

Lesson 24: Questions 50, 51, 52, and 53

In Lesson 23, we began to work through the Ten Commandments by considering the preface to the law. We saw that God identifies Himself as the LORD, the covenant God Who redeemed Israel out of bondage, and that His authority to command is grounded in Who He is and what He has done (Q47-49). That order matters. God does not present His law as an abstract code floating in the air. He speaks as the redeeming LORD. Now, having considered the preface, we come to the 1st commandment itself, which establishes the foundation for all true worship and all true obedience.

50-53

Question 50: What is the 1st commandment?

Q. Which is the first commandment?

A. The first commandment is, Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

The 1st commandment is short, but it is not small.

You shall have no other gods before me. (Exodus 20:3)

This commandment is first for a reason. Before God tells us how to worship Him (2), use His Name (3), remember His day (4), honor authority (5), preserve life (6), pursue chastity (7), respect property (8), speak truth (9), and order desire (10), He first commands exclusive allegiance to Himself.

The first issue is God Himself.

That is because sin is never merely behavioral. Sin is worship gone wrong. When man turns from God, he does not become neutral. He gives his heart to something else. He fears something else, trusts something else, loves something else, serves something else, or seeks final satisfaction in something else. The 1st commandment confronts the root: you shall not have another god.

This matters because idolatry is not only a pagan problem involving statues and temples. It is a human problem involving the heart. A man may not bow before an idol of wood or stone and yet still live as an idolater. He may live for money, reputation, pleasure, control, comfort, family, politics, success, intellect, sex, self-expression, or even religious usefulness. Anything that receives the trust, love, fear, obedience, or glory due to God alone has become a rival god.

We should also notice that the 1st commandment is not merely negative. It says, *"You shall have no other gods before me"*, but the negative command implies a positive duty. If we must not have other gods, then we must have the true God as God. We must know Him, trust Him, love Him, worship Him, obey Him, and glorify Him. The 1st commandment is not satisfied by deism, vague spirituality, or bare monotheistic correctness. The commandment calls for covenantal allegiance to the living God.

This is why the 1st commandment is foundational. If we fail here, everything else collapses. A man may externally avoid murder, adultery, theft, and lying, and yet still be a covenant-breaker at the deepest level if he does not worship the true God (see discussion on Matthew 19:16-22 from Lesson 22). Moral respectability without true worship is not righteousness. It may restrain certain sins, and that is a mercy, but it does not fulfill the 1st commandment.

So Question 50 introduces the 1st commandment as the great command of exclusive worship and allegiance. The LORD alone is God. He alone is worthy. He alone must be trusted, loved, feared, served, worshiped, and glorified. No rivals. No replacements. No substitutes. No hidden gods before His face.

Question 51: What does the 1st commandment require?

Q. What is required in the first commandment?

A. The first commandment requireth us to know and acknowledge God to be the only true God and our God, and to worship and glorify him accordingly.

The catechism now opens the positive requirement of the 1st commandment. It is not enough merely to avoid obvious idolatry. The 1st commandment requires us to know and acknowledge God to be the only true God and our God, and to worship and glorify Him accordingly.

Notice the order. First, we must know God. Then we must acknowledge Him. Then we must worship and glorify Him accordingly. True worship is not built on ignorance. God is not honored by vague religious energy detached from His self-revelation. We must know Him as He has made Himself known.

And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, for the LORD searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will cast you off forever. (1 Chronicles 28:9, ESV)

David's charge to Solomon is deeply personal and covenantal. *"Know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind."* That is 1st commandment religion. It is not mere outward compliance. It is knowledge of God, wholehearted service, and willing obedience before the God Who searches hearts and understands thoughts.

That is searching. God does not merely see the outward action. He searches the heart. He knows whether worship is sincere or hollow, whether obedience is glad or grudging, whether public religion is joined to private love for Him. The 1st commandment reaches into the inward man. It asks not merely, "To whom do you bow?" but, "Whom do you love? Whom do you trust? Whom do you seek? Whom do you fear? Whom do you serve?"

This day the LORD your God commands you to do these statutes and rules. You shall therefore be careful to do them with all your heart and with all your soul. You have declared today that the LORD is your God, and that you will walk in his ways, and keep his statutes and his commandments and his rules, and will obey his voice. And the LORD has declared today that you are a people for his treasured possession, as he has promised you, and that you are to keep all his commandments, and that he will set you in praise and in fame and in honor high above all nations that he has made, and that you shall be a people holy to the LORD your God, as he promised." (Deuteronomy 26:16-19, ESV)

That is covenantal acknowledgment. Israel declared the LORD would be their God and they would walk in His ways, keep His statutes, and obey His voice. The 1st commandment requires not only that we confess there is one God, but confess He is our God. It requires personal, covenantal allegiance.

This matters because there is a kind of bare orthodoxy that says true things about God but does not embrace Him as God. The demons know there is one God, and they tremble. A man may affirm monotheism, defend theology, and win arguments, and yet not worship and glorify God as his God. The 1st commandment requires more than correct vocabulary. It requires the heart's allegiance.

Then the catechism says we must worship and glorify Him accordingly.

Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve." (Matthew 4:10, ESV)

Jesus speaks these words (cited from Deuteronomy 6:13) to Satan in the wilderness. Satan offered Him the kingdoms of the world and their glory if Jesus would fall down and worship him. Jesus answers with Scripture: worship belongs to the LORD God alone. Here we see the 1st commandment obeyed perfectly by Christ. Where Adam failed in a garden, Christ succeeded in the wilderness. He refused the shortcut of idolatry. He would not receive a kingdom by worshiping another. He would worship and serve God alone.

Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness. (Psalm 29:2, ESV)

To glorify God is to ascribe to Him the glory due His Name. That word “due” matters. Worship is not something we generously decide to give God. It is owed. God is infinitely worthy, and therefore worship is not optional. The creature owes worship to the Creator. The redeemed owe worship to the Redeemer. The child owes love, reverence, and obedience to the Father.

And notice that worship must be “accordingly”. If God is the only true God and our God, then we worship Him as such. We do not worship Him casually, as though He were one interest among many. We do not worship Him selectively, as though He may command some areas of life but not others. We do not worship Him pragmatically, as though He exists to serve our goals. We worship Him as God.

This includes public worship, but it is not limited to public worship. The 1st commandment reaches all of life. We must glorify God in our homes, work, speech, money, bodies, thoughts, desires, relationships, and plans. The 1st commandment requires whole-life allegiance.

So Question 51 teaches us that the 1st commandment requires true knowledge, true confession, true worship, and true glorifying of God. We must know Him as the only true God. We must acknowledge Him as our God. And we must worship and glorify Him accordingly.

Question 52: What does the 1st commandment forbid?

Q. What is forbidden in the first commandment?

A. The first commandment forbiddeth the denying, or not worshipping and glorifying the true God, as God and our God, and the giving of that worship and glory to any other, which is due unto him alone.

The catechism now opens the negative requirement of the 1st commandment. Question 51 tells us what the commandment requires. Question 52 tells us what it forbids: denying God, failing to worship and glorify Him, refusing Him as God and our God, and giving His worship and glory to another.

FIRST, the commandment forbids denying God.

The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good. (Psalm 14:1, ESV)

The Bible does not treat atheism as intellectual neutrality. It treats it as folly. That does not mean every atheist is unintelligent. Some are very intelligent. But Scripture’s category of folly is moral and spiritual, not merely intellectual. The fool denies what is most fundamental: God is God.

This denial may be philosophical, but it may also be practical. A man may say he believes in God and yet live as though God does not see, does not speak, does not judge, and does not matter. Practical atheism may sit in church, sing hymns, and speak orthodox sentences. The question is not only, “Do you affirm that God exists?” The question is, “Do you live before Him as God?”

SECOND, the 1st commandment forbids not worshipping and glorifying the true God.

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. (Romans 1:21-23, ESV)

Notice the order. They knew God, but did not honor Him as God or give thanks. That is 1st commandment rebellion. God revealed Himself, and man refused to glorify Him. Man’s problem is not merely lack of information. It is suppression, ingratitude, and refusal to honor God as God.

This should correct the way we think about sin. The root problem is not that man needs a little more self-esteem, organization, or religious inspiration. The root problem is that man does not glorify God as God. He takes gifts and forgets the Giver. He receives life, breath, food, pleasure, beauty, intellect, family, and strength, and then refuses gratitude. Ingratitude is not a small sin. It is an assault on the 1st commandment.

THIRD, the 1st commandment forbids refusing the true God as “God and our God”.

I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it. But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. (Psalm 81:10-11, ESV)

That is tragic language. “*I am the LORD your God*”, and yet “*my people did not listen*”. God presents Himself as their Redeemer, the One Who brought them out of Egypt, but they would not submit. Their sin was not merely that they failed to believe certain doctrines about God. They refused covenantal submission to the God Who had claimed them.

This is a warning to religious people. It is possible to be near the means of grace, near the language of covenant, near the worship of God, and still resist God. External nearness is not the same as inward submission. The 1st commandment requires that we receive the LORD as God and our God.

FOURTH, the 1st commandment forbids giving any other the worship and glory due to God alone.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:24-27, ESV)

This is the logic of idolatry: exchanging the truth about God for a lie, worshiping and serving the creature rather than the Creator. Idolatry is not harmless spiritual creativity. It is a lie. It takes the glory due to the **Creator** and gives it to a **creature**.

And notice what follows. Disordered worship leads to disordered desires. When man exchanges God for the creature, his loves become corrupted. The sexual revolution, the cult of self, the worship of comfort, the obsession with money, the hunger for approval, the sacrifice of children to the god of convenience, the frantic need for control: these are not disconnected sins. They grow from disordered worship. False gods always deform their worshipers.

That should make this commandment deeply practical. What do you fear losing most? What do you run to for refuge? What do you believe will make life worth living? What makes you angry when it is threatened? What do you sacrifice for? What do you daydream about? What do you obey even when God says otherwise? Those questions often reveal the functional gods of the heart.

So Question 52 teaches us that the 1st commandment forbids agnosticism, practical atheism, ingratitude, false worship, covenant refusal, and idolatry. It forbids every attempt to **deny** God, **neglect** God, **minimize** God, **replace** God, or **give His glory** to another.

Question 53: What does “before me” mean?

Q. What are we especially taught by these words before me, in the first commandment?

A. These words before me, in the first commandment teach us, that God, who seeth all things, taketh notice of and is much displeased with the sin of having any other God.

This final question presses the commandment into the conscience. “*Before me*” teaches that God sees all things, takes notice of idolatry, and is much displeased with the sin of having any other god. Idolatry is never hidden from God.

Exodus 8 tells of the 2nd (frogs) and 3rd (gnats) plagues. The crux of the story is found in verse 10:

*Moses said, "Be it as you say, so that you may know that there is no one like the LORD our God."
(Exodus 8:10b, ESV)*

In Exodus, the plagues are not random displays of power. They are judgments against Egypt and Egypt's gods. Pharaoh and Egypt had false gods, false worship, false confidence, and false power. The LORD exposed them all. He showed that He alone is God.

That context helps us understand "before me". Pharaoh did not merely hold mistaken religious ideas in private. He stood before the living God in defiance. Egypt's gods stood, as it were, before the LORD, and the LORD judged them. He saw. He took notice. He was displeased. And He acted.

However, "before me" does not merely mean "where God can see it", as though the main issue were secret idolatry versus public idolatry. It means no other god may be brought before Yahweh's face. No rival may stand in His presence. No supposed lesser deity may be treated as though it has a legitimate place beside Him, under Him, or alongside Him. The LORD does not merely require first place among many loves. He requires exclusive worship.

We, like the Israelites of old, must heed the call of this commandment. It is not enough to proclaim that God is God. We must hold to Him and Him alone as God, clinging to no other.

If we saw a man who claimed to love his wife, yet he was cheating on her with other women, we would call him a liar. He could not say "I love my wife the most." Loving his wife means excluding all others. So, too, we must not simply love God first, we must honor Him alone.

Conclusion

Questions 50-53 bring us into the 1st commandment. God commands, "*You shall have no other gods before me.*" This is the foundation of all obedience. Before we ask how to worship, speak, or order time, authority, life, marriage, property, truth, and desire, we must ask: Who is God? Who has my worship?

- **FIRST**, we should believe differently.
We should stop thinking of idolatry as merely an ancient or pagan problem.
Idolatry is the great human problem.
The heart is always worshiping, always trusting, always seeking refuge somewhere.
The 1st commandment teaches us that God alone must be known, acknowledged, worshiped, and glorified as God and our God.
- **SECOND**, we should examine ourselves differently.
We should ask not only, "Do I believe in God?" but, "Do I live before Him as God?"
What do I fear, trust, love, obey, and glorify?
What competes with Him?
What would I sin to gain or sin to keep?
Where am I giving creaturely things the worship and glory due to God alone?
- **THIRD**, we should run to Christ.
The 1st commandment exposes us all.
None of us has loved God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.
But Christ has.
He is the faithful Son, the true worshiper, the perfect commandment keeper.
And by His grace, He not only forgives idolaters;
He teaches us to worship the true God.

So let us come to this commandment humbly.

No other gods before Him. No rivals before His face. No hidden idols in the heart.

The LORD alone is God.

He alone is worthy.

And in Christ, He is not only the true God; He is our God.