

STUDY 10 - HAVE NO GODS BUT GOD

Commandment 1: 'Do not worship any other gods besides me.' (Exodus 20:3)

The Second Commandment dealt with worshipping God in the right way. The First Commandment, however, comes to the heart of things; it is about making sure that we worship the right God and no one else. God wants a relationship with us, but he is only prepared to be involved in one that is totally exclusive.

→ 1 STARTER

Discuss some of the following:

- Imagine that your house catches fire. After ensuring that your family and pets are safe, what do you rush in to save?
- You decide to look for a new job. What things would you consider to be either essential or desirable (salary, new car, responsibility, etc)?
- Who are the most committed members of any religion you have ever met? Why?
- Who have you known, or heard of, whose desires ended up destroying them?

→ 2 SURGERY

Discuss one of the following:

A) Let's define religion as 'that which gives a life meaning or purpose'. On this basis:

- What are the main religions in your area?
- What demands of time or money do they make on their devotees?
- Where and what are their temples?
- What rites or practices do they carry out?

B) Everybody likes to think that they are free and able to choose to do whatever they want. Is this an illusion? Doesn't everybody serve something or someone?

→ 3 STUDY

This is divided into an Old and a New Testament part.

The Old Testament

A) Read Exodus 20:1-3. Although verse 3 is normally considered the first of the commandments, the verses immediately before it are helpful in understanding what this commandment really means. As we saw in Study Eight, behind the expression 'the LORD' lies the name 'Yahweh', the personal name of the God who had made a covenant with the Israelites.

- The covenant was God's solemn agreement to protect and bless the Israelites. Why do you think God starts the commandments by using his covenant name and reminding the people that he has just saved them out of Egypt?
- Do you think the commandments were a) rules someone had to keep in order that God would love them? b) the appropriate response to being one of God's saved and loved people? Which category do they fit into for Christians?
- Someone might say, 'Why can't God share worship with other gods?' How would you answer?

B) In Joshua 24 we read how, once established in the Promised Land, Joshua led the Israelites in a ceremony where they renewed their covenant vows. Read Joshua 24:1-28.

- What, according to verses 2-13, has the LORD done for the Israelites?
- What does he expect as a response?
- In verse 19, Joshua appears to express reservations about the people's reply. Is he a pessimist or a realist?
- How does this whole passage underline the seriousness of the commitment that the LORD expects of his people?
- How often does the word 'serve' or 'served' occur in this passage? Does this just mean they had an obligation to worship him? What would it have meant for the Israelites to serve God? What does it mean for us?
- What -if any -ceremonies of covenant renewal do Christians hold?

C) But who is this God that we are called to serve exclusively? Isaiah gives something of an answer. Read Isaiah 40:18-31.

- What does this passage say about the temptation we have to worship either things that we have made (vv.18-20) or things that we have done (vv.23,24)?
- How is God superior to either our idols or our achievements?
- What practical application of these truths is found in verses 27-31?

D) The exclusive bond that God wants with his people not only rules out the worship of other gods -it also rules out religious practices that would undercut that right relationship. Read Deuteronomy 18:9-14.

- What things are forbidden here?
- Why, in the light of the First Commandment, do you think they are prohibited?

The New Testament

Much of what Jesus taught focused on the need to make God the centre of our lives; in order to become part of the kingdom of God we have to allow God to be king.

A) Jesus himself was specifically tempted over this commandment. Read Matthew 4:8-10.

- Given the size of the offer that the Devil makes, how important do you think it was to him to break Jesus' commitment to the First Commandment?
- Why does Jesus quote Scripture (Deuteronomy 6:13) back to the Devil?
- What lessons are there here for us in regard to our commitment to worship and serve God?

B) Read Matthew 22:34-40. Jesus is here quoting the verses from Deuteronomy 6:4,5 that lay at the heart of the Jewish faith.

- What does verse 37 say is our duty towards God?
- If we take this seriously, where, when and how are we to love God?
- What would that mean practically for us?
- Can we keep this standard?

C) The key issue is how we can get into that right relationship with God where he is central in our lives. Read what Jesus says to his disciples in John 14:20-24.

- What is the relationship between Jesus and God (v.20)?
- What is the relationship between Jesus and his disciples (vv.20,21)?
- What is the test of whether we really love Jesus (vv.21.23a)?
- How does the promise of verse 23b fulfil the requirement of the First Commandment?

D) Read 1 John 2:1-6.

- If we fail to keep the commandments, is there any hope for us?
- What has Jesus done to help us?
- Are we then free from the commandments?

→ 4 SUMMARY

Think about how we are only partially committed for God

- What things compete for God in our lives? Do we see them as being other gods?
- What parts of our lives are there that God has no control over?
- Is our half-heartedness because we lack faith that God cares for us?
- Is our half-heartedness because we don't think that God is that important?

Think about how we can be more fully committed to God

- Are we really prepared to let God have that exclusive relationship that he wants?
- How can we be single-minded about serving God?
- How can we help each other to serve God more faithfully?

Discussion

- We like to think of ourselves as being free people; able to choose what will want to do. But is anybody free? The Bible portrays us as slaves to desires that we cannot control and which ultimately destroy us. Is serving God the only way to freedom?
- The Bible is anxious that we realize that God is majestic and all-powerful. What price do we pay for having a small-sized God?
- Some of our songs and our worship can make it seem as if loving God is something that only involves the emotions. Is this right?
- We often relegate God to a compartment of our lives, marked 'Religion', which can stay shut for much of the time. How can we let 'God be God' in our lives?

So what?

At the end of this study:

- What has challenged you most?
- In what areas are you most vulnerable?
- What attitude or action do you need to change?

→ 5 STEPPING OUT

Practical suggestions

- Review your relationship with God. How well do you know him? Are there things that need to be sorted out?
- Think about some recent decisions you have made and actions you have taken. Did your relationship to God play any part in them? Think about decisions ahead; how can you ensure that God is allowed to play a part?
- If your spiritual health was given a check-up, what would the verdict be? That you should give up unhealthy habits? Take more spiritual exercise? Take remedial medicine? Have radical surgery?

Further study

A) Read 1 Kings 18:16-40. At this time the religion of Baal had almost taken over the worship of the one true God in Israel.

- Baal was a thunder god and Carmel was a site for the worship of Baal. Why do you think that Elijah chose to challenge his opposition this way? Are there lessons for us in dealing with 'other gods'?
- What was the challenge that Elijah threw down to the people in verse 21? Are they unable to choose? Or are they reluctant to make an exclusive commitment to the Lord?
- Elijah commanded that the prophets of Baal be executed. There could be no legitimate basis for such an act today, but what principles can we draw from this about how we should treat those things in our life that come between us and God?

B) In his explanation of the Parable of the Sower, Jesus says the following about the seed that fell on fertile ground and produced a good crop. Read Luke 8:15.

- What does Jesus say is the secret of the fruitful life?
- How does this relate to the First Commandment?

C) Read Luke 12:13-21.

- What, according to this parable, is our ultimate priority?
- Why is anything else foolishness?

D) Romans 1 is the classic passage on how human beings fail to keep the First Commandment and what happens as a result. Read Romans 1:18-32. According to verses 18-25, God has given all humanity some knowledge of himself.

- How has this knowledge been treated?
- What, according to verses 26-32, has resulted from this?

Questions to think about

- If God spoke directly to us from heaven we would probably obey him instantly. But we generally treat his communication to us through the Bible as something less serious. Why?
- Why is it so tempting to worship God *and* my career, God *and* my home or God *and* my wealth? Why does God have to demand an exclusive relationship?
- Do people become like whatever god they worship?
- It is easy to make grand declarations along the lines of 'I love Jesus so much that I would die for him.' Yet in practice it is often the little things that seem so difficult: making time to pray, being a law-abiding driver, not answering back to abuse, and so on. How can we convert the principle into day-to-day practice?

For prayer

- Pray that we would put God first in our lives.
- Pray that we would love God with our hearts, minds and actions.
- Pray that churches across the land would wake up to the responsibility to be totally committed to God.