words, idols. The "other gods" also means people we place on a pedestal, people with whom we have developed a co-dependent relationship, or those to whom we give power over our own emotional lives. It can also refer to those who put too much emphasis on their bodies, coddling them, expensively decorating them, showing them off, and so forth, making of the body an idol.

And so, it isn't the letter that is the truth, but the meaning, the spirit of the commandment that we must embrace, through the daily fulfillment of the commandments.

The purpose of the First Commandment, then, is to guide us to dedicate ourselves to God. This must be a dedication not just on Sunday mornings. We must devote ourselves to the one God through our Lord Jesus Christ, who has shown us the Father. *This* is the true faith in the One True God, but we can easily slip away from it unless it is nourished daily and constantly through prayer and study.

Keeping all of this in mind, next Sunday we will take a very close look at the Second Commandment: "Thou shalt not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name."

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.