

# Divine Obligations

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*Exodus 20:1-7*

## INTRODUCTION

- A. One day, when one of his secretaries suggested dropping work for some recreation, President Woodrow Wilson replied, “My boss won’t let me do it.”
  - 1. “You’re boss?” asked the friend. “You’re the President of the United States.”
  - 2. “Yes,” said the President, “I have a conscience that is my boss. It drives me to the task, and will not let me accept the tempting invitation.
  - 3. President Woodrow Wilson knew he had a duty, and he was going to fulfill his duty.
  - 4. Just as the President had a duty, we have a duty to God.
    - a. We have spent the past several Sundays discussing God’s character that we might understand him better.
    - b. Now that we understand God better, I think it only appropriate that we discuss this morning the duty we have toward God. We’ll discuss that duty from the Ten Commandments.
- B. I think there has been a clear tendency among us in the churches of Christ to preach from texts other than the Ten Commandments.
  - 1. I understand why we do that.
    - a. The Ten Commandments have no direct effect upon our Christianity today. Jesus abolished “in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances” (Eph. 2:15).
    - b. Not a single commandment applies to us today because it’s part of the Ten Commandments. Those commandments which do apply today apply because the NT tells us to follow them.
  - 2. But, the Ten Commandments — even the Sabbath commandment which doesn’t apply at all today — play a vital role in Scripture.
    - a. In speaking of some of the warnings which fell upon the Israelites, Paul wrote, “These things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction” (1 Cor. 10:11).
    - b. The Ten Commandments, too, without any doubt, were written for our instruction. They are inspired by God, and therefore, there are some things we can learn from them.
- C. This morning, we want to think about the divine obligations given in the first three commandments.

## NO LESSER GOD, v. 3

- A. “You shall have no other gods before me.” Since their God was the High God, the Israelites were to have no lesser god.
  - 1. In the culture in which the Israelites lived there were a plethora of other gods.
    - a. Polytheism, the belief of many gods, was quite common among the people who lived around the Israelites.
    - b. God was concerned that his people might go along with their neighbors and worship a whole host of gods.
  - 2. God had reason to be concerned, for that’s exactly what happened. Until they returned from the Babylonian Captivity, the Israelites worshiped a host of pagan deities.
    - a. “The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight to the LORD, forgetting the LORD, their God, and serving the Baals and the Asheroth” (Judg. 3:7).
    - b. Jeroboam, the first king of Northern Kingdom under the divided kingdom, “appointed a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month like the feast that was in Judah, and he offered sacrifices upon the altar; so he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he had made. And he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places that he had made” (1 Ki. 12:32).
- B. Why did God command the Israelites to have no other gods?
  - 1. It all comes down to divided loyalty.
    - a. God did not want his people to be loyal to him on the one hand and loyal to some other god on the other hand.
    - b. “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other” (Mt. 6:24).
  - 2. Where is our loyalty? Are we as loyal to God as we need to be?
    - a. Let us think about that for a moment.
      - 1) If I’m holding on to a favorite sin — perhaps a sin no one else knows about — can I really claim to be that loyal to God?

- 2) If on Sunday night I'm not willing to come back to services and worship my God, can I really claim to be that loyal?
- 3) If I go along with what my boss wants me to do, even though I know it's wrong, can I really claim to be that loyal?
- b. When Leonardo da Vinci was forty-three years old, the Duke Ludovico of Milan asked him to paint the dramatic scene of Jesus' last supper with his disciples.
  - 1) Working slowly and giving meticulous care to details, he spent three years on the assignment.
    - a) He grouped the disciples into threes, two groups on either side of the central figure of Christ.
    - b) Christ's arms are outstretched. In his right hand, he holds a cup, painted beautifully with marvelous realism.
  - 2) When the masterpiece was finished, the artist said to a friend, "Observe it and give me your opinion of it."
    - a) "It's wonderful" exclaimed the friend. "The cup is so real I cannot divert my eyes from it!"
    - b) Immediately Leonardo took a brush and drew it across the sparkling cup! He exclaimed as he did so: "Nothing shall detract from the figure of Christ!"
- c. What in our lives detract us from the figure of God? Let us tear it from our hearts, that nothing be in our hearts besides the Lord our God!

## **NO LESSER PICTURE, vv. 4-6**

- A. "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God" — Since God has presented the true picture of himself in Scripture, the Israelites were to have no lesser picture.
  1. Just as polytheism was common in the culture of the Israelites so was the fashioning of idols.
  2. But, why would God care if the Israelites made images of him?
    - a. God cannot be depicted by an artist.
      - 1) You simply cannot draw a spiritual being such as God is.
      - 2) If you were to draw a picture of God, you'd have to be able to determine what he looked like, and there's not a one of us who has ever seen any spiritual being, let alone God himself
    - b. But we also need to understand something about ancient near eastern thought.
      - 1) In Ancient Near Eastern thought the deity represented by an idol came to dwell in that image.
        - a) Thus, the image became the god.
        - b) But, the God of the Israelites is simply too grand to be housed in a statue — "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man" (Acts 17:24).
      - 2) As a result of the god actually living inside the statue, the ancients believed they could perform some magic on the idol and that the god would obey them. Obviously, our God is not a puppet on a string that we can compel to act a certain way.
    - c. God forbids the Israelites not just from making any image but also from making any creature he had created.
      - 1) Why should the God who made all that is be represented by some likeness of a cow or a bird or a fish?
      - 2) Notice what Paul said about the Gentile pagans: "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!" (Rom. 1:25).
  - B. I know what you must be thinking about right now: "Justin, if you were to go on a mission trip to Africa, you could really talk about making graven images, but we don't need that in this culture."
    1. Granted, I've only seen a handful of true idols in this country.
    2. But, I think there's an important lesson we can learn an important lesson from this commandment: we need to think of God on his terms, not ours.
      - a. The people who lived around the Israelites had all made idols of what they thought God (or the "gods") looked like. And, at times the Israelites fell into this trap — when they made the golden calf, when Jeroboam set up those calves.
      - b. But, God wants to be understood the way he truly is, not the way man can conceive of him.
        - 1) You hear people think of God in their own way all the time.
        - 2) I can't tell you the number of people I've had tell me, "God doesn't really expect me to be baptized." Says who? Who are you to say what God wants and what God doesn't want? Just like the pagans had an idea of what God should look like, they have an idea of what God should be like.
    3. Let us allow God to be God and not try to change him to suit our own ideas!

## NO LESSER TALK, v. 7

- A. “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain” — Since God demanded that the Israelites were to speak of him appropriately, they were to have no lesser talk.
1. You have probably heard this text before to say that we should not use the Lord’s name in cursing.
  2. While this text would certainly apply to that, I don’t think that’s the main point of the text.
    - a. The Hebrew word “vain” means “in vain, vainly, to no avail.” The word denotes anything that is unreal or worthless.
    - b. Hence, I think the full idea of this commandment is: “Don’t use God’s name lightly: Do not take an oath in the name of God you don’t intend to fulfill, don’t use God’s name as though it were a common, every day name.” The whole point is that the Israelites were to hold God’s name in reverence and awe.
  3. The Israelites had problems with the two previous commandments — they turned to paganism and idols on many occasions.
    - a. But, the Israelites really valued this commandment.
    - b. They were so afraid of taking God’s name in vain they would not even pronounce his name.
      - 1) In fact, we have no idea how the divine name should be pronounced, because the Israelites would not say it.
      - 2) This tradition is carried over even in English translations of the Old Testament.
        - a) When the Israelites would come to the divine name, written throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, they would say “Adonai,” “Lord” rather than Yahweh.
        - b) Hence, nearly all translations put the word “Lord” in all caps when the divine name appears.
- B. In how much reverence do we hold the name of God?
1. Throughout the New Testament, we are told to revere God’s name.
    - a. God’s name is revered — “Our father who art in heaven, Hallowed by thy name” (Mt. 6:9).
    - b. That revered name is to be proclaimed in all the earth — “For the scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth’” (Rom. 9:17).
    - c. In the Revelation men cursed the name of God — “Men were scorched by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues, and they did not repent and give him glory” (Rev. 16:9).
  2. How do we revere the name of God?
    - a. Obviously, we dare not use his name in profanity, but I doubt seriously any of us have that problem.
    - b. When God comes up in conversation — at work, at school, at home — we need to be sure that we speak of God with the dignity, the respect, the awe that he deserves.
    - c. When we worship God, we need to be certain we do so with the utmost of reverence.
      - 1) When we pray, we need to be reverent. When we call upon the God whose name is so high, how can we not be reverent?
      - 2) When we read from the inspired Word of the Most High, we need to devote our full attention to what he has said.
      - 3) When we worship God congregationally, we need to use the utmost respect.
        - a) We need to be certain that our children are not making so much noise they disturb those around us.
        - b) We need not be going back and forth to get drinks of water when we’re worshipping the Creator of the universe.
        - c) We need not be flipping through the bulletin to see what’s coming up when we’re worshipping the God who makes what’s in the bulletin relevant.
      - 4) Brethren, let us resolve ourselves to showing God that respect and that honor.

## CONCLUSION

- A. Yes, we have a solemn duty and obligation toward our God in heaven.
1. During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln said, “Let us have faith that right makes might; and in that faith let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it.”
  2. Let us this morning resolve ourselves to doing our duty as we understand it.
- B. Do you need to come this morning and begin to do your duty?